When it comes to politics, sisters are dedicated to confronting pervasive structures of oppression

Mary Hanrahan, a Sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Dublin, ministered in teaching and administration in inner-city Dublin with disadvantaged teenage girls. She served one term on the provincial leadership team and two on the congregational level. She is currently employed as chaplain in a prison for men convicted of violent crimes.

The first International Congress of Parliamentary Women's Caucuses — female politicians representing more than 40 countries as well as activists, writers, artists and academics — was held in Ireland recently.

In his address to the group, our president said, "We can now speak of a fourth wave of feminism, a feminism global in its scale and in its ambition and universal in its solidarity, dedicated to confronting some of the most pervasive structures of oppression which yet still remain."

What has this to do with religious sisters being politically active? I think as women, we are all called to be part of this fourth wave.

The first politically active woman in our Presentation congregation was our founder, Nano Nagle. Defying the oppressive political regime of 18th-century Ireland, Nano, regardless of the objections of bishops and powerful family members, set up Catholic education for the poor children of her native city.
Despite numerous setbacks, she established a congregation that could go out onto the streets to pick up "the urchins" and bring them to education and, consequently, freedom and independence. At this time in Ireland, religious sisters were enclosed and cloistered. I don't think we can imagine anything more political set against a backdrop of fear and the threat of imprisonment.

On five continents today, sisters and friends of Nano (associates and co-workers) continue to reach out to those on the margins of society. I work as a chaplain in a prison for men convicted of sexual crimes, perhaps the most despised and marginalized human beings in society.

Nano urged us to go where no one else would go, and my choice to work with these men is my way of sharing my charism. Am I as politically active as my sisters who work on the Christian Peacemaker Team in Palestine, who set up children's parliaments in India, who are environmental activists or who are representatives at the United Nations?

My politicism may take a different form, but — as politics for me means making a difference to those forgotten or rejected by society — yes, I am a politician! My politics is about shedding some light and hope into the darkest corners and above all about sharing the strength and tenderness that is our gift as women.

Let's be part of the "fourth wave of feminism" that will confront oppression and make our founders smile!