

African American Spirituality and Song

This reflection appeared recently in the online blog of Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM.

Black Song Is Sacred Song

Monday, February 8, 2021

Thea Bowman (1937–1990), a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, was a powerful communicator, deeply passionate about Jesus, the Catholic Church, and her African American heritage. I [Fr. Rohr] begin today with her words on the history and significance of what she celebrates as Black sacred song.

From the African Mother Continent, African men and women, through the Middle Passage, throughout the Diaspora, to the Americas, carried the African gift and treasure of sacred song. To the Americas, African men and women brought sacred songs and chants that reminded them of their homelands and that sustained them in separation and in captivity, song to respond to all life situations, and the ability to create new songs to answer new needs.

African Americans in sacred song preserved the memory of African religious rites and symbols, of a holistic African spirituality, of rhythms and tones and harmonics that communicated their deepest feelings across barriers of region and language.

African Americans in fields and quarters, at work, in secret meetings, in slave festivals, in churches, camp meets and revivals, wherever they met or congregated, consoled and strengthened themselves and one another with sacred song—moans, chants, shouts, psalms, hymns, and jubilees, first African songs, then African American songs. In the crucible of separation and suffering, African American sacred song was formed...

As early as 1691, slaves in colonial homes, slave galleries or separate pews participated in worship services with white slave holders. They learned to sing the traditional European psalms and hymns . . . which they loved and adapted to their own style and use

Black sacred song is soulful song—

1. *holistic*: challenging the full engagement of mind, imagination, memory, feeling, emotion, voice, and body;
2. *participatory*: inviting the worshipping community to join in contemplation, in celebration and in prayer;
3. *real*: celebrating the immediate concrete reality of the worshipping community—grief or separation, struggle or oppression, determination or joy—bringing that reality to prayer within the community of believers;
4. *spirit-filled*: energetic, engrossing, intense;
5. *life-giving*: refreshing, encouraging, consoling, invigorating, sustaining...

Black sacred song celebrates our God, [God's] goodness, [God's] promise, our faith and hope, our journey toward the promise. Black sacred song carries melodies and tonalities, rhythms and

harmonies; metaphors, symbols and stories of faith that speak to our hearts; words, phrases and images that touch and move us...

Black sacred song has been at once a source and an expression of Black faith, spirituality and devotion. By song, our people have called the Spirit into our hearts, homes, churches, and communities.

The music Sister Thea describes is the gift of a deeply incarnate faith. The people who allowed the spirituals to sing through them knew the presence of a God who existed within themselves and in the difficult circumstances of their lives. In her final years, my [Richard Rohr's] own mother listened to Thea preach and sing. She found immense comfort through witnessing Sister Thea's love for God even while Thea journeyed with cancer.

Reference:

Thea Bowman, "The Gift of African American Sacred Song" in *Lead Me, Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal* (G.I.A. Publications: 1987), [iv, v, vi, viii].