

## **Flowers for Magdalenes, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2013**

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for coming today to participate in the second annual “Flowers for Magdalenes” event as part of International Women’s Day which we will celebrate this coming week.

Before I begin, I want to take a moment to thank Aine Downes for taking the initiative to organise today’s event and for last year starting what will hopefully continue to be an annual tradition. On behalf of the survivors in touch with JFM who came to Leinster House on the day of the apology, I also want to thank Mary Lou McDonald for helping to facilitate their safe entry into Leinster House. These women did not want to be exposed to the glare of the media and we were particularly anxious to ensure they were protected. We know from stories that came back from the survivors that they had a wonderful time with no stress and we are truly grateful for this assistance.

It is almost two weeks since the Irish State finally said sorry for what it did and for what it allowed to happen to women and girls incarcerated against their will in Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries. Being here in Glasnevin cemetery today is all the more significant therefore, because for Justice for Magdalenes, this is where it all began ten years ago in 2003. Indeed, this is where it began twenty years ago for the Magdalene Memorial Committee, who stood up and insisted that the women who were exhumed from High Park and reinterred here would be remembered and respected.

That is why we are here today – to remember them, to pay our respects and to include them in An Taoiseach’s apology, to let them know they “are and always were wholly blameless”.

By placing flowers on Magdalene graves and the Mecklenburg Street memorial cross today, we remember these women who were forgotten by society and denied dignity in death.

We had hoped that the McAleese Report would also bring some dignity to these women, particularly the women buried in the High Park grave which we will visit today. I am deeply saddened to have to say that it did not.

For those who are unaware of the issues surrounding the High Park exhumations, I will briefly explain.

In 1993, having lost out on the stock exchange, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge decided to sell some of their land at High Park, Drumcondra and applied to the Department of the Environment for the exhumation of 133 women. The exhumation order was granted by the Department of the Environment on 25th May 1993. When the undertakers were carrying out the task of exhuming the bodies on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1993, an additional 22 remains were discovered. The Department of the Environment then supplied an additional exhumation order to allow the removal of “all human remains” at the relevant site.

The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge told the Department of the Environment that they could not produce death certificates for 24 women on the exhumation order who appear under fictitious names. The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge also told the Department of the Environment that they could not produce death certificates for a further 34 women on the exhumation order.

The remains of 154 out of 155 of the women were then cremated and reinterred at Glasnevin Cemetery.

A comparison between the names listed on the Glasnevin grave and the exhumation order reveals the following:

- There are a total of 133 names on the exhumation order, of which only 110 are the women’s real names.
- The exhumation order lists a further 23 women under fictional names.
- The exhumation order does not list the extra 22 bodies found in the graveyard.
- Only 54 of the names listed on the grave match those on the exhumation order

Before coming here today I felt I owed it to these women to read Chapter 16 of the McAleese Report, which discusses the area of deaths.

Unfortunately, Chapter 16 presents more questions than answers. The deaths of institutionalised women who died after the closure of the laundries are not included. JFM has the names of 166 women who are not included in the report. And, there are 185 women from High Park and Sean McDermott Street that we were previously unaware of and whose burial place we do not know.

JFM began this journey in 2003 by asking questions about High Park, rest assured we will not stop until these women are afforded the dignity and respect they deserve.

I also want to take a moment to remember others who are often forgotten about in the issues of deaths and burials. While not every woman and girl incarcerated in a Magdalene Laundry was an unmarried mother, some were – in fact, our own committee director Mari Steed, who was sent to America for adoption is a proud daughter of a Magdalene survivor. There are other daughters here today whose mothers are no longer with us. I think Maisie K, who was incarcerated in the Galway Laundry from 1948 to 1951 can best articulate the impact of unmarked graves for adopted people:

*Somebody's mother, some child's mother and some mother's child. And it's an awful thing to think. You wouldn't do it to a dog what they did. That you go up and down with no name. Magdalene children who were adopted come home; look for their parent's grave and to find nothing – to find a grave with no name."*

There are at least 1,150 women buried in Magdalene graves around the country. Today we will lay flowers on graves belonging to High Park, Drumcondra and Sean McDermott Street and at the Mecklenburg Street Magdalene Memorial Cross. There is a similar event taking place in Galway today to remember the women there. As we progress around the different graves, I will mention some of the women buried – by first name only – and how long they spent there.

There are other graves around the country and we ask that you think of them too. Unfortunately we don't have time to name all of the women, but these are the names of some

of those who never saw freedom. We remember: Margaret G who was sentenced to twelve months but spent 46 years in Sunday's Well, where to this day she remains in her final resting place still behind 12 foot high walls topped with barbed wire; Mary K, who spent at least 51 years in the Good Shepherd in Waterford; Margaret M who spent at least 74 years in the Good Shepherd in Limerick; Catherine, who spent at least 57 years in Peacock Lane; Bridget who spent at least 46 years in the Galway Magdalen and Mary who spent at least 45 years in the Good Shepherd in New Ross.

For the daughters and sons of those who have passed away we remember Elizabeth M, whose daughter never stopped looking for her; Margaret B, who is never forgotten by her twin daughters; Mary N, who spent over 50 years in a range of different laundries and is never forgotten by her daughter and family; Mary F, whose granddaughters are still seeking answers and Bridie, whose son never forgot her...

We also remember Mary Raftery who drew our attention to what happened at High Park and without whom we would not be here today.

To conclude, I have said already this week that if An Taoiseach's apology and the emotion behind it are to mean anything, the Irish government must truly take back the stigma and shame and show leadership by affording these women the fairness, transparency, honour and respect that they deserve – that includes those who are buried here and in other locations around the country. They deserve dignity, respect and truth.