



SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICAN AMERICAN AFFAIRS
Sr. Thea Bowman's Address to the U.S. Bishop's Conference
June 1989

Sr. Thea Bowman:

What does it mean to be Black in the Church in society? I want to tell you about a Church
(singing)

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long way from home, a long way from my home.

Sometimes I feel like an eagle in the air
Sometimes I feel like an eagle in the air
Sometimes I feel like an eagle in the air
Still, I'm a long way, I'm a long way, I'm a long way.

Can you hear me, Church? Will you help me, Church?

(singing) *"I'm a long way from home, a long way from MY home."*

A pilgrim in the journey looking for home. And Jesus told me that the Church is my home. And Jesus told me that heaven is my home and I have here no lasting city. Cardinals, , bishops – my brothers or Church – please help me to get home.

What does it mean to be Black in these United States? What does it mean to be African American? Our history includes the services of Simon of Cyrene, the search of the Ethiopian Eunuch, the contributions of Black Egypt in art and mathematics and monasticism, and politics, the art and architecture of Zimbabwe, the scholarship of Timbuktu, the dignity and serenity of textile and gold and religion in Ghana, the pervasive spirituality and vitality of Nigeria, the political and social systems of Zaire. Our history includes enslavements, oppression, and exploitation. As Malcolm X said it, "My folks, most of 'them didn't come over here on the Mayflower, they came over here on slave ships in chains" – proud, strong men and women – artists, teachers, healers, warriors, and dream-makers, inventors and builders, administrators, like yourselves; politicians, priests – they came to these shores in the slave trade. Those who survived the indignity of the Middle Passage came to the American continent bringing treasures of African heritage, African spiritual and cultural gifts – wisdom, faith and faithfulness, art, and drama - here in an alien land African people clung to African ways of thinking, of proceeding, of understanding values, of celebrating life, of walking and talking and healing and learning and singing and praying. You saw it on the film - African ways of laughing and being together and loving. That's "culture". To the Americas our people brought the secret memory of Africa, the celebration of life values in an African way and style, in song and instrumentation, in story and drama, in verse and anecdote , the memory of the survival mechanisms of Africa. The memory of color and texture, of culinary arts that translated even when we add chitlins and other folks' leftovers. African people here became African Americans expressing faith

in the God who loves and saves. They embodied and celebrated their own lives and their own values, their goals, their dreams, their relationships. Our history includes the island experience – the Virgin Islands, Haiti, Cuba, our Hispanic experience in Central and South America, our native experience where African blood co-mingled with Choctaw and Chickasaw and Cherokee, with people of Asian and Asian-Pacific origin, with Europeans from France and Germany. You want to know why some of us look like we do? (laughter). African people of the diaspora. We are here in this land, and this is our land. That’s part of our history too. Our people, black people, helped to build this Nation in cotton and grain and beans and vegetables and brick and mortar. They cleared the land and cooked the food that they grew. They cleaned houses and built churches – some of them Catholic churches. They built railroads and bridges and National monuments. Black people defended this Country as soldiers and sailors. Black people taught and molded and raised the children and I’m not just talking’ about the black children and if you don’t believe me just ask that Cardinal sitting over there – some of y’all too, I’d imagine. You know what I’m talking’ about Church? I mean, are y’all walking with me Church? Surviving our history physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, spiritually, faithfully, and joyfully – our people developed a culture that was African and American – that was formed and enriched by all that we experienced and, despite all of this, despite the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, and the socio-educational gains of the 70s – blacks in the 80s are still struggling – still “scratching and clawing” as the old-folks say – still trying to find home in the homeland and home in the Church. Still struggling to gain access to equal opportunity. A disproportionate number of black people are poor, poverty, deprivation, discrimination, stunt physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth. I don’t need to tell you this, but I want to remind you – more than a third of the black people living in the United States live in poverty – the kind of poverty that lacks basic necessities. I’m talking’ about old people who have worked hard all of their lives and don’t have money for adequate food or shelter or medical care. I’m talking’ about children who can never have equal access and equal opportunity because poverty doomed them to low-birth weight and retardation and unequal opportunity for education. More than 55% of black babies are born to single mothers. About 41% of black families are single parent families headed by women. The divorce rate for blacks is twice as high as for whites. Black children are twice as likely as white children to be born prematurely – to suffer from low-birth weight, to live in substandard housing, to have no parent employed. Unemployment and underemployment among us are endemic and many of us don’t have the social and political context to put us where the jobs are when the jobs are being passed out. One out of every 21 black males are murdered. A disproportionate number of our men are dying of suicide and AIDS and drug abuse, and low self-esteem. What does it mean to be black and Catholic? For many of us it means having been evangelized, having been educated, having been given a chance through the work in the Catholic Church, through the Josephites – the Devine Word fathers or the Holy Ghost fathers or the Franciscans, or the Yemenites, or the sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. I’m from Mississippi – the first schools in Mississippi were started in the Cathedral basement by diocesan priests and a group of laywomen. For so many of us being black and Catholic means having come into the Church because education opened the door to evangelization. It means, in an age when black men and black women were systematically kept out of the priesthood and out of most religious communities, there were those who cared and who came and who worked with us and for us and among us and helped us to help ourselves. And now our Black-American bishops in the name of the Church universal have publicly declared that we as people of faith, as a Catholic people of God, have come of age and it is time for us to be evangelizers of ourselves.

What does it mean to be Black and Catholic? It means that I come to my Church fully functioning. That doesn't frighten you, does it? I come to my Church fully functioning. I bring myself; my black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become. I bring my whole history, my traditions, my experience, my culture, my African American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility - as gifts to the Church. I bring a spirituality that our Black-American bishops told us (they just told us what everybody who knew, knew), that spirituality is contemplative and biblical and holistic, bringing to religion a totality of mind and imagination, of memory, of feeling and passion, and emotion and intensity. A faith that is embodied incarnate praise - a spirituality that knows how to find joy even in the time of sorrow - that steps out on faith that leans on the Lord. A spirituality that is commoner - that tries to walk and talk and work and pray and play together. Even when we're busy, we're busy around and we want to have found Him, where we want to reach out and touch Him. Where we can talk to Him. Don't be too busy y'all. A spirituality that in the middle of your mass or in the middle of your sermon we just might have to shout out and say "Amen", "Hallelujah", "Thank you Jesus!". (clapping)

A faith that attempts to be spirit-filled. The old lady says, "That if you love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart and your whole soul, and your whole mind and all your strength then you praise the Lord with your whole heart and soul and mind and strength and you don't bring him any feeble service. If you get enough fully functioning Black Catholics in your dioceses, they're going to hold up the priest and they're going to hold up the bishop. We love our bishops y'all. We love y'all too but see these bishops are our own - ordained for the Church universal, ordained for the service of God's people. But they ours - we raised them. They came from our community and in a unique way they can speak for us and to us. That's what the Church is talking' about with indigenous leadership - the leaders are supposed to look like their folks. (laughter) Isn't that what the Church says? (clapping)

To be Black and Catholic means to realize that the work of the ordained ministers is not a threat to me and I'm no threat to them. The work of the ordained minister, of the professional minister, is to enable the people of God to do the work of the Church. To feed us sacramentally - to enable us - to preach and to teach - and I am not necessarily talking' about preaching in the pulpit. You know as well as I do that some of the best preaching does not go on in the pulpit but as a Catholic Christian I have a responsibility to preach and to teach - to worship and to pray - black folks can't just come in the Church and depend on the preacher and say let father do it and if father don't do it right and they walk out and they complain - "That liturgy didn't do anything for me" - the question that we raise is "What did you do for the liturgy?" and the Church is calling us to be participatory and to be involved. The Church is calling us to feed and to clothe, and to shelter and to teach. Your job is to enable me, to enable God's people - black people, white people, proud people, all the people - to do the work of the Church in the modern world. Teaching, preaching, witnessing, worshiping, serving, healing, and reconciling in black - because whether to the lived experience to the history and to the heritage of black people - getting in touch. To be Black and Catholic means to get in touch with the world's Church - with my brothers and sisters in Rome - with my brothers and sisters in China - with my brothers and sisters in Europe and Asia, and Latin-America - with the Church of Africa. Do you folks realize that there are more Catholic Christians in Africa than in North America and they run around talking' about the minority? (laughing). In African, right now 300 people become Christian every day and 75% of them are becoming Roman Catholic - The Vatican's Central Office

reports that in Africa the number of students for the priesthood increased by 88% between 1970 and 1988 – while in North America the number dropped by 43%.

To be Black and Catholic means to be intensely aware of the changing complexion of the College of Cardinals. I picked up your Catholic newspaper and I saw the picture Church – the World Church – a lot of folks look like me! (laughter).

We got to get the word out.

To be Black and Catholic still though often feels like being a second- or third-class citizen of the Holy City. You know, Bishop Jim Lyke said a long time ago that Black Catholic Christians will be second class citizens of the Church until they take their places in leadership beside their brothers and sisters of whatever race or national origin. Realizing that the documents Bishop Marino was talking' about, Brothers and Sisters to Us – that you wrote What We Have Seen and Heard have not been uniformly studied or implemented/integrated into life. Bishop Houck said one time that the Church has excellent documents, but no body reads them. I mean Bishop Howze – they both from Mississippi and sometimes I mix up the name (laughter). The majority of priests, religious and lay ministers who serve the black community in the United States still are not from the black community and many of those people who attempt to serve among us – some of them perhaps in your dioceses – do not feel an obligation to learn or understand black history or spirituality, or culture or life – black tradition or ritual. They work for the people, but they have not learned to share life and love and laughter with the people. They somehow insulate themselves from the real lives of the people because they don't feel “comfortable” with black people. I travel all over the Country and I see it – black people within the Church – black priests – sometimes even black bishops who are invisible – and when I say that I mean they're not consulted. They are not included. Sometimes decisions are made that affect the black community for generations and they're made in rooms by white people behind closed doors. Some of us are poor – some of us have not had the advantages of education, but how can people still have a voice and a role in the work of the Church. Isn't that what the Church is calling us all to? I see people who are well educated and experienced, and willing to work – sometimes they're religious, sometimes they're lay – they're not included in the initial stages of planning – they're not included in the decision making. Now I know y'all are bishops and I'm not talking' about somebody coming into your dioceses trying to tell you what to do – I'm talking' about the normal Church authorized consultative processes – that attempt to enable the people of God to be about the work of the Catholic Church. If you know what I'm talking' about say “Amen”.

Attendees: “Amen!”.

See, the Church then – oh yeah, y'all talk about what do you have to if you are going' to be a multi-cultured Church - sometimes I do things your way and sometimes you do things mine (laughter). Isn't that how it is Archbishop ...yeah. (Laughter and clapping).

Black people who are still victims within the Church of paternalism – of a patronizing attitude – black people who within the Church have developed a mission mentality – they don't feel called – they don't feel responsible – they don't do anything – you know, “Let Father do it – Let the sisters do it – Let the friends and benefactors from outside do it”. That's the mission mentality and it kills us, and it kills our churches. And so, within the Church, how can we work together so that all of us have

equal access to input – equal access to opportunity – equal access to participation – Go in the room and look around and see who’s missing and send some of your folk out to call them in so that the Church can be what she claims to be – truly Catholic. They still talk about black folk in the Church – you hear it - you know you hear it over on the sideline – they say, “We lazy” - They say, “We loud” - they say “We irresponsible” - they say “We lowered the standards” – So often we’ve been denied the opportunities to learn and to practice. You learned by trial and error – isn’t that how you learned? And to grow. Some black people don’t approve of black religious expression in Catholic liturgy. They’ve been told that it’s not properly Catholic. They’ve been told that it’s not appropriately serious or dignified or solemn or controlled – that the European way is necessarily the better way. How can we teach all the people what it means to be Black and Catholic? The National Catechetical Director says that all Catechesis is supposed to be multi-cultural – but how little of it is. When we attempt to bring our black-ism to the Church, the people who do not know us say that we are being “non-Catholic” or “Separatist” – or just plain “uncouth”.

I got to say one more thing and y’all aren’t going’ to like this but that’s alright. Catholic schools have been a primary instrument of evangelization within the black community. The Church has repeatedly asked black folk “What do you want?” – “What can the Church do for you?” and black folk all over the Country are saying, “Help us with education. We need education” and the way out of poverty is through education – the opportunity – we can’t be touched without education because ignorance cripples us and kills us. Black people are still asking the Catholic Church for education. Now sometimes we don’t have the money. Are we finding alternative ways to speak to the black community in a language that they understand?

Bishop Brunini said that a lot of Catholics spend time ministering to the saved and go out there and work with the Church folks. A lot of black people out there are un-churched. We have come a long way in faith. Just look at where we’ve come from. We as black people find ourselves at the threshold of a new age and as I look about the room, I know that many of you have walked and talked – and worked and prayed – and stood with us in society and in the Church and in the name of all black folk, I thank you.

Today we’re called to walk together in a new way toward that Land of Promise and to celebrate who we are and whose we aren’t. If we, as a Church, walk together – don’t let nobody separate you – that’s one thing black folk can teach you – don’t let folks divide you up – you know, put the lay folk over here and the clergy over here – put the bishops in one room and the clergy in the other room – put the women over here and the men over here – The Church teaches us that the Church is a family of families and the family got to stay together and we know, that if we do stay together, come here brother – we know that if we do stay together – if we walk and talk and work and play and stand together in Jesus’ name – we’ll be who we say we are – truly Catholic and we shall overcome – overcome the poverty – overcome the loneliness – overcome the alienation and build together a Holy city, a new Jerusalem, a city set apart where they’ll know that we are here because we love one another.

(singing) We shall overcome.

Y’all get up.

(Sr. Thea and Attendees singing) - “We Shall Overcome” -

*“We shall overcome, we shall overcome
We shall overcome someday
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall overcome someday”*

Now bishops I’m going’ to ask you to do something – cross your left arm over your right arm – you got to move together to do that (laughter) – You got to move together to do that. All right now, walk with me – See – in the old days, you had to tighten up so that when the bullets would come – so that when the teargas would come – so that when the dogs would come – so that when the horses would come – so that when the tanks would come --- brothers and sisters would not be separated from one another and you remember what they did with the clergy and the bishops in those old days where they put them? – Right up in front (laughter) – To lead the people in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Church who suffer in South Africa – who suffer in Poland – who suffer in Ireland – who suffer in Nicaragua – in Guatemala – in Northern Ireland – all over this world – We shall live in love.

(Sr. Thea and attendees singing to the tune of “We Shall Overcome”)

*We shall live in love.
We shall live in love.
We shall live in love today.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall live in love.*

That’s all we got to do – love the Lord and love our neighbors - (*singing*) “today”

Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen.
(Extended clapping and ovation)

In the name of all the mothers and grandmothers and aunts and sisters and friends – all the women who have brought you to priesthood – who have nurtured you toward episcopacy – who have strengthened you in faith and hope and love so that you can be the Church of Jesus Christ – I accept these beautiful roses. God Bless you always.

(Extended clapping and ovation)

Bishop John Ricard: Thank you so very much Sr. Thea.

Sr. Thea: Thank you for the opportunity.

Bishop John Ricard: Sr. Thea has been called a National Treasure and I think that has been affirmed today.