

# 180 Years of Service Love and Dedication

On July 2, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first order of African American Sisters in the United States will celebrate their 180th anniversary of dedication, service and love to God and his people.

It began when the French colony of Saint Domingue, then the richest colony in the Caribbean, now called Haiti and one of the poorest countries in the world, had an uprising in the year 1791. Not only was the revolution racial, but economic as well. Many mulattos as well as white plantation owners had to flee the island. Among those who sought refuge was a woman by the name of Elizabeth Clarissa Lange. Oral tradition tells us that she fled to Cuba, eventually landing in Fells Point, in east Baltimore.

Elizabeth was an educated, refined French Catholic woman who found herself in the slave-holding state of Maryland. She entered with several strikes against her. Elizabeth was female, black, free, educated, French speaking and Catholic. She was black, and racism prevailed. She was French in an English-speaking country - a woman in the age when women had no voting rights. Elizabeth was Catholic and, even though Maryland was founded as a state supporting religious tolerance, Catholics were frowned upon here.

In 1794, Louis William DuBourg, a refugee from San Dominique came to Baltimore. The next year DuBourg entered the Sulpician Seminary. As a priest, he saw the need for religious services for French-speaking people and opened the lower seminary chapel, Chappelle Basse, to French Catholics.

Father Jean Marie Tessier, superior of the Sulpician Fathers, was appointed director or pastor of the black French-speaking immigrants. At the same time, Father Tessier was a professor at St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street and the right hand of the archbishop. He spared nothing in taking care of his new flock. He had hundreds of penitents, offered Mass on Sundays, married the young people, baptized babies, had a spiritual lending library and offered instructions for the children on Sunday

afternoons. He also kept a strict account of spiritual duties of his congregation; first Holy Communion, Easter duty, confession, etc. After 30 years of such service, Father Tessier decided that it was time to pass this ministry on to younger shoulders.

In 1827, Father Tessier turned the needs of the black congregation over to Father James Joubert, who like Elizabeth Lange, was a refugee from Saint Domingue.

Having escaped to Baltimore with his uncle, James Joubert found employment as a teacher in the exclusive school of Madame Lacombe on Calvert Street. After a while, Joubert heard the call of Christ and entered St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street. As a newly ordained priest, teaching in the college, he was called by providence to lead the black Catholics worshipping in the Chappelle Basse.

Father Joubert was dissatisfied with his teaching catechism. The children were not learning. Unable to read, they could not understand the doctrines. The children lived in two different environments. At home and among relatives and friends, they were under the influence of French culture. Elsewhere, everything was English.

The State of Maryland provided no public education for Black people although free black people were taxed for such services. Father Joubert, like all good priests needed some women to help him. He appealed to Father Tessier. Father Tessier recommended Elizabeth Lange, who at the time, in the late 1820's, was conducting her own school in Fells Point. Preparations were made for the two of them to meet. Providence was at work. The thoughts and desire to educate black children fused. Added to that was Elizabeth's desire to devote her life to God. This historic meeting resulted in the formation of the first Catholic school for African Americas in the United States (1828). The school is now known as St. Frances Academy. One year later, another outcome of this venture was the creation of the first black Sisterhood in the America, "The Oblate Sisters of Providence".

Like Julius Caesar, Elizabeth could say: "I came, I saw, I conquered." Amidst racism and prejudice, Lange instituted a new institution in the American Catholic Church.

*Sister Reginald Gerdes is a historical researcher for the Oblate Sisters of Providence. This will be the first in a series about the Oblates.*