



Magdalene Institutions: Recording an Archival and Oral History

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Catherine Whelan
Good Shepherd Convent, New Ross County, Wexford
(Aka St. Aidan's Industrial School for Girls)
June 1949 – 1953

It is my intention to describe my four years at the Good Shepherd's Convent in Ross County, Wexford. I was a resident there from June 1949 at the age of fourteen until the summer of 1953 when I turned eighteen. Historically, the Irish government took children from their families to aid and educate them in the church convents. However, I had never been an orphan. My placement there had been totally the decision of my father and the administering nuns and was made without my knowledge or any understanding of the reason why. It is my hope that by reading of my experience, your office will gain insight into the plight of unwanted Irish children during that period of history.

My mother died before my seventh birthday leaving me and my older brother, younger sister and infant brother in the charge of my father. My mother had been pregnant seven times within a nine year period – finally hemorrhaging after the birth of her last child. My father was working as a miller and a baker. The coping mechanisms and dynamics of the family were tested daily.

Fortunately, many extended family members stepped in to help. My Aunt [REDACTED] and her children lived next door and always lent a helping hand. My father's aunt, a retired nanny, came to live at our home and stayed two years until she suffered a stroke. My paternal grandmother then lived with us until we were sent to my father's cousins in [REDACTED]

After four years, my father remarried. Our father's treatment of us changed dramatically after this event. His choice of dealing with the enormous pressures and responsibilities of raising four children under one roof, a new marriage and all the problems associated with the economics of the times, was to become a very strict and emotionless authoritarian. Any emotional need or verbal outcry would be met with a

forcible silence. It may have made his life easier to manage us in this way— but it was devastating to my siblings and I.

Our family struggled along for three years, until one day my father made a very arbitrary decision concerning my life. On June 10, 1949, my father told me I was going on a short vacation. I gathered my things and began a long bicycle trip with him. I was fourteen and asked many questions about where we were going. He gave me no answers. I was brought to the doors of the Good Shepherd Convent and he was ushered in and given tea by the nuns. I was whisked away to the dormitory and never said goodbye to my father. I never saw or heard from him again for four and one-half years. I had never said good bye to my siblings or relatives either. I would never receive a letter from my dearest Aunt [REDACTED] for over a year. I was totally abandoned within a moment. I felt the crush of realizing that I was “unwanted” – never knowing what my father could have possibly said to the nuns to get them to keep me there. I learned later that my father had told them I was “unmanageable.”

At first, I felt relieved to be away from my father’s rule – but slowly, the uncertainty and silent wall being woven around my young life brought its own emotional terror. I was told to never use my name and was immediately given a new one. I arrived on the feast of St Columba (June 10th) and therefore, I was dubbed Columba. I was warned not to make any close personal friendships and never give any personal information such as my address. My personal belongings were taken from me and in their place a uniform, night dress, socks and shoes and one pair of underwear.

It was shocking to be stripped of my personal identity – and I felt as if I was being sentenced to a prison. Indeed, at a certain level I was a prisoner, because I was to learn I was living not in an orphanage but on the “penitent area” of the dormitories. This felt so outrageous to me. I had committed no crime and there had been no trial or jury or explanation! Yet indeed, I was in the penitence partition sentenced to daily labor along with 40 other residents some who were wayward young women (prostitutes and petty crimes) or had been institutionalized life-long (some were mentally impaired).

I was not allowed to ask questions, contact my family or have anything to do with “the outside”. Any feelings of anger or emotional outbursts were met with comments like “you are as bad as we were told.” I had no voice against the powers that had decided my future. The parental, government and church authorities were in agreement – falsely – that I was not worth an explanation or a normal life.

I was sentenced to four years of steady labor with no educational or emotional development possible. I had no advocate. The nuns simply took a troubled man’s word for it – that I deserved this situation. For me it created feelings of deep shame, low self esteem and anger. This experience would color every aspect of my life physically, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally.

PHYSICAL ASPECTS

Immediately upon my arrival I began a very strict working regimen and a very austere existence.

WORK DUTIES (Monday thru Friday)

6 am Prayer Time
7 am Mass
Breakfast – then followed by work in the convents
Laundry Service.
No morning breaks
1 pm Lunch for one hour
5-6pm Finish at the Laundry. Dinner served.
If we had to finish a large laundry order,
(this occurred often at the holidays), we would
work after supper until 8 or 10 pm.
No extra food would be offered.

WORK ASSIGNMENTS

Worked on Mangle
Feeding Mangle
Shut press
Ironing
Planting potatoes in the Spring and picking them in the Fall.

WORK DUTIES (Saturday)

6am Prayer

7am Mass – The offering of the Immaculate Conception Rosary
Chores to be done in the dormitory
Afternoon – Laundry work until finished.

There was only steady work from Monday thru Saturday. I did not receive any class instruction. Sundays were free to us after Mass although with strict boundaries. I never left the premises other than one trip to the sea during the summer of my third year there. I never left for a holiday or a vacation.

SUNDAYS

6am Prayer

7am Mass

11am Reading of the “Black book” which was a list of our mistakes and was read aloud and a “penance” was assigned. This was very humiliating.

Afternoon - Library of old religious books which we could check out from 12-2pm but had to be returned immediately. The books could not go back to our dorm rooms.

We were allowed to sew – some instruction was given.

We were allowed to embroider.

We could work in the fields for “fun” but only under strict supervision.

By the way, we were not compensated in any way for our work. The laundry service received funds from hotels which belonged to the convent. Any money we received, was from relatives that may send it to us. When it was sent, the money was confiscated and put into an account for us and controlled by the nuns.

All in all, it was a monotonous and oppressive existence. We girls, lived in a large dormitory. There were no curtains on the windows nor between our beds for privacy. We each were given a uniform, night dress, shoes, socks and one pair of underwear. These items were given to us to clean every two weeks. Anything like sanitary pads or a needle and thread, were given to us only upon request. Items such as a toothbrush, toothpaste or deodorant needed to be purchased by us with any meager personal funds we had. I personally did not receive a toothbrush for one year. My Aunt ██████ finally had sent me a ½ crown piece and I finally could purchase one.

NUTRITION – I did not receive the basic components of a balanced diet for four years. Our diet did not contain fruit or vegetables and very little protein. Typical meals were as follows:

Breakfast: consisted of bread (without butter) and weak tea. On feast days we were given a hard boiled egg and an orange.

Lunch: largest meal of the day.
Mashed or boiled potatoes.
Sausage (1 link) or a scant amount of meat.
Cabbage – infrequently
Thin stew
Tea

Dinner: A smaller version of lunch.

The medical outcome of such a diet:

I was extremely thin and sickly for my first year.

I never began my menstrual cycles until the age of 19.

I had a tooth pulled out that should have been filled.

At the age of 29 I had a lot of problems with my gums. The root to the tooth that had been pulled was never completely removed and caused numerous infections. The dentist commented that whoever had taken care of my teeth previously did not know what they were doing.

Also – no one gave any of us young women, basic instruction in hygiene or the “facts of life”. We worked in great heat associated with the laundry machine and mangles. There was no discussion about how to handle the ever changing challenges of puberty such as perspiration and personal grooming.

In every aspect of our physical growth and development the convent cared for us with absolutely the minimal standards.

INTELLECTUAL EFFECTS

The most important fact to know about the convent is that there was no formal education given to me or the other residents. We forty girls were broken down into groups of ten. These “circles” as they were called, were governed by the “black girls”.

These “black girls” were the girls who had been at the convent a long time and had been good examples of discipline and good behaviors. They wore black uniforms and watched over us as task masters. They were the ones who reported to the head nun on our errors which were recorded in the dreaded “black book”. Other than this, they did not nurture or “sister” us younger girls.

I knew how to read, so therefore I was allowed to read aloud during the lunch hours daily. I enjoyed this very much. On Sundays I could borrow books from the library for 2 hours. While they were usually religious books, I craved the diversion. One book I read dated a hundred years old but it still was greatly appreciated and fed my intellectual needs.

There was some sewing instruction too. I learned to embroider—and the nuns supplied us with cloth and thread. I really enjoyed embroidery but all my projects were taken from me and sold by the nuns. I also knitted socks and sweaters. Again all was turned over to be sold for the convent’s revenue.

Occasionally, for spiritual feasts, one kind sister, [REDACTED], would teach us to sing and prepare a special recital. We were also allowed to listen to the radio after dinner.

However, for the most part, our intellectual development was ignored. At times, I felt totally hopeless with no aspirations during this period of my life. I had no idea why I was there or when “my situation” would end. I totally functioned in a survival mode, just trying to make sense out of each day of my life.

SPIRITUAL CONCERNS


I was raised Catholic by my mother and received my first communion while she was still alive. When she died, I began a personal spiritual devotion to the Blessed Mother. I had also enough teaching from my aunt and my earlier parochial education to remain prayerful and trusting of Jesus Christ. I believed that Jesus and Mary would help me to find my way eventually.

However, my belief in a loving, powerful father-figure God – came to an abrupt end. I was totally intimidated by “God’s nuns” who treated me so harshly and impersonally. I felt my feelings toward the Church itself, turned into stone. It would

take me 30 years of therapy and a conversion experience at the age of 43 years of age for me to return to the Church open-hearted and filled with trust once again.

EMOTIONAL ASPECTS

Disciplinary action was severe. One incident was when I talked back to the "head nun," and my braids were cut off. When I grabbed her veil she had 3 older girls hold me down and then the nun cut all of my hair down to about ½ inch from my scalp. When we were disciplined we were always humiliated in front of others. Without exception, humiliation was the rule. Another time when I answered back I was slapped across the face and then received a barrage of verbal insults. I was told I had "been unmanageable at home but would not be unmanageable here." After the insults, I was placed in a room with a window seat and told to sit on it alone for 48 hours. When the nun returned, she was disgusted by the stench in the room. She called me a "dirty slut" and then had me clean and disinfect the room and scrub the floor before I could clean myself and get anything to eat.

What more can be expressed--- my dignity as a human person was completely demolished. My very dignity as a human being created and made in the image of God was systematically broken and destroyed by the "nuns". I was defenseless against those that I trusted the most – my father who had placed me here and the Church and it's nuns. I was forced to accept shame just for existing as the young confused girl. *That I was.* 

LEAVING THE CONVENT

My exit from Good Shepherd Convent was as abrupt as my arrival. I was called into the head nun's office, given a dress, shirt, blouse and socks, underwear and a coat and told I would be leaving. Since none of the convent shoes fit me I was taken to town to buy a new pair. The nun who accompanied me kept complaining to me that I was a big waste of money for simply needing shoes that fit... The minute that the shopping was done I was on a train to Dublin and brought to an Orthopedic Hospital, where I was to work as a domestic maid.

Again nothing about this change in my life was explained to me. There was no preparation for my new position nor any input allowed from me. All I knew that I didn't dare tell my coworkers where I had just been for four years. I got my name back but now I had to hide my shameful past – one I had not deserved or had control of... I had been a prisoner without rights held in a Catholic Prison called a convent where I felt God did not exist!

I gradually went from maid and culinary training to nurse's training in England where the training was free. I eventually took an amazing leap by immigrating to the United States of America to seek a new life. However, it is not easy to close certain chapters of our lives no matter how much distance we put between us and them. I would spend a lot of hard earned money on therapy, psychiatrists and medication to deal with depression and feelings of low self esteem. *I had a great deal of trouble trusting*

*and people
in positions
of authority*

I dated when I was younger but I never felt comfortable taking huge risks and I never married. Again the pattern of functioning in the "survival mode" dominated my adult life style. I retired early from my career as a licensed practical nurse at the age of 62.

I hope that these pages give you a fair overview of what went on for me at Good Shepherd Convent over a four year period. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to be able to express the injustices that some of Ireland's youth endured.

I am now a 69 year old, retired woman living in the United States. Three years ago I underwent quadruple coronary bypass surgery and now spend most of my time watching my health and living peacefully amongst my dear friends and family.

Finally, I want to thank-you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Catherine Whelan