



**Congregational Gathering
April 19th – May 14th, 2018**

**Opening Address:
Sister Mary Deane, PBVM,
Congregation Leader**

Welcome or Céad míle fáilte to this sacred space, this holy ground of Cork for the ninth Congregational Gathering.

It's wonderful to be here and hard to believe it is 6 years since our last Congregational Gathering. I know you have all been greeting and meeting each other over these past few hours but as we welcome each other into this sacred space, this sacred time I invite you to turn to the person on either side of you and welcome them in your own language or in a language from the community in which you live and serve.

For how many of you is this your first time at a Congregational Gathering? The rest of us obviously are a bit more seasoned in terms of having more experience. However, whether it is your first time or your ninth time – we are all here as equals in terms of our participation at this Congregational Gathering.

So we celebrate and give thanks for our presence here, for being called to journey together.

We gather...

In the name of God, our Father, Mother, Creator, source of all life, love and light. In the name of Jesus the Christ, eternal word of God, And in the name of the Holy Spirit, breath of life. In the presence of this holy mystery that is around us and within us..

I formally declare the ninth Congregational Gathering opened.

As I said earlier it's good to be here ... to be together in this new journey of our ninth Congregational Gathering.

Each of us were called into this space from our own Unit. Although we come as representatives of a particular Unit, or mission area, we are here on behalf of the whole Congregation, to make decisions for the whole. It is in this spirit that we come together – we are all here as equals in terms of our participation, recognising that each person has a unique contribution to make to the whole.

We are mindful that how we are together in this space and the energy that we hold, impacts the outcomes of our work together and also has an influence on the whole universe.

As whole-makers, we call ourselves to be open to hear the different voices and to welcome the contribution of each person. Working from this space invites us to give witness to our unity in diversity through holding intercultural, international and inter-generational perspectives across the Congregation as we find a way to move from the 'I to the We'.

It's been a long journey to arrive at today. Some of you have travelled a great distance to be here and we also acknowledge the inner journey that has taken place across the Congregation in preparation for this Gathering. The engagement of our Sisters and Friends of Nano in the Contemplative Dialogue Process has been amazing.

Reminded of a quote from the Irish mystic John O'Donohue ...

“At its heart, the journey of each life is a pilgrimage through unforeseen sacred places that enlarge and enrich the soul.”

The richness of the harvest in terms of the gathered reflections has hopefully enriched and enlarged our souls and I think you would agree has enlarged our awareness of the whole congregation. It has certainly provided us with lots of reading – with much inspiration, challenges, sustenance and pointers for our pilgrimage over the next few weeks and for our journey into the future.

I take this opportunity to thank our preparatory Commission – Srs Trinita Laffan, Miriam Martin, Susan Richert, Riffat Sadiq, Anne O'Leary and Fatima Rodrigo – for the wonderful way they have guided us in this journey.

As we know this is a very significant year for us as we celebrate the 300 birth anniversary of Nano. So what better place to begin our journey of the

Congregational Gathering than here in Cork, where the story of the congregation began. Our Presentation story is embedded in a much deeper story that began around 13.7 billion years ago – A story shared by our ancestors and people of faith who have walked this path ahead of us. From this evolving story, a new level of consciousness is emerging, calling us into a deeper communion, a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all that exists and of God's revelation in all of life.

As we walk in the footsteps of Nano over the next few days, let this journey enter deep into our bodies, into our heart and soul so that we can feel and learn from the wisdom of the sacred places and the stories that nurtured, challenged and sustained Nano in her call to become a radical follower of Jesus. May it be a pilgrimage that continues to enlarge and enrich our hearts and souls.

Like Nano, we have said 'yes' in responding to the call to follow Jesus. Inspired by Nano's example, we have said 'yes' to become as she was, a prophetic presence and voice in the service of people and Earth made poor. In a world which is very different to Nano's, we have said yes to engage in compassionate service, and to work for the transformation of unjust systems and the integrity and flourishing of humanity and Earth. We have said yes to continue to seek the living God and to be drawn more deeply into the spirituality of being in communion.

The Journey of our Congregational Gathering invites us to return again to our roots, to the heart of who we are as a congregation, who we are as women religious – to be more contemplative, to rediscover interiority and the capacity to appreciate what is important and to live with passion, integrity and energy. We are called to immerse ourselves in the heart that is within all hearts, the heart which is the source of life and love, so that: Leaning heart to heart on the One who pulses life, we too can learn to unclasp the last kept store and lay it down in welcome: Take and share. (Woman of Welcoming Heart - Raphael Consedine)

It is from this space that we grapple with the reality of our varied contexts, acknowledging and holding with compassion our own vulnerability and brokenness and that of the world. In this space we are invited to welcome and immerse ourselves in the dreams, the longings, the questions and the struggles that are stirring deep within each one of us, and in the Congregation, as reflected in the gathered wisdom from the Contemplative Dialogue Process.

As we enter into this time of pilgrimage together, I am reminded of a story from ancient Irish folklore about Fionn Mac Cumhaill. Fionn Mac Cumhaill is an Irish hero, a warrior who is also renowned for his wisdom. One day in conversation with his friends, Fionn posed the question to them, “What is the finest music in the whole of creation?”

One answered, “The birdsong of the dawn chorus”.

“The laughter of a happy child” said another.

“The gurgling of water over stones in a stream” said another and the “beautiful sound of the harp playing” said another.

So tell us” they asked Fionn, “What do you think?”

He replied “the most beautiful music in all of creation is the music of what happens.”

Now is the time to listen deeply to the music of what is happening within us, in our congregation, in religious life, in our church and in our world today? Can we trust the insights and wisdom within us and among us as we search for ways to respond today as Presentation Sisters, as Consecrated Women, to the breakdown, the alienation, the lack of respect and reverence for all of life that is prevalent in our world today? Can we learn from the wisdom of Jesus, the wisdom of Nano, from our ancestors, from the Earth itself to show us how to live each day with more compassion, peace and love for each other and for all of life.

I think it is significant that our journey here in Cork takes place during the Easter Season, reminding us that we are an Easter people –followers of Jesus, bearers of hope and joy, proclaiming the good news to all creation. For the disciples this awareness and sense of mission came out of an experience of encounter with the risen Jesus. There are many resurrection stories but the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus illustrates very graphically the change that happens from this encounter with Jesus and offers much wisdom for our journey.

The story begins with the disciples feeling sad, dejected and fearful. Having lost all hope, they are in shock and grieving at the death of Jesus. They are on a journey, leaving their new way of life, their community in Jerusalem and returning home to what was familiar and known. Later we see them transformed, returning to Jerusalem, back to their community, full of hope, enthusiasm, confidence and a sense of purpose. Their encounter with Jesus renews their faith and strengthens

their discipleship. They came to a gradual realisation that something amazing had happened and eventually the power of the Spirit broke through their secure walls and locked doors releasing them from fear, freeing them to proclaim the good news and face the future with courage and joy.

Nano's courage and zeal in the face of the many challenges she faced came from her deep faith and trust in the living God. Through her daily encounters and the reality of her lived experience, Nano was drawn more deeply into prayer and mystical union with God, the source of her energy and mission.

Nano tended the flame of God and kept it burning...this helped her to respond to the needs of her time with Zeal – a wonderful word not much used today but a word which captures a sense of enthusiasm, passion, commitment, and courage, virtues which just as essential for our life today as for Nano.

During the year of Consecrated life, in his letter to Religious, Pope Francis reminded us of the words of Pope John Paul II (now Saint) from Vita Consecrata... "You have not only a glorious history to remember and recount but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things." Vita Consecrata Par 110

As we look to the future, are we open to change like the disciples on the road to Emmaus? What if the future is calling us to return to the heart of who we are, the heart of our vocation as consecrated women, rediscovering a new passion for what is possible, living with more integrity and fidelity our call to become a community of disciples who live simply, love tenderly and act justly.

Can we allow the spirit to enkindle in us a new flame ... stoking our passion ... so we become a vibrant fire, radiating love for our world today?

As we gather in this sacred space, we welcome the presence of the Spirit who calls us ... to be still, to listen and reflect together as we seek to clarify the vision and discern anew the direction for the Congregation's life and mission. (C55) It's a big responsibility for us as delegates and it may seem a bit overwhelming, however, let us like Nano, trust in Divine providence, in the Spirit who is leading us into the future. As in any journey, we will no doubt encounter some challenges on the way and also graces and blessings.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the accompaniment of our Sisters and Friends of Nano through their commitment to pray for us and with us on our journey, also for the many blessings and good wishes which are pouring in from all over the world. Held in this energy of love we begin our journey of the Congregational Gathering 2018.

And so we pray...

We pray together.....

God of love and compassion, as we step out in faith and hope on our journey of this ninth Congregational Gathering, we thank you for the gift of your Spirit which set Nano aflame. We pray that she will continue to stoke our passion so we, too, will become a vibrant fire radiating love as we continue to live in communion with all of God's creation, especially those made poor. God of the journeys, be with us. Amen.

