

Nun's ministry lives on even in death

By Archbishop William E. Lori

Last week, I was privileged to preside, along with Bishop John H. Ricard, bishop emeritus of Pensacola-Tallahassee and former auxiliary bishop of Baltimore, at a moving and historic ceremony marking the transfer of the mortal remains of Servant of God, Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, foundress of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, from New Cathedral Cemetery, where her remains had been buried since 1882, to the Oblates' motherhouse in Arbutus.

The ceremony is a unique and rare one and was filled with emotion, reverence and great joy.

Mother Lange's cause for sainthood is currently being investigated by the Holy See's Congregation for the Causes of the Saints. The Oblates, believed to be the first religious community of women of color in America and perhaps anywhere in the world, are hopeful that the transfer of her remains will help to promote her cause by inspiring more people to pray for her canonization.

Mother Lange began the first Catholic school for African-American children in 1828, operating the school out of her home in the Fells Point area of Baltimore. That school would become St. Frances Academy in East Baltimore, which is still going strong after 185 years. A year later, with the help of Father Nicholas Joubert, a Sulpician priest, she and three other women took their vows as the first Oblate Sisters of Providence. Until then, no woman of color in the United States had consecrated her life to God, something Mother Lange sought to do for much of her life up until then.

Mother Lange also nursed the terminally ill during the cholera epidemic of 1832 and cared for the elderly, all the while suffering the prejudice that met her at every turn and begging and working as a "domestic" at St. Mary's Seminary in order to fund the sisters' ministry of love.

I discovered at last week's ceremony that even in death, Mother Lange continues to teach us the same lessons she taught in life. This became especially apparent at the moment when her remains were presented to me for my blessing and veneration. I was overcome with feelings of great respect and reverence for this woman who in both life and death urges us to holiness, just as she continues to show us that love keeps on loving even when it is not returned; that it is relentless in serving the marginalized and vulnerable, and it overcomes every form of prejudice and hatred. She continues to teach us how we should love in a polarizing culture, to love when it

is not returned and to persist in loving without counting the cost. Mother Lange's life reminds us that we can, indeed, transform our polarizing culture - a culture polarized politically, socio-economically and by interest groups vying for our attention - to create a civilization of love, where mutuality is so hard to achieve.

I was also deeply impressed with the large number of people who came to the weekday afternoon ceremony and by the emotions of those present. It was clear how deeply devoted they are to Mother Lange, to her apostolate - which imbues the life and work of today's Oblate Sisters - and to her cause for canonization.

May we lift our voices with theirs in praying for the canonization of this holy and worthy Servant of God, Mary Elizabeth Lange.

Prayer for the Beatification of Mother Mary Lange, O.S.P.

O Almighty and Eternal God, You granted Mother Mary Lange extraordinary trust in your providence.

You endowed her with humility, courage, holiness and an extraordinary sense of service to the poor and sick.

You enabled her to found the Oblate Sisters of Providence and provide educational, social and spiritual ministry especially to the African-American community.

Mother Lange's love for all enabled her to see Christ in each person, and the pain of prejudice and racial hatred never blurred that vision.

Deign to raise her to the highest honors of the altar in order that, through her intercession, more souls may come to a deeper understanding and more fervent love of you.

Heavenly Father, glorify Your heart by granting also this favor (here mention your request) which we ask through the intercession of your faithful servant, Mother Mary Lange. Amen.

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