

## RECLAIMING THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE FOUNDER

**Nano Nagle founded the Presentation Sisters in Cork, Ireland in 1775**

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One of the tasks facing us when we entered as postulants was to learn the language of Religious Life. There was the local dialect such as referring to the pergola near the Cathedral as “the pagoda” and there was a more universal vocabulary of religious institutions such as coiff, guimpe, matins and lauds, lecture (which we now refer to as spiritual reading) and so on. One word that had not entered our vernacular when I was a postulant was “charism”.

It came much later. The Second Vatican Council enshrined **charisms** in The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), (par.12), the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, (pars.3 and 31) and the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, (par.23).

What is clearly defined in the above paragraphs is that **a charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit given to each of us at Baptism for the good of the whole church.**

“These charismatic gifts, whether they be the most outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation for they are exceedingly suitable and useful for the needs of the Church.” LG 12.

It is worth noting that charisms were not mentioned in the Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis).

However, Perfectae Caritatis in par.2, outlined the two principles of appropriate renewal as “(1) a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community, and (2) an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times.... Therefore, **loyal recognition and safekeeping should be accorded to the spirit of the founders**”.

It seems that there tends to be some confusion in our use of the terms **charism** and **the spirit of the founder**.

We frequently hear mentions of Nano’s charism. It was surely one of the more outstanding of the charisms referred to above. She is associated with her lantern seeking the poor in the dark alleys of Cork. Our Founder’s little lantern became a shining light in the church as she inspired other founders to adopt an apostolic, rather than a monastic way of life in responding to the needs of the poor in her contemporary Ireland.

It is significant that in her native Ireland, she was named “Woman of the Millennium”.

Nano’s vision of meeting the needs of the church is prophetically expressed in her words: “If I could be of service in saving souls in any part of the globe, I would willingly do all in my power.” (letter to Miss Fitzsimmons, 17<sup>th</sup> July, 1769)

Nano’s charism was to found a new type of religious community and to inspire other founders to recognise the place of apostolic religious life in the church. The Christian Brothers are best known for acknowledging her influence on their founder, Edmund Ignatius Rice, but other congregations devoted to apostolic work and ministry followed where she led.

What the Vatican Documents make clear is that a charism is an individual gift for the good of the whole church. Each one of us received from the Holy Spirit our own charism at our Baptism.

A charism cannot be given by anyone other than the Holy Spirit, Our relationship with Nano, therefore, is not through her charism.

Our relationship with our Founder Nano, Perfectae Caritatis clearly tells us, is forged by continuously returning to her spirit.

What is that telling us today, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How does it apply to our congregation as we acknowledge our diminishment yet believe that we can still respond in some way to the needs of the church?

We need to read Nano’s story carefully and pay special attention to her letters.

She did not set out to found a Religious Congregation. She saw a need and responded to it from her position as a lay person. In fact, for about 55 of her 66 years, she was a layperson.

Her entry into a French Order, the decision to leave that Order, the invitation to the Ursulines to teach in Ireland, her secret and dangerous involvement in teaching the children and visiting the poor in Cork were all steps towards heeding God’s call to serve the poor. When she realised that each in turn was not serving that purpose, she let it go and moved on.

What is that telling us about her spirit?

This is a very important question because our answers to it will not only tell us about her but will also guide us as we make decisions in our time of diminishment.

I believe that to be faithful to Nano’s spirit, to discern what she would do in the present time, we need to acknowledge that letting go is a response to the Holy Spirit.

We have already let go of ministries, property, a community lifestyle etc, so we should feel encouraged to believe that taking one step at a time with trust in God who is always faithful, will eventually lead us one pace beyond.

What each of us brings to that discernment is our own particular charism, the gift received from the Holy Spirit at Baptism.

It should be noted also, that not only each Sister but also each Presentation Associate has his or her individual charism. What draws us together is the spirit of Nano.

We have been paying careful attention to the **charism** of Nano as the Founder of the Presentation Sisters. It seems to me that now in this time of diminishment, we would do well to reflect deeply on her **spirit(uality)** to understand how she faced failure and the need to let go of what was not furthering the mission of Jesus.

There is a profound connection between letting go as an expression of her spirit and taking one step beyond, which in her case, was founding our congregation.

We can let go in the spirit of Nano. How, when and where we will take the step beyond will be determined by our community discernment, in a coming together of our individual charisms. This is called for by the changed conditions of our time.

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