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NANO NAGLE: A PROPHETESS FOR OUR TIMES

By Monsignor Cornelius Higgins, printed in the February 26, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*



Picture from Nano Nagle Website

Sister Nano Nagle

Coincidental with the United States Bicentennial celebration, the Presentation Sisters throughout the world are observing the bi-centenary of the founding of their order which had its beginning on Christmas Eve 1775 in Cork, Ireland. The Presentation Sisters and Saint Mary School in Sacramento will mark the occasion with a special Mass at Presentation Church on February 28 at 5:30 PM. Bishop Alden J. Bell will be the principal celebrant of the Solemn Concelebrated Mass.

The Order of Presentation Sisters owes its origin under God to one Nano Nagle whose family motto was: "Not words, but deeds" and whose indomitable spirit and all-consuming zeal are enshrined in her own declaration: "If I could be of any service in saving souls in any part of the globe, I would willingly do all in my power."

Nano Nagle was born of well-to-do parents in Ballygriffin, County Cork, Ireland, in 1719. The period of her birth is significant because the infamous Penal Laws, designed by English oppressors to kill the practice of the Catholic religion in Ireland, were in full force. No Catholic

Churches were allowed and a reward was offered to anyone who brought in the head of a priest, a teacher, or a wolf, as these were considered the three beasts which should be extirpated in Ireland. Schools were outlawed except for the obnoxious “charter schools” set up for proselytizing purposes.

Under these circumstances, Nano Nagle’s wealthy parents contrived to send her to Paris in 1728 to further her education. Beautiful and gifted, agreeable and entertaining, Nano enjoyed the whirlwind of Parisian amusement until the death of her father in 1746 caused her to return to her widowed mother then residing in Dublin. The death of her father, the spiritual conflict that had already begun to make itself felt in her soul as she realized the emptiness of her Parisian life, the terrible sights of poverty and hunger and the lamentable ignorance of the Irish people for lack of the education they were denied, all had a tremendous impact on the young lady Nano.

Her thoughts turned to the religious life which she sought with the Ursulines in Paris where she returned. But the voices of Ireland’s poor, hungry and uneducated kept calling to her as they did to Saint Patrick 1300 years before. In answer to that call, she returned to Ireland, this time to Cork City. There she rented a mud cabin, secretly provided a forbidden education to poor children in religion, reading, writing and arithmetic, with needlework for the girls. She furtively begged support for her educational and charitable program which continued to expand with the aid of helpers she gathered around her.



Photo from the Nano Nagle Website

Nano Nagle Leading the Children to Safety

Determined to found a community of sisters who would be teachers, nurses, and Little Sisters of the Poor all in one, with three companions she began on Christmas Eve, 1775, in Cork City, the first Novitiate of the Presentation Order. This Order of Sisters, which is now spread throughout the world, had its beginnings in the United States as early as 1854 in San Francisco. Among its some 140 present foundations in the US are the convents at Presentation and Saint Mary parishes in Sacramento, which were founded in 1961 and 1969 respectively. In all the foundations, the spirit of Nano Nagle lives on—that indomitable spirit that supported her in her multitudinous tasks of educating and caring for the poor, the neglected, the hungry, the sick, the dying, and the ignorant until her saintly death in 1784.

Though Nano Nagle died almost two centuries ago she might well be considered a prophet of our times when the needs of the Third World are crying for our attention. In the 18th century, Nano Nagle, like Mother Teresa of Calcutta today, exemplifies the charity of Christ that urges us to cloth the naked, to feed the poor, to tend the wasted bodies, to speak words of comfort, to heal infections, to give hope to the destitute and to provide people with a sense of their dignity as children of God.



Photo from Nano Nagle Website

**Giving Thanks to God for the Life of Nano Nagle
At her Burial Site at South Presentation Convent in Cork, Ireland**

A champion also in the field of education, the Presentation foundress realized and inculcated the necessity of treating pupils in the totality of their nature and environment. Well she knew that education divorced from God can be disedification and rightfully did she fight for the cause of an education distinct from, though not opposed to, a governmentally imposed lopsided uniformity. To be educated is to be truly human and to be human is to be developed spiritually as well as physically and intellectually.

Nano Nagle is also a woman for our times—a liberated woman. Experiencing the ease, the comfort and the pleasures of Parisian society life she had the courage and conviction to free herself from the slavery of the passing show to share the freedom of the children of God. Liberation for her was a way of life, expressed and manifested, not in arrogant self-assertion, but, like the grain of what falling into the ground, dying to self and thus coming to fruition.

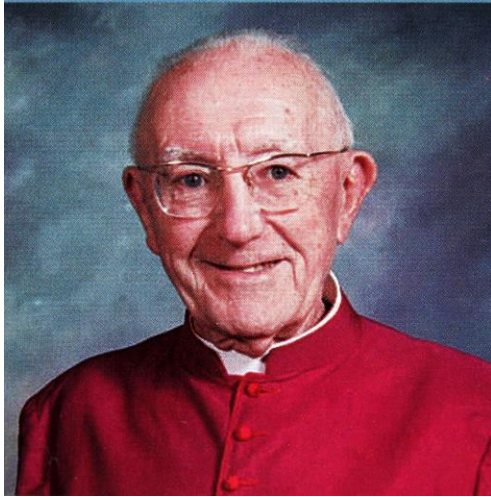
The difficult and oppressive times in which Nano Nagle lived are partly responsible for her not being as well known universally as she deserves. However, the vast number of her spiritual daughters and the multitude of Presentation foundations encircling the globe bear living witness to a gallant and saintly lady who was known by her contemporaries as “The Lady of the Lantern” and whose light, thankfully, continues to shine, enlightening, helping and comforting a world in need.



Photo from the Nano Nagle Website

Presentation Sisters Many Years Ago

About the Author



Monsignor Cornelius Higgins was Irish born and like many Irish priests before him, left his homeland to serve in the missions of California in the Diocese of Sacramento.

During his many years of service in Sacramento, he served in the Marriage Tribunal, was chancellor of the diocese during the episcopacies of Bishop Joseph McGucken, Bishop Alden Bell and Bishop Francis Quinn.

He was the founding pastor of Presentation Parish, Sacramento in 1961 and was able to secure a small group of Presentation Sisters from Ireland to come to Sacramento to staff Presentation Parish School.

The parish was named for the *Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, in part to honor the Presentation Sisters who came from Cork, Ireland to teach in the parish school.

Monsignor Higgins was also pastor of St Mel Parish, Fair Oaks from 1974 to 1976. He died on May 11, 2001 and after his Funeral Mass was laid to rest in the priest section of Calvary Cemetery.