

Heroine of the church

Catholic Review
**Mother Lange's
 contribution to
 Maryland and
 the archdiocese**

By Joseph Cosgrove
 Special to the Catholic Review

All

For two centuries Baltimore's black Catholics and their institutions have paved the way of change nationally and have enriched the history of our local church.

It was here in our city in the early 1790s that the first Catholic African-American community formed in the basement chapel of St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street. Some 70 years later in February of 1864, St. Francis Xavier Church was opened as the first black parish in the United States. Some seven years later, the Josephite Fathers located their mother house in Baltimore in 1871.

More recently the 1970s saw the emergence of the Black Catholic Caucus. Added to these and other institutional advancements are the innumerable contributions of individual African-American Catholics themselves.

Elizabeth Lange was one of these individuals who contributed so much to the history of our archdiocese and the American Catholic church. During the celebration of Women's History Month — and as we recall last month's celebration of African American History Month — the time is appropriate to mark Mother Lange's contributions to the archdiocese and the American church.

She arrived in Baltimore in the early years of the 19th century as a French-speaking refugee from political violence and turmoil in what is now Haiti. Despite the language barrier, and in the face of often virulent racial prejudice, she succeeded in making significant contributions in the area of education and welfare. **CATHOLIC REVIEW**

Perhaps her most significant contribution was the founding of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first religious order for African-American Catholics. Today 155 Oblate Sisters continue the work of their founder in ten dioceses in the United States as well as one in Costa Rica.

The early years of Elizabeth Lange (1784-1829) are now being looked into with renewed interest by historians within and outside her order. At the present time our information about her early life is limited. It is fairly certain now that she was born in Haiti.

Her mother Annette was the daughter of an affluent Jewish plantation owner (Elizabeth enjoyed the benefits of that wealth throughout her life). Her father was reported to be an unnamed slave on that plantation.

During these years Elizabeth's family made sure that she was well educated. She became fluent in Spanish in addition to her native French.

Her world was soon to be thrown into confusion. The Haitian revolution led by Toussante L'Overture displaced the white and black upper class from Haiti with whom her family was identified. **CATHOLIC REVIEW**

As a young woman Elizabeth Lange was caught up in a mass exodus from her native land. Like so many of these exiles, she and her family first went to Cuba. For some reason Elizabeth left her family behind and went on, apparently alone, to Baltimore.

There can be little doubt that what attracted Elizabeth and so many other Haitian exiles to Baltimore were the French Sulpician priests who had opened St. Mary's Seminary on the city limits in 1791 and began to minister to French-speaking Haitian refugees there. There can be little doubt that Elizabeth Lange was an active member of this community. **MAH 1 3 1991**

We know that by at least 1816 Elizabeth Lange was in Baltimore teaching black children in her house along with another Haitian emigre, Marie Magdaleine Balas. Almost certainly as a result of her own experiences, she showed from her early years a special concern for the poor. Those who could not pay were admitted free of charge to her parlor school. Except for private instructions, black children were not given any opportunity to be educated in antebellum Baltimore.

During those ten years she and Marie Magdaleine had wished to consecrate themselves to God by entering a religious order, but joining a religious order in a segregated American church was out of the question. There were no black religious orders that they could enter. **MAH 1 3 1991**

The two had a conviction, however, that God would show a way and somehow that this would happen as they continued to do his work with patience and determination.

The interest of Elizabeth Lange in providing schooling for black children coincided with the general educational interest of the Sulpician Fathers. Two priests had approached Elizabeth and Marie about starting a school for black children, but it was not until 1827 that substantial progress was made toward this goal. **CATHOLIC REVIEW**

The catalyst turned out to be the appointment of the Sulpician Father Jacques Nicholas Joubert as spiritual leader of the black, French-speaking Catholics in the *chapelle basse* at Paca Street. Father Joubert had a curious mixture of talents. He had been a tax collector for the French government in Haiti before being driven out by the revolution there. Coming to Baltimore he had taught in a girls' school in Baltimore prior to joining the order. **MAH 1 3 1991**

Upon taking over the pastoral care of the black Catholic community, he was soon convinced of the need for educated catechists for the children. He was also inclined toward "institutional" solutions of problems. Father Joubert realized that Elizabeth Lange's hopes of entering religious life and devoting herself to the education of black children would provide the solution. Elizabeth Lange now had a ready and able ally who could help to make her dreams a reality.

Events moved quickly over the next two years. A key moment came in April 1928 when the new archbishop of Baltimore, James Whitfield, gave not only his approval but his full backing for the new order of black religious women, the Oblate Sisters of Providence. **MAH 1 3 1991**

It is difficult to describe accurately the depth of racial prejudice in the early 19th century. The idea of black women wearing a religious habit was "offensive" to many within and outside the Catholic church. If that was not enough, a great deal of anti-Catholic sentiment was directed toward religious communities of women.

Fears of "slave" revolts caused restrictive laws affecting free blacks to be passed in Maryland. The threat of violence from many different quarters was real.

Elizabeth Lange and the two women who would form the nucleus of the new order expressed their own misgivings, especially about wearing a habit publicly.

Archbishop Whitfield refused to take the cautious approach. He said he saw "the finger of God" in all of this. He recognized, like Father Joubert and others, that the Spirit was active in this foundation and that

nothing, especially fear, should stand in its way. "Do not pay any attention to anything that might be said," Archbishop Whitfield assured Father Joubert and the three novices.

Elizabeth Lange and her sister novices moved in together to form a common life and immediately began a convent school for black girls.

On June 24, 1829, Elizabeth Lange and three other novices took their final vows and the Oblate Sisters of Providence officially began. Elizabeth Lange took the name Mary with the title of "Mother" as superior of her order.

The profession ceremonies began at 6 a.m. and lasted until 8 a.m. Twenty guests of all colors were present. After the profession ceremony, a "fine" breakfast was served. And with characteristic humility and with a table fellowship that took no account of race, Elizabeth Lange's dream as a young woman of consecrating herself in service to her God became a reality.

That does not mean that Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange and the Oblates had seen the last of their trouble. Numerous times their existence was threatened. The Oblates were not as well endowed as other Catholic orders and were, therefore, more subject to the turbulent economy of the early 19th century.

But in each instance someone provided, not the least of whom was Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, who used her own family fortune to support her order and the school. During her tenure as superior she helped to put the Oblates on a firm financial footing, so that by 1836 they had assets worth \$9,500 (a substantial amount of money in those days) and almost no debt.

She also did not forget her special care for the poor and orphans were admitted free of charge to the convent school.

In the summer of 1832, a cholera epidemic swept the eastern seaboard of America. It proved to be a particularly lethal strain of the disease. Baltimore's Bureau of the Poor made a special request to the Oblates to send four sisters to help take care of the sick, since the Sisters of Charity could not send the required number.

The Oblates were primarily educators and care of the ill was not part of their mission, but when the request was put before them nearly all volunteered. They insisted that they "should find much happiness being able to serve Our Lord in the person of the sick."

Four were chosen to go, including Sister Mary Elizabeth Lange. The example given by the Oblates during that summer is credited with helping to stem the tide of anti-Catholic violence in Baltimore.

It didn't matter that caring for the sick was not an expressed part of their mission. Sister Mary Elizabeth Lange had known from an early age that God "shows the way" to those who are willingly his vessels. It didn't matter that their world was increasingly antagonistic toward them as black Catholic religious women. In the end what mattered was that Christ was waiting for them in Baltimore's sick house.

There were other great triumphs as well. In 1836 the Oblates dedicated St. Francis chapel, the first building erected exclusively for the needs of African American Catholics

in the United States. In May of 1853 the Oblates opened St. Francis School for boys, the first school in the United States for the education of black male children.

She lived until 1882. While she never learned to speak English fluently, she continued to offer her talents to her community in whatever capacity she could. In the latter part of her life "Sister Mary" served her community as assistant superior, director of novices and constantly as a financial advisor. Her sisters, especially the ones she trained as novices, were devoted to her until the very end. She died Feb. 3 at 7 a.m. and was interred at Bonnie Brae, the black section of New Cathedral Cemetery.

As a seminarian I think about my predecessors who visited the Oblates' convent in the early years of the order. Elizabeth Lange was a woman of exceptional confidence and trust in God. She had great generosity, courage and determination. She loved the poor and was willing to see Christ in those around her and the prejudice and racial hatred never blurred that vision. Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange is a real heroine of the church and a model of Christian life, the stuff of which saints are made.

Joe Cosgrove is a seminarian now serving at Nativity parish, Timonium.



PRAYER FOR the Beatification
OF
MOTHER MARY Elizabeth Lange



Almighty and Eternal God, You granted Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange extraordinary trust in Your providence. You endowed her with humility, courage, holiness and an extraordinary sense of service to the poor and sick. You enabled her to found the Oblate Sisters of Providence and provide educational, social and spiritual ministry especially to the African American community. Mother Lange's love for all enabled her to see Christ in each person, and the pain of prejudice and racial hatred never blurred that vision.

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.

Heavenly Father, glorify Your heart by granting also this favour (*here mention your request*) which we ask through the intercession of Your faithful servant, Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange.

Amen.

Nihil Obstat:

*Msgr. Carroll Satterfield
Censor Liborum
Archdiocese of Baltimore*

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*Most Reverend William H. Keeler, DD
Archbishop of Baltimore*

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**If favors are received,
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**LANGE GUILD
701 Gun Road
Baltimore, MD 21227**