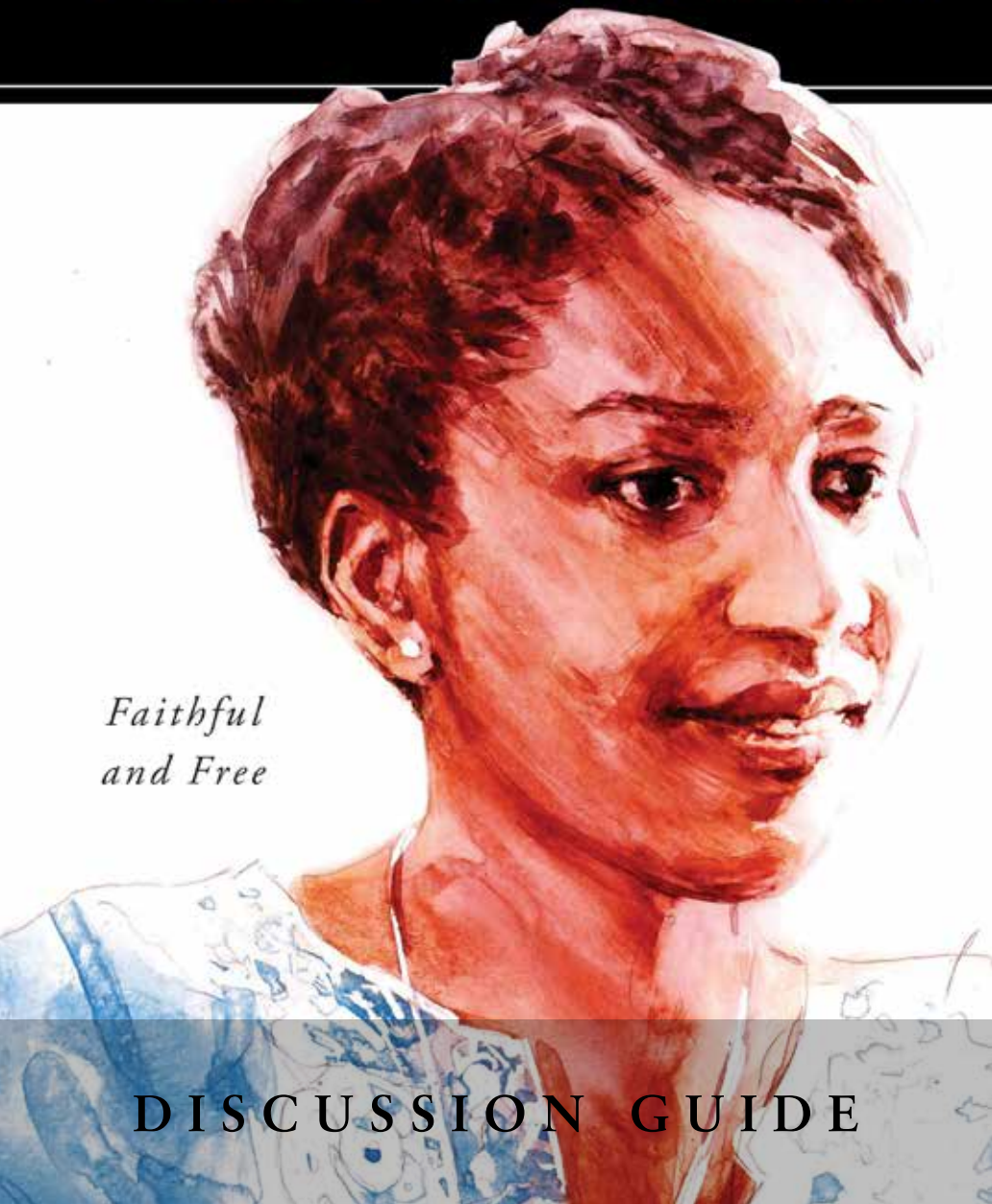


MAURICE J. NUTT

# THEA BOWMAN

*Faithful  
and Free*



DISCUSSION GUIDE

## **About the Book**

With every passing year since her death in 1990, more people are recognizing Sister Thea Bowman as one of the most inspiring figures in American Catholic history. A granddaughter of slaves, Thea became Catholic on her own initiative at the age of nine. As a Franciscan sister, she lived a wide-ranging ministry of joy, music, and justice.

Drawing on careful research and the insights of people who were close to her, Father Maurice Nutt explores her personality, her passion, her mission, and her prayer in this new biography. He captures Thea Bowman as she was: an unapologetically African American woman; a religious sister who deeply loved God and the people to whom she ministered through teaching, preaching, and singing, and who embraced the blessing of her ancestry; the wisdom of the “old folks;” and a passion for justice and equality for all God’s children.

## **About the Author**

Maurice J. Nutt, CSSR, holds a Doctor of Ministry degree in preaching from Aquinas Institute of Theology. He is a noted retreat, revival, and parish mission preacher both nationally and internationally. He is a former director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana. He is the convener of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium. Father Nutt serves as the Diocesan Liaison of the Cause for Canonization of Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, for the Diocese of Jackson.

# Discussion Guide

## Introduction

1. What is “holy boldness”? How was it displayed in the life of Sr. Thea Bowman? (Maybe it’s too early in your reading of this book to full consider this; but, keep an eye out for this theme in the pages to come.)
2. How have you encountered “holy boldness” in the lives of people around you? In your own life? If you could muster just a bit more holy boldness, how might this virtue affect a particular situation or challenge in your own life?
3. What “vow to the Lord” (literal or not) have you made that you most want to make sure you will “never will turn back” on?
4. Thea summarized her vocation in three words: “I’m a teacher.” What does this say about her? How would you summarize your own life’s vocation in a handful of words?
5. Do you know anyone whose presence or personality produces something like the “Thea effect” that Fr. Nutt describes on page 7?

## Chapter One

1. How did the ministers hired by the southern slaveholders and the slaves who composed the Negro spirituals use the Bible differently?
2. How was Thea's experience of growing up rather different from that of most other Southern black folks of her day?
3. What may have been the impact of being an "old folks' child" (the child of older parents) on Thea's upbringing?
4. In what ways did racial inequality mark Bertha's life and that of her family?
5. Fr. Nutt notes that many of Bertha's best childhood teachers were not formally educated, but they knew the Bible and lived it well—especially elders. Does this describe any of your own teachers? How so?
6. Theo and Mary Esther Bowman (a Methodist and an Episcopalian, respectively) respected their daughter's wishes to become Catholic at age 9. How would you have responded to your child with a request of this nature?

## Chapter Two

1. What further examples of racial inequality do we see in the portion of Bertha's life described in this chapter?
2. Imagine Bertha's August 1953 train ride from Mississippi to Wisconsin with Sr. Lina Putz. What must this experience have been like for her? Why do you imagine the trip in this way?
3. What would it mean for Bertha to "assimilate into the dominant white culture" in the LaCrosse convent?
4. What do you suppose Bertha's experience during her year at the River Pines Sanatorium was like? What may have been most difficult, challenging, interesting, or enjoyable?
5. Thea's extraordinary personality and intellect probably helped her to flourish and succeed in some situations that would have left a more "average" black sister in trouble. Can you identify a few of these situations?

## Chapter Three

1. What significant new experiences did Thea undergo in her eight years away from Clanton that helped to shape her into the person, and sister, she returned as?
2. In what ways was Clanton a remarkable place for Thea to be in the mid-1960s? How did events there during that period intersect with Thea's life and interests?
3. What experiences from the early years of Sr. Thea's life and ministry offered signs of the interests and priorities that would shape her life in the following decades?
4. Are you familiar with the Negro spirituals "Go Down Moses," "Steal Away," and/or "Deep River"? If not, take a look at the lyrics of each on the internet. Among the many possible choices, why would Thea have chosen to include these on the *The Voices of Negro America* album?
5. Reflect on the excerpt Fr. Nutt offers of the words that Thea wrote for the album commentary. How do you respond to these sentiments?

## Chapter Four

1. This period of Thea's life brought several experiences that would shape who she was for the rest of her life. What are the most significant ones?
2. Are you familiar with the sort of black Catholic cultural and liturgical expressions that this chapter references? How have you experienced them?
3. What is your reaction to the suggestion that the Catholic Church is "a white racist institution"? What compelled the National Black Clergy Caucus and Lawrence Lucas to each make this observation in 1968?
4. What, to Thea, did "black power" mean?
5. Thea's master's thesis and doctoral dissertation were both related to the work of St. Thomas More. Why do you suppose Thea was so drawn to his writing? Why does this interest seem fitting, and why might it be surprising or even puzzling?

## Chapter Five

1. The chapter opens with a passage from Sr. Thea describing her approach to education. Does this approach resonate with you? How does it seem similar or different than the educational philosophies you have experienced or would employ?
2. This chapter includes a narrative of Thea's visits to important sites related to the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare. How was Thea like St. Francis? How was she like St. Clare?
3. Are you familiar with the works of Thomas More, William Shakespeare, Eudora Welty, and/or William Faulkner? What do you suppose attracted Thea to developing an expertise on any of these writers?
4. Why do you suppose Sr. Thea was interested in organizing a group of singers to perform Negro spirituals in a predominantly white community? What value might she have seen in this?
5. This chapter mentions Sr. Thea coming in contact in some way with three long-dead saints (Francis, Clare, and Thomas More) and with one living person who would later be canonized (Pope Paul VI). This is all the more interesting since Thea's own cause for canonization has now been formally opened. In what ways are these holy intersections interesting? How can reflecting on them help us grow in our own faith and love?



## Chapter Six

1. Why should developing an understanding of cultural diversity be considered an important ministry within the Catholic Church?
2. What is “the mask” that Thea refers to in the comments made to an interviewer (quoted on pp. 70–71)? What does this reveal about Thea and her life experience? If you are a person of color, can you relate to the idea of “wearing” such a “mask”? If you are a white person, what are your thoughts on reading that some might feel the need to wear such a mask?
3. We read here of Thea’s role in the founding of an organization intended to support the enterprise of “black Catholic theology.” Are you familiar with black Catholic theology in our day? Have you heard of or read the works of James Cone, M. Shawn Copeland, Bryan Massingale, Jamie Phelps, and others? What are your favorites and why? If not, consider exploring this fascinating and rich body of resources!
4. This chapter mentions several of Thea’s dear friends. Other of her closest friends are mentioned elsewhere in her biography. Comment on the role of friendship in the life of Thea Bowman. (Keep this question in mind during the next chapter, as well.)
5. Have you read the U.S. bishops’ 1979 pastoral letter *Brothers and Sisters to Us*? Consider reading this document in tandem with your reading of Thea Bowman’s biography. How do Thea’s experiences speak to the realities and concerns mentioned in this document?

6. How did the developments in Thea's wardrobe choices express in changes in her priorities, personality, and convictions?

## Chapter Seven

1. How, as Thea claims in the quotation that opens this chapter, are her history, traditions, culture, and so on, gifts to the Church? What might it look like to take this conviction seriously? How do you express similar, or different, convictions in your life?
2. The Kujenga retreats for black Catholic youth mentioned in this chapter first gathered in the 1980s and are still active in several U.S. dioceses today. Have you heard of these encounters, or perhaps participated in one (or more!) yourself? Consider becoming involved with this program if it exists in your diocese. If Kujenga retreats do not take place in your area, consider looking into initiating one or supporting one of the programs financially (for example, the Kujenga programs in Milwaukee, Arlington, Richmond, or Fargo, among other places).
3. The National Black Catholic Congress, which Thea helped to re-establish in the U.S., met most recently in July 2017. Did you perhaps participate in that event? If so, what was your experience? If not, consider taking a look at the organization's report on the event, photos from the gathering, or the beautiful mural commissioned especially for the Congress (which includes an image of Thea Bowman) at [NBCCongress.org](http://NBCCongress.org).
4. What might be the value in having a religious sister like Thea (that is, someone who is not ordained and is therefore not a liturgical preacher) preparing seminarians to preach as priests?
5. What impact did Thea's 1985 trip to Africa have on her life and sense of herself?

6. Why would the publication of a hymnal like *Lead Me, Guide Me* be important to the Church and to the black Catholic community?
7. 1987 was remarkable year for Thea Bowman: Her *60 Minutes* segment was broadcasted, she sang for John Paul II, and she participated in the National Black Catholic Congress. Her death, from cancer, came only three years after these momentous experiences. What must the experience of living through this year been like for her and for those who loved her?
8. The full video of Thea's 1989 address to the U.S. Catholic bishops is easily accessible on the internet. Consider watching it. What feelings, sentiments, or reactions do her words evoke in you?

## Chapter Eight

1. “Lord, let me live until I die.” What did these words mean to Thea? What might they mean to you?
2. Read, reflect upon, or pray with the quoted passages from Thea’s “final meditation-reflection-sermon.” What response does it elicit in you? What concrete response might Thea’s words prompt in you?
3. Why do you suppose Thea chose the inscription on her tombstone that she did? If she had invited you to choose the words that were to appear there, what would you say? What words would you want on your own tombstone?