

Nun's tribute is 171 years in the making

■ **Honor:** Baltimore pays its respects to Mother Mary Lange, who founded the first order of American nuns of African descent.

By JAMIE STIEHM
SUN STAFF

In a winter chill, the warmth of a woman's life-works were officially remembered yesterday as Cardinal William H. Keeler, Mayor Martin O'Malley and a few hundred others gathered to honor Mother Mary Lange, who in 1829 in Baltimore founded the first order of American nuns of African descent.

For many of the African-American nuns who exchanged embraces in the crowd, the recognition of a spiritual leader with a monument was a long time coming. Quiet elation — and validation, someone said — were the emotions in Southwest Baltimore.

For Keeler, it was tangible evidence of another long journey — toward the Vatican in Rome, where he hopes one day to witness Lange declared a saint.

O'Malley pointed to the ground where Lange and three women took their vows 171 years ago, now the center of a walkway in Orchard Gardens, a rowhouse complex in the 600 block of Pennsylvania Ave.: "Doesn't it seem as if this place was waiting for this monument?"

The event was perhaps the first of the mayor's inspirations to be finished in stone. While campaigning for mayor last fall, O'Malley first heard of the little-known Lange, who founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence and died in 1882 at age 98.

A French-speaking immigrant from Santo Domingo, she came to the United States in 1813 as a free black woman, well-educated and well-off financially. But she found life harsh in segregated, slave-holding Baltimore — especially for one who aspired to educate children of color, which was against the law.

"Imagine the sacrifice, vision and foresight," O'Malley said after he and Keeler unveiled a block of granite with a plaque listing a summary of Lange's long life. The making of the simple 4-foot-high monument was overseen by

John Armiger, owner of Dulaney Valley Memorial Gardens, who attended the ceremony.

Conquering the odds, Lange created two path-breaking institutions whose works continue: the nation's oldest order of African-American nuns, the Oblate Sisters in Catonsville and St. Frances Academy, the country's oldest continuous school open to black children, which the Oblate Sisters operate in East Baltimore.

Lange began a new order of her religious faith because as a "mulatto" — daughter of a mixed-race mother and a Jewish father — she was not allowed to join an order of white nuns.

Sister Alexis Fisher, assistant su- [See Lange, 18B]

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perior general of the Oblate Sisters, explained that before Lange can be canonized, she must first be beatified, which requires a Vatican-recognized miracle.

"Right now, we're waiting for a miracle," she said. Either a miracle that took place in the past or one in the future which can be attributed to Lange's spiritual grace will do, she said.

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Said Keeler of the march to sainthood: "It's a big thing for the Lord to intervene."

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The cardinal said that he became fascinated with Lange's life story, which he hadn't learned about until he arrived in Baltimore about 12 years ago. Lange, he said, is buried in the New Cathedral Cemetery on Old Frederick Road.

"It was spiritual to see an African-American lady get her just place in history," said Annamaria Joyner, a St. Frances Academy alumna and Mount Washington resident. She and a friend, A. Bernice Hunley, then looked up to see 20 white doves, which took flight at the end of a spiritual sung a capella.



Mother Mary Lange Monument

JENNIFER IMES : SUN STAFF

by the St. Frances Academy Choir. Fisher said Lange was a humble woman who might not enjoy all the attention.

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"If she were alive today, she would not have wanted any of this to take place," she said.

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But others were cheered by the overdue recognition for Lange.

Said Hunley, a lifelong Baltimorean, "It makes my heart warm."