

The Woman Who Laughed With God

**1**

Before you begin, please read the introduction on the right to yourself.

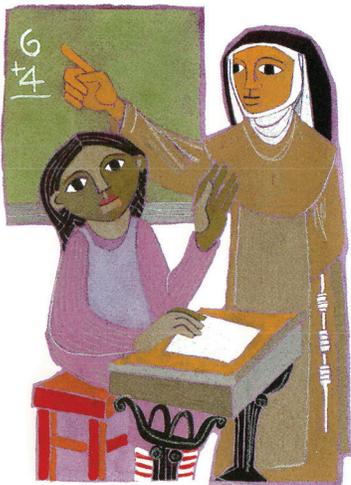
2

With the help of your child, prepare the meeting space. Pull out your Bible, light some candles, and add any other decoration you'd like to make the space beautiful.

Then begin with a prayer.

3

Getting started. Discuss together: What makes you laugh? Has there ever been a time when you “laughed with God” because you were so happy? What happened?

**1**

Have one family member read the text below out loud or take turns. Along the way, clarify anything your child might not understand.

Not so very long ago, there lived a little girl who was the joy of many peoples' lives. Her name was Bertha Bowman. Her father, Theo, was the only African American doctor in their town in Mississippi. He was a tireless worker and gave much to his community. Her mother, Mary Esther, was a teacher. Both of Bertha's parents were generous, loving people. Bertha must have been proud indeed to be the daughter of two such wonderful persons.

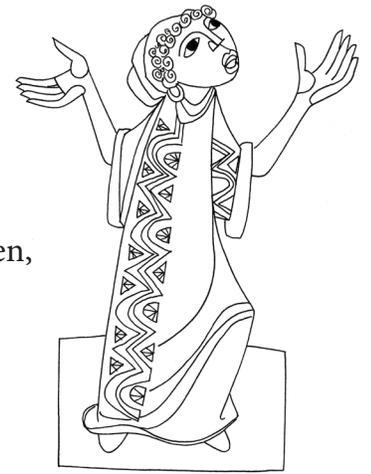
In Bertha's community, the "old folks" (as she called them) were respected and listened to. No one listened any better than Bertha. They taught her songs with words that would burn into her soul and music that lifted her heart. They told her their stories. Some were happy ones about families and friends and good times. Some were sad tales of their experiences with slavery and prejudice. The happy stories would send Bertha skipping or dancing home. The sad ones made her think long and hard about how sometimes people use skin color as a reason to hate those they don't know. Slavery was especially hard for Bertha to understand. How could one person "own" another? "Only God made us and only God owns us," she reasoned wisely.

It would have been easy for Bertha to learn to dislike and fear the white people who had done stupid and cruel things to her people. After all, some still continued to do such things. But that's not the message her parents and her elderly friends gave her. Later in her life, Bertha would tell others, "The old folks taught me how to face life and pain and even death."

When Bertha was ten years old, she went to a Catholic school. A group of women religious (sisters) taught there. They were called the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Here again she listened and learned. These sisters told her more stories about God and Jesus. Her spirit continued to sing and dance with the songs of her people and the words of these lessons. Bertha became a Catholic and, when she finished high school, she joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. She took a new name, Sister Thea, in honor of her father.

Sister Thea left the South and went to Wisconsin to study. The harsh winters were certainly different from what she was used to in Mississippi, but there was nothing cold about Sister Thea. She could warm up a room just by walking into it. Her sisters in the religious community knew that Sister Thea was a very talented woman. They

encouraged her to study even more. She went to Washington, D.C., and earned her Ph.D. in English literature. After this time, she returned to her home in Mississippi, where she taught elementary school. As usual, Sister Thea was as generous as her parents and grandparents had been.



Sister Thea was called by the Spirit to serve in a very special way. Often, we think there is only one way to be, one way to pray, one way to act. We want people to be just like us, and if they aren't, we ignore or reject them. Sister Thea didn't believe that God wanted us to be all the same. If so, why would God have made so much variety? She knew that no one person's way was better than another's. She used to say, "No matter who you are or what your background, always remember to be proud because you can say, 'I am a child of God. I am somebody.'" Sister Thea began to work with the Office of Intercultural Affairs and the Institute of Black Catholic Studies.

Some people teach with blackboards. Some teach with books. Sister Thea taught with these, yes, but she also wrote on peoples' hearts. She wrote a message of love and respect.

Sister Thea never forgot the stories and songs of the old folks or the traditions of African Americans. She wore the beautiful, colorful robes and turbans of various African nations. Whenever she got the chance, she would preach to people, all kinds of people. Even if they began quiet, they didn't stay quiet for long. Sister Thea would raise her head and sing out, and soon everyone would be singing and clapping with her. Joy is contagious. We "catch" it from each other!

People wondered where she got all her energy. Students were amazed at how happy she was. Everyone she met left her presence a little closer to Jesus. How was she able to do all this? Sister Thea laughed when people asked her. "Just go ahead and do it, whatever it is," she would say, "and leave it up to the Lord to decide. The old folks taught me a simple prayer, 'Use me, Lord, use me.' You can't go wrong if you're letting the Lord use you."

All of Sister Thea's life was this prayer. She was being used by the Lord when she taught or sang or spoke. The Lord used her to bring joy into fear, and love into prejudice.

In 1984 Sister Thea faced another great challenge. She found out she had cancer and that she would soon die from it. She certainly had her moments of sorrow and tears, but her laughter stayed as well. "Even when you are scared," Sister Thea told others, "you got to keep on steppin'." She had great pain with her illness, and eventually had to use a wheelchair to get around. Still, even if her legs weren't cooperating, her spirit danced forward.



Sister Thea continued to preach and teach all around the world. Thousands of

people got a chance to hear her in the last years of her life. She would be lifted up, wheelchair and all, onto a stage. “She looks so weak,” the members of her audience would think. Then she would start singing, talking, and laughing, and everyone would feel her power and strength. This was the power of the Spirit that was in Sister Thea and was Sister Thea.

She died on March 30, 1990, but her songs stayed with us. She has provided us with video and audiotapes of her presentations and music. She left behind smarter and kinder people, more likely to understand that there are many ways to pray and live as Catholics. Now she is in heaven singing and talking with the God she loves, the God she has laughed with since she was a young girl in Mississippi.

Differences in race or culture divide us if we shut our eyes to the gifts we have to offer each other. Sister Thea opened our eyes and our hearts. She enjoyed life and music, and that celebration became her unending prayer. The holy and unifying Spirit will do this for us as well. We, too, can make our whole lives into prayer.

1

Now discuss the story with your child. Use the following or other questions:

1. What most struck you about the story? Why?
2. What does the story about Sister Thea teach YOU about how to live as a Catholic?
3. When do you do your best praying? Where? Alone or with others?

2

Have your child start their activity on the next page. (The words hidden in the picture are “I am God’s child.”) Then continue to read below.

3

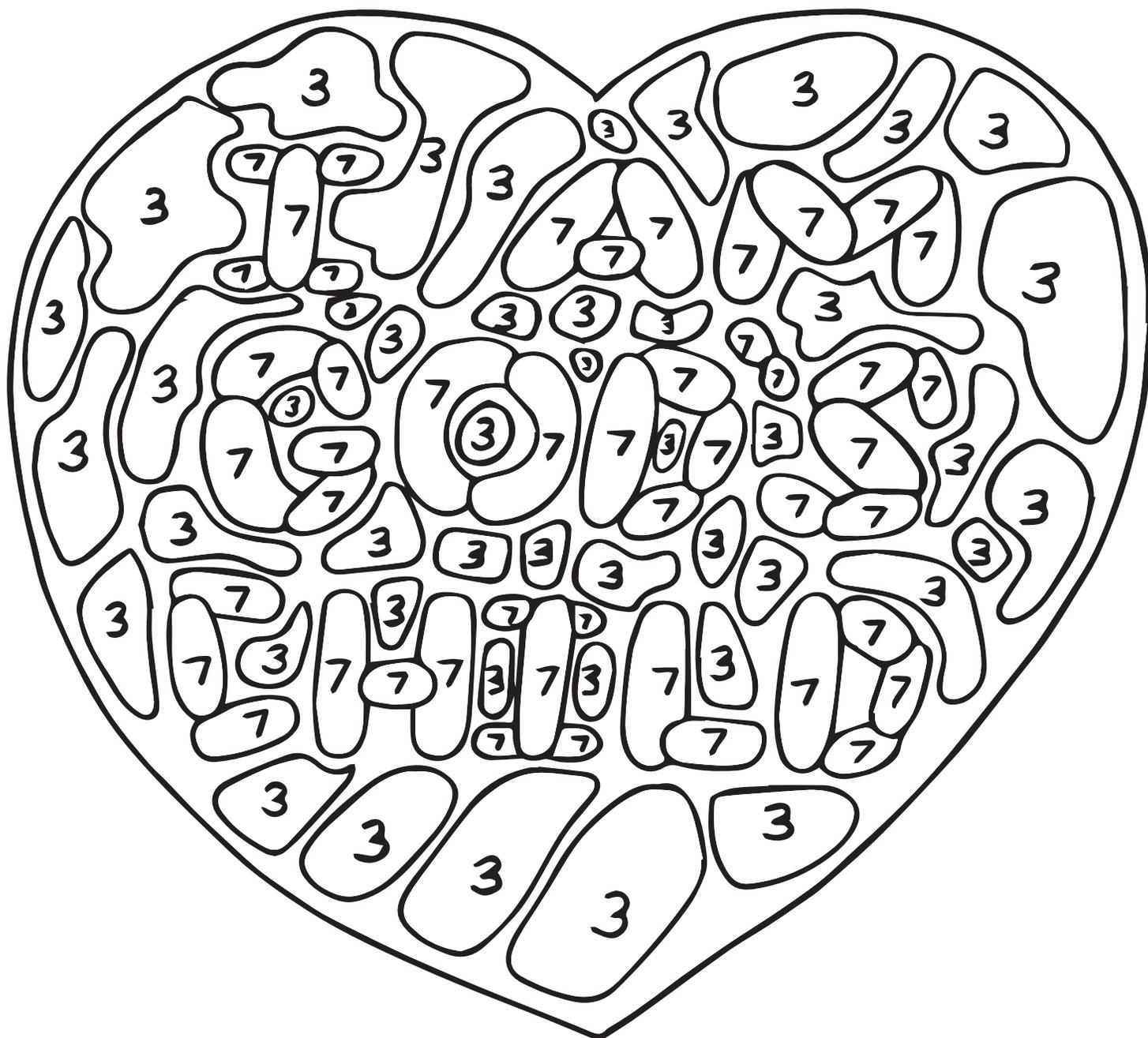
Just for you: When we pray individually, we bring back to God the rich diversity of creation.

If we limit ourselves to one way to pray, the way most common to our culture, we will lose opportunities to grow in our awareness at God. We are created as individuals who bring our own experiences, background, and stories to our prayers. The beauty of the Spirit of Jesus lies in our recognition of the diversity of humanity. There are many ways to pray!

Who We Are, Whose We Are

Sister Thea used to say "Always remember who you are and whose you are." Using the color code below, fill in the spaces in the heart. Inside the heart is Sister Thea's reminder of who and whose we are.

3 = red 7 = yellow



How Do You Pray?

1

Help your child get started on their activity on the next page, and then continue to the next step.

2

Just for you: There are many ways to pray, and we use them at different times. Sister Thea was very clear in her message to us: It is not important *how* we pray. It is important *that* we pray.

3

Please look at the list below (your young person has a similar list). How many of these “ways of prayer” have you tried?

1. Place a check mark by any of these you have tried.
2. Place a star by the ones you like best.
3. Place a question mark by the ones you would like to try.



- Journaling (writing down your thoughts, prayers, or observations about how God is working in your life)
- Experiencing God outside in nature
- Sunday Mass
- Weekday Mass
- Talking with God
- Saying the rosary
- Sitting alone at home aware of God's presence
- Singing a song about God
- Reading the Bible
- Listening to music that brings you closer to God
- Offering up our actions as we help others or listen to them when they need a friend.
- Other (please describe)

Many Ways to Pray

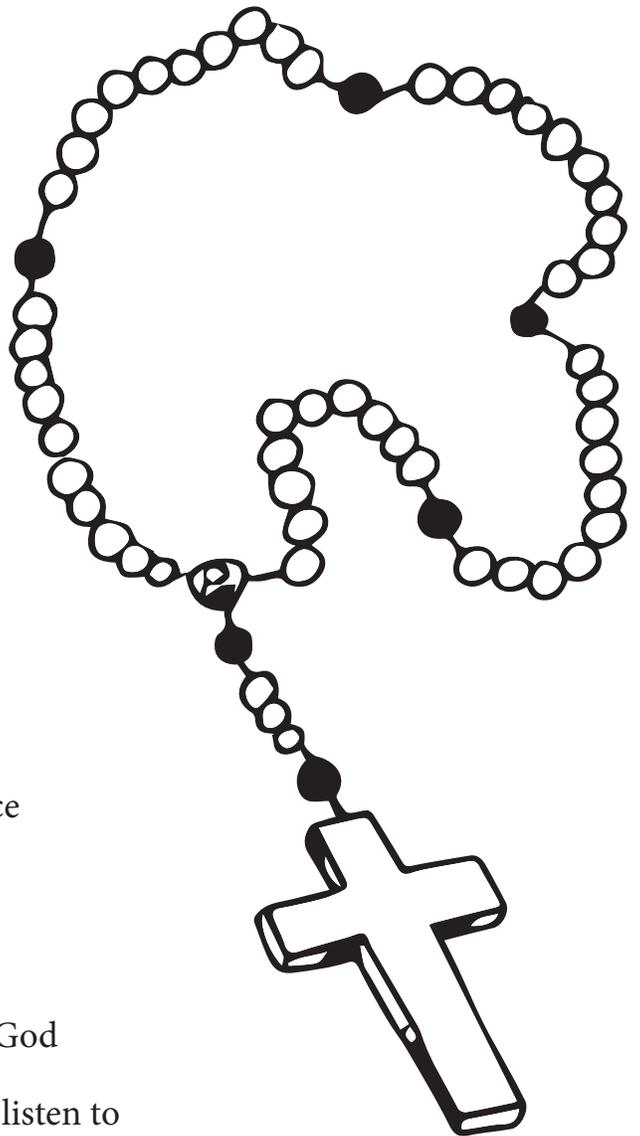
There are many ways to pray. Some may not even seem like praying, but they are. Read the list below.
(Your adult partner has the same list.)

X Put an X next to the ways you have prayed.

***** Place a star by the one you like best.

? Place a question mark by the ones you might like to try.

- Journaling (writing down your thoughts, prayers, or observations about how God is working in your life)
- Experiencing God outside in nature
- Sunday Mass
- Weekday Mass
- Talking with God
- Saying the rosary
- Sitting alone at home aware of God's presence
- Singing a song about God
- Reading the Bible
- Listening to music that brings you closer to God
- Offering up our actions as we help others or listen to them when they need a friend.
- Other (please describe)



Exploring Prayer

1

Talk with a variety of people about when they most like to pray and how they pray. This group could include your pastor, a pastor from another tradition, members of your family, your Church, or other faiths.

Go to the library and see if you can rent a DVD or borrow a prayer book from another faith tradition. How are we different? How are we alike?



Closing Ritual

2

Think of a song you could both listen to and reflect upon together. Where is God in the lyrics of this music? Thank God for all our differences and for the rich diversity in our world!

