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Pádraig McCarthy

Mother and Baby Homes

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We have had much heart-searching about the Tuam home situation, and many comments seem to presume that this is a particularly Irish and/or Catholic problem. I have no specific information about Tuam; we await the further results of investigations.

I would like to briefly cover some points so that we may be better able to understand why people acted as they did.

– *Were Mother and Baby Homes a specifically Irish feature?*

Mother and Baby Homes first appeared in England in 1891 under the guidance of the Salvation Army in London. By 1968 there were a total of 172 known homes for unmarried mothers, the majority run by religious bodies.

A Royal Commission ‘On the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded’ reported in 1908. It recommended compulsory detention of the mentally ‘inadequate,’ as well as sterilisation of the ‘unfit,’ so that it would be impossible to have children and thus perpetuate what were then seen as inherited characteristics ... Detention of the ‘feeble-minded’ – for life – was considered by the Royal Commission to be vital to the health of the wider society.’

Maternity Homes for Unmarried Mothers: A Community Service was published by the US Department of Labor in 1946. It reports on page 6: ‘Today, the number of maternity homes for unmarried mothers in the United States is estimated at 200.’

– *Is burial in an unmarked grave a sign of disrespect – that those who died were just dumped or discarded?*

In one location in Dublin there are about half a million people buried in unmarked graves. That place is Glasnevin Cemetery, where just about half the graves are unmarked. My mother’s parents who died in the 1920s and 1940s were in an unmarked grave until about five years ago when we erected a headstone.

Burial in an unmarked grave does not mean disrespect to the dead. Usually it means that the people concerned had other priorities on their minds at the time. It is likely that most families in Ireland

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(and perhaps elsewhere) have relatives in unmarked graves – you could enquire for yourselves.

This is the case not only in Ireland.

The suggestion that infants in Tuam were buried in a septic tank causes great distress. We await further results from the investigation in Tuam.

The Notice of 3 March 2017 from the Commission is cautious: ‘Test trenches were dug revealing two large structures. One structure appears to be a large sewage containment system or septic tank that had been decommissioned and filled with rubble and debris and then covered with top soil. The second structure is a long structure which is divided into 20 chambers. The Commission has not yet determined what the purpose of this structure was but it appears to be related to the treatment/containment of sewage and/or waste water. The Commission has also not yet determined if it was ever used for this purpose. In this second structure, significant quantities of human remains have been discovered in at least 17 of the 20 underground chambers which were examined. A small number of remains were recovered for the purpose of analysis ... Further scientific tests are being conducted.’

The Tablet 14 June 2014 reported: ‘Fr Fintan Monahan [now Bishop], spokesman and archivist for the diocese of Tuam, said the diocese’s baptismal register showed that 2,005 children from St Mary’s mother and baby home had been baptised from 1937 to 1961.’ Since they were baptised, it is unlikely that those buried at the Home were in unconsecrated ground.

– *Was infant mortality in homes such as Tuam evidence of malpractice?*

Again we await further reports, including the infant mortality rate.

For reference keep in mind what Robert Karen PhD wrote in *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*, Oxford University Press, 1994, page 18ff:

‘It had been reported, for instance, in 1915, that infants admitted to ten asylums in the eastern United States had mortality rates of from 31.7 percent to 75 percent by the end of their second year ...’

Perhaps Ireland may be found not greatly out of step with international experience.

– *Was treatment of unmarried mothers particularly harsh in Ireland?*

Minister Katherine Zappone says that human rights were violated. As seen today it was undoubtedly harsh.

We must remember that our contemporary awareness of human rights dates from after World War II, following the abomination of how so many were treated in Nazi Germany. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights dates from 1948. Other jurisdictions had far more draconian ways of dealing with those who were judged unfit to procreate, particularly for 'eugenic' reasons.

Legislation for mandatory sterilisation was enacted in 32 of the then 48 States of the USA, beginning with Indiana in 1907. These included many women who were sent to institutions, judged 'feeble-minded' because they were promiscuous or became pregnant while unmarried. Most notorious, perhaps, is the judgment of US Supreme Court Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., in *Buck v. Bell*, in 1927, upholding the Virginia law: 'Three generations of imbeciles are enough.' Carrie Buck (1906-1983) had been raped, and had no 'hereditary defects.'

Justice Pierce Butler, a Catholic, dissented.

European countries that had similar sterilisation programmes include Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Estonia, Switzerland, Iceland, Austria, France, Belgium and the Czech Republic. Winston Churchill was in favour, but, thankfully, failed to get it through.

From this perspective, how unmarried mothers were treated in Ireland then, however objectionable today, was less severe than found in other jurisdictions.

It is possible that the strength of Catholic teaching helped keep Ireland free of those excesses.

– *Were children placed for adoption without the free consent of the mother?*

There seems to be much evidence to indicate that this was the case. Where her consent was sought, and the mother of the child had little possibility of raising her child, could her 'consent' to adoption be regarded as a truly voluntary decision? Was Ireland unusual in this?

Since about the 1980s there has been a trend towards greater openness in adoption procedures. There are good reasons for this. Previously, there was an emphasis on confidentiality for the adopted child, the birth mother/parents, and the adoptive parents. The importance of the adopted child and the adoptive parents bonding was seen as a primary focus in the arrangements. To have an extra parent was seen as a possible danger to the stability of the adoptive relationship.

The practice of sending poor or orphaned children to the English settler colonies, to help alleviate the shortage of labour, began in England in 1618. Prior to the second half of the twentieth century, the Home Children programme was seen as a way to move

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impoverished children to a 'better life' in Australia, Canada and elsewhere, also providing good white stock to former colonies. The children and parents were not consulted, and often siblings were separated. In total 130,000 children were sent from the United Kingdom to Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and Australia. In February 2010 UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown made a formal apology to the families of children who were taken.

Children were taken also in USA and Canada. On Australia, John Pilger reported in *The Guardian*, 21 March 2014: 'The mass removal of indigenous children from their parents continues unabated.'

Removal of children from their families is very much a live issue today where child safeguarding is concerned, and in the light of some reports of high-handed action by statutory authorities.

CONCLUSION

What I have written is not in any way an attempt to minimise or dismiss the suffering of mothers or of children. The fact that such practices were carried out elsewhere, and even seen as the accepted wisdom of the day, does not imply that there is no reason for concern about our experience in Ireland, but it is important to understand the world and social milieu of the time. We have much to learn for our own day.

The above is abstracted mainly from a submission to the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation. The full submission can be downloaded as a PDF booklet from: <http://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MOTHER-AND-BABY-HOMES-ENQUIRY.pdf>