I am going to tell you a sacred story which begins nearly three hundred years ago in 1718, when Nano Nagle was born. She and her family lived in Ballygriffin in County Cork. Nano had two brothers and four sisters. Their father, Garret, was a rich man who owned plenty of land and because of this the Nagle children had everything that they needed. However, the Nagles were a Catholic family and the Penal Laws forbade Catholic children from going to school. So Nano and her brothers and sisters learned their lessons in a secret hiding place among bushes and ditches in what was called a hedge-school. The hedge-school master was always looking out for the red-coated English soldiers. Due to the Penal Laws, he could have been killed if the school was discovered. Could it be that it was these school days which inspired Nano to spend her life as an adult educating the poor?

Nano was a tomboy; she loved to climb trees, hide in barns, ride her pony and swim in the lake. Sometimes she played hide-and-seek in Monamy Castle. Nano’s mother often felt that she would never be able to turn her daughter into a young lady! When the young tearaway became a teenager, her parents decided to send Nano and her sister, Ann, to school in France. This was against the law so the two girls had to be smuggled across the sea in the hold of a cargo ship! At the end of the journey the sisters arrived safely in Paris.

Nano really liked Paris. She and Ann went to lots of parties and balls and they wore all the latest fashions. Their father sent them so much money that they never wanted for anything.

To all outward appearances Nano seemed happy but deep down she knew that something was missing. At half past five one morning, when Nano was on her way home from a ball, she looked out of her carriage window to see a group of poor people standing outside a church and shivering in the cold as they waited for food. Nano was upset by what she saw and cried for hours because she realized that she had so much and they had so little. She would never forget these poor people; however, she continued living the good life in Paris for another six years.

When she was 28 years old, Nano’s beloved father died and she and Ann returned to Dublin to be with their mother. In those days Dublin was a very poor city and Nano pitied all the barefoot children. However she didn’t think she could do anything about it. One day she searched in the presses at home for a piece of expensive material which she had brought back from Paris – but she couldn’t find it. Then she discovered that Ann had cut up the material to make clothes for the poor. Nano was amazed. She also found out that Ann used to visit the poor and Nano started to go with her but she was shocked by the poverty, which she saw. This was a turning point in Nano’s life and she slowly began to understand that God had special work in store for her to turn her pity for the children of the poor into positive action for their future.

In 1748 Ann died and her mother died soon afterwards. Nano was broken-hearted and returned to Ballygriffin in County Cork to live with her brother, David. She decided to do something that Ann would be proud of. She started to teach the poor children in the local village how to read and write and taught them stories about God. A little while later, Nano went back to France to become a nun. She felt that maybe she could do more to help the poor through prayer. She didn’t stay long in France this time, however, because she missed Ireland too much. Most of the people whom Nano knew thought that she was terrible for leaving the convent but she knew that God wanted her to help the people back in Ireland so she came back to Cork city to live with her other brother, Joseph. At this stage, the force of her belief in the path that God had laid out for her was weaving a pattern out of all that seemed uncertain.
In 1754 Nano opened her first school in Cove Lane in Cork city. She taught the children in secret because it was against the law. Within a short time Nano had seven little schools in the city – five of these schools were for girls and two for boys. When her brother Joseph found out what she was up to he was furious and extremely worried that either Nano or he himself would get caught. Joseph feared the Penal Laws, which cast a veil of cloud at a dark hour in our history. However, Nano calmed his fears saying that God would keep them safe. So Joseph began to help her in her work and a wealthy uncle, also called Joseph, gave money to her schools.

With so many pupils to look after, the money soon ran out and Nano sometimes had to beg in the streets. One day she called into a shop owned by a family friend. The owner wasn’t there and the shop assistant, thinking she was a beggar, threw her out of the shop. Nano waited outside and when the owner returned he was delighted to see her and immediately gave her both money and goods for her work. The embarrassed shop assistant went on with his work… Nano often experienced embarrassment for the sake of her good work but she endured all such sorrow in silence.

Nano was determined not to give up but her health began to deteriorate and she was worried about what would become of her schools if anything happened to her. Her friend, Fr. Laurence Callannan suggested that she set up her own order of nuns to dedicate themselves to education. On Christmas Eve 1775, Nano Nagle, Mary Ann Collins, Elizabeth Burke and Mary Fouhy became the first sisters of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which later became known as the Presentation Order.

In the evenings after school Nano visited the poor, the sick and the lonely, carrying a lamp to find her way through the dark city streets. She went from hovel to hovel, providing these poor people with the necessities of life and bringing consolation with her cheerful manner. As a result of her good deeds she became known as the Lady of the Lantern. However, things were not always easy. Elizabeth Burke died and Nano’s own health got worse. Very few other young women joined the Presentation Sisters in those early days, yet Nano believed that the time would come when young women would join in their hundreds… How right she was! Now, 225 years later, we realise how much the determination of one woman could achieve. There are Presentation nuns in all five continents; and they are women who follow the example of their founder… Nano, who a carried the lantern for the oppressed and dared to let herself be guided to a place one step beyond what was easy and comfortable and expected.

Nano Nagle became a champion of the poor, of the right to education and religious freedom. Through her vision, dedication and commitment, Nano Nagle has earned a place in our history books for all time. Despite her bad health, Nano worked cheerfully, spurred on by her belief in the children under her care. She died on 26th April 1784 but her memory lives on.

[With grateful thanks to Yvonne Crotty]