

Baltimore nun advocated for Catholic sainthood

Vatican approves campaign to canonize founder of Oblate Sisters.

By Patrick Ercolano

Evening Sun Staff

Baltimore's Roman Catholic archdiocese has begun petitioning the Vatican for the canonization of Elizabeth Lange, a founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first Catholic order of black nuns.

This Sunday at the Oblates' mother house in Catonsville, Archbishop William Keeler will announce that Rome has permitted the archdiocese to start making its case for the sainthood of the Cuban-born nun, whose religious title was Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange.

"We want to stress that this is a very preliminary stage of the process," says the Rev. William Au, a spokesman for the archdiocese. "Right now, we want to make the public aware that Mother Lange is being considered for canonization so we can receive any documentation of her life that people might have."

Officials of the archdiocese will accumulate evidence of Lange's worthiness for sainthood. They will comb biographical matter to confirm that the nun lived a highly moral life.

The evidence also must include two miracles attributable to Lange. The archdiocese is hoping to hear from people who have prayed to Lange and consequently experienced miraculous physical cures.

All the material eventually will be sent to the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints. If the congregation approves of the facts of Lange's life, the nun will be beatified, the midway point in the canonization process.

The archdiocese then would repeat the previous accumulation of evidence, including accounts of two more miracles, and submit it again to the congregation. In some cases, the pope may decide to dispense with some of the required steps of canonization.

Then, maybe, Lange would be made a saint.

"Repeating the steps is a safeguard measure, to make sure all the information is careful and precise," explains Sister Virginie Fish, an Oblate nun who represents a "guild" of local Catholic clergy and laity promoting Lange's cause.

"It can be a long, long process from where we are to canonization," says Fish. "It can take decades, it can take hundreds of years. Rome does not canonize people at the bat of an eye. I'll be dead before [Lange's sainthood] happens."

The archdiocese's main investigator into Lange's life will be the Rev. John Bowen, the chaplain of the Oblates' mother house and the archivist of St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park.

Bowen will serve as one of two "postulators" whose job will be unearthing as much hard information about Lange as possible. The other postulator will work at the Vatican.

So far, the priest says, the pickings are slim.

found them yet."

According to what is known about Lange, she was born in Cuba around 1800 to Santo Dominican refugee parents. She probably came alone to the United States around 1817, landing in the Carolinas and ultimately settling in Baltimore. The city was then a haven for refugees from Hispaniola.

During the next 10 years or so, at a time when educating blacks was illegal in Maryland, Lange made it

her mission to teach black children.

In the late 1820s, she met a French Catholic priest of the Sulpician order, the Rev. James Joubert. Together they founded the Oblates as an order of black nuns whose primary work was schooling black children. Lange served as the Oblates' first mother superior, a position she held for nine years.

The Oblate order nearly collapsed in the ensuing decades. The

sisters faced a constant shortage of funds, at one time relying on an inheritance Lange received from her father.

They also had to confront the racism of individual Catholics who frowned on black women in religious garb, as well as the institutional racism of a church that largely believed black women were more suited to being servants than nuns.

But, says Fish, the order sur-

vived, thanks mainly to Lange's unflinching faith. The nun died at the mother house in 1889 and was buried at New Cathedral Cemetery on Old Frederick Road.

American church figures who have been made saints include Elizabeth Ann Seton of Baltimore, the first American saint, canonized in 1975, and John Neumann of Philadelphia, in 1977.