

The NANO NAGLE story

Nano Nagle was born in Ballygriffin, County Cork, in 1718. The name "Honora" given at baptism was soon replaced in the family circle by the affectionate diminutive "Nano". She was the eldest of six children, the others being Ann, Catherine, Elizabeth, David, and Joseph. She was born between Fermoy and Mallow in the Blackwater Valley in County Cork which possesses views of the distant Nagle Mountains. Much of this region was once the property of the Nagle family. In the protracted struggle between the English and Irish for the possession of Ireland, the Nagles' loyalty to the Catholic king - James Francis Edward Stuart (James III of England and Ireland and James VIII of Scotland)- and the Catholic faith cost them extensive lands. However, when her parents married, the family still owned extensive property at Ballygriffin, Killavullen, as Garret's brother Joseph had converted to Protestantism so that he could hold property on behalf of the Roman Catholic members of his family as was required under the Penal Laws.

Nano Nagle is believed to have attended a hedge school close to her home before she was sent to France for the rest of her education. The first "Act of 1695" made it unlawful to open a Catholic school at home, and also forbade travel overseas for education. The Nagles had a branch of the family who were merchants in Cork city, with strong connections on the European Continent, particularly in France. It was through these channels that Nano and her sister Ann were able to travel to Paris, smuggled, perhaps, in a cargo ship, where they received a full Catholic education and also enjoyed a sophisticated life in French society. According to one account she had a hectic social life in Paris – "balls, parties and theatre outings, all the glamour of the life of a wealthy young lady". It was after one of these parties that she noticed a group of wretched-looking people, huddled in a church doorway and was taken aback by the contrast between her wealthy, privileged life and that of the Paris poor.

After their father's death in 1746, she and her sister returned to Ireland and went to live with their mother in Dublin, where they

found widespread poverty. She returned to Paris intending to enter an Ursuline convent, but a spiritual director advised her to return to Ireland and take up the education of deprived children there. Nano Nagle founded her first school in 1754 in Cove Lane with about 30 students. This is now the site of South Presentation convent. Within nine months, she was educating 200 girls. By 1757, she had opened seven schools, five for girls and two for boys. These provided pupils with a basic education and religious instruction. At first alone, and later with the support of her family, particularly her uncle Joseph Nagle, she established a network of schools in Cork. Not everybody in Cork welcomed the initiative: she was insulted in the street on occasion, and her pupils were dismissed as "beggars' brats.

Nano Nagle began to visit the sick and the elderly after school, bringing them food, medicine and comfort.[7] She opened homes for aged women, and began conducting adult classes. She went from hovel to hovel each day to gather the most needy people to teach. Night-time ministries to poverty-ridden elderly and sick in her home town gave Nagle the nickname The Lady with the Lantern. The lantern later became the symbol of the Sisters of the Presentation worldwide.

As her workload increased she realised that she would need help with her work. She set up an Ursuline convent in Cork city which she initially sponsored in 1771; the first community was made up of four Cork women – who were professed at the Ursuline Convent in the Rue St. Jacques in Paris – together with a reverend mother. However, they were unable to work for or educate the poor because at that time religious sisters were required to remain enclosed in their convents.

Nano and her assistants continued their work without becoming an established religious congregation so they were free to work for the poor without being enclosed. On Christmas Eve 1775 she founded the Society of Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in Cork. She resisted the local bishop when he expressed fears that the establishment of the convent might provoke a Protestant backlash. When her uncle Joseph died, he left her a large sum of money which she devoted to building schools and convents,

providing relief for the poor and the infirm. All of this was done in secrecy, initially, but even the authorities, seeing the beneficent nature of her institutions, relaxed their vigilance somewhat.

She founded the first Presentation convent in Ireland on Cove Lane (now Douglas Street) in Cork, which opened on Christmas Day, 1775. There she received the habit on 29 June 1776, taking the name of Mother Mary of St. John of God. The sisters made their first annual vows on 24 June 1777. Nano Nagle died from tuberculosis on 26 April 1784.