

Flowers for Magdalenes—Glasnevin Cemetery, 4 March 2012

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for coming out to take part in today's "Flowers for Magdalenes" memorial celebration as part of International Women's Day which we celebrate this coming week.

My name is Susan Lohan, and I represent Justice for Magdalenes (JFM), the survivor advocacy group, that for the past three years has pursued a campaign to bring about justice for all women who spent time in Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and for the children born to some of those women. JFM has repeatedly called on the State to offer an apology and to provide Redress to survivors of institutional abuse in the Magdalene Laundries. Our group made an Inquiry application to the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) in 2010 and again to the United National Committee Against Torture (UNCAT) in 2011, and both these bodies published recommendations that the State provide Redress and facilitate Restorative Justice. To date, the State refused to do so. It has established an independent inter-departmental committee, chaired by Senator Martin McAleese, to clarify State interaction with the Laundries and to create a narrative detailing such interaction. And it continues to meet with representative survivors and groups like JFM, as well as with the religious orders. But this process takes time and that is the one commodity many survivors can't afford.

It is important to remember that no one in Ireland—not State, not Church, not the four Religious Congregations, not Families, and not society in general—has apologized to these women for the abuse they suffered.

Many Magdalene survivors are aging and are vulnerable. They deserve a Church and State apology without further delay. They need Redress and Reparation when they are still well enough to benefit from it.

This afternoon we gather to place flowers on the graves of women who died at the High Park, Drumcondra and Sean MacDermot Street/Gloucester Street Magdalene Laundries in the city, and at the much older Mecklenburg Street Magdalene Memorial Cross. In doing so, we remember women who for too long were forgotten by Irish society, and in remembering them we afford them a measure of dignity in death that was too often denied them in life. Some of these women died after a lifetime spent working without pay in laundries that were always commercial and for-profit enterprises. Others, perhaps, entered the convent nearing the end of their lives, turning to the nuns in the absence of others to care for them in their final years. The nuns do not afford access to their post-1900 records and thus strictly speaking no one knows how many women entered the laundries in the twentieth century, where they came from, how they ended up at the Laundry, how long they stayed, where they went if and when they left, how many died behind convent walls, and where all those women are buried. Uncertainty enables Irish society to edit these women out from our national story.

JFM answers such uncertainty with what we do know. We do know is that in August 1993, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity (of Refuge) applied to the Department of the Environment to exhume 133 Magdalene women's bodies from St. Mary's Private Graveyard, High Park, Drumcondra, with the intention of first cremating and then re-interring the remains here at Glasnevin Cemetery.

We do know that of the 133 names on that original exhumation license, Death Certificates could be identified for only 75 women, meaning that there was no death certificate available for 58 women. Moreover, we know that for 24 of these 58 women, the nuns could only supply a quasi-Religious names such as "Magdalen of Lourdes," "Magdalen of Delours," rather than Christian forenames. We also know that the exhumation process had to be stopped mid-process when an additional 22 human remains were discovered bringing the total to 155, and these additional bodies that were not listed on the original exhumation license. We know that all these human remains were cremated prior to re-interment here at Glasnevin Cemetery, despite Canon Law 1176 which "earnestly recommends" burial of remains. We know that of the 155 names and dates of death listed on the Headstone here at Glasnevin, only 27 correlate precisely with the names and dates given to the Department of the Environment when applying for the original exhumation license. Likewise, of the 133 names given to the Department, 86 of them do not appear on the Glasnevin Headstone, leading one to ask where these remains are buried. These are serious anomalies, ones that from JFM's perspective remain to be fully explained.

JFM has sought explanation from the Department of Justice at a meeting in December 2009. The Department, in turn, requested that the Garda Commissioner re-examine an earlier Garda investigation that took place in 2003 after the late Mary Raftery brought these anomalies to light in *The Irish Times*. In June 2010, the Department of Justice wrote to JFM offering a synopsis of the Garda Commissioner's investigation. The discovery of the additional 22 bodies is explained as follows, and I quote:

Garda enquiries reveal that the exhumations commenced on the 23rd August, 1993. The figure of 133 remains referenced in the application for the Exhumation License was calculated on the basis of the existing crosses on graves. In arriving at the figure of 133 remains it appears no account was had to the fact that due to vandalism other crosses on graves had been removed. However, when the work of exhumation and re-internment began it was discovered that there were more remains than the 133 first identified (by a count of the crosses on the graves) as having been buried in the private graveyard. Following the realization that there were more remains buried in the plot a *further application* was made to the Department of the Environment for an Exhumation License to cover the additional remains found. It appears that a General Exhumation License for the exhumation of all human remains within the private graveyard was granted. All the remains were removed by Funeral Undertakers and subsequently cremated. ... The

preliminary indications provided to the Gardaí last April (2010) suggest that the Religious Order followed all the appropriate steps in registering the deaths of their residents.

It remains to be seen whether the work of the Inter-Departmental Committee, and in particular the Committee's access to the records of the Religious Orders, sheds additional light on these disturbing anomalies.

JFM wants nothing more than a full and thorough accounting for each and every woman who entered these institutions, and in particular for those women who died behind convent walls. The anomalies on the High Park gravestone call into question the accuracy of all similar Magdalen gravestones across the county. The Magdalene Grave at Bohermore Cemetery in Galway has no names listed on it at all—even in 2012 Galway's Magdalene are denied that most basic tenet of human dignity, a name of a gravestone. And today you will pass the Celtic Cross memorial to the women who died at the late 19th century Mecklenburg Magdalen Asylum and you will witness the word "penitent" carved in stone. We know from survivor testimony and other historical sources that many women in these institutions were never "penitents"—some had fallen on hard times, others were the victims of male sexual violence, and others were young girls who grew up in State-licensed Industrial Schools and were transferred to the Magdalene only to spend the rest of their lives working in the Laundries.

Today's event is not, finally, about making a political statement. Rather, it is about affording dignity to a group of women who, in many cases, were denied that dignity in life, and in the instances of those women at High Park, denied the dignity of a **final** resting place. We abandoned them in the past. We cannot deliberately forget them in the present. As a society, we can and must do right by these women.

In closing I read the lines of Patricia Burke Brogan's poem "Make Visible the Tree" from her collection *Decollage*.

Make Visible the Tree

This is the Place of Betrayal.

Roll back the stones
behind madonna blue walls.
Make visible the tree.

Above percussion of engines
from gloom of catacombs,
through a glaze of prayer,
scumble of chanting,
make visible the tree,
its branches ragged

with washed-out linens
of a bleached shroud.

In this shattered landscape,
sharpened tongues
of sulphur-yellow bulldozers
slice through wombs
of blood-soaked generations.

This is the place
where Veronica,
forsaken,
stares and stares
at a blank towel.