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JFM calls on election candidates to declare support for survivors of Magdalene Laundries

Justice for Magdalenes (JFM), the survivor advocacy group, calls on all candidates contesting the General Election to publicly commit to bringing about justice for Magdalene women. Our expectations for the incoming government include:

- An official apology from the State and the Catholic Church
- The establishment of a distinct redress scheme for Magdalene survivors
- Immediately adopt the IHRC recommendation to establish a statutory inquiry into Human Rights violations in the laundries.

Three months ago today the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) published its assessment of abuses in the Magdalene laundries. On the same day, the Taoiseach referred the report to the Attorney General for review and evaluation. Nothing has been heard since. The outgoing government leaves a legacy of total failure to act on behalf of this group of vulnerable citizens.

The IHRC assessment outlines significant human rights violations. These include the state's obligation to protect against "arbitrary detention," "forced and compulsory labour," and "servitude." The report also raises important concerns related to "end of life issues," the vaccine trials, and adoption. The assessment concludes with an unambiguous recommendation: "that a statutory mechanism be established to investigate the matters advanced by JFM and in appropriate cases to grant redress where warranted."

Though Ireland is undoubtedly at a time of unprecedented crisis, this general election must be about more than the economic situation. There are other, equally important, issues that should be addressed throughout the campaign. What kind of society do Irish people want? What role, if any, should the Catholic Church play in Irish politics and society? What values do we place on protecting the human rights of all citizens? What is our ongoing obligation (moral, political, and financial) towards survivors of past institutional abuse?

JFM encourages the electorate to ask the following questions of candidates and canvassers on your doorsteps. Will they, and the party they represent, support justice for survivors of Ireland's Magdalene laundries and the Bethany Home? If elected, will they demand that Church and state offer an immediate apology and thereby afford some measure of restorative justice to this community of aging and elderly survivors? And, will they demand that the incoming government take up the IHRC recommendation and immediately institute a statutory inquiry into human rights violations in the nation's Magdalene laundries? (JFM's Election Flyer is available on our website.)

JFM welcomes today's statement by the Oireachtas Ad Hoc Committee on the Magdalene Laundries in which it supports the IHRC's recommendations and we call on all other general election candidates to join in this commitment. A full copy of this statement may be found at http://www.magdalenelaundries.com/ad_hoc_statement.pdf. A full copy of the IHRC statement may be found at http://www.magdalenelaundries.com/IHRC_Statement_09-11-10.pdf.

It is not sufficient for politicians to focus solely on putting right the nation's economic malaise. As a nation we must also fulfill our moral obligations and not ignore our most vulnerable citizens.

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Notes to Editor on JFM Campaign:

JFM is a survivor advocacy group working to bring about (i) an apology from Church and state, and (ii) the establishment of a distinct redress scheme for all survivors of Ireland's Magdalene laundries.

No one has apologized for the abuse suffered in these particular institutions, not Church, not State, not families, not the wider society. Consequently, these women—the majority of whom are elderly and aging—are denied restorative justice.

The Magdalene laundries were excluded from the state's Residential Institutions Redress Act, 2002. Consequently, Magdalene survivors are denied redress when they apply to the Residential Institutions Redress Board.

Historical Context

- Magdalene Laundries were institutions operated by nuns in which women, called “penitents,” worked at laundry and other for-profit enterprises
- these women were denied freedom of movement, they were never paid for their labour, and they were denied their given names and identities
- the daily routine emphasized prayer, silence, and work
- Women had to be signed out of the Magdalene or have a “position” to go to
- many remained to live, work, and ultimately die, behind convent walls
- after 1922, Magdalene Laundries were operated by The Sisters of Mercy (Galway and Dun Laoghaire), The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity (Drumcondra and Sean MacDermott Street, Dublin), the Sisters of Charity (Donnybrook and Cork), and the Good Shepherd Sisters (Limerick, Cork, Waterford and New Ross)
- these four orders also managed State residential institutions, in some cases on the same convent campus. All four are members of CORI
- the last Magdalene ceased operating as a commercial laundry on 25 October 1996
- the Nuns will not release records for women entering the laundries after 1 January 1900. Therefore there is no detailed accurate information regarding numbers involved
- JFM recognizes at least five distinct groups within the survivor community: those now speaking out and demanding justice, those living in silence due to the ongoing shame/stigma, those dependent on and living in the “care” of the religious congregations, victims who have died—many of whom are buried in incorrectly marked mass graves, and the adopted children/families of former Magdalene women

JFM's Campaign to Establish State Complicity

Mr. Batt O'Keeffe, T.D., then Minister for Education and Science, rejected JFM's proposal for an apology and distinct redress scheme on 4 September 2009. He claimed:

- the state is only liable for children transferred from residential institutions
- the laundries were privately owned and operated
- the state did not refer individuals nor was it complicit in referring individuals to the laundries

JFM does not refute the assertion that the laundries were privately owned and operated. We contend, however, that the State was always complicit in their operation. Moreover, this complicity, along with the State's conscious failure to regulate or inspect the laundries, breached the Magdalene women's constitutional rights and their rights under the European Convention on Human Rights, and further violated the State's obligations under several other international treaties to prevent and suppress slavery and forced labour. JFM has met with the Departments of Justice (twice), Education, and Health, and we have corresponded with the Departments of Social Protection, Finance, and Defense.

JFM asserts that the Irish State:

- was aware of the nature and function of the Magdalene laundries
- was aware that there was no statutory basis for the use of the laundries by the courts as an alternative to a prison sentence

- was aware that there was no statutory basis for the use of the laundries by the courts for placing women and young girls “On Probation”
- enacted legislation to enable the use of the Sean McDermott Street Magdalene laundry as a remand home
- was aware that children and adolescent girls were confined in the laundries as late as 1970, and that these “voluntary” placements were in addition to children transferred to the laundries from State residential institutions
- maintained a “special provision” whereby women giving birth to a second child outside marriage at a Mother-and-Baby or County Home could be transferred directly to a Magdalene laundry
- paid capitation grants to Magdalene Laundries and other religious convents for the confinement of “problem girls,” girls “on probation,” and girls “on remand” and yet it maintains that these were “private and charitable” institutions
- never inspected, licensed or certified these home as “Approved” institutions, rather referred women and young girls into these institutions based on the assumption that the religious congregation would care and provide for them
- has yet to produce a single record for any woman or young girl, or the children born to these women and young girls, referred to the laundries by State agencies
- refuses to admit its complicity in referring women to the Magdalene laundries
- refuses to acknowledge its failure to protect women’s constitutional rights
- refuses to apologize for its role in referring women to the laundries and therefore impedes “restorative justice” for this population of institutional survivors
- refuses to enter into discussions with the Catholic hierarchy and/or the relevant religious congregations in an effort to produce records
- refuses to establish a distinct redress scheme as outlined by JFM

JFM’s Campaign to Engage the Catholic Religious Congregations

JFM met with Cardinal Sean Brady in June 2010. Cardinal Brady characterised JFM’s presentation as “fair” and “balanced.” And, as reported by the Irish Times, he encouraged JFM to “continue its efforts to establish dialogue and a process of justice and healing for all concerned.”

On the Cardinal’s recommendation, JFM wrote to Sr. Marianne O’Connor, CORI’s Director General, on 9 July 2010 and requested the opportunity to present its campaign before CORI’s executive board.

On 1st October 2010, Sr. O’Connor informed JFM that CORI will not meet with the group. Rather, she directed the group to contact the respective religious congregations directly, explaining that “while CORI is an umbrella organisation for religious Congregations each retains its autonomy and management of its own affairs.”

JFM has written to the four religious congregations on three separate occasions in the past year (13 November 2009, 2 April 2010, and 11 June 2010). On each occasion JFM shared information related to its ongoing campaign and requested a meeting. To date, none of the congregations are willing to meet with JFM.

Further information about our campaign can be found at www.magdalenelaundries.com.