News

An image of Mother Mary Lange, foundress of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, is seen in a stained-glass window in the chapel of the religious order's motherhouse near Baltimore Feb. 9, 2022. (OSV News/CNS file/Chaz Muth)

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Pope Francis has declared as venerable Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, the Cuban-born foundress of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first Black Catholic religious order in the United States.

Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, published decrees on June 22 affirming the "heroic virtues" of Lange and four others, immediately following authorization from the pope during a private audience.

"Convinced of the power of Providence against all forces of evil, she managed to carry out her educational role, showing in her mission great charity, even for enemies, and a profound sense of justice," reads her new biography on the dicastery website.

"Her reputation for holiness has spread in the United States and to various other countries where the Oblate Sisters of Providence are present, combined with a certain *fama signorum*."

Raised in Cuba after fleeing the island of San Domingo (Hispaniola) as a child, Lange immigrated to Baltimore and founded the Oblate Sisters in 1829. Despite her clear call to consecrated life, she had been prevented from joining any existing congregation due to rampant anti-Black racism among White American Catholics.

Named the first Black superior general in U.S. history, Lange led the new order as it dedicated itself primarily to education, teaching in Black Catholic schools and also performing domestic work. Their operations later expanded across the country, and also into the Caribbean and Central America.

Following her death in 1882, Lange became the third African-American sainthood candidate when her cause was opened by Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore in 1991, granting her the title Servant of God. As of 2022, there were chapters of her sainthood guild in 16 countries around the world.

As part of the process for her sainthood cause, Lange's remains were exhumed and examined before being reinterred in the Oblate Sisters' motherhouse chapel in Baltimore in 2013. The sisters celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the event on June 3.

In March, the Oblates reported that they had received notice from the Vatican that Lange's *positio*, the official document detailing her life and work, had been approved. It was originally sent to the Vatican in late 2019 and was subject to a final review this year by dicastery officials before she could be declared venerable.

This painting depicts Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, who founded the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore, the world's first sustained women's religious community for Black women. (OSV News/CNS file)

With the new decree, Lange's is the first of seven African-American sainthood causes to move forward in nearly four years, since Fr. Augustus Tolton was declared

venerable in 2019. Lange is now one of four African-American venerables with Tolton, Mother Henriette DeLille, and Pierre Toussaint.

No African American has ever been beatified in the Catholic Church, which usually requires Vatican approval of a miracle brought about by the sainthood candidate's intercession. Canonization also requires a miracle, part of an overall process that can take centuries and is known to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Lange's cause, now more than 30 years old, has represented for many Black Catholics a sign of the importance of Black women religious, and of Black Catholic education — with the Oblates being best known for their flagship school in Baltimore, St. Frances Academy.

Since Lange's death, the sisters have ministered across the United States and overseas, and continue to educate Black children in churches and schools while spreading the legacy of their saintly foundress.

"Docile to Grace, she carried out a work of evangelization and cultural and Christian formation of the African American population in the United States of America, especially of children," her dicastery biography notes.

"Along with love for her people, she nurtured a deep love for the Lord and made herself available to the action of the Holy Spirit, abandoning herself to God's will with heroic faith."