Religious Life

Tim Swift

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A painting depicts Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first Catholic order of Black nuns, who work largely in the Baltimore area. (CNS/Courtesy of the Catholic Review)

Vatican officials are moving ahead with the cause for sainthood for Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori said Dec. 5 in Rome.

If canonized, Mother Lange, the founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, would become the first black American saint. Mother Lange immigrated to Baltimore in the early 19th century and opened a school for black children in her small home in Baltimore's Fells Point section.

Eventually, Mother Lange founded the Oblate Sisters — the first religious order for women of African descent in the U.S. — and would operate what would later become St. Frances Academy. Mother Lange and the Oblate sisters provided Catholic education to black children in Baltimore despite the prevailing racism of the time.

Lori was in Rome with fellow bishops from Region IV — the District of Columbia, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, U.S. Virgin Islands, West Virginia and the Archdiocese for the Military Services — for the "ad limina" visit. During their time in Rome, the bishops present detailed reports on their dioceses to Pope Francis and other Vatican officials.

While meeting with Vatican officials, Archbishop Lori received an update on Mother Mary Lange's cause for sainthood, which began in 1991.

"I’m happy to say her cause is moving along," Lori said. "The position paper on her life of heroic virtue is nearly complete, and I think we should be all praying very hard that Mother Mary Lange’s cause will advance and that one day she will be canonized a saint."

Xaverian Brother Reginald Cruz recently completed writing his official position paper, or "positio," on her life and holiness. Once published, the Congregation for Saints' Causes will evaluate the document, and if approved, the "positio" will be forwarded to the pope, who could grant Mother Lange the title of "Venerable," declaring her heroic virtues.

After the approval of the "positio," church scholars will then have to document two confirmed miracles attributed to her intercession. In general, one such miracle is needed for beatification, and a second miracle is needed for canonization.

Lori called Mother Lange "a person who was in every way a pioneer" who "stood head and shoulders above the racism of her era."

The Archdiocese of Baltimore plans to open a new school named for Mother Lange in September 2021. The school — the first new Catholic K-8 school in the city in 60 years — will serve about 500 students from across Baltimore.

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