

# Plans to seek sainthood for black nun bring joy to order she founded in 1829

By Deborah I. Greene  
Baltimore County Bureau of The Sun

Sainthood may be years away for Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, the 19th century Cuban refugee who founded Baltimore's Oblate Sisters of Providence, but some say her nomination as the first black female for canonization marks a new age of enlightenment for the Roman Catholic Church.

"This is something we hardly dare dream," said Sister Mary Alice Chinenworth, the superior general of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

"It's incredible to think that a black sister would be given the first step to sainthood when you consider the racism that existed — and still exists — in the church," she added.

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**SISTER M. ALICE CHINENWORTH**

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Yesterday, row after row of black veils filled the pews of the teaching order's motherhouse chapel in Catonsville as nuns and parishioners gathered to celebrate Archbishop William Keeler's plans to begin petitioning the Vatican for the canonization of Mother Lange.

Sister Virginia Fisher, director of

the Mother Lange Guild, said she was exhilarated over the prospects of a black woman saint. It is a sign that the "Catholic church appreciates our gifts as black people as a whole to the total church," she said.

Church historians researching Mother Lange's life hope to uncover at least three miraculous works — spontaneous physical healings with no medical explanation — directly attributed to her while she was alive or through her spirit in prayer.

There are many historical references of the good works of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, but few documents speak specifically of Mother Lange, who founded the order in Baltimore in 1829, died here in 1882.

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LANGE, from 1B

and is buried at the New Cathedral Cemetery on Old Frederick Road.

The Oblate Sisters extol divine providence, but they don't expect to uncover some great revelation that would suddenly confirm Mother Lange as a saint.

"If God didn't let the Israelites gather manna in two days, then this is not going to happen overnight," Sister Mary Alice said. "It could be 400 days or 400 years."

Sister Reparata Clark, who teaches journalism and English at St. Frances-Charles Hall Upper School on East Chase Street, agreed.

"The impact of her life on successive generations is, itself, a miracle," she said. "Even though we have been in existence since 1829, we are known so little by our own people. The fact that the Oblates are still here and being recognized by the church is proof of [Mother Lange's] vision," Sister Reparata said.

Church historians have, so far, determined that Elizabeth Lange was an affluent teacher who fled in 1817 to the United States from her native Santiago, Cuba, to escape persecution during an uprising there.

She had hoped to educate poor black children, but her efforts were scorned. She was a black woman in a slave society, and French-speaking in an English province.

With the help of the Rev. James Joubert, a French Catholic priest, the renamed Sister Mary Elizabeth Lange formed a religious society dedicated to caring for the sick and ministering to and educating black Catholics.

Through the years the order faltered for lack of funds and support from the Catholic church. Racial tension outside the church seeped in-



THE SUN/AMY DAVIS

Sister Virginia Fisher shows portrait of Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange.

side as some priests catered to the ideas of their white, affluent parishioners, and relegated blacks in the church to subservient roles.

Handy with needlework, the nuns sold altar vestments to the church and aprons to the community. They took in wash and took on jobs, appealed for donations and held numerous fund-raisers.

With the nomination of Mother Lange to sainthood, the order faces

an even greater financial task to obtain funds for the research campaign — an endeavor estimated to cost \$1 million.

However, with the support of Archbishop Keeler, they say they have come this far by faith.

"Those of use who are in the order now never thought we would see the day when a black person would be raised to the altar of the church. . . . Black or white, that's not an easy thing to happen to anyone," Sister Reparata said.

"The racial climate has changed," said Sister Mary Alice. "When people saw the first Oblate sisters don habits and walk the streets of Baltimore, they wanted to lynch them."

"People are becoming more sensitive to racism in the church and they are willing to recognize that this is not good Catholicism. Even if Mother Lange isn't canonized, we know in our hearts that she is a saint and her works speak for themselves," Sister Mary Alice said.