

Nano Nagle

AND AN EVOLVING CHARISM

A Guide for Educators, Leaders and Care Providers

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Presented in the Temple of God's Glory

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On 24 June 1776, Nano Nagle, along with three companions – Mary Fouhy, Elizabeth Burke and Mary Ann Collins – professed her vows and began a new religious congregation that had as its primary aim to bring education to poor Catholic children.¹ Nano named this new group the 'Sisters of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus'.² Following her death, this name was changed, at the request of her Sisters, to the 'Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary'.³

In recent years, as religious congregations have reflected on their founding charism and taken on new ministries, the image of the compassionate Heart of Jesus has been a source of inspiration and a link back to Nano's original vision. I, and others also, have questioned whether Dr Moylan and Fr Lawrence Callanan, OFM, made the right decision in facilitating the change of the title of the Congregation. In this chapter, I will begin by examining some evidence from the Annals of South Presentation Convent, Cork, that may help our understanding of the decision; then I will explore how the new title is iconic of a rich spirituality for Presentation life and ministry in the twenty-first century.

The Feast of the Presentation of Mary

The early Annals of the Congregation record that the Feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple was the date chosen by Nano in 1782, to receive two young women into the novitiate, Miss Connell and Miss Anastasia Tobin. On this same day, Miss Oliffe was received.⁴ These were the only women to begin their novitiate during Nano's lifetime, and her choice of this day for this ceremony, indicates that it had a special place in her spirituality. Following Nano's death her fledgling Congregation again chose this day to

(September 1791). They 'repeatedly solicited Rev. Mgr Callanan'. The Annalist writes:

[Father Callanan] ... had ever known Miss Nagle, the venerable Foundress, to have had a particular and marked devotion to the festival of the Presentation of our Blessed Lady; and, that he would not, therefore, feel any hesitation in giving it the name of the 'Presentation Order'.⁶

However, while there was a change of title, it seems that the Sisters retained a great devotion to the Sacred Heart, for the Annalist continues:

From this time, the Congregation assumed this glorious title – they, however, only changed their appellation, because they were and are, and ever will continue to be, in spirit and in truth, 'Sisters united, closely united, in word and work, by, and in, the Sacred Heart of Jesus.' Live, Jesus, for ever!!!⁷

The choice of the Feast of the Presentation as the day when young women entered the Novitiate, suggests that Nano saw in this feast an expression of Mary's total self-giving to God with which Nano identified. What is it about this feast that led Nano to have 'a particular and marked devotion,' to it, according to Fr Callanan?

The Temple as God's Dwelling Place

The Collect of this Feast speaks of Mary as the *dwelling place* of the Holy Spirit and prays, 'that we, like her, may be presented in the Temple of God's glory.' This ancient prayer from the Liturgy may give us a means of interpreting Nano's devotion, and also provide new insight into how to be Presentation today.

The Feast of the Presentation celebrates a meeting point, when Mary, the new Temple and *dwelling place*, of the Holy Spirit, is presented to the former Temple of Israel. Israel's Temple, represented by the High Priest, recognises and welcomes the New Temple, Mary. The Protogospel of James records that the High Priest 'set her down upon the third step of the altar, and the Lord God went grace upon her; and she danced with her feet, and all the house of Israel loved her.'⁸ The Eastern Church, with its rich theology of the Spirit, celebrates this feast as the moment of Divine exchange between the Old and New Covenants. In the Western Liturgy this same thing is celebrated

in the feast of the Presentation of Jesus. On this day the Gospel of Luke is read, where Simeon, as prophet of the Hebrew Covenant proclaims, 'Now Lord you can let your servant go in peace, according to your word'. The former dispensation may graciously depart for the new has come. The Jerusalem Temple is no longer needed as the dwelling place of God's glory; there is a new indwelling of the Spirit, heralded first in Mary (celebrated in the Eastern feast of the Presentation of Mary), and then in Jesus (celebrated in the Western feast of the Presentation of Jesus). In both Feasts the Temple is central as it symbolises the presence of God dwelling in Israel's midst.⁹

Nano's Experience of Being in God's Presence

Nano, in the midst of a busy and exhausting ministry out in the lanes of Cork, also spent much time in prayer. Following her death, the Sisters discovered that Nano had ulcerated knees and they recalled her discomfort during her long hours of daily prayer, 'from five in the morning until nine,' and then in the evening. These times of prayer were extended during her Christmas retreat and 'on Holy Thursday nights, which she spent on her knees in [the] presence of the Blessed Sacrament until morning'.¹⁰

We do not have extant any of Nano's own writings where we would know her own motivation for these practices, but perhaps we can gain some insight from another historical fact – the choice of the name 'Sister Mary St John of God'. This sixteenth-century Saint established hospitals for the poor. Legend has it that one day as John washed and kissed the feet of a beggar from the streets he found them marked with the wounds of Christ and heard a voice saying, 'John, to Me is done all that you do for the poor in My Name ... Mine are the feet that you wash'.¹¹

From these two facts about Nano's life we can infer that she encountered God in both the solitude of her prayer and in her passionate love of the poor. Her passion pulses through her letters as she writes, 'my schools will never bring me to heaven, as I only take delight and pleasure in them.'¹² Nano also writes of her work spreading from Cork to other countries leading to her declaration, 'If I could be of any service in saving souls in any part of the globe, I would willingly do all in my power.'¹³ From a small, rudimentary chapel in Cork, Nano's heart reached out to encompass the world, yet in all this missionary zeal, Nano knew that this work would be impossible except for God. Her letters speak of difficulties and failures

alongside constant affirmations of God's providence: 'The Almighty is all sufficient';¹⁴ 'Providence has ordered all for the best';¹⁵ 'The Almighty has been pleased to make it turn out to our advantage';¹⁶ 'By degrees, with the assistance of God we may do a great deal';¹⁷ 'It's all in the power of the Almighty';¹⁸ and 'The Almighty makes use of the weakest means to bring about his works'.¹⁹ Nano's hours of solitary prayer brought her to know a God in whom she could have utter trust, and a God who impelled her to go out to the winding lanes of Cork. Contrary to her first impulse, she was not called to live a monastic life. For her contemplation and ministry beyond the confines of monastic enclosure are both the essence of her vocation. For this reason, Sandra Schneiders lists Nano among the 'pioneers of apostolic religious life long before it was officially approved in 1900'.²⁰

Called to prayer and action, to solitude and crowded lanes – this apparent paradox is seen in the life of Jesus, who spent time in prayer (Mk 1:35) and knew days of busy engagement with people (Mk 1:21–34; 6:30–1). It is also a paradox associated with the Temple. In what follows, I explore the implications of the current Collect Prayer of the Presentation of Mary (21 November), 'that we may be presented in the Temple of God's glory,' and how this can open up for us a rich Temple Spirituality that is particularly relevant in a more ecologically-conscious age. More than ever, the world needs people willing to be Temple people.

The Temple/Heart of God in the World

Temple spirituality can complement a heart spirituality and further draw out the richness of Nano's spirituality, now expressed through the spirituality of Presentation Sisters and all who follow in her footsteps today. As individuals, a temple spirituality calls for contemplation. Recent papers on the contemplative nature of Religious Life have shown that contemplation is not restricted to monastic enclosure – 'all are called to contemplation'.²¹ Contemplation has been described as taking 'a long, loving look at reality'. Such contemplative activity can move people into Spirit-directed action in the world. Here is where temple and heart spirituality coincide. The contemplative attitude is linked with the heart. As Teresita Weind writes, 'From the heart we grow into a connectedness marked by compassion and kindness, selflessness and unconditional love'.²²

The link between heart and temple was expressed symbolically most powerfully when the first temple of Israel, built by Solomon, was dedicated. Solomon was aware that no building could ever

contain God's presence, but he prayed, 'that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house' (1 Kgs 8:29). In response God declared, 'I have heard your prayer and your supplication; I have consecrated this house which you have built; *my eyes and my heart* will be there for all time' (1 Kgs 9:3). The Temple of Israel represents the loving gaze and compassionate heart of God in *this* world. The heart of God is meant to be a power-house/temple of God's healing and life-giving activity *for* the world.

Temple and Cosmos

Israel's Temple always had a cosmic dimension. According to Jewish mythology, all the waters of the Earth have their origins in the heavens, and flow down to touch Earth at the place where the Temple stands. For this reason Jerusalem is called the Earth's navel (Ezek 38:12) since this is the meeting place of Heaven and Earth. The Temple rests upon the fissure above the great abyss, which is the source of the creative waters (Genesis 2:8).²³ After the flood, the rock of Noah's altar sealed up the waters of the abyss and Noah's altar became the foundation stone of a new creation. Jewish traditions link the altar of Noah with the foundation stone in the Holy of Holies supporting the Ark of the Covenant.²⁴ According to this theologized mythology, the Temple lies upon the wellspring of Earth, the centre and source of creation:

The waters under the Earth were all gathered beneath the temple, they believed, and it was necessary to ensure that sufficient was released to ensure fertility, but not so much as to overwhelm the world with a flood.²⁵

This cosmic mythology lies behind the strange story of waters flowing from the Temple in Ezekiel 47. In Ezekiel's vision, the Temple is the source of life, healing and fertility for the New Israel. Water flows from under the sanctuary to cleanse and fructify the whole land (47:1–12), recalling the creation myths of Canaan and Israel where waters well up from the cosmic rivers of paradise to provide life (Gen 2:6, 10–14).²⁶ Even the waters of the Dead Sea are brought to life and the trees growing beside this Temple water are miraculously life-giving: 'Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month ... Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing' (Ezek 47:12). God's Temple is to be a source of nourishment and healing for the world.

The very structure of the Temple represented God's act of creation. When all the elements of the Tabernacle within the Temple were completed the narrator records, 'Thus all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was finished ... And Moses saw all the work and behold, they had done it ... and Moses blessed them' (Ex 39:32, 43). These words echo the first account of creation, 'Thus the heavens and the earth were finished ... And God saw all that had been made and behold, it was very good ... So God blessed the seventh day' (Gen 2:1; 1:31; 2:3). We read in Exodus 40 that the Tabernacle was then erected in seven stages replicating the seven days of creation.²⁷ Margaret Barker quotes an early Midrash which states, 'The tabernacle is equal to the creation of the world' (Midrash Tanhuma 11.2).²⁸ In this symbolising tradition, the Holy of Holies corresponds with the first day of creation, the separating of light from darkness. The Temple veil corresponds with the second day when the firmament is made. This veil was made by weaving coloured wool into white linen (Exod 26:31), and these four colours represented the four elements from which Earth was made: red for fire, blue representing the air, purple representing water and the white linen, Earth. According to the Mishnah, the veil was woven by young women (m. *Middoth* 4.7).²⁹ The veil thus represents the entire created world.

In the ancient Middle East, the Temple of a deity was frequently depicted with elaborate images associating the Temple with a world-garden. The palace of a King was surrounded by lush gardens,³⁰ and this world view led to the association of the Garden of Eden and the Temple in much Jewish thought.³¹ In Eden, God was present 'walking (hbk: hitpa'el) in the garden in the cool of the evening' (Gen 3:8). This same verbal form is used to describe God's presence with Israel 'walking about in a tent and a tabernacle' (2 Sam 6-7; also Lev 26:12; Deut 23:14).³² The Temple was elaborately decorated with carvings of trees, flowers, and animals to depict the world of nature: cedars, cypress, gourds, olivewood, palm trees, pomegranates, oxen, lions, and a great laver of water symbolising the primal Sea. Just as Kings in the Ancient East established their palaces surrounded by gardens, so God's Temple was to be God's garden.³³

Living a Temple Spirituality

The above brief reflections on the significance of the Feast of the Presentation for Nano and her small community and how this Feast also resonates with the 'heart' imagery of Nano's original title, offer

all Presentation people – Sisters, Associates, friends and colleagues – a new opportunity to claim and reclaim a spirituality for today. Such a Temple spirituality will have three elements:

- › Temple/Presentation people will be deeply contemplative. They will know that the Temple is to be the eyes and heart of God in the world (1 Kgs 9:3). They will look at their own reality through the lens of God's loving gaze and compassionate heart and this will necessarily call them to act. As people alive with the indwelling presence of God, they will be the bearers of 'good news to the poor and liberation to the oppressed' (Lk 4:18). A powerful vignette from the early years of the Congregation illustrate this. The Annals of South Presentation record Nano walking the dark lanes ...

after a well spent day, returning thro' the darkness of the night, dripping with rain, mingled in the bustling crowd, moving thoughtfully along by the faint glimmering of a wretched lantern, withholding from herself in this manner, the necessities of life, that she may administer its comforts to others.³⁴

- › Temple/Presentation people will be sources of nurturing and healing (Ezek 47:12), moving into the most arid and needy situations to bring life. God is one who 'sees the affliction of my people; who hears their cry; who knows their suffering, and comes to deliver them' (Ex 3:7-8). Within the Temple of Israel great care was taken to blend the holy anointing oils (Exod 30:22-33). The priestly ministry today by virtue of Christian baptism is now extended by Presentation people through the quality of their nurturing and healing presence to others with whom they minister.

- › Temple/Presentation people will be committed to care of the earth (Mk 16:15, kosmos). As Temple people, they cannot but have an ecological consciousness, alert to the world within and around as a sacrament of God's presence. The whole cosmos is now the dwelling place, the *oikos* of God's Spirit.³⁵ John writes, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt (literally *tabernacled*) among us' (Jn 1:14). Matter is now imbued with Divinity and the active agent of this is the indwelling Spirit. So the world is rightly called the Temple or Dwelling Place of God (Rev 21:1-8).

The vision of new creation reflected in the Gospels of Mark and John and the Book of Revelation is captured in Presentation/Temple spirituality and the spirituality of Nano Nagle. Nano, the lantern-carrier, worked to achieve the vision of 'good news to the poor' in her age, and our task is no less worthy. Temple people would seem to be essential in our time. The world cries out for people who can look at reality from a contemplative stance and see how to act collaboratively for justice for people and planet so that creation is birthing and not dying. Given the growing ecological consciousness in the world, Presentation/Temple spirituality is most relevant. The world, our *oikos*, needs to become more and more visibly a place where God's Spirit is at home.

Endnotes

1. M. M. de Pazzi Leahy, 'Transcript of the Annals of South Presentation Convent, Cork. 1771-1989'; hereinafter 'Annals'. Entry for January 24 1776.
2. Annals, 1776, January 25.
3. T. J. Walsh, *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1959), 179, 396.
4. Annals, 1782, November 21.
5. Annals, 1789, November 21.
6. Annals, 1791, September 3.
7. *ibid.*
8. See Chapter 9 above.
9. Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), Chapter 3.
10. Annals, 1777 (this entry appears immediately before June 24 1777).
11. Raphael Consedine, *Listening Journey: A Study of the Spirit and Ideals of Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters* (Melbourne: Presentation Sisters Victoria, 1983), 87.
12. Nano Nagle to Miss Fitzsimons, AL 17 July 1769, par 8, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 346.
13. Nano Nagle to Miss Fitzsimons, AL 17 July 1769, par 11, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 347.
14. Nano Nagle to Miss Fitzsimons, AL 17 July 1769, par 12, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 347.
15. Nano Nagle to Miss Fitzsimons, AL 13 May 1770, par 1, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 351.
16. Nano Nagle to Miss Fitzsimons, AL 28 September 1770, par 2, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 354.
17. Nano Nagle to Miss Fitzsimons, AL 28 September 1770, par 4, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 355.
18. Nano Nagle to Miss Fitzsimons, AL 17 December 1770, par 1, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 355.
19. Nano Nagle to Miss Mulally, AL 29 September 1776, par 1, in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 357.
20. Sandra Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 31-2.
21. Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country*, 98.
22. This quote is from a talk by Teresita Weind, given at the LCWR National Assembly in 1991.
23. See Frédéric Manns, *Le symbole eau-esprit dans le Judaïsme ancien*, vol. 19, SBFA 19 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1983), 285. ADDIN ADDIN
24. F Manns, *L'évangile de Jean à la lumière du Judaïsme*, SBFA, 33 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1991), 135.
25. Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (London: SPCK, 1991), 18.
26. For a discussion on the Temple as a source of fertility for the Earth see Barker, *The Gate of Heaven*, 75-82.
27. Seven times the phrase occurs, 'as the Lord had commanded Moses' (Exod 40:19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32). This phrase marks the placing of: the Holy of Holies, the Veil, the table for the bread, the golden lampstand, the altar of incense and anointing oil, the altar of burnt offerings, and finally the laver for the washing of the priests. When it was completed, the narrator states:

- 'Thus Moses finished the work.' (Exod 40:33; compare 'And on the seventh day God finished the work (Gen 2:2).
28. Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2004), 17.
 29. The *Protoevangelium* records a legend that Mary was one of the young women chosen to weave the Temple veil: Let us make a veil for the temple of the Lord. And the priest said: Choose for me by lot who shall spin the gold, and the white, and the fine linen, and the silk, and the blue, and the scarlet, and the true purple (Exod 25:4) And the true purple and the scarlet fell to the lot of Mary, and she took them, and went away to her house.
 30. Lawrence Stager describes the lush gardens built by Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, Queen Hatshepsut's gardens in Egypt, those of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II in Assur, Sargon II and Sennacherib in Nineveh; see Lawrence E. Stager, 'Jerusalem as Eden,' *Biblical Archaeology Review* 26 (2000): 36-47. Mariusz Rosik also describes the significance of the garden for burial sites for kings in the Ancient Middle East; see, Mariusz Rosik, 'Discovering the Secrets of God's Gardens. Resurrection as New Creation (Gen 2:4b-3:24; Jn 20:1-18),' in *Liber Annus Lviii*, ed. Massimo Pazzini (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 2009), 82-3.
 31. Howard N. Wallace, 'Garden of God (Place)', in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 906. Also Howard N. Wallace, *Eden, Garden of (Place)*, idem. 282.
 32. Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 66.
 33. The Gospel of John draws upon this cosmic-garden imagery in its presentation of the Passion narrative which takes place within a garden (John 18:1; 19:41), with the cross 'in the middle' as a 'tree of life' that was 'in the middle' of the Garden of Eden. With wonderful irony the Risen Jesus is first revealed to Mary Magdalene as the Divine Gardener. For more on this Johannine symbolism see, Mary Coloe (ed.) *Creation Is Groaning: Biblical and Theological Perspectives* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), 71-90.
 34. Annals, Introductory pages. Also cited in Walsh, *Nano Nagle*, 115-16.
 35. The word ecology comes from the Greek word for house - *oikos*. The most frequent name for the Temple in the Old Testament was the House of God - the *oikos tou Theou*.