Cardinal Wilton Gregory speaks at a lecturn next to a painted portrait of Sister Thea Bowman

Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory speaks during a ceremony Aug. 28, 2023, where he blessed and dedicated the new Sister Thea Bowman Catholic Student Center at Howard University in the nation's capital. At left are Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl, retired archbishop of Washington, and Fr. Robert Boxie III, the Catholic chaplain at Howard University. (OSV News/Catholic Standard/Patrick Ryan)

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On a day when history was made 60 years earlier with the March on Washington, Fr. Robert Boxie III, the Catholic chaplain at Howard University in the nation's capital, noted that the campus ministry program there was making history of its own, with the blessing and dedication of its new Sister Thea Bowman Catholic Student Center.

"Today is an historic day, dedicating this new center," Boxie said Aug. 28. "It's going to be a place for students to pray, to worship, to study, to meet, to fellowship, to socialize, even to cook -- we have a kitchen -- (it will be) a place to build community and grow in authentic friendship, and a place where we can be unabashedly young,

Black, gifted and Catholic."

Howard University, one of the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities, was founded in 1867, and the Catholic campus ministry at Howard University, named HU Bison Catholic to reflect the nickname of the university's sports teams, marked its 75th anniversary this past year.

Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory blessed and dedicated the new Catholic student center at Howard University, named for the late Bowman. The Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration was a dynamic evangelist and noted educator who died of cancer in 1990. She also is one of six Black Catholics from the United States being considered for sainthood. She has the title "Servant of God."

"What a wonderful thing we do today to set aside this place as another house for God," the cardinal said.

As he dedicated the center, he prayed, "We ask that the life of Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman may inspire these young people to share their God-given gifts, rooted in the African- American and African traditions, with the church and on this campus."

The new center is located in a semi-detached row house in Washington's LeDroit Park neighborhood. According to Boxie, the home once belonged to Gen. William Birney, a Southern abolitionist who served in the Union Army during the Civil War. After the war, Birney moved to Washington to establish a law practice.

Boxie opened the ceremony noting that "no event that involves Sister Thea Bowman is without music, is without singing a song," and in homage to the woman religious who was known for her soaring singing voice, he led the students, alumni and guests in singing the spiritual "We Have Come This Far by Faith."

To applause from attendees, he introduced Gregory, noting he is "the first African American cardinal in the history of the Roman Catholic Church.'" Pope Francis made him a cardinal in 2020.

Also attending the ceremony was Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl, retired archbishop of Washington, who was thanked by Gregory for helping to find financial support for the purchase of the building now housing the Catholic student center; and Washington Auxiliary Bishop Roy E. Campbell Jr., who is pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Largo, Maryland, a suburb of Washington.

Campbell, who also is president of the National Black Catholic Congress, offered a closing prayer at the ceremony. He is an alumnus of Howard University and studied zoology there.

The guests also included Redemptorist Fr. Maurice Nutt, the author of the book "Thea Bowman: Faithful and Free." A consultant to the Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi, for her canonization cause, he was her student at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans, the nation's only historically Black Catholic university. Nutt donated a large portrait of Bowman to the center, a print of a painting by Vernon Adams, a young Black Catholic artist from her home state of Mississippi.

Also attending the ceremony were several pastors of Washington parishes and members of the Knights of Peter Claver and that group's Ladies Auxiliary. Representing Howard University was Leelannee Malin, its associate dean for community engagement and strategic partnerships.

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Boxie acknowledged the presence of many Catholic students from Howard University, saying, "This is a day to celebrate you, and what God will be doing through you in this center."

Offering an opening prayer, Elei Nkata, a Howard University junior from Nigeria who is majoring in computer science and is a co-president of the Catholic campus ministry at the university, asked God to "unite the hearts of every one of us that passes through here with your love and joy, and lead us to become the sons and daughters of faith you have called us to be."

Another co-president of HU Bison Catholic, Loren Otoo -- a junior from Ghana majoring in electrical engineering -- noted that when he came to the university he sought a group where he could be connected to his Catholic faith, and he had found friends and "grown a lot in my spiritual journey" in the campus ministry program. Another Howard University student, Cameron Humes, a junior from Birmingham, Alabama, majoring in political science, read a Scripture reading at the ceremony. He serves as the liturgy chair for the campus ministry program.

Ali Mumbach, campus minister for HU Bison Catholic, spoke on Bowman's life and legacy.

"Sister Thea was a radiant disciple of Jesus Christ. People Catholic and not, Christian and not, were attracted to her exuberant spirit," said Mumbach, a graduate student working toward a master's degree in sociology at Howard University and is also working toward a master's degree in theology at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies.

She quoted part of a dramatic address that Bowman gave to the nation's Catholic bishops in 1989, in which she said that as a Black Catholic, "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."

Mumbach pointed out Bowman's special connection to Howard University: She spoke at the school after the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Naming the university's new Catholic student center after Bowman honors her role as a Black Catholic leader, she said.

"We as Black people have gifts to share with the church. This is a part of our ministry at Howard," Mumbach said. "In HU Bison Catholic, we are raising up and equipping the next Black Catholic leaders. We hope that this is the first of many Bowman Centers on HBCU campuses – that in the same way there are Newman Centers to remember and honor the great work of (St.) John Newman, we can celebrate, commemorate and carry on the legacy of Sister Thea Bowman."

After the ceremony, Nutt, who wrote Bowman's biography, said he was very moved that Howard University's new Catholic student center was named for her.

"She was my teacher, my mentor and my spiritual mother," he told the Catholic Standard, Washington's archdiocesan newspaper. "It was hard to hold back the tears, because I know how much this would mean to Sister Thea Bowman. She loved her time in Washington, D.C. It was here she became greatly aware of her identity of being Black and Catholic. She was inspired by the large number of Black Catholics in the archdiocese, and they welcomed her with open arms."

He added, "I know she will inspire [the students here] to share their gifts of Blackness, not only with Howard University, but with the whole church."

In Washington, Bowman earned a master's and a doctorate degree in English from The Catholic University of America, and in 2022, a street at the campus was renamed as Sister Thea Bowman Drive. That same spring, Georgetown University renamed its chapel in Copley Hall after her.