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**Text of Address given at the Launch of
Nano Nagle and an Evolving Charism
Eds., Bernadette Flanagan, Anne M. O’Leary and Mary T. O’Brien
Mount St Anne’s, Killenard, Portarlinton
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Dom Christopher Dillon OSB

Nano Nagle (1718-1784)

Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters,

To be asked to launch this volume of essays on the life and legacy of Nano Nagle is an honour of which I am unworthy. An accident of birth endows me with a lateral kind of relationship with this extraordinary woman of the eighteenth century; but that is the beginning and the end of my qualification to stand here... apart from the fact that I have, actually, read it, from beginning to end.

This work is the result of a project, which evolved from an original body of retreat material, by Mary O’Brien and Anne O’Leary, relating Nano to the “zeal” of the Pauline writings and the inspiration which she drew from St John of God and the Jesuit tradition. I have found it a fascinating tissue of essays, like so many facets of a cut stone, circling around the constant factor of this high-born woman of faith and indomitable courage, who pursued a visionary mission, against a backdrop of prejudice, persecution and constant insecurity, in the eighteenth century Ireland of the Penal Laws.

The very penetrating Introduction of Thomas O’Loughlin describes it as “critical history”. Of its nature, as a collection of essays by twelve different, mostly scholarly, authors, the reader finds a certain amount of overlap, in the repetition of certain chestnuts drawn from the small written material of Nano, herself. But, strangely, that serves only to reiterate the main themes of her varied missionary vision, as described in individual fashion by Máirín McCarron, Catherine Nowlan-Roebuck and Deirdre Raftery.

The human story of Nano’s abandoning the security and fashionable society of Paris and the French Court for the muddy lanes of Cork City, so as to devote herself to the welfare of the Poor of that city makes for heroic drama. But, woven through it all, there is the theme of mission, to educate those same Poor from the ignorance and fear of superstition, by instructing them in the faith, so that they could do the same for others. There is a remarkable account of Nano arranging for boys, whom she considered adequately instructed, to travel to the East Indies, to educate children who had been brought there as slaves.

The story of Nano’s invitation to the Ursuline Sisters to come from Paris, to pursue this work, and their establishment in Cork, at her expense; the frustration at their enclosure, giving rise to the decision to establish her own group of sisters who would not be enclosed; the subsequent *contre-temps* with Bishop Moylan, all makes for a moving account of the woman of faith, in late middle age, who works under the radar, who prays for hours, every morning, on ulcerated knees.

The inspiration which Edmund Rice drew from Nano's work, presented by Frank Steele and Beth Hassel, fills out the picture of the extraordinary contribution which these saintly philanthropists have made to our history. The story is embellished by theological reflections on The Presentation of Mary and the Proto-Gospel of James, in pieces by Anne O'Leary and Mary Coloe, with a very demanding reflection by Anne Codd on the Presentation charism, through the perspective of those great Dominican scholars of Koinonia, Tillard, Congar and de Lubac.

These reflections, together with the consideration by Gloria Hoya and Margaret Preston of the transplanting and evolution of Nano's mustard seed in Mexico and the American prairies, with its foray into the world of hospital care, illustrate very powerfully how small beginnings, fuelled by hope and prayer, even in the most hostile of environments, with which contemporary Ireland is all too familiar – how these small beginnings can burgeon and flourish. One of the last essays, by Bernadette Flanagan, presents a surprising offering on the gift of leadership, as exemplified by Nano, who did not manage to establish a rule of life, but managed her little band, nonetheless, for the few years of her own life in community. The question about the future, which concerns every religious congregation, today, is addressed, I think, by the story of the living faith of Nano Nagle. While she was a surprisingly engaged and enterprising manager of funds which she kept in Paris, thanks to her family, she spent hours of every day in prayer. The same has to be true for us. And, while the Poor are not as obviously destitute as they were, they are still poor and in need of education, in the sense of liberation from the slavery of addiction and ignorance, not least, ignorance of the God who loves them.

I would like to conclude these few observations with something of a plea. This volume, I dare to suggest, offers both a challenge and a blue-print for a greater endeavour, one which I have tried to promote, so far without success. Nano Nagle, Edmund Rice, Catherine McAuley, Mary Aikenhead, to name but some of the better known religious founders in this country, represent a chapter of Irish social and religious history which deserves to be explored and celebrated, as an essential factor in the evolution of the modern Irish polity. Is it possible that the major religious congregations in this country might collaborate to fund a chair at one of the universities, to promote the study of the social and religious history of Ireland from 1700 until modern times? It is for lack of this kind of awareness that the crass opinions, which we have seen expressed around the National Maternity Hospital and its development, have been tolerated and even approved by relatively well-informed authorities. In the nature of things, we, as the professionally religious of the species, cannot be the best, or the most effective, promoters of our story. There is a wealth of archival material to be gathered and organized for academic research, before it is dissipated and lost. Instead of submitting to the denigration of the history and traditions of the heroic women and men who joined the ranks of these pious founders of the eighteenth century and up to modern times, we should promote and support its study, as an essential tool for discovering and explaining why we are where we are, as a society.