

Our School Charism

Blessed Nano Nagle (1718 – 1784)

Nano Nagle was born in Ireland, to a wealthy family, in 1718. Like many Irish Catholics at that time, her family were penalised for their faith and it was unlawful for Catholic schools to operate. Nano's family was wealthy therefore her and her sister, Ann, were able to enjoy a full Catholic education by staying with relatives in France. Although they were witness to sophisticated society, the plight of the French poor left an indelible mark on the girls.

On their return to Ireland, the girls found widespread poverty and Nano wondered how she could serve the poor. Initially, she thought she would do this in Paris, in a religious order but a perceptive spiritual director advised her to return to Ireland to educate the deprived children there. Returning to Ireland, once more, and in complete secrecy, she set up her little school in a small mud cabin for thirty of the poorest children. Within a year, that number had risen to two hundred students, spread across seven schools. Mary understood that a practical education was required in addition to literacy and numeracy skills and introduced classes in needlework, lace making and other crafts that would enable students to earn a livelihood and gain a foothold in society.

For a short period Mary brought the Ursuline sisters from France to teach but for various reasons, this did not work with her vision for learning and resulted in Nano setting up her own order of congregational sisters under a constitution that suited their special vocation of educating the poor.

Nano's sisters were unofficially known as the 'Walking Nuns' and Nano herself as, 'The Lady with the Lantern'. By the time Nano died on the 26th April, 1784, she had set up a network of schools with over four hundred students in seven parishes. To support her schools, she used her own considerable, inherited wealth. Her heart was always with the poor and extended beyond the classroom to include visits to homes in the backstreets of Cork. Single handedly, she laid the foundations of an educational system that inspired Edmund Rice, founder of the Presentation Sisters and Christian Brothers. Her Lantern has become the symbol of the Presentation Sisters, all over the world.

