

The cause behind the cause

by Sister Reparata Clarke

“The humblest citizen in all the land when clad in the armor of a righteous cause is stronger than all the hosts of Errors” (William Jennings Bryan, National Democratic Convention, 1896). Clearly, the occasion was political; surely, the man was an influential orator; the message was undeniably non-religious in its intent. Yet, the insight of such a remark by such an orator reaches beyond the milieu of the profane and edges the world of the sacred. For truly these words seem to identify the humble nineteenth century French-speaking refugee whose love courage, confidence and generosity proved “stronger than all the hosts of Errors” in antebellum Baltimore. There is little doubt that Mary Lange did just that on June 24, 1828 when, clad in the steel of Providence spirituality, she made a statement to the Church in the Americas by responding to God’s call to champion the “righteous cause” of education for children of color as she embarked on a journey of religious consecration, thereby becoming the first woman religious of color in the world.

Who was this woman? What virtuous cause did she espouse? What hosts of Errors fell victims to her strength of character? Her story is unique; her impact on Catholic education in America is too little known; in fact, has gone unrecognized. Although continuous and serious research has not as yet unearthed the precise Caribbean country of her [birth], it is most generally the stance of cautious historians that Lange was well-educated, was of French [Haitian] lineage, and belonged to the well-to-do class of people of color. With other refugees who fled the uprisings and revolution in Haiti and Saint Domingue, Lange with her family fled the islands, eventually settling in Baltimore. Tradition tells us that for ten years she conducted a school in her own home for the children of free Blacks and those of the people of color for whom no avenues to public education were open at that time. Lange saw a need; she heard the Call; she armed herself with a righteous cause, she wielded the sword of justice with her Saint Frances School for Colored Girls in 1828.” Moreover, she formed a band of faith-filled women into an enduring monument of consecrated commitment to the Christian formation of children of color – especially, the poor and those who were excluded by the hosts of Errors: the prevalence of social ills, racial bias, and the dearth of Gospel values. Indeed, the woman, Mary Elizabeth Lange **is the Cause behind the Cause!**