

Chapter 17: The Sacred Heart Mother and Baby Homes

Introduction

17.1 The mother and baby homes in Bessborough (established 1922), Sean Ross (established 1931) and Castlepollard (established 1935) were owned and run by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. They were sometimes called 'special homes' in order to distinguish them from county homes. They were regarded by the health authorities as 'extern' institutions. This meant that they were not owned by the public assistance/health authorities but were largely paid for by those authorities. They were entitled to take private patients as well as those paid for by the public authorities.

17.2 Before setting up mother and baby homes in Ireland, the congregation ran many institutions in England and Scotland where they undertook welfare work relating to the care of 'orphans, mentally deficient children and unmarried mothers and their children' and were regarded as 'specialists in their work'.¹ They ran St Pelagia's Home, Highgate, London, which according to the *Cork Examiner* was 'world famous' and since its establishment in the 1880s had 'been the means of saving many thousands of girls from lives too terrible to contemplate'. The *Cork Examiner* article continued:

The Home was the first in the world to conceive the idea that the one road which could possibly lead to the permanent good of the mother and child was that both should be together, that the unfortunate mother should not desert her child, but that her love for the child should be fostered and encouraged and help given to her to provide for and bring the child up under a mother's care. The result of the experiment has surprised the most experienced welfare workers and today the scheme is being adopted generally.²

Sacred Hearts' attitude in 1922

17.3 In June 1922, the Mother General of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary wrote to Reverend M H Maclnery regarding an article relating to 'Rescue Homes', or lack thereof, for single expectant women in Ireland which Reverend Maclnery had published in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*. The mother general informed him that her congregation was about to open a home for

¹ *Cork Examiner*, 14 March 1922.

² *Cork Examiner*, 14 March 1922.

unmarried expectant women and their children in Cork which would be operated in a similar manner to homes in England, Scotland and Wales. She stated:

Mother and child are received into the Rescue Home for one year. The greater numbers, at their own request, remain two, three, or four years, as the case may require...In the great majority of Irish cases, it would seem neither necessary nor desirable to detain girls in the Rescue Home for a year or two after their confinement...of course, they ought to be detained until their child's life is out of danger...Before their confinement they may need to spend two or three months in the Home, to escape observation and scandal...The sooner a girl can leave the Rescue Home, and return to her proper abode with health restored, the better chance she has of saving her reputation.³

- 17.4 The mother general stated that, in her experience, 'girls in trouble' were 'filled with a wild terror lest their sin should be detected and talked about' and would go anywhere 'to hide their shame, and to prevent their misfortune from becoming known to their relatives and neighbours'. She observed that a feeling of 'anguish and shame' caused by the betrayal of 'some worthless rascal' is made worse by the overwhelming thought that she had brought disgrace on her family. The mother general stated that the women her congregation dealt with were 'more sinned against than sinning' and:

To speak of these unfortunate girls in trouble, even the relapsing ones, as if they were confirmed in evil, is to be guilty of rather wild nonsense...Those who talk so lightly of the need for compelling these girls in trouble 'to realise the heinousness of their sin' can have little insight into the psychology of the unhappy victims.⁴

Governance

- 17.5 All three institutions were under the immediate control of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The local health authorities and the Department of Local Government and Public Health (DLGPH) (the Department of Health from 1947) had significant involvement but their roles were never clearly delineated. The interaction between the local and national authorities and the congregation is described in the separate chapters. The congregation has told the Commission

³ Reverend M.H. MacInerny, 'A postscript on the Souper problem', *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Vol. XIX, January to June, 1922.

⁴ Reverend M.H. MacInerny, *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, June 1922.

that it considers that the local and national authorities had a much greater involvement and influence than is recognised by the Commission.

- 17.6 Unlike workhouses and county homes, there were no specific regulations governing the extern mother and baby homes. Their maternity hospital sections were required to be registered under the Registration of Maternity Homes Act 1934 and their licences could have been revoked if they were in breach of the registration requirements - see Chapter 1 for details.

The Commission's dealings with the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary

- 17.7 The Commission received very few records from the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The following is a description of the interactions between the Commission and the congregation in its attempts to get more information about the three institutions.
- 17.8 On 4 March 2015, the Commission first made contact with the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary by writing to Sister Eileen McLoughlin at the congregation's mother house in Chigwell near London asking what documentation was held by the congregation relevant to the investigation. The Commission advised that in due course it would seek voluntary discovery of documents as required under the *Commissions of Investigations Act 2004*. The letter also advised that the Commission would be pleased to accept a written statement from the congregation should they wish to provide same. Sister Eileen replied on 12 March 2015 to say that all documents relating to the three institutions had been handed over to the HSE. The letter also stated that she had asked that a further search be carried out in the congregation's archives in the mother house in Chigwell for any other material which could be of assistance.
- 17.9 By agreement with the congregation, a member of the Commission and two staff visited Bessborough and Sean Ross on 19 and 20 March 2015 and were shown around by members of the congregation (who still had a presence in these two premises). The Commission had planned to visit the third premises (Castlepollard) the following month, but was told that, as the congregation had not had any dealings with Castlepollard in over 40 years, it would not be of any benefit for any member of the congregation to accompany them on that date. (Later, the three

Commissioners visited Castlepollard and were shown around by staff of the HSE which currently owns the premises.)

17.10 On 22 May 2015, the Commission requested that two members of the congregation (Sister Sarto and Sister Brigid) attend for hearing on 22 June 2015. The congregation's solicitor replied on 8 June 2015 stating that Sister Sarto would not be able to attend due to ill health but would submit a written statement. He further said that the congregation here (presumably in Ireland) did not hold any relevant documentation. The letter added that the congregation would be submitting a formal submission before the year end (2015). On 17 July 2015, the Commission wrote stating that it required the congregation's formal submission be delivered by 30 September 2015. It requested that a sworn affidavit by Sister Sarto and other Sisters with information should be delivered by the same date, 30 September 2015, and set out in detail the issues which should be covered in these affidavits. The issues were:

- Management structure of the Home
- Finance
- Daily routine in the Home
- Rules
- Birthing process
- Length of stay
- Counselling
- Outside agencies
- Burial arrangements

17.11 The Commission also asked what documents were uncovered by the congregation's search in their archives in Chigwell. In accordance with Section 10 of the *Commissions of Investigations Act 2004*, the Commission sought formal discovery by way of affidavit on or before 30 September 2015 of all documentation held by the congregation either in Ireland or outside the jurisdiction. The congregation's solicitor replied saying that his clients would be unable to supply a formal submission by 30 September dealing with over 70 years of engagement in relation to three mother and baby homes and suggested that the original timeframe of end of year stand. He also said that Sister Sarto's health would not allow her to prepare an affidavit. He further stated that his clients could not address the issues raised in the Commission's letter of 17 July without access to the documents now

held by the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) and that sometime in the New Year would be a more appropriate time within which to deliver the affidavits.

- 17.12 On 27 August, the Commission responded that the time frame for delivery of the submission of 30 September 2015 stood. The requirement that the affidavit of discovery and the affidavits of Sister Sarto and others be delivered by 30 September 2015 also stood. The Commission offered to have one of its archivists attend at the congregation's premises at Chigwell to assist in the discovery process.
- 17.13 A formal hearing was held on 15 September 2015. Sister Eileen McLoughlin attended. (Sister Eileen had not ever worked in any of the three institutions) At the hearing it was agreed that statements from two Sisters who had worked in at least one of the homes and an affidavit of discovery would be delivered by 30 September 2015. The length of time within which to deliver a submission was extended until 30 October 2015 as well as the time for delivery of affidavits based on the statements of the two Sisters and others.
- 17.14 On 29 September 2015, a preliminary submission on behalf of the congregation and an Affidavit of Discovery sworn by Sister Eileen McLoughlin were delivered. The discovery documentation included statements of 17 Sisters each of whom had worked in one or more of the three mother and baby homes. It also included approximately 300 pages of a range of miscellaneous material, for example, letters in relation to tracing; some lists of residents in 1990; some referral letters from the early 1970s (mainly from health boards); and a detailed set of documents on one American adoption in 1952 including the reports on the proposed adopters.
- 17.15 On 23 October 2015, an unpublished *History of Bessboro* written by Dr Ann Matthews was delivered to the Commission.
- 17.16 On 4 February 2016, a direction to attend for hearing was issued to Sister Sarto and she attended for hearing on 23 February 2016. She also provided an extensive affidavit dealing with her experiences in Bessborough. A similar direction was issued on 22 April 2016 to Sister Mary McManus and she attended for hearing on 11 November 2016 and provided an affidavit of her experiences in Bessborough and in Castlepollard. On 26 May 2016, directions were issued to two

Sisters who had each worked in Bessborough and they attended for hearing on 15 November 2016.

- 17.17 On 26 October 2016, the Commission issued a direction seeking discovery of audited accounts and bank statements for the three institutions, as this issue had not been addressed in the affidavits provided by the congregation. Further enquiries were made about the search for documents at the congregation's headquarters in Chigwell. On 24 November, a reminder was issued regarding the affidavit relating to the archive search for documents at Chigwell.
- 17.18 On 16 December 2016, an Affidavit of Discovery sworn by Sister Eileen McLoughlin in relation to audited accounts and bank statements for the three homes was delivered. This stated that the congregation did not have these records.
- 17.19 On 25 April 2017, the Commission issued a direction for discovery of the documentation returned by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Ryan Commission) relating to vaccine trials. This documentation was delivered along with an Affidavit of Discovery on 23 May 2017.
- 17.20 On 30 May 2017, the Commission issued a direction that the congregation provide an affidavit setting out all knowledge of post mortem practices including the reporting of deaths, burial arrangements and transfers of remains to educational institutions in relation to all three institutions. On 28 June, an affidavit of Sister Eileen McLoughlin was delivered exhibiting a document written by Dr Ann Matthews entitled *In Context, The Political Agenda for unwed mothers, Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland 1922 to 1953*. On 6 June, the Commission extended the time in which to deliver an affidavit dealing specifically with the reporting of deaths and burial arrangements until 25 July 2017 and this was further extended until 25 August 2017. On 31 August 2017, the congregation provided a further document by Dr Ann Matthews dealing with paragraph 1(iv) of the Commission's Terms of Reference regarding post mortem practices and procedures. On 17 November 2017, the commission issued a direction in relation to title documents and conveyancing files for Bessborough House.
- 17.21 On 6 June 2018, the Commission sought details of banks and firms of accountants used by the congregation as the congregation was unable to provide any

information regarding audited accounts or bank statements. This information was provided on 26 June 2018. On 29 June 2018, in response to the Commission's direction, title documents and conveyancing files relating to Bessborough House were provided. On 5 September 2018, the Commission requested that the report of Dr Ann Matthews furnished on 31 August 2017 be provided by way of sworn affidavit and this was provided on 31 October 2018. (In its 5th Interim Report, the Commission described this affidavit as 'in many respects, speculative, inaccurate and misleading'.) On 12 November, the Commission issued a direction to Dr Ann Matthews to attend for hearing and she attended for hearing on 23 November 2018 along with Sister Eileen McLoughlin.

17.22 On 27 March 2019, the Commission wrote to the solicitors for the congregation seeking:

- An update on efforts to uncover financial documentation in Chigwell;
- That the congregation make enquiries of their accountancy firms and banks so as to establish what information they held;
- The congregation's comments on anecdotal evidence that private patients in the three homes paid the sum of £100 for their stay.

17.23 On 4 April 2019, the solicitor responded that the accountancy firms held no correspondence and enclosed copy letters to this effect.

17.24 On 27 May 2019, the Commission wrote to the solicitors citing various documentation referenced by Dr Ann Matthews in her reports which had not been made available to the Commission. The Commission advised that one of the Commissioners, Professor Mary Daly accompanied by a researcher, would attend the congregation's archives in Chigwell to review the records held there. With the agreement of the congregation, Commissioner Daly and the researcher attended at the archives in Chigwell on 6 and 7 August 2019. Access was given to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Council Minutes, 1904-37 and the Annals of the Order (Diaries of the Mother General) 1919-99. On 22 August, the Commission asked for copies of documents which had been viewed by Professor Daly in the archives and they were provided.

17.25 On 18 September 2019, the congregation submitted an affidavit of Sister Eileen McLoughlin exhibiting a report by Dr Ann Matthews entitled *Submissions: 1922–1976 Funding the Maternity Hospitals and Mother and Baby unit at Bessboro,*

Cork, St Peters, Castlepollard and Sean Ross, Roscrea. A further affidavit of Sister Eileen McLoughlin was submitted exhibiting a report of Dr Ann Matthews entitled *Entrance and Exit pathways to the three external homes 1922-996*. On 12 November 2019, the congregation submitted an affidavit of Sister Eileen McLoughlin exhibiting a report of Dr Aoife Bhreathnach entitled *Report on Burial Practices at Bessboro Mother and Baby Home 1922-1994*. None of these reports added to the facts already available to the Commission as they were all based on sources which had already been collected and examined by the Commission's researchers.

- 17.26 In line with normal procedures, the Commission provided the congregation with drafts of its reports on the three institutions in the period December 2019 – February 2020. In August 2020 the congregation provided an affidavit with a response to the Commission's report on Bessborough. This did not contain any information which was not already available to the Commission.