

I Bring Myself

Sister Thea Bowman (1937–1990), a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, addressed the United States Catholic bishops in 1989. She sang several lines of the African-American spiritual “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child / A long way from home.” Embracing her Black, Catholic, female identity, she said:

What does it mean to be Black and Catholic? It means that 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 a gift to the church.

I bring a spirituality that . . . is contemplative and biblical and holistic, bringing to religion a totality of minds and imagination, of memory, of feeling and passion and emotion and intensity, of faith that is embodied, incarnate praise, a spirituality . . . that steps out in faith, that leans on the Lord, a spirituality that is communal, that tries to walk and talk and work and pray and play together . . .

A spirituality that in the middle of your Mass or in the middle of your sermon just might have to shout out and say, “Amen, hallelujah, thank you Jesus.” A faith that attempts to be Spirit-filled. The old ladies say if you love the Lord your God with your whole heart, [with] 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 [God] any feeble service . . .

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 are. If we as church walk together, don’t let nobody separate you. That’s one thing Black folk can teach you. Don’t let folk divide you or 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. It’s a family of families and the family got to stay together. 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 we are his because we love one another.