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Presentation Sisters and their commitment to the poor

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NCR Today

Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary around the world are celebrating the life of their founder, Mother Nano Nagle.

It was 228 years ago today, April 26, 1784, Nano, ended a life of service to the poor in Ireland. On her deathbed she was to have given her daughter sisters the following injunction: "Love one another as you have hitherto done. Spend your lives among the poor."

The San Francisco community of the Sisters of the Presentation trace their history to the five sisters who came from Ireland at the request of Bishop Joseph Alemany in 1854. They came to teach Irish immigrants pouring into California as a result of the Gold Rush and California becoming a state.



According to Presentation Sisters, Nagle was born in County Cork, Ireland in 1718, during a period in

Irish history when the English had imposed oppressive penal laws, upon the Irish, denying them access to basic human and economic rights. It was a crime, for example, punishable by death, to educate the Irish -- and it was forbidden to practice the Catholic faith.

Nano's parents sent her to be educated in an Irish community then living in Paris. During that time she began to see how the poor lived in Paris. The story is told that late one night, at age 22 and riding in a carriage she saw a small group of poor working people waiting in front a church for early morning mass. It was an awakening moment, impressing her with the distinction between the pampered rich and the needy poor.

Returning to Ireland, she began to consider ways to help the poor. Distressed by the ignorance of the Irish in both faith and academics, she opened a school in 1754 with an enrollment of thirty-five girls in a two-room cabin.

That was the beginning. She taught during the day and attended to the sick by night, becoming known in Cork as the Lady with the Lantern, which today continues to be the symbol of the Sisters of the Presentation worldwide.

Eventually, realizing the need for a group to continue her work after her death, Nano founded the Sisters of the Presentation on December 24, 1775.

Given the misperception remotely possible by some who happen upon the April 18 Vatican doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, of which the San Francisco Presentations are a part, it might be helpful to reread the group's mission statement adopted in June, 1995. It reads

"We, Sisters of the Presentation, (San Francisco) are a community of Catholic women religious committed to living and transmitting the message of Jesus Christ through prayer and service. In the tradition of our foundress, Nano Nagle, we seek to promote a society which respects the dignity of all persons with emphasis on compassion and justice for the poor and oppressed."

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