Culture

News



A still from the first chapter of “Hermanas de Corazón” (Sisters of the Heart), a Spanish-language documentary on Venerable Mary Lange and her Oblate Sisters of Providence's work in Cuba (Black Catholic Messenger)

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"Hermanas de Corazón" (Sisters of the Heart), a Spanish-language docuseries on Venerable Mary Lange and her Oblate Sisters of Providence, is streaming online with English subtitles for the first time.

The three parts, first released sequentially beginning in 2021, were directed by Afro-Cuban cinema stalwart Gloria Rolando. Her mother was educated by the Oblates — America's oldest surviving Black Catholic religious order — during their time serving on the island before the infamous 1959 revolution.

The sisters served in Havana and elsewhere, making inroads in education among the Afro-Cuban community where Lange herself was raised following her family's escape from Hispaniola during the Haitian Revolution. Though she did not return to Cuba herself after founding the Oblates in 1829, the order founded schools there beginning at the turn of the 20th century, almost two decades after Lange's death.

Prominent among them was El Colegio San José, founded as a boarding and day school in 1908 in Cárdenas. It plays a central role in Rolando's film series.

"From the meeting of a group of Black Cuban women in the city of Cárdenas, Matanzas, Cuba, a completely forgotten passage of the history of Blacks on the Island is revealed: the history of El Colegio San José, an institution that was dedicated to promoting education before 1959," reads a description of Part 1 of the docuseries.

"Religious education — Catholic — was accompanied by a requirement for preparation to face a society full of discrimination based on skin color."

The film's three chapters focus on the Colegio and its former students, including Rolando's mother, Olga América Casamayor Armas; the order's struggle against racism in Cuba; and the testimonies of Black women who joined the order on the island. The final chapter delves into the modern Afro-Cuban legacy and its connection to the Oblates' pioneering work in the 1900s.

"We will be very interested in seeing what kind of impact it will have, how people will view it. We hope to learn from and collaborate with those interested in the themes it touches on," said Chester King, a U.S. affiliate of Rolando's film studio.

"There is a lot of relatively unknown work on this period by Cuban historians, several of whom were interviewed in the film (Alejandro Leonardo Fernández Calderón and Manuel Fernandez Carcassés)."

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The documentary is the only contemporary film to focus on Lange and the Oblates, whose profile has increased worldwide since the Archdiocese of Baltimore opened her cause for canonization in 1991. It was there that Lange arrived in the United States in the early 19th century and founded her order and its flagship school, St. Frances Academy, which still operates.

Lange was declared venerable by Pope Francis in 2023, putting her one step from possibly becoming the first beatified African American in the Catholic Church. That would require Vatican confirmation of a miracle brought about by her heavenly intercession; a second such miracle would clear the way for canonization as a saint.

The "Sisters of the Heart" docuseries can be purchased on the AfroCubaWeb site, with options to rent or buy a digital copy of the three parts individually, or to buy the series as a package for $25.