News

Religious Life



The Oblate Sisters of Providence are presented a special resolution by the Baltimore City Council Oct. 30 for their historical impact on the community. After 191 years, the Oblate Sisters of Providence religious community founded for Black women receives long overdue honor for their heroic ministry during the cholera epidemic in Baltimore in the summer of 1832. It was one of the worst public health crises the city ever faced. (OSV News/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

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The cholera epidemic that ravaged Baltimore in the summer of 1832 was one of the worst public health crises the city ever faced.

The horrifying diarrheal disease afflicted countless people, ultimately claiming the lives of 853 Baltimoreans — more than 1% of what was then the second-largest city in the country.

"An infected person could lose 10% of their body weight and die of dehydration," said Dennis

Castillo, a professor of church history at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore's Roland Park neighborhood who has researched the history of the disease in several U.S. cities.

"What's really tragic is it's an easy disease to cure now," he told the Catholic Review, the news outlet of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. "You just rehydrate them and make sure they get their salts and maybe potassium added in there. But they didn't know that."

To make matters worse, he said, early treatments were deadly.

"They're hitting people with mercury — copious uses of mercury," Castillo said, "and they also used bloodletting and that kind of thing."

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It was in that milieu that two women's religious communities ministered to those afflicted with the disease: the Sisters of Charity, a religious community founded by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg that was then limited to whites; and the

Oblate Sisters of Providence, the world's first sustained religious community for Black women founded in Baltimore by Mother Mary Lange, a candidate for sainthood who in June was declared "venerable."

While both communities made heroic contributions trying to save lives, it was the white religious community that received most of the accolades.

Castillo noted that the Sisters of Charity received at least seven forms of public recognition, including a Baltimore City Council resolution and the erection of a monument to the Sisters of Charity the council described as a "receptacle for the remains" of two members of the religious community who died of the disease.

Yet the Black religious sisters, who also lost a member of their community who gave her life treating victims of the disease, did not receive the same level of public acknowledgment other than a resolution from the Trustees for the Poor and an official report from the same organization — an expression of thanks that was briefer than what was extended to the Sisters of Charity, even though the Oblates served longer, Castillo said.

More than 190 years later, Catholic and civic leaders are rectifying that disparity.

The City Council passed a resolution Oct. 30 honoring the Oblate Sisters of Providence for their 194 years of service. The resolution, supported by the Archdiocese of Baltimore, was presented on the 191st anniversary of the death of Oblate Sr. Anthony Duchemin. Duchemin cared for Baltimore Archbishop James Whitfield when he was struck with the disease. She later contracted cholera herself after nursing the archbishop's housekeeper.



Sr. Rita Michelle Proctor, superior general of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, addresses the Baltimore City Council Oct. 30. (OSV News/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

When the Oblate Sisters of Providence were first approached about serving cholera victims living at the Baltimore City and County Almshouse, all 11 members of the religious community volunteered. Four were selected, including the order's founder and Duchemin.

Since their founding, the Oblates' ministry focused mainly on the education of Black children.

According to Shannen Dee William of the University of Dayton, author of *Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle*, Duchemin had previous experience in nursing before joining the Oblates.

"Here you have these women dedicated to the education of children and they're getting into this unknown terror," Castillo marveled, noting that as part of their work, the sisters would have cleaned linens soiled from vomiting and diarrhea. "They put their faith in God and were ready to be martyrs of charity."

Just as there wasn't much civic recognition of their contributions, the church had few expressions of thanks.

Castillo, who is writing a book about the Catholic Church and the cholera epidemic, said he was impressed that the editor of the 1833 edition of the Catholic Almanac referenced the sisters from both the Sisters of Charity and the Oblate Sisters of Providence who sacrificed their lives. But, he said, there wasn't a lot more, not even an official recognition from the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Adrienne Curry, director of the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Office of Black Catholic Ministries, said it's "obvious" racism played a role. She noted that plans are in the works to place a plaque outside the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore, honoring Duchemin.

Church leaders are exploring establishing a memorial for the basilica's main church that will honor the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Additionally, there's a movement to erect a portrait of Venerable Mother Lange in the archbishop's residence, she said.

Fr. Louis Bianco, rector of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Baltimore's Homeland neighborhood, said parish leaders also are exploring how to honor Lange at the cathedral.

Sr. Rita Michelle Proctor, the 20th superior general of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, said sisters of her religious community welcome the belated recognition and are grateful, but it's not something they sought.

"Our sisters were motivated by their love for God, their trust in God and the need to serve God's people — and they did it," she said. "The fact that it's being recognized so many years later is kind of irrelevant from my perspective. It's more important that we did what we did."