

Our Foundation, Our Legacy

We honor the pioneering spirit of our foundresses and the countless sisters who have walked this path with us, spreading the light of hope and love into the world. Their legacy continues to inspire and guide us in our mission.

1775 | *Founded in Cork, Ireland, by Nano Nagle*

In the heart of Ireland, amidst the shadows of oppression, Honora Nagle, affectionately known as Nano, stood as a beacon of light against the dark tyranny of the Penal Laws. These laws, meant to suppress Catholicism, banned the education of children and silenced the voices of the faithful. Yet, Nano refused to yield. Believing that education was key to ending poverty, she began to search for ways to educate young girls. In 1754, she rented a mud hut and hired a teacher to assist her in welcoming 30 girls to the world of education. By 1769, Nano had opened seven schools, five for girls and two for boys.

As the sun set over Cork after long days of teaching, Nano walked the dark, winding lanes of Cork City, carrying a lantern to light her way. Her silhouette, illuminated by the soft glow of her lantern light, became a symbol of hope and love amidst the darkness, bringing solace to the sick, comfort to the elderly and companionship to the marginalized.

Nano soon realized that fulfilling her dream of educating and serving those most in need would require help. In 1775, she founded the Sisters of the Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, later known as the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Her words, "If I could be of any service in saving souls in any part of the globe, I would willingly do all in my power to respond," offer a glimpse into her courageous spirit and global vision for transforming lives. Over the years, her dream has inspired countless others to follow in her footsteps, extending far beyond the winding lanes of Cork.

As daughters of Nano, we continue to tend the light of her lantern, spreading love, hospitality and compassion throughout the world. Her legacy resonates through the ages, urging us to seek timely and effective ways to confront the injustices of our world with unwavering passion and commitment.

1874 | *Established in Dubuque, Iowa, by Mother Vincent Hennessey*

In the picturesque village of Mooncoin, Ireland, Mother Vincent Hennessey, accompanied by former student, Alice Howley, Alice's cousin, Ellen Ahearn and Mother Vincent's niece, Kate Reide, made a pivotal decision that would forever shape their destinies. With unwavering courage, they heeded the call of Bishop John Hennessey to journey to Dubuque, Iowa. Their mission was clear — to educate impoverished immigrant children. With unfaltering faith and fortitude, they departed their homeland, leaving behind familiar comforts. Carrying Nano Nagle's "lantern" across the Atlantic, they arrived on November 13, 1874, marking the foundation of the Dubuque Sisters of the Presentation community.

Despite facing countless obstacles and navigating through periods of uncertainty, Mother Vincent remained steadfast, fueled by the fiery passion for love and service ignited within her by Nano. As the years unfolded, her community flourished, attracting hundreds of women who chose to dedicate their lives as Dubuque Presentation Sisters.

Inspired by the vision of Nano, Mother Vincent's fortitude carried the Presentation mission into the future. Her story — our story — is one of profound determination and resilience and a commitment to education and service to immigrant families.

As we pause to reflect with gratitude on our rich heritage, the paths we have trodden, and those still ahead, our hearts are filled with deep appreciation for the vision of our founding mothers. We hold in reverence the hundreds of women who have dedicated themselves to sustaining that vision with their sacrifices and unwavering dedication.

With grateful hearts for the past, present and future, we press onward, tending the light as we continue to go out where need calls loudly, always united by the legacy of these great women.



We, the Sisters of the Presentation, share the vision of our foundresses, who dared to dream of a better world by confronting the unjust structures of their time. Today, we weave the example of their lives with ours by empowering those most in need, educating the uneducated and caring for the vulnerable. Our mission calls us to live our charism of radical hospitality — an intentional, welcoming presence. Throughout our history, we have taken many steps to offer this gift of hospitality, viewing our world, our work and our mission through its lens. It is who we are as Sisters of the Presentation.





Our Journey

Guided by prayerful contemplation, we reflect with gratitude upon our rich history and narratives from the past. Our history is a shared story — sacred and collective — grounded in the heritage and values that continue to inspire and guide us forward, transforming both us and those we serve.

This timeline highlights key moments, ministries and milestones that have shaped our journey and life as Presentation Sisters.

We invite you to be drawn into our unfolding story — a journey of faith, determination, resilience and service that has defined our mission for over 150 years.

1775-1887



April 26, 1784

Nano died at South Presentation Convent in Cork, Ireland, leaving behind a legacy of education, hospitality and service.

January 7, 1875

The sisters moved to a new convent in Key West, Iowa, establishing their first motherhouse, which also served as both a convent and the sisters' first school. The convent parlors served as classrooms, beginning with 20 students. Enrollment quickly grew to 80 by the following September.

The original three companions of Mother Vincent were initiated as Presentation Sisters. As was the tradition in Ireland, the candidates wore wedding dresses as Brides of Christ. The wedding dress tradition continued until the late 1960s.



December 9, 1879

The sisters built a new motherhouse on Rush Street in the West Hill neighborhood. At the dedication the following July, it was named St. Vincent in honor of Mother Vincent. A separate school building to the east was added in 1898. The property was sold to St. Columbkille Parish in 1930 and the school continued under that name.



Despite the difficult loss of their foundress, the young community continued to grow through the grace of God. As the community flourished, sisters were missioned to Danbury, Iowa. Since 1887, sisters have served in 22 parishes and schools in what has become known as the Diocese of Sioux City.



1775

1784

1874

1875

1876

1879

1880

1887

Nano Nagle, a daughter of Ireland, defied the oppressive Penal Laws of England to establish a religious community in Cork, Ireland, laying the foundation for what would become the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.



November 13, 1874

In response to an invitation from Bishop John Hennessy of Dubuque, Iowa, Mother Vincent Hennessy and three companions journeyed from Mooncoin, Ireland, to establish a Presentation congregation in Dubuque. Upon their arrival, they were warmly welcomed by the Visitation Sisters, finding temporary refuge in their home due to the unavailability of a convent.

IOWA



Within a year the congregation had grown from four to seven sisters. On September 12, three sisters were assigned to their first mission at St. Malachi parish in Dubuque, later known as St. Anthony parish and school. Since 1876, Presentation Sisters have served in 55 locations in the Archdiocese of Dubuque, embodying their commitment to education and community service.



February 19, 1880

Soon after the sisters moved into the incomplete St. Vincent convent, Mother Vincent contracted pneumonia due to harsh conditions of the building. Despite their prayers and care, she succumbed to the illness, leaving the young community devastated. Her death was a profound loss that tested the resilience of the fragile sisterhood.



1895-1941



The first Presentation mission outside the state of Iowa was in Nebraska. The sisters taught at a school in Madison, Nebraska.

NEBRASKA

The first Presentation missions in the state of Colorado were in the cities of Stratton and Akron. Sisters were also missioned to Timber Lake in the Diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota, where they served for 59 years.

SOUTH DAKOTA



COLORADO



The first summer vacation school was conducted by three sisters in Belle Plaine, Iowa, to provide religious instruction to children from parishes without parochial schools. By 1933, the Presentation Sisters were serving 15 of these parishes.



A summer religious education program was initiated for Black children in Dubuque, the first of its kind in Iowa. In addition to religion, instruction was given in art, music and dramatics. The program continued until 1939. Later, a similar program was conducted in Eufaula, Alabama, from 1949-1953, the first Presentation mission in the South.



The community began its first religious education program in Monticello, Minnesota, the community's first presence in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.



MINNESOTA

1895

1903

1909

1919

1924

1926

1930

1934

1935

1941

The first Chapter of Affairs and Elections elected Mother Josephine Howley as the first leader of the congregation. Previously, due to insufficient professed sisters, Bishop Hennessy appointed Mother Patricia Reide until 1895. A chapter sets the community's direction and elects new leadership to implement the congregation's vision.



November 4, 1909

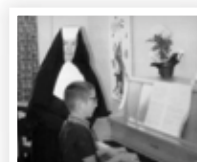
The sisters moved from St. Vincent to Mount Loretto, a motherhouse they built at 1229 Wilde Avenue, shortly thereafter renamed Mt. Loretta Avenue, directly to the south of St. Vincent. Sixty years later this motherhouse became the Archdiocesan Pastoral Center of Dubuque.



After 50 years under the Irish Presentation Rule, the first American constitutions were approved by Rome, changing the length of leadership terms to six years, and creating a five-person team, with the superior to use the title "mother general." Education was the only external work permitted for the Dubuque Presentation Sisters.



During the 1930s Depression, no new schools opened and some closed. Many parishes couldn't pay salaries. Music teachers often received food for private lessons. These efforts sustained the sisters and created a lasting legacy of service.



The first sister was sent to nursing training to provide care in the motherhouse infirmary. Later other sisters received degrees in nursing, working in the infirmary or at other institutions. Eventually lay people were hired to provide medical services at Mount Loretto.



1952-1992



1952
-
1970

A Juniorate was established which provided more spiritual direction for sisters on mission who were in temporary vows.



The first issue of the Mount Loretto Bulletin was issued in October. Early issues focused on the work at Mount Loretto and highlights from the sister's ministries. The publication began to feature more news stories by 1962. In 2007, the publication was renamed Presentation Doorways.



A new parish and school named St. Germaine, located in Oak Lawn, Illinois, was the first mission of the community in the Archdiocese of Chicago.



By the summer of 1967, the sisters updated their traditional habit to a shorter veil, a black dress with a white collar, and eventually allowed white blouses with black sweaters. In 1969, a brooch was introduced for identification as habits became similar across communities. Eventually, the habit became optional, with the ring from final vows becoming the primary symbol of community membership.



Responding to Pope Paul VI's call for religious congregations to send 10% of members to foreign missions, the Presentation community sent two sisters to serve the poor in southern Bolivia. The mission expanded to include other sisters and lay volunteers, focusing on catechist training, education, a pharmacy and advocacy. The mission further grew to include work with an international team serving 36 Guaraní communities across a 100-square-mile mountainous area, where the sisters continue their ministry today.



BOLIVIA

1952

1954

1956

1958

1963

1964

1965

1967

1969

1970

As the community continued to grow, an addition to the motherhouse included a library, classrooms, community rooms, offices and private bedrooms.



Before 1956, newly-professed sisters spent three years at the motherhouse, two of which were in college-level classes before going into teaching. To complete their degrees, they attended summer school for many years. Starting in 1956, sisters were allowed to stay five years at Mount Loretto to finish their degrees before being missioned. Most sisters began receiving their B.A.s from Clarke College (now Clarke University).



The Sisters of the Presentation of Oregon, Illinois, transferred their vows to the Sisters of the Presentation of Dubuque to form one congregation.



ILLINOIS

The community peaked at 332 members, including professed sisters, postulants and novices. Following Vatican II, renewal in religious life brought expanded ministries, lifestyle changes and modified garb. Many sisters reverted to their baptismal names.



October 12, 1969

After the sudden closing of Mount St. Bernard Seminary, the sisters purchased the facility as a new motherhouse at 2360 Carter Road. This home, retaining the name Mount Loretto, is the center for the administrative offices, the retired and infirmed sisters and the formation programs. The old Mount Loretto was sold to the Archdiocese of Dubuque.



1975
-
1992

Because of the educational discrimination experienced by many in the African-American community, Presentation Sisters began ministering at St. Dorothy School in Chicago that served this population. Over time this ministry has expanded to other locations and services.



With a strong desire to serve the needs of the poor wherever they may be, the sisters were drawn to serve in the Hispanic and migrant communities. The first mission to these communities in the United States was at Our Lady of Guadalupe parish and school in the Archdiocese of Chicago.



Presentation Sisters from around the world united to create the International Presentation Association (IPA) which works for world-wide justice and supports a non-governmental organization at the United Nations. A Dubuque Presentation Sister was named the first coordinator and remained in this role until 1995. Over the years, various sisters held positions within IPA.



For 10 years, Presentation Sisters served as pastoral ministers in Chupol, Guatemala. They developed adult education programs, trained catechists and lay leaders and organized community improvements. Their work with the oppressed was challenging due to multiple languages, dialects and ongoing conflicts.



GUATEMALA



The first gathering of Presentation Sisters and former members called "RE-Weaving Memories" took place to renew relationships, deepen friendships and share the happenings in their lives. It was a blessing to reconnect with members who journeyed with the Presentation community.



Through a process of discernment, the community formally set its focus and direction into the next decade by committing their efforts toward empowering women and children.

1975

1979

1980

1981

1987

1988

1989

1990

1991

1992

As new needs arose, fewer sisters taught in parochial schools. While continuing to teach religious education, new avenues of pastoral ministry opened including planning liturgical services, home and hospital visitations and leadership development.



Sisters taught English as a Second Language to Southeast Asian refugees resettled in Iowa, continuing their long tradition of serving immigrants. In 2017, they welcomed a Marshallese family, and in 2022, an Afghan family, providing housing on the Mount Loretto grounds.

Dedicated to the value of faith formation, the sisters utilized their skills and reached out to young adults as college campus ministers.



As the sisters aged and the size of the community declined, more lay people were hired to assume administrative and manual labor duties that were once handled by sisters. Lay help for the kitchen was hired in 1987 with additional hires gradually evolving in areas of finance, healthcare, house administration, communication, development, justice, archives and other departments. Maintenance had long been handled by a lay person, who often resided on the grounds.



The first Presentation Sister interned with NETWORK, a Catholic social justice lobby in Washington, D.C., advocating for foreign policy, reduced military spending and affordable housing. Presentation Sisters continue to engage in political advocacy, championing justice and legislation to support low-income and impoverished communities.

WASHINGTON, DC



Retreat ministry began in Buffalo, Minnesota, at Christ the King Retreat Center. Presentation Sisters continue this ministry in various locations.



MINNESOTA



1994
-
2018



1994
-
2003

TANZANIA



As women's roles in the church and society evolved, the Presentation Sisters expanded into diocesan administration, education, pastoral work, therapy, counseling, spiritual direction, chaplaincy and social services. They brought hope to diverse communities: the Oglala Lakota on Pine Ridge Reservation, Tanzanians in Africa and those at food pantries in Chicago and Dubuque.

Presentation Sisters welcomed the Visitation Sisters, who purchased an acre of the Mount Loretto grounds and built their new convent. Since 1874, their treasured friendship has been rooted in love and hospitality. In 2021, the Visitation Sisters moved into Mount Loretto and some Presentation Sisters moved into their convent for intentional community living.



With a desire to nurture mutual and supportive relationships with Christian laity, the Presentation Sisters initiated an Associate Partnership, inviting others to share their lives and gifts. After two years of preparation and reflection on heritage, prayer, mission and community, the first 54 associates formally committed to partner with the sisters in furthering the Presentation mission in 2000.



To address unmet housing needs for women and children in Dubuque, the Presentation Sisters joined five other congregations to form the non-profit Opening Doors. This collaborative effort established Maria House for transitional housing. Teresa Shelter for emergency shelter opened in 2006, and Francis Apartments, offering affordable housing with support services, in 2017.



The Sisters of the Presentation initiated the Presentation Lantern Center, located in Dubuque. This center offers hospitality, educational opportunities and advocacy to adults and their children. The doors opened on November 13, the anniversary of the founding of the Dubuque Presentation community. The center continues to welcome and serve adult immigrants from numerous countries.



1994

1995

1996

1998

1999

2000

2001

2002

2003

The community offered spiritual comfort by reaching out to those imprisoned in Marianna, Florida, and later in Rochester, Minnesota. Sisters walked with terminally-ill inmates and those on death row.



FLORIDA

In fall 1994, renovations at Mount Loretto began to address the sisters' future retirement and long-term care needs. Over two years, the project added a handicap-accessible entrance, expanded healthcare facilities, modernized dining and kitchen areas, a therapy pool, exercise room, larger bedrooms and centralized offices. In October 1996, after two years of work and transition, the community blessed the completed project.



Presentation Sisters actively engaged in social justice issues as peace activists. One particular sister passionately worked for a nuclear-free future, which often involved participating in protests against nuclear weapons. These protests against injustices, in seeking peace instead of war, were always practiced with non-violent resistance, however, some yielded jail and prison time.



Presentation Sisters, along with Archbishop Jerome Hanus and over 50 guests, gathered in prayer to dedicate the renovated Sacred Heart Chapel at Mount Loretto. Following a vote, the chapel retained its name to honor the Sacred Heart of Jesus. A notable feature of the renovation is a lantern above the altar, visible from both inside and outside, serving as a daily tribute to foundress Nano Nagle.



In a community vote, the sisters took their first corporate stance to adopt the Earth Charter, committing to a sustainable global society based on respect for nature, human rights, economic justice and peace. In 2007, they further pledged to reduce their carbon footprint by 25% annually for five years.



2004
-
2018

LOUISIANA



"Céad Mile Fáilte," a newly-constructed home on the Mount Loretto property, welcomed women entering religious life.



Presentation congregations in North America initiated and ministered at Lantern Light in New Orleans, a collaborative ministry to serve those in need. Lay people continue this work.



For 15 years, sisters and associates organized an annual garage sale, supporting non-profits and schools connected to the Presentation community.

Tending the Light, an informal history of the Dubuque foundation of the Sisters of the Presentation, was written.



Scholarships and awards were instituted to honor Nano's legacy. Two scholarships are awarded annually to students from Iowa high schools where Presentation Sisters have served, and two awards support individuals dedicated to service, helping them further their education or fund service opportunities.



Founded in 2014 by Catholic religious sisters in Dubuque, Iowa, the Tri-State Coalition Against Human Trafficking is a faith-based group working to combat human trafficking in Iowa, Illinois and Wisconsin by educating people of all ages on the signs of human trafficking.



A corporate stance was affirmed supporting "the implementation of a just and comprehensive immigration policy for the United States that includes a broad-based legalization of currently undocumented persons, providing them a path to citizenship."



2004

2005

2006

2008

2009

2010

2013

2014

2015

2018

Thirty-two years after ministry began in Bolivia, young women desiring to enter the Presentation community were captivated by the spirit of Nano. A formation program was established in order to welcome Bolivian women. In 2011, the first Bolivian woman made final vows and she continued her ministry serving among the Bolivian people.



Nearly 100 Dubuque Presentation Sisters and associates joined over 400 North American Presentation Sisters and associates at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, for the 2006 Convergence. The theme, "Walking One," emphasized unity in advancing the mission of Nano and provided a platform to share aspirations for creating a more just and peaceful world.



On Christmas Day, 1777, Nano, together with her three companions, invited 50 poor people to Christmas Day dinner. Following this tradition, the Sisters of the Presentation have been inviting homeless men from the city of Dubuque for a Christmas dinner since 2009.



October 31, 2013
The Catholic Church declared Nano Nagle Venerable. This was the second step in the process of canonization, which recognizes someone as a Saint.

La Luz Hispana (meaning The Hispanic Light) was established in Hampton, Iowa, to support Hispanic immigrants by providing a welcoming space to build community, overcome isolation and foster hope and possibilities.



After investigating the needs of immigrants in rural Iowa, Hispanic Outreach Ministry of Evangelization (HOME) was established to provide translation services, personalized religious studies and community resource connections. In 2023, HOME expanded to include one-on-one English tutoring.



Vietnamese sisters came to reside at Mount Loretto as they attended Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa. Their presence brought gifts of youth, energy and a new dimension of global life and culture.

2019
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2025



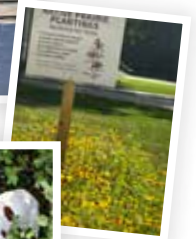
2019
-
2023

During the COVID-19 pandemic, sisters adapted by serving in new ways: staying home to protect the vulnerable, sending resources where needed and creatively connecting with others. Their careful adherence to guidelines kept the community healthy and safe.



To foster relationships and provide transformative experiences, over 200 Presentation people gathered virtually for the first Gathering of Presentation People on September 24-26, 2020. An in-person gathering followed in 2022 in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The Presentation Sisters are fervently committed to an ongoing journey toward sustainability and integral ecology. Inspired by Pope Francis' call to care for our common home, they educate themselves and implement initiatives like solar panel installations, plastic reduction, prairie grass plantings and usage of goats for weed management to reduce their carbon footprint.



2019

2020

2021

2022

2023

Presentation hospitality was extended to homeless women and children in the Katrina devastated area of New Orleans, Louisiana, through Hotel Hope, a nonprofit offering a safe, nurturing space while guiding residents to self-sufficiency through case management. This fulfilled Nano's dream of building a refuge for the homeless.



The Presentation community began working with consultants to plan for the future with an emphasis on mission abundance, vital living and new opportunities. Through the lens of radical hospitality, the sisters focused on positioning the community intentionally for mission through the use of their property and resources, while ensuring each sister can live her vocation to the fullest.



The Presentation Sisters strive to create a healthier future by advocating for racial equality, fair housing, income justice, immigrant rights, care for creation and the marginalized, with a focus on women and children. A justice promoter plays a key role in advancing the Presentation mission and engaging the community in social justice efforts, a responsibility previously carried out by various sisters has now transitioned to a lay person.



2024
-
2025

The Sisters of the Presentation celebrated their 150th anniversary year. This milestone provided the opportunity to pause, to look back with gratitude on all that has transpired and to look forward with renewed purpose to the mission that continues to call. As the community steps into the next chapter, they carry forward the same spirit that inspired their foundresses, a spirit of faith, courage and tender care for the most vulnerable.



2024

2025

With the changing demographics of the community, new ways for mission expression were considered, new structures of leadership were explored resulting in an executive director being hired and renovations were made to accommodate the aging population, continuing the long tradition of caring for the sisters at Mount Loretto.



With Gratitude

Remembering the courage of Nano Nagle, who gave everything to respond to the cries of impoverished Irish children 250 years ago, and honoring Mother Vincent Hennessy and her companions who left Ireland to serve immigrant children 150 years ago, we embrace the uncertain journey ahead, united by the legacy of these remarkable women and reminded that even in uncertainty, the mission leads the way.