

FOUNDATIONS IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Presentation Sisters



Group of Presentation Sisters with Bishop J. O'Collins, centre front row, 1936



Nano Nagle, Foundress of the Presentation Sisters



The icon pictured above is the work of internationally recognised Irish artist Desmond Kyne, an expert in the ancient craft of iconography. The original hangs in the Nano Nagle Centre in Cork.

The beginning

In 2003, the Irish Newspaper *The Sunday Tribune* conducted a Public Opinion Poll, which named Nano Nagle, Foundress of the Presentation Sisters, as the greatest Irish person of all time.

Nano Nagle was a woman of faith and integrity, who devoted her life and fortune to the education of poor children and the relief of those bowed down by oppression and poverty at a time when legislation in Ireland proscribed education and aid for Catholics.

A stroll around Cork City reveals many monuments, even a bridge, erected in her honour. For it was there in Cork, on Christmas Eve 1775, that Nano Nagle and three women who shared her vision came together as the Sisters of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart, later renamed the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Nano Nagle told her Sisters, "we must prefer the schools to all others". She recognised the importance of education and so she trained the children to be witnesses to the faith so that wherever they went they would proclaim the Good News. "If I could be of service in saving souls in any part of the globe, I would willingly do all in my power," she was heard to say.

New horizons – Geraldton

More than a century later, Mother Joseph O'Connell wrote the following words in her diary: "21st May 1891, left Cork for Geraldton, Western Australia."

At the invitation of Bishop Matthew Gibney, nine Sisters embarked on the *SS Orient* to realise Nano's dream in a vast and distant land. The Sisters landed at Albany and travelled 55 weary hours by train to Perth.

After a short rest they boarded the *SS Australind* at Fremantle, where they spent three days getting tossed around on the stormy water before setting out on the last leg of the 24 hour trip to Geraldton. On arrival they assumed responsibility for the school that had been kept open for them by the Sisters of Mercy and commenced work the very next day.

It was the beginning of a long, successful and continuing presence of Presentation Sisters in schools within the Geraldton Diocese. During the next 78 years, the following schools were opened: Geraldton 1891, Northampton 1899, Roebourne 1901, Greenough 1902, Lawlers 1903, Carnarvon 1906, Sandstone 1909, Goomalling 1912, Mullewa 1914, Mt Magnet 1915, Youanmi 1918, Wiluna 1933, Nanson 1939, Bluff Point 1940, Wonthella 1940, Tardun 1941, Port Hedland 1942, Big Bell 1949, Wittencoom 1956, Beachlands 1963 and Rangeway 1969.

Extraordinary experiences

Their experience was extraordinary. They followed the mining towns, opening and closing schools wherever there was a need, even taking their convent and school by 'jinker' (a wheeled flat topped conveyance) from one mining town to the next. They reached out to country children by taking in boarders, both boys and girls, and many of their schools taught numbers of Aboriginal children.

They survived the worrying times of the Japanese bombing in Port Hedland and, rather than evacuate, stayed on to look after their charges. They did it all – from teaching classes, music, speech, art, commercial subjects and adult evening classes – to looking after boarders, cleaning the schools, visiting people and providing support to the priests.

All of this, while still continuing their daily religious life of Mass, prayer and spiritual exercises in support of one another in community as Nano Nagle had taught them:

"Love one another as you have hitherto done."

Southern adventure

But there is another Presentation story in Western Australia. In 1900, Mother Angela Treacy, an Australian, led five Presentation Sisters from Hay in New South Wales to the goldfields at Southern Cross at the request of Bishop Matthew Gibney who was very short of teachers for his schools since government aid had ceased in 1895.

The sisters arrived in Albany onboard *RMS Orizba* before setting out on the two-day train trip to Southern Cross where it seemed that the priest had forgotten they were coming.

As the annalist wrote: "Our hearts were sad indeed when we saw the fields of our labours." However, by the end of 1900, 100 children were enrolled in the school and a good beginning had been made. A postulant joined them there and they remained until 1904 with some moving to the mining town of Collie in 1902.

Bush foundations

The year 1905 saw the Sisters establish a new foundation, 'Star of the Sea', Cottesloe, and then in 1907 they journeyed through the bush to Buckland Hill and established Iona College, which commenced operation in 1908. About this time the Sisters operated a public lending library out of the College, some of the books from which still survive today.

The next 80 years resulted in the opening of a further 16 schools at Claremont 1908, Beverley 1909, Brunswick 1951, Wyalkatchem 1951, Bruce Rock 1954, Quairading 1955, Mandurah 1955,



Iona music pupils – 1911

Lancelin 1955, Rivervale 1956, Boyup Brook 1957, Corrigin 1959, Cloverdale, 1961, Dowerin 1962 and Karratha Primary 1978 and Secondary 1987.

While the Sisters continued to work very hard, the smaller schools gradually closed due to a decline in the farming population, the amalgamation of schools and the lack of Sisters to staff the schools. In 1959, the school at Mandurah was closed due to the tragic drowning of three Sisters in a boating accident that left the Congregation unable to provide Sisters to staff the school. The school reopened in 1962.

Signs of the times

In 1967 the Sisters once again responded to the needs of the time with the introduction of the Presentation Motor Mission – an initiative that was surely dear to the heart of Nano Nagle. The Sisters visited the government schools in many areas of the wheatbelt, preparing more than 300 children to receive the Sacraments. They also visited hospitals in Kondinin, Corrigin, Beverley, Pingelly and Brookton and ran a Spiritual Reading Library.

Decree of union

On 21 November 1969, Presentation Day, a Decree was presented from the Sacred Congregation for Religious Institutes to unite the Presentation Congregations of Geraldton and Perth into one Congregation with the head house and novitiate being at Iona, Mosman Park. Henceforth, the Congregation would be known as The Congregation of the Presentation Sisters of Western Australia.

New initiatives

Following Vatican II and the Union of the Perth and Geraldton Congregations, there were many challenges to be faced. The number of vocations started to decline while the needs continued to be great. The Sisters worked to provide schooling for newly arrived refugees and displaced persons from East Timor, Europe and the children of the fishing fleet based at Lancelin.

From 1984, the Sisters also responded to the needs of people in Papua New Guinea and Thailand. The scope of work was widening as foundations were established at Lockridge, Lesmurdie and Yangebup. New ministries were also taken up in parish, social work, chaplaincy and catechesis.

A new millennium

Today a number of Sisters remain in their Order-owned schools, Iona Presentation College and Iona Presentation Primary School, both in Mosman Park. They are also involved in a number of systemic schools in the Diocese of Perth, Bunbury, Geraldton and Broome.

A variety of other ministries are also being undertaken by the Sisters in order to meet needs in the community. The ministries include tertiary and adult education, pastoral care in schools, community mental health, support for the physically impaired and disadvantaged and care and support for the frail, aged and terminally ill.

Over the last 114 years, the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary have been, and continue to be, a significant and faith-filled presence in both the State of Western Australia and Thailand, maintaining their work and prayer in the tradition of Nano Nagle.



Presentation Convent in Geraldton – circa 1911



Pioneer Sisters prior to their departure in 1900 from Hay, NSW to Southern Cross, WA



Celebrating the centenary of the Presentation foundation in Geraldton on 6 July 1991