

**Camillus Metcalfe****NO THINKING IN THE INSTITUTION** (February 2016)An exploration of institutional abuse in Irish convents in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

Talk given at 'Antisocial Personalities: Antisocial Organisations: What has been learned from institutional Abuse?': a seminar organized as part of the ESRC funded series 'Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on 'anti-social personality Disorder.' Saturday 13 February 2016

**Introduction**

Institutional abuse of women and children in Irish institutions, run by nuns, first came to light in the 1990s. This led me to question the paradoxical nature of religious life. Firstly, there was the perception of nuns as holy, perfect and beyond reproach; women who had publicly vowed, in God's name, to love and care for the poor and secondly, the reality of wounded and often cruel human beings who had little compassion for those entrusted to their care. This motivated me to undertake an exploration of the life and work of religious women in Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Before the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962-65) permitted the opening up of convents to allow nuns out and the public in, convents existed apart from the world, they were hidden, as was the life within their walls. The sisters, in their limited contact with friends and family, did not usually speak about convent life.

This paper seeks to explore the closed system of the convent and its effect on the nuns in the study. It includes their understanding of why abuse occurred and broadens the theme to examine mental states that lead to abusive behaviour on subordinates. Finally I will examine the relationship between society and the nuns and also the relationship between the nuns and the Magdalens and by extension the children in the industrial schools.

The research was conducted using a series of three life-story interviews (two free association and a third more structured interview) with ten nuns most of whom lived in different convents and came from three different congregations.

**Background**

Nine of the ten interviewees belong to indigenous Irish congregations founded in the early nineteenth century. They were closely connected with and under the jurisdiction of the local Bishop. By the end of the nineteenth century the religious orders had established an immense network of institutions, which had become indispensable to the functioning of the Irish church and society<sup>1</sup>. The involvement of the religious suited the State because religious labour was cheap or free 'and the capital costs were met by fundraising from the flock and through dowries brought in by the middle class religious'<sup>2</sup>. There was little supervision by the State of the institutions run by the nuns, especially industrial schools and the Magdalen Laundries because 'belief in the altruism of the religious running them the fear of challenging the church together with ignorance of conditions and the inmates' lack of powerful connections isolated them from public scrutiny'<sup>3</sup>.

There is evidence that the sisters also suffered abuse at the hands of their superiors and there was no redress for them. Of necessity, the silent majority turned a blind eye<sup>4</sup>. The lay sisters were treated as servants; uneducated and untrained professionally for the work they carried out. This left many of them resentful, hurt, and angry. Until the 1970s, there was no professional training for the sisters who worked in industrial schools. Those who worked in Magdalen asylums received no professional training.

**A closed system**

It was in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that much, but not all, of the abuse of children in residential care and of women in the Magdalen laundries occurred. At this time the closed system that operated in convents saw women enter the convent and make an almost complete break with the world. The structures that held the system in stasis were set out in the rule and constitutions of the order and included monastic enclosure, the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience,

and the acceptance of the almost godly status of the superior who 'knew' God's will. The social class system that operated in the convent saw the wealthy in more exalted positions and the lay sisters (those who brought no dowries) in the lowest rank, beneath the novices. The lay sisters were not educated or trained by the convent and worked in the convent kitchens and laundries and often in the industrial schools and Magdalen homes. This was accepted as the status quo. Becky who was in a teaching order says that, 'a lot of the older sisters felt that discrimination quite deeply.'

#### *Monastic enclosure*

Once they entered the convent, the Sisters rarely went outside the perimeter of the convent boundary, 'we weren't let outside the gates at all. It was locked at four o'clock' (Clare). 'I mean you couldn't go out anywhere. You see we were never let out for walks or anything' (Birdie). There was a limit on letters and visits from family and friends:

The regulation in our place was one hour once a month, which was quite strict you know so they [the visitors] were just allowed to come once a month you know. Eh that was hard enough (Clare).

There was a prohibition on newspapers, radio and books, 'nothing in the way of books that would educate us, then no way could we read anything – I don't know how we escaped at all, how we're half normal' (Birdie). There was minimal communication with the outside world and little opportunity for reality testing, all of which served to intensify the bond with the community, and reinforced the convent ideology that precluded doubt and uncertainty. The young women entered a system that, through its enforced isolation, replaced the reality of the outside world with the reality of the convent, thus providing a psychic retreat<sup>5</sup> for those who fully committed to its demands. Where the psychic retreat became a permanent psychological state psychological help would have been required to restore the personality<sup>6</sup>.

#### *The vow of poverty*

The vow of poverty ensured that a lack of financial resources left the individual powerless, dependent and exposed to neglect and deprivation. It extended beyond the notion of being penniless to living a common life, keeping busy at all times and often working to the point of burn out. Barbara was given some money for expenses at university but every penny had to be accounted for and although she often missed meals in the hostel where she stayed, because of her timetable, she did not buy food:

It would never have entered our heads to buy an apple or to buy a banana or anything. Would you believe that? .... It just never dawned on me to spend it where I shouldn't spend it. It never dawned on me; I think I was very naïve. I really think I was; I was stupid. But anyway I didn't. I was very honest.

She views her honesty as naivety and berates herself instead of criticising the regime that took away her freedom. The sisters took the institution as the ego ideal so it was always right and all blame for failure or inadequacy lay with the individual<sup>7</sup>.

#### *The common life*

The vow of poverty extended to the regular or common life. In the average convent, daily life was organised around a teaching or school day. A horarium or timetable was posted, where all the activities of the day were listed, a time for rising and praying, eating and working, recreating and sleeping. Barbara says, 'It was regulated from morning till night; every minute was regulated' and Birdie comments:

The great emphasis was to keep you working. We washed floors; we were all the time polishing and dusting (pause); sure we killed ourselves waxing and polishing.

Nora also has regrets about work. She is distressed when she remembers:

I got a brain haemorrhage I did. It was the hard work. I gave my blood and I mean that. I talk about it and it's a mistake (almost crying). Work was emphasised in my day. Thank

God it's de-emphasised, well, not as emphasised today, which is a good thing. But I got a brain haemorrhage.

This caused Nora to lose her sight, which she later partially recovered. She, like Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex*, is insightful but becomes blind because she has to turn a blind eye in order to survive. Nora suffered many illnesses, and much distress at the positions she was asked to undertake in her career as a teacher. She never refused to do what she was told and, looking back, she regrets her compliance and lack of courage in speaking against injustice which she terms her 'sins of omission.' Constant activity was a way of preventing thinking, 'To be always at the highest pitch of involvement, commanding the entire span of attention, prevents the mind from running in other than habitual grooves'<sup>8</sup>.

#### *Deprivation*

Compliance and the absence of a voice often resulted in extreme deprivation. Deprivation serves to lower self-esteem<sup>9</sup>. As a young nun Barbara found herself sleeping, with three others, in the, 'outer room of the laundry, underground. I'm not exaggerating, the ivy was coming down the walls and the blue mould or whatever kind of mould and the plaster all falling off'. Birdie was often cold and hungry:

The light was put out at ten at night (pause) and we only had cold water and I used to be awake half the night with the cold and then we used to be hungry as well. You got some kind of a light supper at night but it wasn't any good.

#### *The vow of chastity*

The vow of chastity forbade any emotional involvement with another, inside or outside the convent, 'you weren't allowed friendships at all. You know they were totally condemned' (Birdie). Nora felt that budding friendships were closely monitored and expressly forbidden by the superiors who 'were watching'. Emotions could not be tolerated. Birdie says that 'the hardest thing in my religious life was loneliness... loneliness for a man.' This vow brought a lot of misery and often led to a dampening of all feeling (the state of 'no feeling' described by Lily) and a repression of sexuality. The overt reason for the prohibition on dyadic relationships was to avoid sexual encounters between individuals. The less obvious reason was to avoid energy being diverted from the group, as affective relationships are considered as a threat to organisational discipline, and if they become too strong, they may bring about the disintegration of the group<sup>10</sup>.

#### *The vow of obedience*

Blind obedience to the will of the superior was probably the most significant and powerful force in the life, 'the people who were in charge they were like God.... They were just God Almighty' (Clare). 'It's just that they had so much power and their word was law and you daren't oppose them and oh God, you couldn't' (Birdie). Looking on humans as gods, who cannot be opposed, deprives the individual of her source of personal action<sup>11</sup>. By projecting her authority into the superior the individual sister no longer had recourse to her own authority and the superior was invested with what did not belong to her<sup>12</sup>. For an ego that is weak, it is further weakened and impoverished by projection and projective identification<sup>13</sup>. Obedience of this kind can become so deeply ingrained in the psyche that it can override personal emotions such as guilt, sympathy, or a belief in moral conduct<sup>14</sup>. And those carrying out orders, do not see themselves in control; they are merely a tool or an extension of the authority and therefore not responsible for their actions<sup>15</sup>. In the convent nothing excused disobedience. Disobedience was the sin. This view is borne out when, in the *Ryan Report* (2009) on child abuse, the Provincial of one congregation cited the vow of obedience in defence of some Sisters who had used corporal punishment and employed an extremely harsh, physical regime on the children in their care.

Conformity, the concomitant of obedience, ensured that transgressions of the rules were of a minor nature. The emphasis was on external behaviour while abusive situations remained hidden and unacknowledged.

#### *The effects of the system*

Settling down in the convent meant becoming institutionalized, accepting without question whatever one found to be the norm and engaging in 'collusive group denial'<sup>16</sup>. There are many possible psychological effects of the closed system on the individual personality. Each sister

brought her own past experiences and ego strength to bear on the imposed demands of convent life and was more or less affected psychologically by them. In trying to conform to the system of religious life 'the normal maturation process to psychological adulthood may become thwarted'<sup>17</sup>. According to Freud (1921) the psychological effect of conformity to the system was regression to an earlier stage of development. Many of the research respondents are aware that the system has had a deleterious affect on them. Looking back Birdie admits, 'we behaved very childlike and very immature and that's the wholly all of it.' Annie agrees with this, 'In convents, in religious life, you were treated as a child ... and you were kept more as a child.' Barbara claims that, 'any bit of personality we had was beaten out of us, beaten out of us' and Clare sums it up:

Well, I would come in at eighteen, not fully matured really, and whatever growth my stage was at, when I came in at eighteen, it was cut off. It was cut off there. There was no growth after that. There wasn't; there was regimentation after that, you know and that's probably (pause) I think that's why it was difficult.

The nuns now see the effects of the system and they can verbalise the fact that they were kept as children. Each one recognises, in her way, that the system has had its effect on her but no one links it with how she might have acted as a result. At this stage awareness is more connected to cognition rather than consequence. The nuns do not look at the effect of immaturity on the work of the institution. Each one of them speaks of her particular work with love and she found solace and satisfaction in it. Some saw it as an escape from the strict convent life. This begs the question of the lay sisters and others who were not educated and worked with the most vulnerable. Socialisation in the convent often resulted in the sister remaining immature, feeling powerless and victimized and conformity necessitated a splitting of the ego, a splitting off of the self that knows, at least temporarily<sup>18</sup>. There was a sense that in the cloister there was no place for individuality, personal action, judgement, discretion, or the expression of feelings. It was a place where the ego had to be split to conform to 'group think', where the institution was the ego ideal, where normal maturation was thwarted, and where the nuns regressed to a child mentality.

## Understanding abuse

All of the research participants had some connection with vulnerable women and children. They have some understanding of the reasons for the abuse. They attribute it to the convent regime with its emphasis on activity and silence, inequality of education and training and the less than adequate value accorded to the care and education of children in the industrial schools and the women in the Magdalen homes.

### *Activity and silence*

Lily was interviewed by a Health Board inspector about a worker who was later jailed for ten years for the abuse of children in her institution. She concludes:

If you look back it was all activity. Then in the end, in the summing up he said [the inspector] 'you hardly had time to know what was going on'. I said the houses were all very separate and we didn't know what was going on because we didn't have time to know what was going on.

This reflects the mindless activity of incessant work and lack of reflection referred to earlier. Nora has sympathy for the sisters who worked in the industrial schools. She says:

It's hard to mind these girls and show us how they [the nuns] feel. They couldn't do that, no, they couldn't do that. No, no, the silence was very holy (drawn out) (pause) I'm not saying the cause of it. They could - this lack of education of all kinds now.

She recognises the difficulty of the work and knows that the convent system did not allow for the possibility of vulnerability or of appearing less than perfect even if the sisters who felt this way were not trained or were treated as second class citizens in the convent.

### *The value system*

Mary reveals the value system in the convent: the teacher was more important than the sister who worked in the industrial school and there was little care for the education of the less privileged nun and child. She explains 'it's a big number of them up there, children crying and someone needed to go up and look after them and here I am and something else to be done.' Mary also refers to a custom that was prevalent in many industrial schools:

My sister, she was the principal; she was the head of the school, they [the children] had a school of their own- they didn't go to the primary school and she was actually the principal and she was very caring of them because you know people would want them taken out to do jobs and she just wouldn't have it. See there was no child care training; they were getting in-service training.

Mary's sister, although protecting the children in her care, shows a practice that was the norm. Once again the value system is called in question. Sisters were willing to take children out of school to work. The in-service she speaks of first began in the 1970s. The division of the nuns into those who were educated and taught in the more public schools and those who were uneducated and worked in the hidden laundries and industrial schools with the most deprived and despised members of society, was bound to have implications for the care provided in these institutions, and for the self esteem of the nuns who worked there.

#### *A non-questioning culture*

The fear of speaking out, 'whistleblowing' meant that nobody saw what was happening. Although Lily entered in 1974 she was, to some extent, caught up in the frenzy of activity and the culture of conspiratorial silence. In her two placements in Magdalen Laundries, run by her order, she says that, 'nobody questioned they just got on with it.' Looking back she wonders, 'were there things happening and I didn't see them?' Lily could not bring this unthought known<sup>19</sup> to consciousness. She is influenced by the social defence system of turning 'a blind eye'<sup>20</sup> even now when there is no longer any need to do so.

## **Further links to abuse**

Besides constant activity, the social class system, the value system, and the non-questioning culture, all of which were mentioned by the nuns, other mental states and defences that lead to or ignore abuse can be identified. They include immaturity, powerlessness, victimisation, splitting of the ego, the repression of feelings and societal denial or blind eye on Magdalen homes and industrial schools.

#### *Immaturity*

Adults need to be psychologically mature to manage their own anxieties, in order to detoxify and make manageable the anxious feelings of the children in their care<sup>21</sup>. Where an adult cannot process the feelings of her own early deprivation evoked by looking after deprived children, she is likely to abuse these children<sup>22</sup>. As for the research participants, in the telling of their personal stories many defence mechanisms were activated and revealed a social defence system<sup>23</sup> that defended against disturbing emotional experiences to protect the individual sister from paranoid-schizoid and depressive anxieties; the former being the fear of being blamed and the latter the fear of feeling guilty. This resulted in a state of 'no feeling' (Lily) which would have made it difficult for the nuns to manage the feelings projected into them by vulnerable and deprived women and children.

#### *Powerlessness*

In this culture of dependency and authoritarianism the sisters were without a sense of agency and often felt powerless. Abuse of power by those in authority can lead to identification with the aggressor<sup>24</sup>. The nuns were in different positions of power. The powerless in the convent were often in positions of power in the schools or Magdalen laundries. It is possible that by identifying with the aggression of convent life they became the aggressors in the institutions where they held power, and carried out aggressive acts on the vulnerable in their care.

#### *Victims and victimisers*

When psychological growth is stunted, the individual regresses to an earlier stage of development, and this often leads to feelings of victimisation<sup>25</sup>. The victim feels that:

she has not been allowed to enjoy a sense of her own development as a separate individual, with her own identity; in other words she has not experienced the freedom to be herself. This creates in her the deep belief that she is not a whole being ...<sup>26</sup>

Victims often becomes the victimizers when, 'In their actions they are the perpetrators of the victimization and humiliation previously inflicted on them'<sup>27</sup> and they treat their victims in the same way they felt treated themselves.

#### *A split ego*

The closed system deprived the nuns of the possibility of reality testing, and any inner conflict had to be split off, as the individual forced her mind to accord with the group mind<sup>28</sup>. The sister had to erase her individual ego in favour of the collective, group ego and, at times, to split off her ego or the sense of self that knows. Symington sees holiness as being consistent with integrated ego functioning and discrepant behaviour as being a possible result of a split ego. He helpfully defines aberrant holiness:

The ego is split: from one part of the ego comes one piece of behaviour, and from another, another. It is possible that the individual may consciously not know about one set of behaviour when in the identity of the other.<sup>29</sup>

Splitting of the ego is usually temporary and where it becomes permanent it can have serious consequences (a Jekyll and Hyde situation). This has important implications for nuns, who might keep the rule and be 'holy' (but not whole) in the convent, while perpetrating abusive acts on the vulnerable in their work situations.

Many nuns, especially those who entered at sixteen years of age, were in danger of being damaged psychologically by some of the harsh practices to which they were subjected, especially the quelling of their critical faculties, and their emergent sense of self, in their efforts to become obedient, self effacing nuns. This had serious implications for those who worked with the most vulnerable women and children, those who were already victims of their past experiences.

#### *The expression of feelings*

The fear of expressing feelings was to defend against anxiety, namely the fear of being blamed (paranoid-schizoid) and the fear of feeling guilty (depressive). Lily describes one of her superiors as a 'very powerful lady who if she didn't get you on the spot, she'd get you later. There was an element of abuse in it, verbally and emotionally.' Barbara also speaks about many abusive events in her life and finally uses the word 'abuse' to describe a particular superior's treatment of her. The effect of abuse is to engender rage at being a victim. In the convent, feelings of rage at disempowerment were not allowed expression. Barbara says 'Well I think you weren't meant to have them' and she adds, 'Well you see I would have tried to suppress anything in that line' (meaning her anger). Birdie, however has been enabled to name her rage:

...you were in a little shell, that's what you were in. And then, wasn't it terrible that we lived in fear. It makes my blood boil now to think that they could, Mother Augustine, I don't think they had the likes of her in any other community.

Clare is also aware of suppressing her feelings, 'I'd say I suppressed my anger. It came out in illness...there was an awful lot of illness' (somatisation). She says that feelings were displaced, 'I reckon they took it out on the next one.'<sup>30</sup> The inability to manage anxiety would have made it difficult for them to manage the feelings projected into them by vulnerable women and children who might have been entrusted to their care

## **The Magdalens and society**

Those outside the Magdalen laundries had some knowledge of what went on inside the walls that surrounded the laundry. The Magdalens, imprisoned, besides washing society's dirty laundry

could be said to have had a symbolic function as well as providing a psychological receptacle for society's projections. Margaret, in recalling her childhood reactions gives a sense of society's attitude towards the Magdalens:

And even as a youngster coming in and out from home, up the road a few miles, I didn't, I shouldn't be saying that, this, out loud, passing here I used to shudder, shivers would go up your back, you associated it with the Magdalens – you'd hear stories. You would see the women – you got this feeling that this was eh –

She cannot find the words; it is easier to forget. Like everyone in society she prefers to turn a blind eye. Stories were circulated, so people in the area had inside knowledge of the institution. Like Margaret, others used to come in 'with the odd tablecloth for Christmas' to be laundered by the women. The women washed the public's dirty linen, so that the public could celebrate the birth of Christ with impunity. At an unconscious level they cleansed away the dirt, while at the same time holding something frightening for society, something that could not be put into words. Nora calls the women 'laundry girls, penitents'. They washed the dirty linen to make reparation for transgressions, sins. They held the shadow side of society; they were available for negative projections. There were no male equivalents of the Magdalens. Men were not incarcerated for their part in illicit sexual acts. Their female partners were branded and taken away and the children of these unions, almost without exception, were condemned to a life in an institution. Women held the bad projections, were removed from public view and forced to make reparation. And the convent system colluded with this, perhaps because the 'holy nuns' feared their sexual selves that had to be repressed and projected onto the 'bad women' and by extension their blameworthy children. This had the function of keeping the nuns and society 'good'. Hiding the women from public view prevented people from seeing their human side and having compassion for their plight. Hidden away they could be objectified. Both society and the nuns had a psychological investment in the maintenance of these institutions. The last Magdalen laundry closed in 1996.

## **The Magdalens and the nuns**

There was a complex relationship between the nuns and Magdalens. Mary refers to the Magdalens as 'semi-sisters'<sup>31</sup> as some kind of 'third order'. She sees many similarities between the strict convent lifestyle and the structured life imposed on the Magdalens. Both groups were separated from society; the nuns by cloister (and they were free to leave) and the Magdalens because they were not welcome in society, and were brought back by the police, if they tried to escape. Both in the convent and in the Magdalen laundries, there was a feeling of powerful, overseeing figures, who 'watched' and inspired fear. A consequence of the lifestyle was that both the nuns and the Magdalens became institutionalised (Lily).

Margaret now lives in the convent with some of the ex-inmates of the Magdalen laundry. She stutters that the women 'love it here' although this convent would not be her own choice 'it wouldn't be a place I'd choose to live.' It suits her because it is near her family of origin. Mary also sets the Magdalens apart from others when she says 'some of these women had strange stories.' Margaret has a very strong reaction to the situation she experienced when she was a child, 'it sends the shivers up my back even to think of it' but she is unable or refuses to speak about it. She says she 'doesn't let it affect [her].' She ignores her feelings. She is still operating in the culture of the social defence of 'no feeling' to defend against anxiety<sup>32</sup> and like everyone in the society at the time, she prefers to turn a blind eye and she continues to claim ignorance of the injustice being done to the women in this institution.

The abuse of the Magdalens is well documented but some of the nuns also claim to have been abused by the convent regime. Mary says, 'I'd say now the kind of abuse they [the Magdalens] complain about was something that maybe the rest of us were suffering from too.' The regime in both convent and Magdalen homes was harsh and punishing and the women felt abused. If the nuns acted out their rage on the Magdalens or projected it into them, then they had to deal with their own rage in addition to that of the nuns.

While Mary refers to the Magdalens as 'semi-sisters' she and Margaret denigrate them. Margaret attributes less than human behaviour to the three remaining Magdalens who now live in her convent 'the three of them would be at one another's throats with the jealousy' if one was favoured over the others. Lily says that some of them 'grated on others and they used to fight' possibly because of unidentified mental health problems. Mary refers to them somewhat disparagingly:

But it seems the poor creatures (laugh) they would be very angry and vexed among themselves and they would be fighting among themselves. Dorothy [a nun who worked with them] was saying that one could throw an iron at another and whatever happened it was generally among themselves.

Mary's laugh is disconcerting. Is it possible that the Magdalens' behaviour deteriorates because of projections. The women were openly angry, and as long as they directed their anger at one another, the nuns were not affected by it. They were not versed in the social graces, and were left to their own devices, to fight it out. Are Margaret, Lily and Mary referring, unwittingly, to the nuns' split-off, unwanted and unsafe feelings of anger and jealousy that have been projected into the Magdalens? It is possible that the Magdalens carried the shadow side of the nuns; that both parties were locked in projective identification, in order to keep the repressed emotions of the nuns hidden from conscious knowledge.

The nuns were identified with the Virgin; they had a vow of chastity, the 'angelic virtue' and remained pure. The Magdalens had transgressed, by having illicit sexual contact and were by implication impure, bad and unholy. The split in the Gospels between the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen, between good and bad, God and the Devil, saint and sinner was, it seems, played out in bold relief in the lives of those who lived in religious institutions, especially where a Magdalen laundry was attached to the convent.

To retain their perceived position of perfection the nuns needed the Magdalens to offset it, and to act as receptacles for their projections. Any expression of rebellion on the part of the Magdalens would have had to be quelled, and any transgressions representing the repressed aspects of the nuns, would have had to be punished. There was no place for the third position<sup>33</sup> that would have revealed the underlying, unconscious and repressed aspects of both groups and led to depressive position thinking<sup>34</sup> where the whole is acknowledged as containing both the bad and the good.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored convent life in the twentieth century and some of its effects on the psychological development of the research participants. Looking back the sisters recognise that their personalities have been affected in varying degrees and that their freedom to develop as free and independent individuals has been compromised. They have their perspectives on abuse, relating it to a system that was not self-reflexive and treated the less privileged with less respect and care. Sisters with weaker egos who were uneducated and treated as servants in the convent were likely to have been more affected by the harsh system especially in terms of their self esteem. They were not part of the study but performed the lowliest tasks and often worked in the laundries and children's homes. The convent was a place where nuns merely had to do what they were told without questioning. There was a social class system that kept everyone in her place without power while authoritarian superiors ruled as they pleased. There was a social defence system in place to keep the nuns from thinking about their lives. The system conspired to lay blame for failure on the individual so that the institution remained unexamined and unchallenged. Society colluded by turning a blind eye to the treatment they knew the Magdalens and their children received. The nuns colluded with the Catholic Church and the State to keep 'objectionable' women and children out of sight in institutions and to keep many unwanted and unacknowledged aspects of society and the nuns hidden from view. Nobody questioned: there was no thinking.

## Appendix

### Who are the nuns?

**Mary** is 80 years of age. She spent 18 years in leadership, including being a superior general at the time of transition after Vatican II. She laughingly recalls the sisters' requests at this time, 'three nights at home, the use of bicycles and experiment with the habit.' She was more or less swept along by change, without giving it much reflection.

**Birdie**, is in her 86<sup>th</sup> year. She was invited to enter by an older nun and she responded without giving it much thought. She was sent to university but her health broke down when her younger sister died, aged 21. She did not return to the university and she taught all her life without a

qualification. Her search for happiness in life is overshadowed by her rage at the treatment meted out to her by superiors.

**Becky** is 46. She is second generation Irish. She worked as a social worker in a middle class teaching order. She never became reconciled to her order's lack of concern for the poor and for the lay sisters. She identifies with the lay sisters who worked in the 'kitchens and did the laundry and the cleaning.' She failed in her self appointed task of changing her mother's image of nuns 'as cruel, vindictive and ungodly' and she left the order with deep sadness, her dreams shattered.

**Clare** is 72. She is the only nun who gives voice to the present conflict between personal freedom and the institutional mission. Her period in leadership, after Vatican II, left her disillusioned about others' commitment to the life and she is disheartened by the course religious life has taken.

**Nora** was born in the Gaeltacht and is 86. She entered the convent so that God would bless her family. She realizes, in retrospect, that she saw many injustices there but she turned a blind eye because she could not allow this knowledge into her conscious mind. At one point she lost her sight from a brain haemorrhage, the result of overwork. She partially regained her sight and spent many years teaching blind girls. She regrets not having spoken out and believes she has been given a long life to make reparation for her 'sins of omission'.

**Margaret** is 76 years of age. Many of her family are nuns and she received many invitations to join them. Looking back she wonders if she had a vocation but says she 'probably got it on the way.' Her main ambition in life was to travel and she fulfilled her dream when she received money from her family and later she used her allowance to visit all the places she had dreamed of.

At 72, **Barbara** looks back at her early childhood with affection while her memories of convent life are sad and painful. She went to boarding school at an early age. Here the teaching nuns in the primary school beat the pupils, as did the lay teachers in her previous school. Punishment continued for Barbara in the convent where a superior treated her unfairly while her companions dared not speak up for her.

**Lily** is 52. She left the convent 10 years ago. She is terminally ill. She wanted to work with children. Much to her dismay she was sent on placements to two Magdalen laundries and was greatly disturbed by this experience. Eventually she was sent to work in a children's residential home where she found the conditions appalling. She spent 18 years in this house and transformed it.

At 83 years of age **Annie** is the most conservative of the nuns. She feels that she has a better life than most people in the world. She describes the mindless activity that was demanded of the nuns but she is not openly critical. She spent 36 years in the USA.

**Teresa**, at 93, gives the impression that she sailed through life without having much input into the course of events. Her only criticism of religious life is that there was more emphasis on career than on spirituality. However, she says that there are two sides to the story of the convent and she is only prepared to give the positive side.

#### Notes

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