

REFLECTION

**Given by Sister Sharon Fagan, PBVM, Congregational Leader
Liturgy in Honour of Venerable Nano Nagle
Basilica of St. John the Baptist, St. John's, NL Canada
May 7, 2014**



Fire to the Rock (Refrain and Verse 1) - Written and Sung by Miriam Martin, PBVM

Fire to the rock, rock from the fire
From the beginning the Universe desire
To share the abundance, the teeming of life,
Fire to the Rock, rock from the fire
Her story then, our story now

From the seed of the universe spinning through space,
The wide womb of emptiness poured forth with grace.
The fire of beginnings burst open with life
And the planets and stars flung out through the night.

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Tonight we gather to give thanks and celebrate Nano Nagle, the Lady with the Lantern, a woman of God who had a fire of love shining within her, a light that could not be contained. Its energies, which ignited in her a passion for compassion and justice, led her to become an advocate for those who were oppressed and who lacked vitality and hope.

In declaring Nano Nagle as Venerable, the Universal Church has recognized her as a woman of faith, hope and heroic virtue, whose vision and work transformed the lives of so many. Such recognition invites the entire world to see her as a unique and holy woman set apart for our admiration and veneration.

What is it that we are admiring and venerating in Nano Nagle? Three things come to mind ... her holiness, her virtue of love, and her zeal.

Fire to the Rock - Verse 2

In the story of Earth life a new time unfolds,
The footsteps of Nano, her lantern light bold,
To shine on the face of those held in the dark,
While her rock and her spirit still shimmer and spark.

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As a Universal Church we are lifting up her holiness.

Bishop Coppinger of Ireland, who knew Nano well, once wrote that “The Almighty presided at the councils of her heart”. Her contemplative way of living was rooted in her relationship with God. Humbly she walked with the Holy One,

cooperating with the grace bestowed upon her, and, in so doing, she was drawn into a deeper awareness of the presence of God in all whom she encountered.

Nano freely allowed the spiraling energies of God's love to evolve within her, thus creating a space within her where a welcoming heart for all of life was born.

Secondly, in venerating Nano we are lifting up her heroic virtue of love.

Nano devoted her life to lighting the way for the lost and the marginalized. In particular, she is remembered for her commitment to education which began in a little school in Cove Lane in Cork in 1753.

In setting up schools in defiance of the established colonial order which prevented Catholic children the right to be formally educated, she sided with those made poor and challenged the institutional injustice that perpetuated marginalization and poverty. The threat of imprisonment did not stop her. She risked all. She was cursed in the streets as an imposter and her schools were called seminaries of vice. Many critics referred to her students as Nano's beggar brats.

However, Nano was determined to work to save the heritage of faith for the children and to provide them with an education that would prepare them to take their rightful place in society. She was noted to have said often that instructing the children was the greatest pleasure of her life. Nano Nagle was known as one of the great pioneers of Catholic Education in Ireland.

She was a pathfinder and model for many other Irish religious congregations. Her response to the call of God in her life laid the foundation for an education system which was to inspire Edmund Rice, founder of the Christian Brothers, and valiant women such as Catherine McCauley and the Sisters of Mercy.

As a servant of God, Nano's love went beyond the field of education. After long days in her schools she carried her lantern and wandered through the streets of Cork creating a field of compassion among the sick, the aged, and the lonely. She opened doors of possibilities for new life among women who were destitute.

Nano's life was centered on the Gospel message of love and justice and the mandate to take its message to the end of the earth.

Thirdly, we lift up Nano's zeal.

Nano's life, commitment and zeal impacted the people of Ireland for nearly forty years. To ensure that her work would continue she founded a congregation of women religious, a congregation she believed would flourish long after her death. And indeed it did. Nano said, *"If I could be of service in any part of the world, I would willing do all in my power to do so"*.

These words were prophetic as her efforts led to a network of schools across Ireland. When Nano died, she left a small band of companions who were so influenced by her that they worked tirelessly to bring Nano's dream and vision into the future.

In 1833 four sisters from Galway carried her lantern of light and hope to Newfoundland where the first foundation of Presentation Sisters outside of Ireland was established. Following their direction others lit their lamps from Nano's Lantern and carried them to 25 countries throughout the world. Today the International Association of Presentation Sisters brings a global voice to the care of earth and those made poor.

Fire to the Rock - Verse 3

The earth whirling 'round and new stories are told
Four women cross waters new worlds to behold.
From storm-tossed beginnings the good seeds are sown,
And Newfoundland shores, Presentation's new home!

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And so we recall a brief part of Nano's story ... a woman remembered as "an evergreen of virtue in the vineyard of the poor, ever budding, ripening, flourishing in the young, ever mature, venerable and productive in the old".

Nano's life gives meaning to the words of Rilke ... *"The fire within must be tended and cared for with courage. For we cannot love unless we do so. To be loved means to be consumed in the flame, to love is to shine with inexhaustible light."*
This is her story.

Venerating Nano is in indeed a wonderful way to acknowledge her life and her works, but to really grasp the significance and meaning of this moment, each of us must ask what her story has to do with our stories.

Nano's vision, her passion and the witness of her life inspire us ...

- To hold a lamp of hope for the vulnerable and those most in need
- To offer a listening heart and compassionate presence to those living in the shadows of hunger, ignorance and prejudice
- To never tire of lighting the way for the lost and the marginalized
- To honor lifelong learning and creativity
- To promote human rights and justice, ecology and sustainable living
- To proclaim that there is divine power within that is loving, non-judgmental and passionate in our care of all of life.

Nano's story is part of a bigger story ... it is part of the nearly 14 billion year old Story of the Universe. It is a story within the dream of God that continues to unfold. Nano's story is our story. Like her, let us become flames of God's love, recognizing that we all are one as we participate in divine mystery.

Fire to the Rock - Verse 4

We come to today and the story of now,
Our hearts full of hopefulness, strong and fragile.
We welcome a future unknown – yet a dream.
And Nano still leads. Her lantern light beams.

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In the words of the late Judy Cannato ... *“this day may we be conscious of bringing light everywhere we go, building up a field of love that will transform the world.”*

With hearts full of hope we welcome a future unknown, yet a part of the dream of God, and Nano, woman of her time, woman for today, still leads, her lantern light beams.

The impact of Nano’s life in her own times and in succeeding generations has been great. In the degraded condition of her people Nano Nagle recognized not only the effects of political oppression and economic change, but a call from God. She knew herself called to make some move against injustice.

English supremacy had been consolidated by force, and English determination to hold what had been gained lay behind the long series of laws which sought to destroy Irish Catholic identity, whether that identity found expression in land ownership, civic position, culture or religion. Without legal right to exist, forbidden to worship, forbidden to teach, the Church seemed to be without hope for a future. In an economy controlled for the benefit of the powerful, the poor sank into sub-human conditions, beyond the touch of hope.

In reality their faith was the only source of identity, meaning and hope for the poor Irish population at this time.

Nano was indeed a champion of the poor, one who pursued the right of education for all and the expression of religious freedom. She was a pathfinder and model for many other Irish religious congregations. Her response to the call of God in her life laid the foundation for an education system which was to inspire Edmund Rice, founder of the Christian Brothers, a number of valiant women such

as Mary Aikenhead and the Irish Sisters of Charity, and Catherine McCauley and the Sisters of Mercy.

Nano was a woman who in her simplicity, dared greatly and fearlessly. Her desire to respond to those whose hearts were burdened and broken compelled her to assist those who were oppressed, to offer them the opportunity to take hold of their lives and create new possibilities for a meaningful future. Nano has left a legacy which lives into the future.

The lantern she carried through the darkness in the streets and lanes of Cork became a symbol for the poor of God's love, touching and transforming the harshness of their lives and offering hope and meaning. Today that lantern has become the symbol of their mission for Presentation Sisters around the world.

It is our task to make from fire not an all consuming blaze but the light in which we see each other fully... all of us different, all of us bearing One Spark.

