

waiting for a miracle

by dean storm

photography
by david

Colwell



Sister Virginie Fish, 68, at the Catonsville motherhouse of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

115 years after her death, the founder of America's first black convent is poised to become a saint. So why is her Baltimore-based order falling apart?

In a beautiful Palm Sunday morning, filtered sunbeams pour through the tall stained-glass windows of a Catonsville chapel, bathing the Oblate Sisters of Providence in delicate patterns of multi-colored light. The 24 members of this Catholic order sit quietly this morning, thinly sprinkled across dozens of pews to fill the expanse of their worship area.

James
h.h. Joubert and Mother
Lange meet the first time



first four Oblate
sisters of Providence
make vows
July 2 - 1829



For nearly four hours, these women have been praying and singing, raising their voices an extra decibel to fill the empty air around them, a determined—if heartbreaking—effort in the face of this order's empty bank account and dwindling membership numbers. Now, as the mass nears completion, many of the nuns are eager to begin the order's private, final prayer.

At the front of the room, a tall, gaunt priest leans over his podium, staring across the nearly empty room. "Mass is over," his rich voice crackles through a cheap loud-speaker, as distorted as it is amplified. "You may now go in peace." He bows his head, closes his massbook, and exits. But the sisters do not move.

Raising their heads, they speak in unison: "Almighty and Eternal God, You granted Mother Mary Lange extraordinary trust in Your providence. . . . Deign to raise her to the highest honors of the altar in order that, through her intercession, more souls may come to a deeper understanding and more fervent love of You."

Individually, the sisters in this room may appear meek and elderly. Many of them have gray hairs poking out from under their habits. One, Sister Carmela Duncan, is 85 years old with arthritis in both knees. Another, Sister Mary Avila, has had a life-threatening aneurism.

But speaking together, they become larger than the room itself, their collective voice resonant with hope and faith. Hope that their order can overcome its economic hardship, and faith that their founder, Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, will help them do it.

WHEN HAITIAN REFUGEE ELIZABETH LANGE decided to open a black parochial school and convent in downtown Baltimore in 1829, the idea seemed more than a little crazy. Black children in this country were not allowed to go to school, and black Catholics were forced to worship in church basements. It was a time of slavery, over a century before the civil rights movement.

But Lange held true to her vision, literally changing the rules to open the Oblate Sisters of Providence convent and the St. Frances School for Colored Girls. A precedent was set.

Now, 115 years after her death, Lange continues to break racial stereotypes. On the threshold of the next millennium, she is poised to complete the second step in a six-step process toward sainthood. If she is canonized, she will become the nation's first black female saint, and only the second saint from Maryland.

But even as Lange's life is honored throughout the world, Baltimore's Oblate Sisters struggle to stay afloat.

Has Mother Lange's success in integrating the Catholic Church made her black-oriented order unnecessary? And is Lange's bid for sainthood the primary cause that keeps them together?

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS DISCRIMINATION. And in Elizabeth Lange's early life, she knew it well.

in their diaries,
the sisters
worried about the
possibility of being
lynched for
teaching colored
children or just
for being a black
woman with the
audacity to wear a
nun's habit.

As a teenager in Haiti, Lange watched as a slave rebellion amplified the segregation in the Catholic Church. Lange fled to nearby Cuba, where she lived for less than three years before fleeing that embattled nation as well. After a stormy voyage up the Atlantic, Lange's ship docked in Baltimore's harbor in 1813.

But the journey wasn't over. In Baltimore, Lange found a Catholic community nearly as divided as the one she left in Haiti. Not only did blacks have to worship in chapel basements, they also had to take communion after the white parishioners. Rather than travel again, Lange decided to stay and fight for change.

Knowing the Catholic Church would be reluctant to accept the world's first black nunnery, she focused first on educating black children in her home. She did not have to look far to find black Catholics who were good educators or black children interested in a parochial education. Members of Baltimore's black community, it seemed, had been waiting for her.

Nevertheless, money was tight for Lange's school, and eventually, she was forced to shut it down. Then she met with Father James Joubert, a white Sepulician priest, who agreed to rent a building in his name and convinced his order to contribute the start-up costs, which totaled \$204.17, the equivalent of almost \$3,000 today. In a two-story white brick house at 5 St. Mary's Court behind St. Mary's Seminary, the

Dean Storm is a Baltimore freelance writer.

nation's first black parochial school was founded, which Lange named the St. Frances School for Colored Girls.

It lasted six months. When their landlord, George Hoffman, discovered that black children were being educated on his property, he asked the sisters to vacate before their lease was up. Perhaps embarrassed by his own bigotry, he claimed that he wanted to rebuild the house.

But shortly thereafter, Lange received some good news: The Archdiocese had approved her request to open the world's first black Catholic order. Almost immediately, on July 2, 1829, Lange and her three teachers held a small ceremony in which Father Joubert administered their vows. It would be more than two years before Pope Gregory XVI would approve their order, but the Oblate Sisters of Providence had been officially sanctioned by their local community. Lange became Mother Superior of the order and remained principal of the school.

As if on a roll, Lange also received enough financial assistance from the Sepulician order to purchase a building at 48 Richmond Street, now called Read Street, which became their home for the next four decades. It seemed that the Oblates' troubles were over.

But racism was still rampant. In their diaries, the sisters worried about the possibility of being lynched for teaching colored children, or just for being a black woman with the audacity to wear a nun's habit. They gained some security from their association with the white Sepulician order of Father Joubert, but when Joubert died in 1843, Baltimore priests hinted that the Oblates should disband to become house servants, according to Oblate records.

Lange didn't budge. "She was a very humble woman," says Sister Mary Claudina Sanz, the order's current superior general. "But she knew what she wanted and she made sure it happened."

Mother Lange's steadfastness paid off. By her later years, she had become so much a part of Baltimore's Catholic community that, in the eyes of many whites, she transcended race, a feat which had seemed an impossibility just a half-century earlier. At her golden jubilee (which celebrated her 50 years as a sister), the convent was flooded by well-wishers, both black and white, including civic and

ecclesiastical dignitaries, lay people, and former students. She had held her order together through poverty, racism, and hardship. But Mother Lange was getting old. The unspoken question was: Would the Oblates be able to carry on without her?

THAT QUESTION *STILL* HAUNTS MANY OF THE Oblates.

"Racism is alive and well," says Sister Mary Virginie Fish, who is leading Mother Lange's bid for sainthood. "In reality, we have not come a long way. There's no integration. If there was really integration, white women would be knocking at our doors just like black women are knocking on white orders' doors for entrance."

Unfortunately, as university multiculturalists lament, that one-way tide *is* integration; the minority group usually conforms to join the majority, but the majority rarely conforms to join the minority. It's the proverbial melting into the pot.

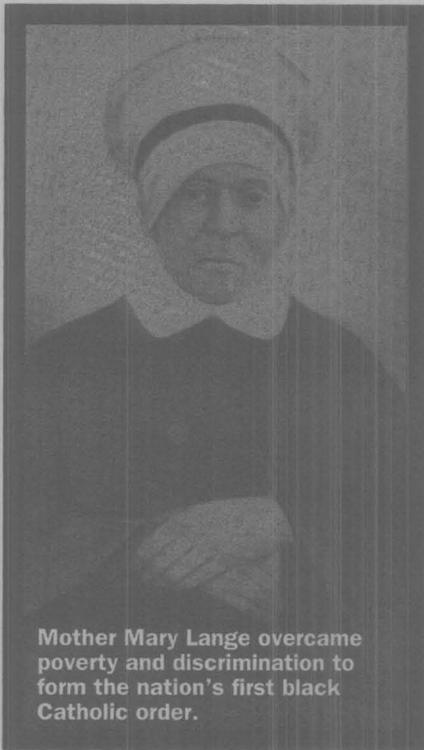
In that sense, integration has taken a significant toll on black orders like the Oblates. Since Mother Lange started the convent, the doors have been open to white nuns. But currently, the Oblates count only one white nun among their ranks.

In addition, their membership of black nuns has rapidly diminished since the 1970s. In the first half of this century, the order had chapters in 34 states and foreign countries, with a membership of over 300 nuns. Today, they exist in seven states, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic, their number reduced to 124 sisters. Even more importantly, fewer than 10 Oblate sisters are under the age of 40.

The decline in membership is echoed in the reduction of the services the Baltimore Oblate chapter can provide. Their orphanage no longer operates. Their boarding school closed in the early 1970s. Even their daycare center, once so popular that a mother-to-be registered for the waiting list, holds only a fraction of its maximum capacity. Only the school, now called the St. Frances Academy, still meets capacity.

The shrinking Oblates are not entirely alone. Across the nation, Catholic institutions have struggled over the last several decades, in contrast to the explosion of Catholicism in other parts of the globe like

Continued on page 121



Mother Mary Lange overcame poverty and discrimination to form the nation's first black Catholic order.



WAITING FOR A MIRACLE

Continued from page 77

Africa and Eastern Europe. But the Oblates' woes are unusually pronounced, their future—even their *raison d'être*—in a haze of uncertainty.

ALL THIS DEFEAT MAKES MORALE HARD to maintain in the mother house. For reassurance, the Oblates think back on their remarkable history. In some sense, all convents are anachronistic, a part of modern society rooted deeply in the past, but the Oblates are especially focused on their history. For them, the quest of Mother Lange—and her imminent canonization—is their last plentiful source of inspiration.

Needless to say, when asked about Lange's prospects, the sisters are beyond optimistic; they are expectant. Sister Fish shrugs: "Mother Lange did for blacks what Mother Seton did for whites."

She's talking about Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, whose life story is remarkably similar to Lange's. For one thing, Seton was also a resident of Maryland and worshipped in the same chapel as Lange during the late part of Seton's life. Like Mother Lange, Seton had founded a religious order, the Emmitsburg-based Sisters of Charity. But Seton's greatest accomplishment was founding the nation's first Catholic parochial school.

For Seton, the road to sainthood was not an easy one; it's not supposed to be. Even if you've never committed a sin, even if you've committed your life to the church, even if you've converted a million believers, there's no guarantee of canonization. St. Patrick, St. Joan of Arc, and St. Nicholas all had to go the rough distance. For Seton, who was canonized in 1975, the rigorous process took 75 years to complete.

Mother Lange may take just as long, but she's well on her way. In April 1991, then-Archbishop William H. Keeler approved her as a candidate for sainthood, completing the first of six steps to canonization.

For the next two steps, the Oblates have to demonstrate that Mother Lange was a heroic servant of God. To that end, they've prepared and submitted a 30-page account of her life's work. When Cardinal Keeler's review commission approves the document, completing the second step, Lange's life story will be sent to the Vatican for approval by a Roman commission and the Pope, the third step.

Next, the miracles. Parishioners pray for the prospective saint to perform a miracle. Then, if three miracles happen, that's evidence that God has chosen the person for sainthood.

Of course, the miracles themselves have to become validated. First, a reported miracle has to be approved by Sister Fish. If she finds it credible, she passes it on to a local postulator and Cardinal Keeler. Then they pass it to a Roman commission and the Vatican. Only if the Pope gives the green light does the miracle count toward canonization.

So far, the Oblates have considered a number of reported miracles, but Sister Fish, being cautious, hasn't yet approved any. A prospective miracle has to be more than just a lucky coincidence; Fish has to believe the event could not have happened without divine intervention.

In theory, the three miracles could be reported tomorrow, and Mother Lange's canonization could occur in less than a month. But the process is backed up, and chances are it will be decades coming.

The irony is, in the nearly vacant chapel of the Oblates, the quest for Lange's sainthood is itself the order's most powerful source of sustenance. Perhaps a long route to canonization is just what the Oblates need, buying enough time to get their feet back on the ground.

IN THE DIMLY LIT MOTHER LANGE Exhibit Room of the Oblates' mother house, Sister Virginie Fish has been sitting on a light green couch, surrounded by paintings of Lange and xeroxed pamphlets, neatly arranged in short stacks.

But now, she stands up, reaching for a looseleaf notebook. At 68, her frame is fragile, slightly bent over the pages of the book, from which she removes a 19th-century black-and-white map of Baltimore covered with yellow post-it notes that identify former locations of the church.

"All our previous homes have been razed except the one on 501 East Chase Street," she says quietly, pointing to one of the yellow markers, where the Oblates' school still operates. "We lived there in 1871." Her hand trails across the map, stopping at another marker. "We only lived at 5 Saint Mary's Court a few months; we moved to 610 George Street and lived there six months. We went into Richmond Street and the city wanted our house, so we had to vacate it. And that was *our* building."

She pauses. "We were not well received in a slave state in slave times with a subjugation mentality." She looks across the room to an especially large watercolor of Mother Lange, whose small face peeks out from under a pillow-sized white habit. "I guess the slowness of the process calls forth our patience, our commitment, our perseverance. This is how God teaches us. But still, it's hard to wait." 