

Champion of Mother Lange's sainthood cause dies at age 87

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Sulpician Father John W. Bowen, a leading advocate for the canonization of Baltimore religious Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, died May 6. He was 87.

Father Bowen served as Archdiocese of Baltimore postulator for Mother Lange's sainthood cause, overseeing the gathering and organization of information pertaining to her life.

In 1829, Mother Mary Lange, a Haitian emigrant who lived in Baltimore, founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first religious order for African-American women. The year before, she founded St. Frances Academy, the first U.S. Catholic school for blacks, with the help of her spiritual director, Sulpician Father James N. Joubert. The Oblate Sisters officially began her sainthood cause in 1991.

Father Bowen prepared Mother Lange's canonization application and sent it to the Vatican for review after Cardinal William H. Keeler officially closed the archdiocesan inquiry in 2004. He became the American vice postulator for her cause and served on board of the Mother Lange Guild.

"He was always gracious and generous to the Oblates. There was nothing he would not do for the Oblates," said Oblate Sister Virginie Fish, who worked with Father Bowen as the cause's vice postulator. He reminded her of Father Joubert, she added.

Father Bowen was born in Baltimore in 1924 and attended Mount Saint Joseph's High School, Irvington, and St. Charles College in Catonsville. He earned two

degrees from St. Mary's Seminary in Roland Park, and two degrees from The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Father Bowen was ordained in 1949 and joined the Society of St. Sulpice in 1952, an association of diocesan priests responsible for educating other priests.

He served on the faculty of St. Charles College from 1949 to 1951 and 1952 to 1963. He then moved to Washington State, where he served on the faculty of St. Edward's High School, Kenmore; St. Edward's Hall, Seattle; and Kennedy High School, Seattle.

He returned to Baltimore in 1980 to serve as the Sulpicians' archivist. He was also acting director of St. Mary's Spiritual Center in Baltimore from 1983 to 1984.

"He was very focused, very dedicated to whatever he was asked to do. He lived a simple life," said Father Thomas R. Ulshafer, provincial superior of the American Province of Sulpicians. Father Ulshafer knew Father Bowen since taking his American history class as a student at St. Charles College.

"He was a very dutiful type of person and had quite a bit of energy," he said.

Father Bowen served as the Oblate Sisters' chaplain at Our Lady of Mount Providence Convent in Baltimore for more than 30 years, until his death. He said morning Mass for the sisters nearly every weekday, even in the snow, walking uphill to the sisters' motherhouse, Sister Virginie said.

"He was a priestly priest, and I'm sure that the beauty of his priesthood never wore off," she said.

In addition to teaching, the Oblate Sisters' ministry includes care for orphans, the homeless, widows and elderly women. Father Bowen's mother, Anna Bowen, lived with the sisters until she died in 2003 at the age of 102.

Father Bowen retired in 1996 but continued to minister at St. Mark and St. Charles Villa in Catonsville, where he lived. He also edited alumni news for St. Mary's Seminary. He was a recipient of the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice, a papal medal recognizing distinguished service to the church.

“He was just very busy” even in retirement, Father Ulshafer said.

Father Bowen is survived by his brother, James Bowen of Boise, Idaho; his sister Virginia Donovan of Ellicott City; and nieces and nephews.

St. Mark will hold a viewing May 14 from 3 to 7 p.m., followed by a 7 p.m. memorial Mass. On May 15, Our Lady of the Angels at Charlestown Retirement Community in Catonsville will hold a viewing from 10 to 11 a.m., followed by an 11 a.m. funeral Mass and burial in the Sulpician Cemetery.

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