

A saint from East Baltimore?

■ **Catching pope's eye:** *The first Catholic religious order for women of African descent wants John Paul II to know of founder's works and to push for her canonization.*

7F ————— Sun
By MARILYN McCRAVEN

From East Baltimore to points abroad, there are scores of people who pray daily to a tiny woman who died in Baltimore in relative obscurity more than 100 years ago.

The woman, Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, was something of a Mother Teresa of 19th-century Baltimore, helping the poor, the elderly and the young.

Though you won't find her name in many history books, many Roman Catholics say she did more for the growth of Catholicism among African-Americans than anyone else. She founded the first U.S. Catholic school for black children here in 1828, and, a year later, the first religious order for women of African descent, the Oblate Sisters of Providence. The order still operates a high school here, St. Frances Academy on East Chase Street, and a day-care

Marilyn McCraven writes editorials for *The Sun*.

center at its motherhouse, 701 Gun Road in Catonsville.

Today, with the historic visit of Pope John Paul II to Baltimore, the Oblate Sisters hope to raise the personal profile of Mother Lange by displaying dozens of poster-size likenesses of the diminutive woman at the papal Mass at Camden Yards and along the pope's post-Mass parade route. The display is part of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the Oblate sisters' campaign, which the Vatican approved in 1991, to have the church declare Mother Lange a saint.

Saying 'Who is she?' OCT 8 1995

"I want the Holy Father to say 'Who is she?' and then Cardinal [William H.] Keeler will take it from there," said Sister Virginie Fish, the Oblates' liaison to the archdiocese in promoting the canonization.

Though many people have long revered Mother Lange, the Oblate sisters say canonization would signify her importance as a spiritual model for people worldwide.

The canonization process — which can take a generation or longer — requires scrupulous documentation. The Oblate sisters and those helping them are not daunted by the task. They have spent years gathering information on Mother Lange's history, and now they are looking for documented miracles — usually healings that doctors can't explain —

that are attributed to a person's praying to Mother Lange for God to intercede. Such miracles are a required step toward canonization. Sister Virginie has two photo albums filled with letters from people in 14 countries who pray to Mother Lange.

She was born Elizabeth Lange in 1784 to a Jewish merchant father and a mulatto mother in Haiti, which her family fled during a time of civil strife for Cuba. In 1817, she came to the United States, settling near Fells Point, which had a large Caribbean immigrant population. As a free black woman in a slave state, a French-speaking Catholic in a mostly Protestant city, Mother Lange was a prime target for bigots.

But social oppression did not keep her from teaching free and slave black children in her home, thanks to the financial support of her father. (She could have been jailed for illegally educating slaves.) When funds for the school dried up, a local priest told her to keep teaching and he would find money. That priest, the Rev. James Joubert, a French-born Sulpician priest who ministered to the French-speaking Haitians here, is credited by the Oblate Sisters as a co-founder of the school and the religious order with Mother Lange.

Father Joubert also encouraged Mother Lange to become a nun. That meant she had to start

her own order, because existing ones were just for whites. At a difficult time, Father Joubert is said to have told Mother Lange: "Make an offering of yourself to God who in his providence will provide all your needs." From that they included the word "providence" in the order's name. Oblate (from the Latin root) means someone who offers his or her life to some form of work.

Fighting cholera

OCT 8 1995

Mother Lange and three others were the first Oblates; they were confirmed at the Vatican in 1832. That, too, was the year that a cholera epidemic swept Baltimore; the Oblates worked fiercely to minister to the victims.

The Oblate sisters at one time had several hundred members spread across 35 states. Today, many of the Oblate sisters are elderly; the membership has dwindled to 137, including those in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. While there still is the occasional new candidate for the sisterhood, the sisters are dying off more rapidly than they can be replaced.

OCT 8 1995
The remaining sisters and many other Catholics are very proud of the Oblates' 166 years of service to Baltimore. The Rev. Peter E. Hogan, whose Josephite order produced the first black priests in the United States and has a long history of helping black and poor people, marvels at the



A saint? *Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange founded an order to serve children, the poor and the elderly before the Civil War.*

work the sisters did here even before the Civil War despite tremendous obstacles.

"I'm a Josephite and proud of that fact," he said. "But we have to hold our heads in shame in comparison with the work done by these black sisters in the early 1800s. We're Johnny-come-late-ys." The Oblates taught in the Josephites' school here.

Mother Lange would not be the first Marylander to become a saint. That honor went to Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton (also the first U.S.-born saint), who was a contemporary of Mother Lange.

Mother Seton established the first free Catholic day school here. It is not known if the women knew each other, though both worshiped in the same basement chapel at St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street; at the time, women weren't allowed upstairs with the clerics. sun

Accounts of Mother Lange's struggles include the racism she was forced to endure. For example, she had to take communion after the white communicants were finished. After Mother Lange's death in 1882, the archbishop of Baltimore told the sisters that they should disband because they were more needed as domestic servants than as nuns, but they continued their work.

Two other black candidates

Mother Lange is one of three who could become the first African-American saint designated by the Vatican. One is Pierre Toussaint, a former slave in New York City who befriended his former owners in a time of great need; he also gave financial support to the Oblates. The other is Henriette Delille, who founded a New Orleans religious order in 1842.

Sister John Francis, principal of the Oblates' St. Frances Academy, a 170-student high school, says many people pray to Mother Lange because she was a woman of color — many minorities and women identify with her. Also, Mother Lange's success — despite being considered a social outcast in her time — makes her a heroine to many, regardless of color.

"I think people will recognize that she was quite a remarkable woman," said Sister John Francis.