

In Praise of Nano Nagle's Spirituality



By Sr. Mary Pius O'Farrell pbvm

Dear Sisters,

We are very happy to share this reflection which Sr. Pius O'Farrell has written. Across the Presentation world we are well aware of the profound and professional contribution which Sr. Pius has made in making Nano and her vision known. In the 1980's and 1990's Sr. Pius worked tirelessly to write the Positio for the Congregation so that Nano's Cause can be furthered. She has written two wonderful books on Nano, *Breaking of Morn* and *Nano Nagle Woman of the Gospel*. They are inspirational and informative. Many of us look to her writings to deepen our own understanding of Nano and her vision. She also produced CD's, so that those who have special needs can dip into the spirit of this valiant woman. She has walked with many of us on the 'Nano Walk' in Cork.

To quote her own words from "*Nano Nagle, Woman of the Gospel*"
'To the people of Cork she gave not just a piece of silk but her whole life. Their needs were so great that she was drawn into ever greater service, into ever deeper poverty, into continual demands of her time. In school and street, she gave what she had. To her, everyone in need was Christ asking for help...It was all 'of the Sacred Heart.' Love and compassion outran every plan she made and every effort at conservation of resources.'

Sr. Pius's contribution is invaluable and will stand the test of time, it is a treasure house that we draw on each day. It will inspire millions across the globe and move us all to live deeply the spirit of Nano in our world.

Thank you, Sr. Pius and may you be blessed, you have been a blessing to the Congregation.

Yours sincerely

Congregational Leadership Team

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In her first extant letter, Nano Nagle could not find words to express her anxiety about two young ladies going to Paris, at her expense, to become Ursulines for a foundation in Cork. Remember the time, 1770s - no phones, e-mails or amenities such as we take for granted today. Vivid imaginations could conjure up enemies on all sides. There was one remedy only. Nano turned long anxious days into intense prayer. Almost immediately, the pattern of her spirituality emerges. God's Providence 'made it turn out better': there was news of two more candidates. Zeal or enthusiasm became the theme of her encouragement. And so, the resilient Nano appears as she continued her compassionate service in the lanes of Cork city from the early 1750s. When she began her schools, her own people knew nothing about it 'because they would be the first to oppose her'. Heroic people, mostly unknown, helped her as she moved from school to school. In her second venture, she went to Bath in England to inform her brothers, David and Joseph, about an Ursuline foundation. Because of agrarian trouble, they had left Ireland in 1762. The Bishop of Cork, John Butler, would be better pleased if she had Protestant consent for her schools. Nano continued her spiritual journey, cautious at all times. A lonely pioneer, her strength was not of this world.

On mainland Ireland, clergy travelled in disguise. Nano named quite a few who were really Jesuits - Mr Halloran, Mr Austin. Mindful that inference must be kept to a minimum, more information than we will ever know, was communicated by word of mouth rather than by letter, much of it not recorded for obvious reasons. In this context we learn about the painful reality that Nano's planned Ursuline foundation earned mostly disapproval, so much so that Fr John Austin S.J., in Dublin lost interest in the project until Fr Halloran S.J., told him the real good news. (To this day, John Austin House in Dublin bears his name).

Already Nano had her own Congregation in mind. From among her associates, Nano chose Mary Fouhy and Elizabeth Bourke. On Christmas Eve 1775 when the heroic Angela Collins joined her, the required number of four was in place. In 1776 Nano sent a copy of her new Constitutions to Teresa Mulally secretly by Mr Shortall, another clergyman. Ladies, like Mrs Creagh, also carried messages from Cork to Dublin and vice versa. Over all the good work done in secret, Fr Doran S.J. uncle of the future Bishop Moylan, kept a watchful eye. And so, in spite of all odds, the heroic narrative develops, constant uncertainty overcome by trust in the Providence of God. A profound spirituality is suddenly alive in spite of the repression of the Penal Laws and the historic Irish Nation made poor by injustice.

Already, Nano's line of vision was global. Trading ships took news of her schools abroad, she wrote triumphantly. She would do all in her power in any part of the globe, if she could be of service in saving souls. The good seed sown would spread. 'With the Divine Assistance everything promises well', she wrote. She even trained would-be sailors in her schools to tell the 'little blacks', the slaves and the victims of oppression in the West Indies, the good news of God's love for them.

Service was the great Christian virtue dating from times past. When the children had the catechism by heart, they learned to write and work. Nano advised the Ursulines to learn everything useful and not to spare any expense. At the death of her uncle Joseph and having received a large sum of money from him, she supported an even greater number of children. With a human touch she did not want Miss Kavanagh to wear herself out with the poor children in Paris but rather to spare herself for the poor children of Ireland! Concealing her tendency to lung-trouble, Nano was only happy when she saw crowds of children 'receiving instruction' for heart and mind and soul, something much more than book learning but always anchored in the thought: 'the Almighty is all-sufficient'.

No sooner were the Ursulines settled in the house Nano had built for them, than she had another project in mind. Miss Mulally in Dublin had heard of the renowned Nano Nagle. Nano, herself, was hoping that Miss Mulally would join her. Already she had Killarney and Dublin in mind for her own Congregation. Indeed Bishop Moylan, he who had initially opposed her in her local project in Cork, begged her for two of her sisters for Killarney, when he became Bishop of Kerry in 1775. When sending a copy of her new Constitutions to Teresa in 1776, she named her new Congregation 'Sisters of Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus', thereby making known for the second time, her aversion to Jansenism. There the definitive title and the Centerpoint of her spirituality appear. In her humility, she remarked that the Lord makes use of the weakest means to bring about his works. To generations yet unborn she was a mulier fortis, a strong woman. Hints of quite a few unpleasant situations appeared in her letters to Teresa Mulally. In her struggle to found her own Congregation, she experienced the volatility of youth. One young lady went off with her nieces going to Cambrai. It was rumoured that another, having left Nano, hoped to join the Ursulines. Nano was blamed for dismissing another. Mrs Moran (possibly a Carmelite in disguise) accepted her but did not keep her a month. So much so that Nano felt obliged to appeal to Bishop Butler to restore harmony.

In 1782 a Sermon preached by Fr Nicholas Barron S.J. delighted Nano as he named the qualities of a Sister of the Sacred Heart. Centrepoint was 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor'. And indeed the 'mustard seed was growing'. Schools were to be preferred to all other means of evangelisation. For candidates, she would choose poor girls with talents. Even so, she was flexible in her plans. She would take pensioners as pupils 'where there were no proper schools for young ladies'. When the Gordon Riots broke out, she placed all her plans under the protection of Our Blessed Lady. She was so compassionate that she asserted, the year before she died, that few were as distressed for money as she was. Sometimes dejected and overwhelmed by the misery and poverty all around her, she admitted she was always in a hurry. Observers, however, noted her serenity 'as she moved thoughtfully along'.

Nano and her brother, Joseph, loved to visit the little chapel of the Dominicans across the River Lee, where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved in a wooden tabernacle which they had donated. Here we have Nano in quiet contemplation after prayer in action. The Church near her convent in the South side of the city was built in 1766, in a secluded side-street by D.A.O'Brien, another Dominican. Nearby was the remains of the Augustinian Church, a ruin from Cromwellian times. Nano's morning prayer was prolonged. Sr. Elizabeth Burke had died in 1783, the year before her. The Franciscan, Fr Laurence Callanan, assisted Nano in her last days on this earth. Her last letter was dated 1783, her last projects - a house for destitute old women, a plan for prostitutes and a pretty garden for her Sisters in religion. After her death, there was much anxiety, admirably borne by Sr. Angela Collins and her companions.

"What would become of the orphans, hundreds of whom she drew from ignorance and vice"? queried her cousin, Sr. Ursula Kavanagh. The object of greatest need was the object of her greatest compassion, without reference to any religion.

The best tributes were paid to Nano by the Protestant Volunteers and the newspaper, the Hibernian Chronicle. On Sunday evenings, an hour's 'instruction' and a poultice for sores continued. The way ahead was the same as ever. Killarney convent was founded in 1793, Dublin 1794, Waterford 1798, North Presentation Cork 1799, Kilkenny 1800.

Pioneered by Nano Nagle, many founders, Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice, Mary Aikenhead, Catherine McAuley, Margaret Aylward, and many more, had a ready model in one who survived the rigours of the Penal Laws. In the years after her death, Nano's Sisters, (having

changed the name to Presentation Sisters) served the Irish Diaspora in Newfoundland, England, India, America, Australia, and later in the 20th century in Africa, New Zealand, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and more.

Vital to any consideration of her spirituality is her aversion to Jansenism. She was in good company! St Francis de Sales, St Vincent de Paul, St Philip Neri, St John Eudes and many more were against Jansenism. Nothing that could be written about Nano Nagle is of more importance than her deep and life-long trust in the Heart of Jesus. When she was eleven years old, the Bishop of Soissons near Paris published the Life of Blessed Margaret Mary. He was against the Jansenists and his book provoked their opposition, even though they had previously been indifferent to devotion to the Sacred Heart. Jansenism was a kind of cult that set up too many 'road-blocks' on the road to heaven. Jansenists made life and religion cold and bleak with over-severity. People became discouraged, kept away from Holy Communion and doubted that they would ever enjoy the vision of God. A special Mass of the Sacred Heart was approved for Poland in 1765. Two years later, a pastoral letter by the Archbishop of Paris, Christophe de Beaumont ordered the Feast of the Sacred Heart to be celebrated in his Diocese. Several other Dioceses followed suit.

In a letter to Miss Fitzsimons, written early in the 1770s, Nano Nagle made a specific reference to Jansenism. Had she known that the 'Fille St Joseph' was Jansenist, she would never have sent a novice to a particular unnamed convent. The name she gave to her own Congregation, 'Sisters of Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart' says it all. Little wonder that devotion to the Heart of Jesus is the source of Compassion and Hospitality among Presentation Sisters. As Canon T.J.Walsh says in his Book 'Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters' – “Its deepest well-spring is compassion for those who do not know Christ”.

The asceticism in Nano's life is generally attributed to Pere Barre, Founder of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus. His humanity appears in chapter 2 of their Statutes and Rules, Their Spiritual Exercises: “They should not undertake any mortification or bodily penance under any circumstance”. Due to the nature of their work, the Confessor is asked not to give or permit any such penances. He also has in the Rules for schools that children should not be given corporal punishment (a directive extraordinary for 17th Century France). Nano's penances were not discovered until after her death.

Bishop Moylan was transferred as Bishop from Kerry to Cork in 1787. He lost no time on his return and wrote to Archbishop Troy in Dublin 7th Nov. 1788, making a definitive statement on the holiness of Nano Nagle... “She died in the odour of sanctity, a victim of her zeal and charity to the poor. In different parts of the city, she established schools where above 400 poor children, boys and girls, were constantly instructed in the principles of Religion, in reading writing and arithmetic, with needleworks of different kinds for the girls, by persons appointed and paid by her for that purpose. These schools she daily visited herself, examined and instructed the poor children ... Her exertions were inconceivable and nothing but the hand of God could have supported her under the constant fatigues of her laborious mission”

The Constitutions, first referred to by Nano in 1776, were finally sent to Rome in 1790 by Bishop Moylan. It contains a lengthy Chapter 16 on visiting the hospitals of the old and on medical care of the poor “to minister relief, both spiritual and temporal to them, to give each woman advice on her salvation, urge them to frequent the Sacraments, arrange general prayers with them, persuade them to show mutual goodwill and charity, with kindness settle their disputes, if there be any such. If proved incorrigible, the superior shall cause them to be expelled, lest those who are good be corrupted by the habits of the depraved.

When sick women, or women who are afflicted with ulcers, come to them, the sisters shall receive them with the greatest humanity, they shall treat them softly and according to the accepted norm, they shall apply poultices to them tenderly. They shall teach them to aspire to the heavenly kingdom and attempt to instil in them tolerance for their pain, penitence and piety, so that the loss of their health may be for the benefit of their souls.”

In a letter to Bishop Coppinger, written between 1800 and 1804 Sr. Clare Callaghan quoted from this same chapter 16: 'Your Lordship is acquainted, I suppose, with the high encomiums lately passed on this Order by his present Holiness and the Sacred Congregation as our Constitutions are lately gone to Rome for confirmation, and we daily expect them with the pleasing gratification of seeing this a confirmed Religious Order in which the life of Miss Nagle is exactly copied, having all our time employed either in instruction or in prayer. And the same preparation (of children) for the Sacraments you speak of is still continued in it with an hour's instruction every day in the year for adults. And never did I see such a constant succession of the miserable and the ignorant as at that hour's instruction, there being always from ten to twenty here at that time. There is besides an hour every Sunday evening devoted to the instruction of those whose labour prevents them of attending on weekdays, which audience generally consists of about 200, which would be much increased had we any place large enough to contain them. Their eagerness for this instruction is such as often to fill up a part of our yard, not being able to press into our room for instruction. But it seems that every action of this great woman was to be productive of a hundredfold, for a plaster she applied to poor creatures afflicted with sores is still administered to them with most general spiritual advantage. The sisters have informed me and I have myself seen since my entrance many conversions by this simple action of affording them bodily relief, as it gives the Sister who attends them an opportunity of enquiring into the state of their souls. And many we find who have been years, nay some their whole life, absent from the Sacraments, but on being instructed have indeed been afterwards models of penance'

How can we summarise the protean qualities of this dynamic pioneer? The essential Nano transmitted an indefinable warmth, security and trust. Frail in body, her heart and soul were suffused with the compassion of Jesus.

Source: mainly Nano Nagle's letters.

Other publications by Sr. Pius O'Farrell

Cause of Nano Nagle. Positio - Books 1, 2 and 3, 1994

Nano Nagle. Woman of the Gospel 1996

Breaking of Morn 2001