News
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The canonization cause of Mother Mary Lange, founder of the world's first sustained women's religious community for Black women, has taken a step forward.

Sr. Rita Michelle Proctor, superior general of the Baltimore-based Oblate Sisters of Providence, said her religious community received a Feb. 27 email from the Vatican informing the sisters that it has approved the "positio," the documentation on the life of Lange, which includes both the theological and historical record of her life.

Proctor made the announcement March 5 at her religious community's motherhouse in Arbutus, just outside Baltimore, during the annual conferral of the Mother Lange Awards honoring local Catholics active in the Black Catholic community.



Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange (OSV News photo/CNS file)

More than 300 people broke into applause and cheers at the news.

"I don't want you to go and say Sister Rita Michelle has just gone and proclaimed Sister Mother Lange a saint," the superior general said, noting that the sisters have long considered their religious community's founder a saint in their hearts.

Lange established St. Frances Academy in Baltimore in 1828 to educate Black children in an era of slavery.

Lange's positio will go to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints for review, Proctor said.

"Once they have concluded the review, it will be sent to Pope Francis, and he will declare Mother Mary Lange venerable," she said.

"Venerable" is a declaration of a sainthood candidate's heroic virtues. Next would come beatification, after which she would be called "Blessed." The third step is canonization. In general, the last two steps require a miracle attributed to the intercession of the sainthood candidate and verified by the church.

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Baltimore Archbishop William Lori said he was excited to hear the news about the latest development in Lange's cause.

"With each step forward, more people learn about the life and legacy of our beloved Mother Lange," he said. "She unlocked educational opportunities for children in Baltimore and beyond during her lifetime — and that impact continues today. The Oblate Sisters have worked very hard to help bring about this key development. Along with so many others, we are delighted."

The uplifting news was just one highlight of the annual awards ceremony, meant to honor the good works of dozens of parishioners from traditionally Black parishes in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The program also included singing performances, opening remarks and a prayer by Auxiliary Bishop Bruce Lewandowski, a historic portrayal and presentation of Lange by Catholic storyteller Janice Curtis Greene, as well as formal public recognition for award recipients.

"God spoke to me and told me that I could make a difference," said Greene, speaking in character as Lange. "And I wanted to be a powerful woman of God — something I had hoped for and prayed for my entire life."

Those honored with Mother Lange Awards were applauded as they were introduced. Over 40 parishioners from a dozen parishes received the awards for leadership and service. Youth were among the awardees.

In his remarks, Lewandowski recalled the service of fellow Redemptorist Fr. Thaddeus Anwander, who is considered by the Oblate Sisters of Providence to be the second founder of their order.

Faced with the order's dissolution in its early days, Anwander went to the archbishop of Baltimore to plead their case. When the archbishop told him no one in Baltimore wanted "colored" sisters, he persisted anyway, prostrating himself before his superior.

"At that point, [Archbishop Samuel] Eccelston was ashamed, because a priest got on his knees and begged to be a servant of the women he was intending to dismiss — holy women, women in the service of God's people in the church," Lewandowski said.

The bishop concluded his remarks by leading the audience in a simple prayer to Divine Providence.

"Providence did. Providence can. And Providence will," he prayed. "Let that be our prayer today.

Lange is one of six African American Catholics who are candidates for sainthood. The others are: Julia Greeley, who after her emancipation from enslavement joined the Secular Franciscan Order and promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus; Sr. Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, who was a noted educator and evangelist; Fr. Augustus Tolton, the first publicly known Black Catholic priest in the United States; Sr. Henriette Delille, who founded the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family; and Pierre Toussaint, a formerly enslaved philanthropist who supported many Catholic charitable works.

Lange, Greeley and Bowman all have the title "Servant of God," bestowed when a sainthood cause is officially opened. The latter three in the list have been given title "Venerable."