Nano Nagle – a woman of heroic virtue

Nano Nagle Mass 2017

Today we honour Nano Nagle. Because of the life and faith and vision and holiness of Nano Nagle St Mary’s College exists. Each year at this Mass we have the opportunity to reflect on the life of Nano Nagle. Who was she? And more importantly, what inspired her life?

I am sure you have learnt of the life of Nano Nagle and her dedication to educating the poor in her city of Cork in Ireland.  In 2013, Nano was declared Venerable by Pope Francis – a fitting recognition of her role as a woman of heroic virtue.

I would like to draw your attention to the first name she chose for what was to become the Presentation Sisters. In 1775 she founded “the Society of Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus”.

I would like to consider the elements of this name.

Firstly, it was a society, later it would be formally recognised as a religious order. The women who joined this society in fact embraced religious life and took the habit. This society was to be a group of women who would consecrate their lives to God in order to serve the work of the society.

In the Church it is common that women and men are drawn to a complete dedication to a religious work by offering up their entire lives to live under the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. It is a total dedication. Nano Nagle inspired a group of women to do this in Cork so that her work would be established and continue and grow. Now, 250 years later there are sisters living under her inspiration across the world.

The original name then speaks of “Charitable Instruction”. The society she formed was to work in the area of teaching. Nano bravely defied the Penal Laws of her time and opened up schools in secret. Schools were banned by the British government as a way of subjugating the Irish population. She opened these schools as being “charitable’ in nature, in that there would be no charge for the services of the teachers. The schools were free and she relied upon donations of those who wanted to support her work. Ultimately Nano Nagle relied upon what we call “Divine Providence”, that God would provide.

In 1791, when the community was recognised by Pope Pius VI, it was describe as having the task “to erect, and to form, not only in the city of Cork, but in other towns, houses for the reception of pious virgins, whose duty it should be to instruct little girls in the rudiments of faith and morals, to teach them different works peculiar to their sex, to visit sick females in the public infirmaries, and help them in their necessities”.

This was the job description of the fledgewing order. Notice that the Pope described their task as “instructing little girls in faith and morals”. Nano wanted the children she instructed to be instructed in their Catholic faith. This was particularly important because at the time this was something the British government sought to stamp out.

One of the most precious things to receive in life is instruction in the Catholic faith. The quality of faith is at the heart of every person’s life. Everyone needs to believe in something. Never underestimate the importance of coming to know God, coming to know Jesus Christ. Never reject God or dismiss the Catholic faith as something of little consequence. It is of vital importance for every human life.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus speaks of the true bread that comes down from heaven that gives life to the world. It is not what feeds our bodies that is ultimately important but it is what feeds our souls.

Jesus declares, “I am the bread of life”. This is an extraordinary statement. Jesus says that knowing him will nourish your soul. Nano Nagle understood this very well. In fact, in a letter that she wrote in 1769 she said, "If I could be of any service in saving souls in any part of the globe, I would willingly do all in my power." Saving souls. This was her mission. She wanted young women to know God and come into a life of faith that would save their souls.

Dear Students of St Mary’s hear Nano Nagle say this to you. The most important thing in life is to know God and live the Catholic faith because it will save your souls.

One final comment. Nano Nagle originally dedicated her newly formed band of consecrated women to the Sacred Heart. She wanted the love of God revealed in the Sacred Heart of Jesus to flow through their work.

On your right you can see the altar in this cathedral dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It has recently been restored. There you can see Jesus revealing his heart – which he did to St Margaret Mary Alacoque in 1673. It is love that is in the heart of Jesus. It is this love that inspired Nano Nagle. As we draw close to Jesus we experience his love, his extraordinary love for all of humanity and for each of us.

Today we celebrate the life of the Venerable Nano Nagle. I invite you to pray to her during this Mass. Pray that you may have the same dynamic faith and love of God in your life. Pray that you may have the courage that she had to defy persecution of the faith. Pray that you may offer your life in the service of those in need.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

Monday, May 1, 2017