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(Courtesy of the Diocese of Jackson)

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The Diocese of Jackson will soon hold a closing ceremony for the diocesan phase of the sainthood cause for Servant of God Thea Bowman, the Mississippi religious sister who helped lead the Black Catholic Movement.

Bishop Joseph Kopacz will celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving during Black History Month at the Cathedral of St. Peter the Apostle on Monday, Feb. 9, followed by official proceedings to mark the transition of the cause to the Roman Phase, which could soon see Bowman named "Venerable" by the pope.

The diocesan phase, which involves years of research and information gathering on the life and work of a sainthood candidate, was slightly behind schedule for Bowman. Diocesan archivist and chancellor Mary Woodward said in October 2024 that there were hopes the process would be completed last summer.

"We invite you to pray for the cause, especially for the historical commission, the theological censors, the transcribers, and the postulator as we continue to follow this unique and noble path," Woodward wrote.

"And of course, ask SOG Sr. Thea to guide us from above with patience and joy."

In November of last year, Woodward shared that the diocesan phase was in its final stages, including the finalization of official biographical and other research that will be sent to Rome after the ceremony in February.

"As mentioned above, the small details of bringing the Acts together involve strict formatting, numbering thousands of pages for corresponding index sections, and transcribing dozens of audio interviews," Woodward noted.

"Margin widths, five-digit page numbers, consistent source citations all are part of the work of the historical commission and chancellor. Truly, it is a labor of love for all involved."

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Bowman is one of seven African-Americans on the path to Catholic sainthood, and one of three currently at the first stage (which accords the title "Servant of God"). She died of cancer in 1990 at age 52 after serving in the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration since her early teens. A gifted orator, singer, writer and academic, Bowman was influential in the fusion of African-American and Catholic liturgy during the 20th century and became internationally known for her anti-racist and pro-Black activism.

Bowman came under discussion for sainthood not long after her death, and her canonization cause was opened by Kopacz in 2018, receiving the approval of the U.S. bishops as a whole the same year. She has since become the namesake of numerous institutions around the country, including student centers and residence halls at various universities, public and private schools for children and the Catholic campus ministries at two HBCUs.

Bowman was also the subject of a 2022 documentary, "Going Home Like a Shooting Star: Thea Bowman's Journey to Sainthood," and a life-size statue of her was installed at St. Peter's Cathedral in 2024.

In 2025, the Diocese of Jackson launched the official Sr. Thea Bowman Guild, which will formally promote her cause. Membership is open to all Bowman devotees and involves a yearly fee that supports the cause's expenses. The Roman phase is considered to be the most costly in the sainthood process, as officials in Rome compile documents from the diocesan phase into a positio, which is presented to a voting commission and the Vatican's Dicastery for the Causes of Saints. If approved, the pope can then declare a candidate "Venerable." (The entire sainthood process can range in cost from several thousand dollars to around $1 million.)

The last two stages of the process, beatification and canonization, allow for public devotion — including the recognition of holy relics, having a shrine with images, becoming the namesake of churches, and having official Masses associated with their veneration and feast day. To date, no Black American has been declared a Catholic "blessed" or saint.

Next month's event for Bowman in Jackson will begin at St. Peter's Cathedral at 12pm CT and will include Catholic bishops and other clergy from throughout the Ecclesiastical Province of Mobile, which includes dioceses across Mississippi and Alabama. Also present will be the postulator for the cause's upcoming Roman phase, Dr. Emanuele Spedicato.

This story was first published in the Black Catholic Messenger.