

V. Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange

Biography

Elizabeth Clarisse Lange's early life is not well documented. She was born between 1783 and 1794, some sources claim her birthplace as San Domingo, Hispaniola, others suggest Santiago de Cuba. One story relates that her mother was the daughter of a Jewish plantation owner, and her father was enslaved on the property. Most agree, however that she grew up in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, and received an excellent Catholic education, her family one of some means.

Eventually, Lange immigrated to the United States as a free person and ended up in Baltimore, Maryland in 1813. In Baltimore at the time, free people of color outnumbered those who were enslaved and there was an established community of other French-speaking, Catholic, Afro-Caribbean refugees from the Haitian Revolution.

Despite her education and means, as a black woman in a society marked by slavery and racism, she faced numerous obstacles in pursuing her vocation. In the early 1800s, there were few opportunities for black women to receive the proper education or training specifically needed to enter into religious life. Nonetheless, Lange persevered in pursuit of her calling, and once in Baltimore, she became involved with the growing community of black Catholics in the city.

Lange began working as a teacher and catechist, helping to educate and evangelize the city's black population. There was an incredible need for education for black children at the time because they were not permitted in Baltimore's public school system, so Lange opened a free school to serve youth of color inside of her home. During this time, Lange met Fr. James Nicholas Joubert, a French priest who shared her vision of establishing a congregation of black sisters. Together, Lange and Joubert worked to lay the foundations for what would become the Oblate Sisters of Providence — the first black religious congregation in the United States.

In 1829, Lange and three other women made a private commitment to live a religious life under Joubert's guidance. The following year, they formally established the Oblate Sisters of Providence, taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Lange served as the congregation's first superior, overseeing its growth and development over the next several decades — becoming the first-ever black superior general in the Americas. She took on the name Sister Mary.

The Oblate Sisters of Providence faced many challenges in their early years, both from within and from outside of the Church. As a congregation of black women, they were subject to discrimination and prejudice, including from some of their fellow Catholics. Nonetheless, the sisters persevered in their mission to serve God and their community by opening schools and orphanages as well as providing spiritual and material assistance to those in need.

Lange herself was known for her deep spirituality, her tireless work ethic, and her compassion. Her example inspired many other women of color to consider religious life and the Oblate Sisters of Providence grew to become a thriving congregation with a strong sense of mission and purpose.

Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange died on February 3, 1882, at the age of 88. She was declared Venerable on June 22, 2023, and she is remembered as a trailblazer, a visionary, and a woman whose faith and perseverance helped to break down barriers and create new opportunities for black Catholics in the United States.

Prayer

Almighty and Eternal God, You granted Mother Mary Lange extraordinary trust in Your providence. You endow her with humility, courage, holiness, and an extraordinary sense of service to the poor and the sick. You enabled her to fund the Oblate Sisters of Providence and provided 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 (*state your request*) which we ask through the intercession of Your faithful servant, Mother Mary Lange.

Amen.

(*Prayer Source:* <https://nolacatholic.org/news/black-catholic-history-month-mother-mary-lange#:~:text=Prayer,the%20poor%20and%20the%20sick.>)

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