

The lives of two Irish women who were the forebears of Presentation High School in Berkeley are recounted below, abridged from the Presentation Sisters San Francisco web site and the memoirs of Mother Teresa Comerford, available online. Photos are from these and other sources. The history of our Presentation High School, Berkeley, education from 1968-1972 begins with their stories. We'll recall Nano Nagle's portrait on our classroom walls, along with a painting of the presentation of young Mary at the temple. Fifty years later, let us honor them.

NANO NAGLE (1718-1784)

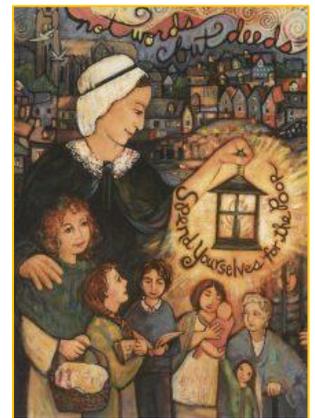
Foundress, Order of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Cork, Ireland, December 1775



Honora "Nano" Nagle was born in Ballygriffin, County Cork, Ireland in 1718, a period of Irish history with oppressive Penal Laws imposed by the English. The Irish were denied access economically, politically, socially, and educationally to the rights and means that would have raised them from poverty and oppression. It was a crime of treason, punishable by death, to educate the Irish and it was forbidden to practice the Roman Catholic faith. Due to her family's position and wealth, Nano was sent to be educated in the Irish community then living in Paris, where the French De La Salle Christian Brothers were also teaching sons of exiled Irish nobility.

According to one biographer, Nano's stay in the midst of Irish Parisian Society was brief, but the vast divide she witnessed at age 22 between her life in wealthy Parisian society and street scenes of poor working people, many waiting in front of a church for early Mass as she rode home by carriage from an all-night ball, made a lasting impression on her. Back in Ireland, moved to help the poor in Cork and raise them from ignorance in faith and academics, she opened her first school in 1754 at age 36, with an

enrollment of thirty-five girls in a two-room cabin. Thus began her great work of education, and as some historians have noted, her important work in saving the Irish culture. Without regard for her own safety, she taught the children during the day and visited and nursed the sick by night. She became known in Cork as the *Lady with the Lantern*, the symbol of the Sisters of the Presentation worldwide. Today, the people of Ireland, especially in Cork, revere her.



Nano Nagle founded the Sisters of the Presentation on December 24, 1775. She died from tuberculosis on April 26, 1784. According to one account, "On her deathbed, Mother Nagle bade her Sisters, 'Spend yourself for the poor.'" On October 31, 2013, Nano Nagle was declared Venerable by Pope Francis – the second of four stages in the Canonization Process. Learn more by visiting Union of Presentation Sisters, Monastervin, Kildare, Ireland. *Exactly one hundred years after Nano Nagle established her first school in Cork, Mother Teresa Comerford PBVM traveled with the pioneer sisters to San Francisco and later to Berkeley to establish Catholic schools.*

MOTHER MARY TERESA COMERFORD, PBVM (1821-1881)

Foundress of the Presentation Order's West Coast Province (1854) and the Berkeley Presentation Schools (1878)



Bridget Comerford, whose family origins in Ireland date back to 1189, was born on February 19, 1821, the third child in a large, happy, and influential family of Kilkenny. Well-educated and disposed to religious life, young Bridget was drawn to the Carmelites but was advised to choose life in a more active order to better meet her personality. Ultimately, she chose the Presentation order, which was, at the time, a contemplative and teaching order. She was professed in 1844, taking the religious name of Mary Teresa. During her seven years in the cloistered life, the great talent she showed in needlework and art of any kind resulted in handcrafted works that were sold by local poor children to the wives of British officers garrisoned in the city. During that time, she found herself drawn to and well-suited to the missionary work of the Sisters in distant lands. Her sister and brother (see photos) also felt this calling in their own religious vocations.

In 1854, a priest visiting Ireland on business for the Archdiocese of San Francisco sought a mission band of Presentation Sisters to travel to the Pacific Coast of America to open schools in the burgeoning Gold Rush city. On a layover in Dublin, one of the missionary sisters who had begun the journey to America became too ill to travel, and Sister Mary Teresa Comerford was given her place, fulfilling her desire for missionary work abroad. Though leaving her beloved family and homeland, she was ready to "sacrifice every tie for Christian education."

The rough and tumble Gold Rush town of San Francisco was not suited for cloistered religious life, but the sisters persisted, and after an arduous two-month journey, they arrived in San Francisco on November 13, 1854. Mother Teresa's memoirs describe harrowing experiences on the trip across Panama. Their 13-day journey by steamship from Panama up to San Francisco was far more agreeable, and Archbishop Joseph Alemany, O.P. welcomed them to that city. In 1855, she became the second Mother Superior for the California group, and as such, Mother Comerford spearheaded the early survival and growth of the Sisters of the Presentation on the West Coast. She was elected superior because "she was a lady of captivating personality, refined and highly educated, had an exceptional gift for making friends, and so of gaining the patronage of the cultured elite." These qualities helped towards the establishment of free schools. (from: History of the Comerford Families)

Mother Teresa's work in building the Presentation Sisters West Coast province, convents, and schools in San Francisco and Berkeley is outlined in the Presentation High School, Berkeley history timeline.

In September 1879, five months after the official founding of St. Joseph's Parish in Berkeley, Mother Teresa returned to Ireland to create a missionary novitiate of Presentation Sisters to further the educational mission in the United States. She missed her Berkeley schools greatly and returned to California in 1881, though in ill health. On May 29, 1881, she arrived in Berkeley to the delight of the sisters, parishioners, and school children. In her absence in Ireland, her brother, St. Joseph's founding pastor, Rev. Pierce Comerford, had built St. Peter's Boys School (1881), the original oak staircase of which became part of the new 1924 St. Joseph's Presentation High School building, and remains in place today at University Terrace condominium housing.

At St. Joseph's, the land in Central Berkeley donated to the Sisters by farmer James McGee was now a lush and green expanse of gardens and walkways through the convent and school grounds, just as Mother Teresa had laid them out in planning for the Berkeley property several years earlier. Her joy was great at being with the Berkeley students again and seeing their educational progress. The sisters in the San Francisco convents were eager to see Mother Teresa, too, and though weak, she was escorted across the bay to the city just a day after her arrival, with a promise to return to the Berkeley community. The happy news of her return to San Francisco spread among the Catholic communities in the city. But her condition continued to weaken and she was resigned to bedrest in the San Francisco convent. On July 31, 1881, she died of tuberculosis. The memoirs recount her dying admonitions to the sisters, and her glorious Requiem Mass, celebrated in the Taylor Street Convent chapel by Archbishop Alemany, with hundreds from across the city in attendance, including many students.

The funeral procession through San Francisco that followed the Mass is described as one of the largest ever in the city: "The casket was placed on the hearse. The religious withdrew to their convent. The procession of children and pedestrians, formed four abreast, reached from Sixth Street to the wharf, followed by sixty carriages. From the wharf it proceeded by [ferry] to Oakland, where it was joined by numerous priests and friends; thence by San Pablo Avenue into Berkeley. The convent grounds [at St. Joseph's] were thronged with persons awaiting the funeral." A second funeral Mass took place in the convent chapel, after which the casket was conveyed to its resting place in the Berkeley convent cemetery. (During the parish centennial in 1978-79, a found photo showed that cemetery, which appeared to be on the site of the Sisters' 1966 convent on Allston Way. The graves had long before been removed to St. Mary's Cemetery in Oakland.)

The legacy of Mother Mary Teresa Comerford that began in Ireland with her 1844 profession and found its way to a nascent San Francisco in 1854 and to the farmlands of Berkeley in 1877, lived on for 130 years at Mr. McGee's open plain on which tens of thousands of boys, girls, and young women were educated in academics and in faith. Numerous vocations to the priesthood and religious life would result from the work, care, and example of the Berkeley Sisters.* Though the schools closed in 1989 and 2007, the beautiful property continues in its educational tradition today as University of California academics' housing.



SISTERS OF THE
PRESENTATION
SAN FRANCISCO

Non Vox Sed Votum
Not Words but Deeds

*Sister Stephanie Still, PBVM, PHS '70, former teacher and principal at PHS-Berkeley, served as President of the Sisters of the Presentation on the West Coast from 2010-2016.

Berkeley Catholics are forever indebted to the Comerford family. Right: Mother Mary Bernard Comerford, PBVM, sister of Mother Teresa, joined her sister in San Francisco in 1861, and joined the Berkeley convent after the 1906 earthquake and fire. She was Mistress of Novices and lived and taught at the Berkeley Presentation schools until her death in 1911. Rev. Pierce Michael Comerford, brother of the two nuns, came to Berkeley in 1879 from retirement in Mauritius at Mother Teresa's request. There he founded St. Joseph's Parish and aided in the great success of the educational work of the sisters.

