

Nano Nagle (1718-1784)

She was voted Ireland's greatest ever woman in a national radio poll. Her life shows the triumph of the human spirit over oppression. Her motto was 'Deeds not Words'.



Nano Nagle was born in Ballygriffin, Mallow, Co. Cork in 1718. Her family was one of the few wealthy

Catholic landowners remaining in the country. At this time in Ireland, Catholics were living under the Penal Laws imposed by England. They were not allowed to sit in Parliament or vote, buy land, engage in trade, own weapons or enter the Legal profession. This meant that Catholics, 85% of the population, were without power and eventually they owned only 5% of the land. It was forbidden to educate Catholic children in Ireland or to send them abroad to be educated, and severe penalties were the consequence if caught.

Nano and her sister were educated privately at home, and were sent to a finishing school in France. Nano stayed on in Paris for several years, enjoying life and mixing with high society.

Nano realised she had a vocation when she saw a group of poor people waiting outside a church to hear mass. Their faith was a revelation to Nano and she swore to reject her wealthy lifestyle and devote her life to the poor.

Nano returned to Ireland after her father's death in 1746. Disheartened by conditions, she returned to France and entered a convent. However in

1749, she came back to Cork. She was determined to make Catholic education available to the poor, to work with her own people in her own country. Nano secretly started a small school for about 30 poor pupils in a mud shack on Cove Lane in Cork. This was completely illegal.

Within a year over 200 students were attending the school. By 1769, five schools had been set up for girls and two schools for boys. All the



children were taught how to read and write and how to do basic maths. Very practical, she introduced classes in needlework, lace-making, and

other crafts. All the children were educated in the Catholic religion.

Nano asked the Ursuline sisters in Paris to start a convent in Ireland with French-trained Irish women and in May 1771, four Irish novices and one fully professed nun landed in Cork. Nano had built a convent for them in Douglas Street in Cork.

But there was a problem. Nano wanted the Ursuline nuns to visit the poor in their homes but they were unwilling to do this. The Ursuline nuns were more interested in educating middle-class children rather than educating poor children. Nano's response to the problem was to set up her own religious community.

In 1777 Nano and three other women took simple vows and started the Presentation order of nuns. They were professed, wore a uniform of black dresses and black caps and entered their new

convent on Christmas Eve. At a time when nuns normally remained in their convents, they became known as Nano's Walking Nuns. Their aim was to become servants of the poor. Their first job was to have a big party and personally serve 50 local paupers.

Nano was in her forties when she took her vows. Despite poor health, she travelled from school to school and visited the sick and the old in their own homes.

She became known as the 'Lady of the Lantern' because she often worked long into the night.



Who will light the lantern and keep it
burning bright?

Who will search the darkness where
shadows seek the light?

Who will find the courage to sing a different
song?

Who will light the lantern and go one step
beyond?

Nano died of lung disease in 1784 and is buried in the grounds of the South Presentation Convent in Douglas Street, Cork. Two years before her death Catholic education was finally made legal in Ireland. By 1900 her seven schools in Ireland had grown to become 50 schools and Presentation sisters had set up schools in North America, Britain, Austral-Asia and India.

The Presentation sisters became one of the most respected teaching orders, now active in 23 countries. The cause of Nano Nagle for beatification is now being pursued.



In Cork city, the Nano Nagle Bridge was completed in 1985 in her memory.

An bhean ís fear in Éirinn. "Is fearr gníomhartha ná briathra". Rugadh í i gCorcaigh 1718. Bhí saibhreas ina clan agus chuaigh sí go scoil priobháideach agus to dtí an Fhrainc freisin. Bhí creideamh láidir aici agus nuair a chonaic sí bochtanas, rinne sí a dian dícheall do na bochtáin. Bhunaigh sí scoil beag i gCorcaigh agus thuigh sí chomh tábhachtach ís a bhí oideachais. Thosaigh sí mná rialta na toirbhirte agus thug said gach cabhair do na daoine bochta. Fuair sí féin bás 1784 ach lean na mná rialta leis an obair iontach a thosaigh sí.