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Oblates: The first black religious order of nuns in America commemorates 175 years of piety and service.

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The early 19th-century notion of a Catholic woman of piety was one reserved for white women.

So for Elizabeth Lange, a Haitian refugee living in Baltimore, driven by what she felt was her life's calling to be a nun, there was nowhere to study and few places to turn for guidance.

She would wait 10 years to divulge her convictions to a white Sulpician priest named James Nicholas Joubert. And with his help, in 1829 she and three other black women would start the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first order of black nuns in the nation.

Today, Mother **Mary Elizabeth Lange** is a candidate for canonization.

This week, the Oblates, who are revered as a Baltimore treasure, will commemorate the 175th year since Lange established the order. Eighteen months of celebrations will culminate with two events. On Thursday Baltimore Cardinal William H. Keeler will celebrate a Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in downtown Baltimore.

And Friday a gala will be held at Baltimore's Martin's West, with guest Camille Cosby, the wife of entertainer Bill Cosby. Camille Cosby is an alumna of the Oblate's school in Washington.

Historians compare the formation of the Oblates to a revolutionary act that defied racial attitudes of the day.

"They were black and free in a slave society. They were Catholic in an essentially Protestant society," said Diane Batts Morrow, an associate professor of history and African-American studies at the University of Georgia, who has studied the Oblates for 10 years.

"And they were women and sisters religious in a society that only valued women as wives and mothers," she said. "Meanwhile, white society viewed these women of color as women without virtue."

This week's events will be a rare opportunity for the 100 sisters to return from missions in Costa Rica, Nigeria and around the United States to the motherhouse, the convent at 701 Gun Road in Catonsville.

And don't be misled by the habit: The commemoration will be a huge party. "We are human!"

"We're party people," said 87-year-old Sister Mary Alice Chineworth, laughing. "The Oblates love parties. ... People come here to work with us on committees, and they get so shocked at how much fun we have. They realize that we are in fact human."

Still, the Oblates are no Sister Act, the Whoopi Goldberg comedy.

But they embody a spirit and personality that many lay people tend not to understand, said Chineworth, a sharp woman with a wide smile who writes letters to strangers and celebrities she thinks might need someone to talk to.

She wrote to actress Grace Kelly in the 1950s including a prayer for her future child with husband Prince Rainier of Monaco, and the princess wrote her right back.

Although historical markers stand in the various places the Oblates called home around the city, many Baltimoreans have never heard of the Oblates or the breadth of their work.

Morrow remembers as a girl going to Catholic schools and never realizing that black women could become nuns until she encountered an Oblate sister. Two other orders of black nuns exist in New York and New Orleans.

A teaching order

First and foremost, Chineworth is quick to point out, the Oblates are a teaching order.

In 1828, Lange started teaching free and enslaved black children in her house in Fells Point. A year later, when the Oblates were established, their mission was defined to educate.

It's one that they uphold today with their noted St. Frances Academy.

The school, which once educated girls only but now is coed, is in Baltimore native Nina Harper's blood. She, along with her aunts and cousins, graduated from the school.

When Harper was a student in the 1960s, she was known as the polite Catholic student around her block in East Baltimore.

At school, she was sheltered, received hot lunches and had teachers who called her parents if she was a moment late for school.

Whether during Harper's day or when her mother attended the school in the 1930s, the Oblates instilled pride, community service and a rigorous education, Harper said.

And in times when professional choices were limited for black women, the Oblates were unique.

"I am so proud to be a product of the Oblate sisters," said Harper, who went on to study business management and ran for the Baltimore City Council in 1995. "Their priorities were to educate poor black children, and so many of us have gone on to great things."

Women like the mother of Baltimore actor Charles "Roc" Dutton and 35,000 other students have studied under the Oblates. About 92 percent of graduates go on to college, according to the Oblate sisters. The Oblates also provided black women like Chineworth the opportunity to enter religious service when there weren't options.

Growing up in tiny Rock Island, Ill., Chineworth knew from kindergarten that she wanted to be a nun.

But in the 11th grade, her Catholic school's counselor asked whether she had changed her mind yet. She told Chineworth she couldn't be accepted into the all-white order in her town, let alone any other order. "I was devastated!"

"I was devastated," she said. "I always thought a sister is a sister is a sister. ... I had always been accepted at home and at school. I thought, 'Now what am I going to do?'"

Eventually, she learned about the black orders, applied to all three, but felt at home with the Oblates.

"Racism is still very alive in the Catholic church, as it is everywhere," she said. "I've never been able to make sense of it. Just because we are black or of color, and we have been persecuted, we are still treated differently? I don't understand it."

Morrow, who chronicles the early years of the Oblates in her book, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860*, said the Oblates have inspired the city's black Catholic community and have received the support of many African-Americans, regardless of their faith.

"You could say the Oblates were formed because of racism or that they were formed in spite of it," she said. "If just one of them did what white society wanted them to do, they wouldn't be here."