

February 20, 1994, Sunday, FINAL EDITION

**SECTION:** FEATURES, Pg. 1K

**LENGTH:** 1949 words

**HEADLINE:** Oblate Sisters serve God by teaching black children

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**BODY:**

As wintry light filters through the stained-glass windows of Mount Providence, several dozen nuns reaffirm their devotion. Wearing habits, veils and silver wedding bands, holding hymnals flavored with spirituals, the women appear joyful, serene and a bit mysterious.

On the wall behind the altar are words which have helped to define them: Therefore Go And Teach All Nations.

These women belong to the world's first order of nuns of African heritage, the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Founded in Baltimore 165 years ago with a mission to teach "colored" children, the Oblate Sisters have served schools and orphanages in as many as 35 states. Now, as is the case in other religious orders, their numbers have dwindled and their members have aged. But their sense of purpose remains strong, bolstered by a history of forbearance through times that were never kind.

The sisters have worshiped in basement chapels. They have weathered the animosity of white Catholics who objected to seeing black women in habits. They have survived periods in which church officials, pessimistic about their survival, advised them to "return to the world."

Sister Anthony Garnier, the 69-year-old sacristan who helps prepare for Mass at the Catonsville motherhouse, remembers the days when black nuns were permitted to take communion only after white communicants had finished.

"We have an extra blessing from God as a race," she says. "Being from the South, I can tell you some awful stuff. But my mother said that eventually God would take care of you. And that's also what our order believes: If we put things in God's hands, God will provide."

Providentia providebit: The Oblate Sisters' belief is rooted in the order's extraordinary beginnings. In 1817, Elizabeth Lange, founder of the order, came to Baltimore from the Caribbean with two major handicaps: She was a free black woman in a slave state and a Catholic in what was then a predominantly Protestant city. Furthermore, she spoke only French.

At the time, Baltimore had become home to thousands of refugees from political upheavals in Santo Domingo and other islands. When the emigrants arrived, they found a segregated society where their children could not attend schools.

With the help of Father James Joubert, a priest of the Sulpician order, Elizabeth Lange started a school that offered free education for black children. Next, she persuaded the Vatican to approve a convent to serve this mission.

When Rome officially recognized the Oblate Sisters of Providence as a religious order, it became the first within the Catholic church to devote itself to teaching black children. (The Latin root of "oblate" refers to someone who offers his or her life to some form of work.)

Over the next century, the Oblates opened and operated many schools around the country, including St. Frances Academy, Baltimore's oldest institution for educating black children. (Founded as a four-year high school for girls, it is now co-educational.)

Before the days of Vatican II, school desegregation and increased career opportunities for women, the order had almost 300 members who helped staff schools in many states. Now the religious congregation works in schools in a handful of cities — Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Trenton and Charleston — as well as serving several schools and missions in Costa Rica.

Today 147 nuns carry on the work and most of them live at the motherhouse. About half are foreign-born. The order has one white member, Sister John Francis Schilling, who works as principal and president of St. Frances Academy. (The order's founding rules state the Oblate Sisters cannot turn away aspiring nuns because of race.) Fewer than 10 nuns are under the age of 40, says Sister Claudina Sanz, the order's superior general.

In Baltimore, the Oblates work at several ministries. The nuns run St. Frances Academy as well as an after-school program for the residents of Johnston Square and an evening tutorial and outreach program. Recently, several sisters have served a program helping AIDS-affected families.

"Their tradition of teaching those who otherwise would have been so neglected is one that we all have to take to heart," says Archbishop William Keeler of Baltimore.

The order also oversees the care of close to 70 children from Catonsville — mostly white — who attend day care at the motherhouse during the week. Although the mission of the order has always been the Christian education of black children, Oblates have also founded and taught at schools with predominantly white populations.

These days, the order also faces an increasing need to care for its elderly members, so it recently sold property in St. Louis to help provide for its retirees.

Sister Dimitria Marshall, who took her vows in 1923, is among roughly 30 sisters who now live in small rooms in the infirmary of the motherhouse. She speaks most proudly of the years she spent teaching at Immaculate Conception School in Charleston. She speaks most lovingly of Mother Lange.

"I believe that's my grandmother up there," says Sister Dimitria, gazing at a picture of the founder taped on the wall over her closet.

At Mount Providence, copies of Mother Lange's portrait can be seen everywhere. The only existing photograph of the founder, taken when she was in her 90s, shows her to be a tiny woman with bright, piercing eyes. She

looks wise, determined and, perhaps, a bit stubborn: She continued to speak French all her life even as she fought to expand her congregation in America.

Now her order is working hard to advance Mother Lange's cause in the Catholic Church's lengthy canonization process, a journey which began three years ago when the Vatican approved the campaign to make her a saint. The congregation has produced a 30-minute video about the history of the order to help build support for Mother Lange, as well as to aid with their recruitment.

"Our main thrust right now is vocations," says Sister Claudina.

A need to recruit

The diminished and aging ranks of the Oblates mirror the population in other American orders. "One of the challenges for orders today is recruitment," says Sister Suzanne Delaney of the national Leadership Conference of Women Religious. "We're also looking for women who are mature and educated. Some women will come to religious life now as a second or third career."

Sister John Francis Schilling first joined the order in 1967. Now 48, the white nun first visited a community of Oblates in Chicago with an African-American friend who was interested in becoming a nun. Instead, it was Sister John Francis who decided to join the order.

"I was very taken by the sisters' warmth," she recalls. "I had been taught by religious all my life, but there was something different about the Oblates that appealed to me. They weren't aloof, there was a warmth, a welcoming kind of acceptance.

"I had always wanted to work in an African-American community — I guess, spurred by my interest in civil rights. I wrote the order, asked if I could join and arrived at the motherhouse sight unseen.

"At first my parents did not feel I would be accepted in the African-American community, but I've found it just to be the opposite. I've been accepted everywhere I've been."

More typical of the nuns is Sister Claudina, 52, who grew up on the island of Belize, the sixth of eight children. She joined the order in 1961 and became its 17th superior general last June.

As a child, she was fascinated by the nuns who taught her, and she read as many books as she could find about convent life. She also participated in almost every extracurricular activity school offered.

Something more 'satisfying'

"I was in all the organizations, I was very popular with the girls and boys, but yet, through all of that, I wanted something more satisfying," she says. "There was always some thing missing. And after the first couple of months here in Baltimore, I realized this is it.

"My friends would look at me and say, 'Not you. You won't be a nun.' . . . But what you need for life as a nun is someone who has a lot of vim and happiness because this is a life of sacrifice. You can't be someone who is dependent on others to bring them happiness. You have to have a lot of your own to begin with so that you can provide to others."

Like many of the Oblate Sisters, she chose to join a black order because of the prejudice against black nuns throughout the church.

"For a while, they were one of only two communities who accepted applicants who were black," says Archbishop Keeler. "But in the '60s, we all became conscious of the need for racial justice. Many other communities took a lead from the Oblates and opened up to people of different racial backgrounds."

Sister Claudina says, "Even until the 1970s, many of the white orders did not accept black girls. I could have joined an order at home but I would have been too close to my family and that would have been difficult. My spiritual adviser was a black man who told me to go to the Oblates because he understood the racism in the American church."

There are two other primarily African-American orders for women: The Holy Family in New Orleans and The Franciscan Handmaids of Mary in New York. Sister Claudina believes the black orders have brought important lessons about persistence and perseverance to the church.

"I think black Catholics in the United States have a lot to teach people in general about love of God and faith in God and that all humankind is one," she says.

#### Clear expectations

Talking of the benefits of life spent with the church, the nuns speak of characteristics that used to belong to more institutions: The feeling of being provided for in return for faithful service; the camaraderie found in long-term affiliations; a certainty about what is expected and what to expect.

"You know that you belong to God. And he has promised that no one in our families will be lost," says Sister Anthony. "We all have relatives who we think aren't doing all they should, but this way, they won't be lost — although they may spend a long time in purgatory."

"I think the world thinks that it is a waste of talent, a waste of life, a waste of everything for a young woman to devote her life to Christ," says Sister Claudina. "It's a special calling. If you don't have it, you don't understand. And if you have it, you cannot run away from it."

And you don't have to be a nun to feel this pull. There is, for example, the case of Aunt Jenny Cancino. Aunt Jenny graduated from St. Frances Academy around the turn of the century — she may be the school's oldest graduate — then returned to her home in the Bahamas to raise a family. At the age of 99, however, she received her family's permission to spend her final years in Baltimore with the Oblate Sisters.

Now 102, Aunt Jenny is hard of hearing, but still eating corn on the cob and welcoming guests to her tidy, bright room in the infirmary.

"I was very anxious to get back here, but I don't know if I can give you a sensible reason why," she says. "I thought perhaps I might become a nun."

Sister Claudina smiles when she hears this. "She has probably always had that longing," she says. "It stays with you."