

RESOURCE TEXTS

SPECIAL EDITION

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250TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE
PRESENTATION CONGREGATION



These Resource Texts have been created to make Nano Nagle and the Story of the Founding of the Presentation Congregation more widely known across the globe.

Short Account

Celebrating the 250th Anniversary

of the Birth of the Presentation Congregation

On Christmas Eve in the year 1775 Nano Nagle and three companions opened a new chapter in a sacred story. Two of Nano's companions, Elizabeth Burke and Mary Fouhy, trained by her as co-workers, had been teaching for some time in her cabin schools. The third companion, Mary Ann, had been known to her in some capacity; and Nano waited almost a year until Mary Ann was ready to join the group. Christmas Eve was chosen as the appropriate date for establishing on a sure footing the inspired project begun in Cork city some two decades previously. All four women took up residence in Nano's humble cabin in Cove Lane (now Douglas Street) on 24 December 1775, to begin a new journey as a religious community. They did not have a convent or a title or a rule of life until later. Nano was happy to refer to the little group as a Society. So begins the story of the Congregation of the Presentation Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary!

It had been more than twenty years in the making. Nano Nagle had opened her first cabin school in Cove Lane in the mid eighteenth century, probably around 1754. Secretly, because of the Penal Laws then in force, she had arranged to have thirty poor girls with a mistress invited into a rented cabin classroom, disguised as a bread-shop. There, she opened her first school. In doing so, she was fully aware of the risks involved, and she kept her plans secret, even from her own family. Soon the demands grew. Within a few years there were seven schools in Cork city, five for girls and two for boys, with over four hundred children enrolled. Nano paid the teachers from her own funds, eventually relying on funds from her uncle

Joseph's estate. She visited the schools daily, in all weathers and on foot, crossing the city from Cove Lane on the southside to Philpott Lane on the northside. In the evenings, lantern in hand, she trod the dark and dangerous alleys of the city, visiting the sick and suffering, bringing comfort and basic medical care to the poorest of the city's poor. She became known as The Lady of the Lantern. The Annalist of South Presentation Convent, Cork, states that "there was not a garret in the city that Nano Nagle did not know". Nano died of tuberculosis on 26 April 1784. *The Hibernian Chronicle* of that date carried the following notice:

Last Wednesday the indisposition of Miss Nagle was announced in the sorrowing countenances of the poor of this city to whom she was the best of benefactors and patronesses. She died this day about noon and truly indescribable is the extreme of universal lamentation for the departure of a lady possessed of all that merit which for many years rendered her the object of unexampled admiration and acquired her the most unlimited esteem of all ranks of people.

In 2000, Nagle was voted Irish Woman of the Millennium, "in recognition of her importance as a pioneer of female education in Ireland." In a 2005 radio poll, she was voted Ireland's greatest woman ever. She was declared Venerable by Pope Francis on the 31st October 2013.

By Mary T. O' Brien PBVM

Longer Account

*In the face of fear, she chose to be daring,
In the face of anxiety, she chose to trust,
In the face of impossibility, she chose to begin.*
Raphael Consedine PBVM

Celebrating the 250th Anniversary

of the

Birth of the Presentation Congregation

(1775 – 2025)

On Christmas Eve in the year 1775 Nano Nagle and three companions opened a new chapter in a sacred story. Two of Nano's companions, Elizabeth Burke and Mary Fouhy, trained by her as co-workers, had been teaching for some time in her cabin schools. The third companion, Mary Ann Collins, had been known to her in some capacity, and Nano waited almost a year until Mary Ann was ready to join the group. Christmas Eve was chosen as the appropriate date for establishing on a sure footing the inspired project begun in Cork city some two decades previously. All four women took up residence in Nano's humble cabin in Cove Lane (now Douglas Street) on 24 December 1775, to begin a new journey as a religious community. They did not have a convent or a title or a rule of life until later. Nano was happy to refer to the little group as a Society. So begins the story of the Congregation of the Presentation Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary!

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How often has she been seen, after a well spent day, returning thro' the darkness of the night, dripping with rain, mingled in the bustling crowd, moving thoughtfully along by the faint glimmering of a wretched lantern, withholding from herself in this manner, the necessaries of life, that she may administer its comforts to others.

Seeing the need for establishing her schools on a more permanent foundation, and with the assistance of Fr Francis Moylan, then Vicar General of the diocese, she invited the Ursuline sisters from France to come to Cork. She had a convent dwelling built for them on the site now occupied by Nano Nagle Place. In 1771, four Ursuline Sisters came from Paris, accompanied by Rev. Dr Francis Moylan. They lived in Nano's cabin until their convent was ready some months later. Their reputation as educators quickly grew. But they were intent on observing the rule of enclosure. This meant that they could not visit the sick and suffering in their homes as Nano used to do. They also insisted on wearing the religious habit, which Nano saw as extremely dangerous as it would likely to draw the attention of Penal Law enforcement. She prayed and consulted and agonised before taking the decisive step to begin anew on Christmas Eve 1775.

Nano's courageous venture was a significant part of what is now known as The Catholic Revival. It was groundbreaking in many ways, but most notably by

making provision for the education of girls, the most neglected segment of society at that time. Much has been written about Nano Nagle's holistic vision of education. It was not confined to the classroom. It addressed the poverty of unemployment, ensuring that training in crafts and skills (as well as literacy, numeracy and religious education) was included in school programmes for girls and boys. She is credited with developing cottage industries in lacemaking and crochet for women and girls and for employing experts from Flanders as teachers of those crafts. She had a home built for destitute ladies and purchased a worthy burial plot in St Finbarr's cemetery for those who could not afford a grave. Her plans to build a refuge for girls and women trapped in prostitution were cut short by her death from tuberculosis in 1784.

In 2000, Nagle was voted Irish Woman of the Millennium, "in recognition of her importance as a pioneer of female education in Ireland." In a 2005 radio poll, she was voted Ireland's greatest woman ever. Several religious congregations of women and men have been inspired by the contemplative-apostolic model of consecrated life modelled and designed by Nano Nagle. Her followers can be found today in all five continents. Nano Nagle was declared Venerable by Pope Francis on the 31st October 2013.

By Mary T. O' Brien PBVM

NOTES ON THE FOUNDING OF THE PRESENTATION CONGREGATION

Prepared by Mary T. O' Brien PBVM

Who is Nano Nagle?

Nano Nagle was born in 1718, the eldest of seven children born to Garret Nagle and his wife, Ann (Mathews), in Ballygriffin, near Mallow in County Cork. She had a privileged upbringing with opportunities denied to most families in Penal Ireland. Nano seems to have been a rather vivacious child. The Annals of South Presentation Convent, Cork, present the following picture:

When a child she was remarkable for the ardour and liveliness of her disposition. Her pious mother deemed it necessary to discourage this vivacity, and, therefore, often withheld from her those indulgences which she usually granted to her other children.

The Nagles were among the wealthiest and best-known Catholic families in the Blackwater Valley and surrounding region. The tree-clad mountains across the river from Nano's homeplace is still shown on the map as the Nagle Mountains. Traditionally, the Nagles were supporters of the Jacobite cause. Garret Nagle, Nano's father, was agent for the Stuarts in Flanders and collected money in Ireland for the Stuart cause. Several of the Nagles served in military circles in the shadow court of King James II in St Germaine-n-Laye. When King James was defeated in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne, Sir Richard Nagle (1636-1699), uncle to Garret Nagle, accompanied the defeated King to France and became Secretary of State at the Court of St Germaine. This same Richard was Speaker in the Irish Parliament and later Attorney General. On her mother's side, Nano can claim royal connections through the Matthews of Thurles. Elizabeth Poyntz, Lady Thurles, was a close relative. James Butler, son of Lady Thurles, was first Duke of

Ormonde and the King's chief representative in Ireland. Through this ancestral line Nano can claim kinship with the late Princess Diana Spencer and with the present royal family of England.

Education and Early Life in Paris

Nano and her siblings were home-schooled in their early years, probably by their parents and by paid tutors, disguised as servants. The Penal Laws forbade anyone to open a school for Catholic children or to teach in such a school. The penalty for a first offence was a three-month prison sentence. Further offenses merited multiples of this and/or deportation.¹ John Bowes, Chief Baron of the Exchequer, declared in 1759 that “the laws did not presume an Irish Catholic to exist except for the purposes of punishment”.² The Nagles, in common with families who could afford it, were educated on the Continent. It is now known that Nano was educated from 1728 until 1734 in the Benedictine Convent School in Ypres, known as the “Irish Abbey at Ypres”.³ On leaving Ypres at age sixteen, she moved to Paris where she had many relatives. She lived there until the death of her father in 1746. Little is known of the twelve or more years which Nano spent in Paris. She may well have found a home among exiled Stuarts in the royal residence in the Chateau de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where many Nagles lived until the time

¹ “No person of the popish religion shall publicly or in private houses teach school or instruct youth in learning within this realm' upon pain of a £20 fine and three months in prison for every such offence”. This Act was not repealed until 1782, two years before Nano Nagle’s death.

² Patrick Corish. *The Catholic Community in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Dublin: Helicon, 1981), 73.

³ The Abbey was established in Ypres, Belgium in 1665 to educate Irish women in exile. The convent and school were destroyed during World War 1, and the community resettled in Ireland in 1920, in Kylesmore, Co Galway.

of the French Revolution. Nano Nagle was formally introduced to the court of King Louis XV in Paris, a privilege reserved for members of high society. According to her own testimony, “she was a lover of the world, of dress, and vanity.”⁴ A friend of hers, who knew her well, gives this insight into Nano’s life in royal circles in Paris: “You have heard, *sans doute*, that she had been fond of the world when young, enjoyed its amusements and, regretting its various enjoyments, she felt deprived of everything pleasant or desirable, yet I do not believe that she neglected the Main Point”.⁵

A story from the Annals of South Presentation Convent, also recorded in TJ Walsh’s history of Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters,⁶ has captured the imagination of artists and others as a turning point in Nano’s life. Returning from a ball in the early hours of the morning, her attention was drawn to a small group of people huddled at a church door waiting for morning Mass. The contrast between her life and theirs gave her cause to reflect on her use of time. It was prelude to a transformation provoked by the charity of her sister, Anne, when, later, both sisters are back from Paris and now living with their widowed mother in Dublin. Their father, Garret Nagle, had died in 1746. The Annalist of South Presentation convent, Cork, reports:

When living with her mother and sister in Dublin... she one day requested her pious sister to get made up a splendid silk dress, the materials for which she had purchased in Paris. She often said she was never so edified as when her

⁴ Annals of South Presentation Convent, Cork.

⁵ M Aloysius Moylan, 1836. From the Annals of Ursuline Convent, Cork.

⁶ TJ Walsh. *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters* (Dublin: Gill & Sons, 1959), 41.

sister disclosed to her in confidence that she had disposed of the silk for the purpose of relieving a distressed family...She often said to her sisters in religion that 'it was this trifling circumstance which fired her determination to devote the remainder of her life to God in the service of the poor.'

So begins a new chapter in the life of Nano Nagle! She is about twenty-eight years old.

Waiting Time

Visiting with her brother David and his wife, Mary, in the homeplace at Ballygriffin, Nano engages in conversation with the tenant families in the neighbourhood.

Her heart is melted with pity... Their miserable condition was ever present to her imagination – no company, no employment, no pleasure, no pain, could mitigate her anxiety for these poor people. Not being then able to remedy the miseries she beheld, she determined to withdraw at least from the sight of it.... (Annals, SPC)

Nano decides to return to France, to enter a convent, and to spend her life in prayer. It is likely, but not certain, that she returns to the Benedictine Abbey in Ypres where she had been at school. She spends only a short time there and is advised by a Jesuit to return to Ireland and to listen to the voices of the Irish.

Humble Beginnings

She returns to Ireland, this time to Cork city, invited by her brother Joseph and his wife, Frances, to stay with them. However, she does not stay very long. She has plans that must be kept secret. She rents a small cabin on the same street, just forty yards from the church of St Finbarr, and takes up residence there. It takes her quite some time before taking the first step in setting up a school. She prayed, she consulted her trusted friends, Fr Francis Moylan, his uncle Fr Patrick Doran and her spiritual director, Fr Lawrence Callanan OFM. Eventually, she sends her maid to gather some thirty poor girls from the area and meets them with a paid teacher in her cabin school. She welcomes them warmly, begins with a prayer, hands over to the teacher and the project has begun. Soon another school opens in Cove Lane, then another in Cross Street, yet another in Mallow Lane and, eventually, on the northside of the city in Philpott Lane.

An interesting entry occurs in a letter written by Bishop Moylan, then Bishop of Kerry, and formerly Nano's friend and adviser in Cork, to Archbishop Troy of Dublin (dated 7 November 1789, four years after Nano's death) where he describes in some detail, his impressions of 'the venerable Miss Nagle' (Note: She was venerable to a bishop who knew her well, long before Pope Francis declared it!). That entry reads:

Miss Nagle, the Venerable Foundress, was early called by Divine Providence, to the care and instruction of the poor. Nearly forty years did she spend in that very laborious, but most meritorious occupation... In different parts of the city, she established schools, where above 400 poor children... were constantly instructed in the principles of Religion, in reading, writing and arithmetic, with needle-works of different kinds for the girls, by persons appointed and paid by her for that purpose....⁷

The status of Nano Nagle as a Pioneer of Catholic Education ensures her a place in the history books. She will be remembered as benefactor of the poor, friend of the sick and homeless, as 'Lady of the Lantern' who braved the dangerous streets of Cork by night; for introducing the Ursuline Sisters to Ireland; for founding her own Congregation, later to be known as the Presentation Sisters; for sending boy-missionaries to the West Indies; for purchasing a plot in St Finbarr's Cemetery where the destitute could be buried with dignity; for befriending prostitutes and 'beggars' brats' – for these and many other reasons, the story of Nano Nagle will live on.

We know from her biographer that Nano spent four hours in prayer each morning in the church of St Finbarr's 'South' before beginning her day's work and "as many hours in her cabin in the evenings". She gave her all – wealth, talents and energy and more – for the project that she calls 'a work of God'. A few sentences from her letter to a friend in 1769 are revelatory:

⁷ Mary Pius O'Farrell, *Breaking of Morn* (Monasterevin: Presentation Publication, 2001), 117.

You see it has pleased the Almighty to make me succeed when I had everything, as I may say, to fight against...I began in a humble manner and, though it pleased the Divine Will to give me severe trials in this foundation, yet it is to show that it is His work and has not been effected by human means.

For further reading

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