

Mother Lange, Pioneering Black Catholic Educator

by Frere Buteau Espiegle

“To understand the courage and daring of Mother Lange, it is necessary...to comprehend the depths of white resistance to the education of black children in 19th century America. One strong evidence of that was a letter from Harriet Thompson, a black woman from New York to Pope Pius IX, in 1853. In her letter to the pope, she pointed out that their children were refused admission to the Catholic schools because of their race.

Lange demonstrated that she was a woman of extraordinary strength and character when she...founded the first black Catholic school in Baltimore and the first [lasting] religious congregation of women of color in the world, the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

The school that began in Lange’s house... [1828] still exists—St. Frances Academy. It continues today to provide quality education. It is the oldest [continuing educational] facility for children of color in the United States. Their mission was to secure the permanency of a black Catholic school in the slave holding state of Maryland.

Msgr. Guy Sansaricq, Director of the National Center [of the Haitian Apostolate] said that Mother Lange’s legacy to the black community deserves the highest recognition. Her prodigious dedication to the education of black children sprang from her deep faith and her tremendous devotion to the Holy Eucharist... Hence, the opposition constantly directed against her never generated any form of bitterness but rather fueled her ardor to the cause she so strongly believed.

It is evident that Mother Mary Lange revolutionized Catholic Education. The suffering, humiliations and perseverance of Mother Mary Lange and the nineteenth century Oblates have contributed to the flowering in the twenty-first century of ... black bishops and ... black ... theologians... Sister Mary Virginie Fish, Director of the Mother Lange Guild for the Canonization of Mother Mary Lange said: “The Mother Mary Lange story is a story of courage and wisdom, a chronicle unique in the annals of Catholic and secular history... Mother Lange continues to speak to the world in several ways: as an immigrant, as an African American and as a Catholic.”