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The Oblate Sisters celebrate the life of founder Mother Mary Lange and another step toward her canonization.

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BODY:

When St. Frances Academy principal Sister John Francis Schilling discovered three weeks ago that the cost to replace 10 heating units at the East Chase Street school totaled \$62,000, she knew that the work could not be delayed with winter settling in. She also knew that St. Frances didn't have the money and couldn't come up with that amount on short notice.

So, Schilling resorted to what she often does when facing such predicaments: She turned toward heaven and prayed to Mother **Mary Elizabeth Lange**, co-founder of the school and Schilling's religious order, the 176-year-old Oblate Sisters of Providence.

Schilling's invocation follows a long line of prayers from Oblate Sisters who look to Mother Lange, a Caribbean-born nun whose works during a time of racial and social discord have helped her gain consideration as a candidate for canonization by the Roman Catholic Church.

Canonization would make her the first woman of color in the United States to be proclaimed a saint, someone recognized by the church as being in heaven and capable of interceding on behalf of those on earth.

Yet to hear the Oblate Sisters talk – and pray – any proclamation by the Vatican would merely corroborate what they've believed about Mother Lange for years. They say the church could take centuries to render its judgment.

And they need her now.

"Look, Mother Lange, this is your school, you started it, it's up to you," prayed Schilling.

With that, she no longer worries about the \$62,000. Schilling says that since signing a service contract to replace the heaters after praying, she has received \$11,000 in gifts as of yesterday.

"I remember stories from sisters of years past, and they would say that a certain amount of money was needed for a bill, and we would get a check in the mail for that amount," says Schilling.

"It's like a legend; sisters would tell me, and I was like, 'Oh, man, that sounds so phony,'" she adds, "but after being here in this position, I believe it."

Tomorrow at an interfaith prayer service, the Oblate Sisters will commemorate the 123rd anniversary of Mother Lange's death while celebrating a major step in her cause for canonization – the Archdiocese of Baltimore's forwarding of six documents detailing Mother Lange's life to the Vatican's Congregation of Causes of Saints in December.

They say they are delighted the 14-year process has come this far, yet they add that it's not only time for a woman of color in the United States to be canonized as a saint, but for Mother Lange's works to be commemorated.

A groundbreaker

The Oblate Sisters are the first successful Roman Catholic sisterhood established by women of African descent, while St. Frances Academy – now, like the order, open to all faiths and races – is the oldest continuously operating Catholic

school in America established for black children.

The soft-hearted, iron-willed pioneer established both institutions in a slave state more than three decades before slavery ended, at a time when it was against the law to educate black people.

"We know Mother Lange is in heaven," says Sister Virginie Fish, vice postulator of the cause for canonization of Mother Lange. "We want the church to officially and publicly corroborate that this black woman has achieved what all these other [saints] have achieved."

Born Elizabeth Clarisse Lange in either Haiti or Cuba in the 1790s, Mother Lange arrived in Baltimore about 1812 with other Haitian refugees.

Together with fellow refugee Marie Magdalene Balas, Mother Lange operated a school for black children out of her home for at least 10 years. The school became St. Frances Academy in 1828, and the next year, Mother Lange and three other women took vows to the sisterhood and formed the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

The sisterhood grew and so did their hardships. The Oblates were forced to move their school and headquarters several times, including once after the owner of a home they rented discovered they were educating black children.

They also drew ire from people unaccustomed to seeing black women as nuns and were spat upon and pushed off the sidewalk as they walked along Baltimore's streets.

Still, when Baltimore suffered a cholera epidemic in 1832, Mother Lange and other Oblates ministered to the sick.

Today, the 95-member order is based near Catonsville, and the sisters evoke the spirit of their founder, passionate but firm and always determined to make a difference.

Their outreach programs include a tutorial ministry for children of all ages and a center for teenage girls.

St. Frances Academy is a high school in East Baltimore with 330 students, some from poor families.

Yet 93 percent of the students go to college, and 80 percent of those who go to college graduate within five years.

"At first, I didn't know if I really wanted to come here, and when I came it seemed like they knew me," says Jerry Miles, a senior from Baltimore. "Here, I'm part of a community."

The sisters say theirs is an order that has never enjoyed financial prosperity.

Broken-down heaters at St. Frances Academy in the face of winter's numbing cold is not an unusual situation for the Oblates, some of whom reside in a second convent between the school and the Baltimore City Detention Center in one of the city's most desolate neighborhoods.

Still, they serve as beacons among the blight.

"We ask God for what we need and we trust that he will provide," says Sister Rita Michelle Proctor, "but in the meantime, you're doing other things to kind of help the situation, all along trusting that God will provide."

The road to sainthood

Many Oblates believe that providence occurred Dec. 13, when Cardinal William H. Keeler officially closed inquiry into the life of Mother Lange and signed documents for her cause for sainthood to be sent to the Vatican.

The Rev. John Bowen, working postulator for the cause of Mother Lange, says that the Congregation for Causes of Saints will take about nine months researching the documents to decide whether to accept them.

If they're accepted, he says, a single document called a *positio* will be drafted based on the results of the inquiry and will be turned over to the Congregation to be examined for two years.

"If that is approved, then Mother Lange will be given the title of venerable," he says. "What's needed after that will be beatification."

That means if a posthumous miracle performed through the intercession of Mother Lange - namely a healing experienced by someone who prayed to her - were recognized by the church, Mother Lange would be bestowed with the title of blessed.

A second recognized miracle would make her a saint.

Fish says the first miracle will likely be submitted later this year.

"There are about 27 possibilities," she says. "We're in the process of getting medical records and getting doctors to confirm these persons were not healed by medical practices."

Mother Lange is one of two women of color in the United States being considered for sainthood.

The other is Henriette Delille, a New Orleans-born Creole abolitionist who founded the Sisters of the Holy Family in 1842 as the second-oldest Catholic religious order for African-American women.

Dr. Charles Nolan, chairman of the Archdiocese Henriette Delille Historical Commission in New Orleans, says diocesan officials there are scheduled to finish their inquiry later this year. Their process began in 1988 for Delille, who is the first African-American woman to have a cause for sainthood.

Says Nolan: "It's important to recognize the great diversity in the church."

In Baltimore, Fish says that although the Oblates remain hopeful and pray for Mother Lange's canonization, they know they must also remain patient.

"Almighty God doesn't jump to our commands," she says. "We press forward to the day when it bears fruit, and we keep in the back of our minds that God's in charge."

Event

What: The Oblate Sisters of Providence Interfaith Prayer Service to honor the 123rd anniversary of the death of Mother Lange

Where: Mount Providence Chapel, 701 Gun Road, Catonsville

Hours: 7 p.m. tomorrow

Admission: Donations accepted

Call: 410-242-6861