

Oblates to celebrate life of Mother Mary Lange

More than 30 years before the Emancipation Proclamation, Mother Mary Lange fought to establish the first religious order for black women and the first black Catholic school in the United States.

To honor the 126th anniversary of their founder's death, the Oblate Sisters of Providence have planned a Feb. 3 Mass of Thanksgiving at 1 p.m., which will be celebrated by Cardinal William H. Keeler in the Our Lady of Mount Providence Convent Chapel in Catonsville. The Mass will be followed by a reception, offering guests the opportunity to view Mother Mary Lange memorabilia.

A novena will also be held Jan. 25-Feb. 2 in the chapel.

Sister M. Virginie Fish, O.S.P., and several of her colleagues in the Archdiocese of Baltimore have devoted nearly 20 years to working on the cause of canonization for Mother Mary Lange, who, along with Father James Hector Joubert, S.S., founded the Oblate Sisters in 1829. With the help of two other black women, Mother Mary Lange also founded St. Frances Academy, Baltimore, in 1828, which is the first black Catholic school in the country and still in existence.

Sister Virginie said the sisters see honoring Mother Mary Lange as a fitting way to kick-start National Black History Month.

Father John Bowen, S.S., postulator for Mother Mary Lange's cause, completed the canonization application three years ago and sent it to Rome, where it is currently under review. There is no timetable for the Vatican to complete or reject sainthood for Mother Mary Lange, Father Bowen said.

The anniversary Mass and celebration at the convent take place on the same day Mother Mary Lange died at the age of 98 on the Baltimore campus of St. Frances Academy on Chase Street in 1882.

Therese Wilson Favors, director of the Office of African American Ministries for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, said her office will host the Mother Mary Lange Awards Banquet Feb. 8 at 7 p.m. at Martin's West in Woodlawn. The annual banquet celebrates the service and ministry of black Catholics, focusing on the areas of leadership, service through the corporal works of mercy and youths who illustrate both service and leadership within their parish and the archdiocese at large.

In light of the efforts and accomplishments of Mother Mary Lange, Ms. Favors said it is only natural that Marylanders should celebrate Mother Mary Lange's life during National Black History Month.

"For so long, no one ever heard of Mother Lange, but now she is getting her just due," said Sister John Francis Schilling, O.S.P., president of St. Frances Academy. "She was someone who saw the need for things before others did and took the risks to make them happen.

"Mother Lange continues to be an inspiration to me," Sister John Francis said. "Every time I need money for the school I pray to her and she always comes through. She needs to be celebrated by the church."