

Mother Mary Lange, OSP

Little is known about Mother Mary Lange's earliest years. Elizabeth Clarisse Lange, a free woman of African heritage, immigrated to the United States from Cuba. By 1813 she was living in Baltimore. Elizabeth and her friend, Marie Magdelaine Balas, opened a free school in their home despite being black women in a slave state where education of people of color was not forbidden but often discouraged. Elizabeth used her money for this enterprise. When the school was about to close, Providence intervened. Fr. James Joubert taught catechism to black children and saw their need to learn to read and write. Elizabeth and Fr. Joubert joined efforts to begin a school, but Elizabeth had more on her mind. For 10 years she had hoped to consecrate her life to God. This would mean beginning a new congregation. No established congregation would accept women of color. Elizabeth turned to prayer and in 1829, she and three others, made vows as Oblate Sisters of Providence, the world's first black religious community.



Copyright © 2019 James Effler

Elizabeth took the name Sr. Mary and later was known as Mother Mary. Fr. Joubert solicited funds for the school encouraging women of color to join the new congregation. The schools the sisters ran held the promise of hope and dignity to children and their parents degraded by slavery. The girls learned religion, all basic subjects but also sewing, embroidery, and the decorum of a dignified woman.

The sisters, under the leadership of Mother Mary were educators, but also met other social needs that were present. They took in widows and other destitute women, welcomed orphans, nursed the terminally ill, cared for the abandoned elderly, taught religion, and began evening classes for black adults. Mother Mary opened a teacher training facility, the first of its kind in the area.

Life was not easy for these pioneers. The people of Baltimore were generally sympathetic to the attitudes found in slave states. While accepting of the schools, many were not accepting of black women aspiring to a religious calling. The sisters, wearing a simple habit, were ridiculed and physically threatened. There were reports of the sisters being pushed off the sidewalks in Philadelphia and of being stoned. The sisters acted with dignity at all times.

When Fr. Joubert died, the sisters faced a crisis. They had given all they had to people in need. How could they continue without his financial assistance? The Archbishop ordered them to disband. Mother Mary would not hear of it. She turned to prayer and then took action. The sisters took in laundry, ironing and mending. They cleaned. Mother Mary never lost faith in Providence, and they recovered.

Mother Mary Lange died somewhere between the ages of 85 and 90. During life she opened herself tirelessly for God and gave her all to the people of God. She often said, "My sole wish is to do the will of God." Mother Mary persevered against all odds. She incarnated the agony and hope of the women of her time. She believed that all persons had a right to live a dignified life and to work to better their own lives and the society they lived in. She proved to doubters that virtue and intelligence know no race and that sanctity is not about color. Mother Mary was wise, holy and energetic. Her life was grounded in the Trinity and she relied on Providence in all things. She sought truth and justice and inspired others to holiness of life.

In 1991, William Cardinal Keeler, then Archbishop of Baltimore, officially began the process that could lead to the canonization of this holy woman. Mother Mary Lange has the honor of being known as Servant of God by the Catholic Church.



"My sole wish is to do the will of God."

Mother Mary Lange Servant of God

Your simple and humble heart embraced black children and all in need. Faith in Providence gave you Divine daring to stand up against racism, humiliation and untold hardships. You gave your all until you had nothing left but the love of Jesus. Gladly you shared that, too. When I am overwhelmed by personal difficulties and by the complexity of national and global problems, remind me to trust in the Providence and to know that God's goodness is stronger than any evil. May I also say, "My sole wish is to do the will of God" and to mean it. Amen.



Church of the Nativity
of Our Lord