

February 5, 2003 Wednesday FINAL Edition

SECTION: LOCAL, Pg. 1B

LENGTH: 1212 words

HEADLINE: A saintly undertaking on founder's behalf;
Oblate Sisters honor, seek canonization for black nun

BYLINE: John Rivera

SOURCE: SUN STAFF

BODY:

In the mid-1830s, the rector of St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore asked Mother **Mary Elizabeth Lange** to send over some sisters to work as domestics.

With unflinching politeness, but unflinching firmness, the founder of the Catholic Church's first order of African-American nuns informed the white priest she would comply - with certain conditions.

"As persons of color and religious at the same time, we wish to conciliate these two qualities as not to appear too arrogant nor miss the respect which is due to the state we have embraced and the holy habit we have the honor to wear," Mother Lange wrote to the Rev. Louis Deluol.

"Our intention in consenting to your request is not to neglect the religious profession which we have embraced."

As the Oblate Sisters of Providence celebrate their 175th anniversary, the Baltimore-based order is preparing its case for making the determined Mother Lange a saint.

The order and its supporters have put more than a decade of work into a 1,000-page history and testimonial to her life. The project's leaders expect to take it to the Vatican this year. Once accepted (which is expected), Lange will be declared "venerable," a major step in the long process toward sainthood.

Lange's letter to the seminary's Sulpician rector is one of only two known examples of her writing.

For her sisters and lay followers, who are commemorating the 121st anniversary of her death this week, it crystallizes the determination of a black woman who dared to start a religious order in a segregated city and a segregated church.

"This was a slave state. The Sulpicians (Deloul's order) owned slaves," said Sister Virginie Fish, an Oblate Sister of Providence who has been promoting Lange's cause for 14 years.

"She was going into the seminary as a domestic and she let them know in no uncertain terms what she would accept and what she would not accept, and to remind them that they were religious and that they would demand to be treated with respect," Fish added.

"And this teaches us something. It teaches us to be strong, to know you are right, respect yourself and to demand respect from others."

One challenge in promoting Lange's cause is a lack of historical records. It isn't clear exactly when she was born or when she came to the United States.

"Most of what we have is tradition or legends that have been passed down," said the Rev. John Bowen, S.S., who is postulator, or coordinator, of Lange's cause for sainthood.

According to the order's tradition, Elizabeth Lange was born in Saint-Domingue, a French colony on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in what is now Haiti. Revolution forced her family to flee to Cuba, and from there, she came to the United States. There is a possible reference to her arrival in Philadelphia in 1811 – a ship's register lists a 24-year-old Elizabeth Lange arriving from Santo Domingo, the name of Hispaniola's Spanish colony.

Lange first appears in Baltimore on the rolls of a pious confraternity, a group that gathered for prayer and charitable works, in 1813.

Lange operated a free school in her Fells Point home for a decade until her family money ran out. She then began volunteering at a parish for French-speaking black refugees at St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street. In 1828, a Sulpician priest, the Rev. James Joubert, asked her to establish a church-based school that would become St. Frances Academy.

They began in a small house near St. Mary's, but had to move when the landlord learned a school for black children would be on his property.

In 1829, she and three other women took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and donned religious habits, becoming the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Lange, who served as the first superior, took the religious name Mary.

The new order had to overcome tremendous odds. The sisters always struggled with finances, and with the death of Joubert in 1843, they lost their greatest advocate. Shortly thereafter, Archbishop Samuel Eccleston suggested the Oblates disband and find employment as domestics.

But they persevered. A Redemptorist priest begged the archbishop on his knees to be appointed director of the struggling order, and over the next several years, school enrollment increased and the number of sisters doubled.

On Feb. 3, 1882, Lange died in her bed in a room that is now in St. Frances Academy on East Chase Street.

St. Frances Academy still stands as a beacon in East Baltimore, educating African-American youth. The 100 Oblate sisters work primarily with disadvantaged youth in several cities in the East and South, as well in the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica.

Represents minorities

"I think the context is that she represents not just a minority within a minority," said Christopher J. Kauffman, a Catholic University church historian who serves on the Baltimore archdiocese commission that reviewed Lange's petition.

Kauffman said there was symbolism in Lange's being a black Catholic within a larger black Protestant community and a predominantly white church, as well as a black nun among orders of predominantly white sisters and a woman in a church dominated by men.

"It's sort of a quadruple minority situation," he said.

Her sainthood has its greatest support among those who have been students of the Oblate Sisters or have encountered them.

Lenwood Johnson, who has volunteered with the sisters for years, believes Lange cured him of cancer. He received a diagnosis of lymphoma 14 years ago and had been undergoing chemotherapy when he was hospitalized with an infected toe.

Fish came to his hospital bed and prayed a novena, a nine-day series of prayers, to Lange, asking her to intervene with God for his recovery. "I never told her about these chemotherapy treatments," he said. "All she knew was I had a sick toe. She came for nine days and prayed a novena for my sick toe."

When he returned to his oncologist, "they took preliminary tests to continue my treatments, and the cancer was gone," he said.

Documenting miracles is the next step in the process toward sainthood. One miracle is required for beatification, and two for canonization. If she is canonized, Lange would become the third saint with Maryland ties. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who founded the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg, was canonized in 1974; St. John Neumann, who spent time in Baltimore as a priest, was made a saint in 1977.

Cataloguing miracles

Fish said she has been given authorization to begin collecting evidence of miraculous cures.

She has collected binders of letters from people who say Lange has answered their prayers, some for small favors like a new job or help with a personal problem, others telling of illnesses cured. One possible cure involves an Oblate sister whose brain tumor vanished after prayers to Lange.

"There are others that we plan to submit," Fish said. "Father (Bowen) and I went through a list of favors received and believe it or not, we picked out about 27 cures that look good to us."

There is no telling when, if ever, Lange will be declared a saint. "It can be discouraging," Fish said. "I'm thinking, 'Lord, will something happen before I die?' I try to look at it in perspective that God is not in a hurry and things happen in his time and in his way."