

Singer and activist Harry Belafonte and Servant of God Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration from Canton, Miss., are pictured in an undated archival photo. Belafonte met Sr. Thea at Xavier University of Louisiana. A sainthood cause for Sr. Thea, who died in 1990, was opened in 2018 by the Diocese of Jackson, Miss. The diocesan phase of her cause was closed after a Mass Feb. 9, 2026, and all the documents will be transferred to the Vatican's Dicastery for the Causes of Saints for further investigation. (OSV News/Courtesy of Xavier University of Louisiana, Archives & Special Collections)

Jennifer Brinker

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Jackson, Miss. — February 11, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Servant of God Thea Bowman was a beacon for the Church to embrace more authentically the essence of what it means to be Catholic, Bishop Joseph Kopacz told Massgoers at the Cathedral of St. Peter the Apostle in Jackson.

"To love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself portrays her lifelong commitment," he said in his homily at a Feb. 9 Mass of thanksgiving marking the conclusion of the diocesan phase of Sr. Thea's canonization cause. "Her loving heart, her prophetic spirit, her brilliant mind and boundless stamina, even in illness, inspired many."

The Mass was attended by friends and acquaintances of Sr. Thea, representatives from her religious order, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, members of the historical commission who were part of the diocesan investigation and students from Sr. Thea Bowman School in Jackson.

An official closing session of the diocesan phase of the canonization process followed the Mass, where the cause's leaders ceremoniously sealed several boxes containing the diocesan phase's documents and findings. In all, 10 boxes containing two sets of documents including more than 15,000 pages each, will be sent to the apostolic nunciature in Washington and then transferred to the Vatican's Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, which will further investigate the cause.

Jackson's Bishop Kopacz, the main celebrant at the Mass, was among several

bishops who witnessed the closing session. Concelebrants included Archbishop Mark Rivituso and retired Archbishop Thomas Rodi of Mobile, Alabama, and Bishop Steven Raica and retired Bishop Robert Baker of Birmingham, Alabama.

Kopacz in 2018 opened the cause for Sr. Thea, a native of Mississippi who was born in Yazoo City and raised in Canton. She was the only African American member of the Wisconsin-based Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Before she died of cancer in 1990 at age 52, she was a widely known speaker, evangelizer and singer.

Nearly eight years after the cause was opened, Kopacz described the moment of closing the diocesan phase of the investigation as a blessing, especially for those who have been inspired by Sr. Thea's life.

"There's considerable joy in the African American community," he said. "It radiates throughout the whole diocese. Our Hispanic population is very proud of Sr. Thea Bowman, too. They look to her as someone who had done a lot in her life and inspires them, in spite of obstacles, to continue forward. She had a great passion and love for God, and she saw the Church as the body of Christ as being for all. She taught people to be proud of their culture, and yet see the universality of the Church."

Among the documents and findings related to Sr. Thea are interviews with more than 40 witnesses as well as her writings, articles and other items pertaining to her life, said Emanuele Spedicato, the postulator for the cause who has been charged with sending the documents to Rome.

There are main components of a canonization investigation, which include a proven reputation for holiness, a rigorous examination of the candidate's writings and life, the testimony of witnesses regarding heroic virtue and the investigation of at least one miracle attributed to their intercession.

Advertisement

Once the Vatican accepts the acts of the diocesan investigation, the sealed boxes will be opened and then begins the work of summarizing the information, said Spedicato, who will be tasked with writing the *positio*, which lays out the case for sainthood. From there, it is sent to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints and then

ultimately to the pope.

"The most exciting part is being here today and showing the people the formalities (of the investigation) that are not only formalities but it's for a purpose," Spedicato said.

Sr. Thea is among seven Black Catholics with active sainthood causes — dubbed the "Saintly Seven."

Of the seven, four have been declared "Venerable": Mother Mary Lange, who founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first Catholic order of African American women religious, in Baltimore; Fr. Augustus Tolton from Chicago, the first Catholic priest in the United States known to be Black; Pierre Toussaint from New York City, known for his works of charity; and Mother Henriette Delille, foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans.

Two others, like Sr. Thea, have the title "Servant of God": Julia Greeley, who was born into slavery and after her emancipation later moved to Denver, where she was known for her works of charity; and Fr. Martin de Porres Maria Ward, a Conventual Franciscan and Boston native who served the poor and the sick on mission in Brazil well into the late 1990s.

Among those who attended the Mass at the Jackson cathedral was Myrtle Otto, one of Sr. Thea's pupils at Holy Child Jesus School in Canton.

After joining the Francsican Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, Sr. Thea returned to the school where she once was a student to teach music and English literature. She often stressed the importance of receiving a good education but also knew how to have fun, too, Otto said.

"We respected her in the utmost," she said, adding that Sr. Thea's legacy should live on in how we treat others.

"Always learn to be kind," Otto said. "Always learn to give people what's due to them. She was a strong woman, and she taught us how to be strong. Regardless of what goes on, you pray and you go on and you'll be successful. She's now gone to glory with God."

Several members of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration leadership were in attendance, including Sr. Georgia Christensen, who knew Sr. Thea from the time they were junior professed sisters.

Years ago during one of her assignments at a predominantly Black school in California, Sr. Thea had come to help out for a brief period and was encouraging with the students, Sr. Georgia recalled.

"She always had a spirit of joy about her," she told the St. Louis Review, news outlet of the St. Louis Archdiocese, which Sr. Thea visited on numerous occasions in the 1980s.

"She was able to break into song at any time, just praising God and making others happy. It touches the soul, and what it says is her life was a life worth living," Sr. Georgia recalled.

As part of their community's perpetual adoration, the Franciscan sisters include a prayer at the end of every hour with the line: "All praise and all thanksgiving, be every moment thine."

"I couldn't help but think of that here today," Sr. Georgia said. "This is a moment of glory to God and Thea was the cause of it."