Child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Ireland

Summary

Severe mistreatment, including prolonged sexual abuse, has been rife in the Catholic children’s institutions of Ireland. Thousands of affected children could neither escape nor complain and for many years were unable to speak out due to stigma. Almost two decades after the last institution was closed, a long campaign led by survivors working with journalists brought the massive scale of the problem to public attention through a series of shocking documentaries on radio and TV. This led eventually to a full State apology, a major inquiry lasting ten years, and financial reparation for survivors. Ireland became an example that inspired many other inquiries into child abuse globally. Despite this, the Catholic orders responsible for the abuse in Irish institutions have repeatedly resisted accountability, and have yet to pay their agreed share of the costs of reparation into the government fund.

Background

Physical, emotional and sexual abuse and severe neglect have been endemic in Ireland’s Catholic residential institutions for children. From the mid-19th century, thousands of children were removed from their families and placed in ‘industrial schools’, reformatories, orphanages and children’s homes. Industrial schools, for example, were established under the Industrial Schools Act of 1868 to house "neglected, orphaned and abandoned children" who had been perceived as a threat to the social order. Approximately 170,000 children were placed in institutions during the 20th century, ostensibly for reasons of poverty, the ill health of parents, birth out of wedlock, single parenthood, and family breakdown.1 These were almost exclusively religious institutions and largely escaped accountability due to the influence of the Catholic Church over the government, as well as a longstanding constitutional culture that forbade state interference in Church affairs.2

Institutions were typically overcrowded, provided little or substandard education, and were rife with neglect and cruelty, yet largely isolated from the outside world. In 1970 an independent investigation into the adequacy of Irish residential institutions for children produced the so-called ‘Kennedy Report’, which found conditions so appalling that two

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1 Supporting Adult Care-Leavers: International Good Practice, Suellen Murray, Bristol Policy Press, 2015, p. 15.
institutions were closed immediately. However, it took a further 20 years for the extent of the abuse nationwide to come to light.

Christine Buckley

Despite the massive scale of mistreatment, many adults who suffered from institutional abuse as children have feared going public because of the stigma that child abuse carries, while others felt nobody would believe them. Christine Buckley was among the first survivors to speak out, and her testimony shocked the Irish public.

Christine was born in Dublin after an affair between a 31-year-old married woman and a 20-year-old Nigerian medical student. At three weeks old she was placed in foster care, and in 1950, at the age of four, she was sent to Goldenbridge orphanage, a Catholic institution run by the Sisters of Mercy.

The nuns at Goldenbridge ruled the institution by continuous terror, inflicting shocking abuse and cruelty on the children in their care. They called the children by number, not name. Christine, known as 89, was once so badly beaten that her leg needed 100 stitches. On another occasion a kettle of boiling water was poured over her thigh.

Long after leaving Goldenbridge, at the age of 37, Christine finally traced her mother, who refused to return the contact. Her father in Nigeria, however, did return her letter, beginning with the words, “Dear daughter...”. When Christine’s father visited Ireland in 1992, he contacted an old university friend, Al Byrne, brother of the broadcaster Gay Byrne, who took an interest in Christine’s case. Christine was invited onto RTÉ Radio’s *The Gay Byrne Show* to tell her story, after which thousands of listeners contacted her sharing similar stories of severe abuse in Catholic institutions or asking for help to trace their parents.

At the time, Christine was almost a lone voice seeking justice for herself, but she soon realised she was also fighting for thousands of other survivors. Her husband, Dónal, said later: “She suffered a lot in there. The way in which she recalled that suffering, the way she explained it, it touched a lot of people who had been in the same situation, and then they opened their hearts.”

In 1996 Christine recounted her memories of Goldenbridge in a drama-documentary for RTÉ, Ireland’s national television and radio broadcaster. *Dear Daughter* was the first television exposure of the abuse that children suffered in Ireland’s industrial schools. The film director then developed the programme into a series to tell other survivors’ stories. That

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series, and a number of other documentary programmes over the following years,\(^4\) helped to push the truth onto the front pages of the newspapers and attract public attention nationwide.

*Dear Daughter* used dramatisations to depict the Goldenbridge regime. One survivor told of accidentally breaking a statue of the Virgin Mary while playing. Her punishment was to stand overnight, adopting Mary’s pose. Beatings, scaldings, and infants strapped to potties were hard viewing, but *Dear Daughter* attracted a huge audience. Christine said that despite the “denials or dismissals by the religious and their apologists in the lay world, as well as elements in the media,” in general viewers’ sympathies were with survivors and their stories.

### Lobbying for apology and public inquiry

Christine sought help from the main political parties on behalf of the survivors who had contacted her. “My requests ranged from seeking an inquiry to finding out what went on, and why, in those institutions - as well as to the provision of counselling and education for victims of abuse,” she later recalled. In 1995 Christine contacted Bertie Ahern, then leader of the Opposition, whose constituency had incidentally included the Goldenbridge orphanage where Christine grew up.

In early 1999, out of frustration at repeated “one-liner” replies from politicians, Christine went with a group of other care leavers to meet the then minister for education, Micheál Martin. At a second meeting with the minister, they also met Bertie Ahern, by then the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), who shared his plan for a public apology and national inquiry.

In the meantime, a further RTÉ documentary, *States of Fear*, exposed the abuse in other children’s institutions. The documentary brought debate on institutional abuse to the peak of attention across the country.

On 11 May 1999, Bertie Ahern apologised on behalf of the Irish people to all those who had spent their childhoods in residential institutions run by religious organisations, and established the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. The apology was specific, clearly identified the harms done, recognised the failure of responsibility, and offered significant reparation. Bertie Ahern recalled: “The apology from my recollection was absolutely necessary. These people, their lives had been ruined […] and you did not have to be

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\(^4\) For example, in 2002, BBC broadcast documentary titled *Suing the Pope* which included the testimony of Colm O’Gorman, who was abused as a teenager by Fr Seán Fortune in the diocese of Ferns. Soon after the documentary O’Gorman met the then minister for health Micheál Martin, after which an inquiry was established to investigate how allegations of clerical child sex abuse were handled by both church and state authorities in the Ferns diocese between 1962 and 2002. The same year, another documentary, *Cardinal Secrets*, investigated the handling of child sex abuse allegations in the Dublin archdiocese. Then minister for justice Michael McDowell labelled the programme “deeply disturbing” and a subsequent inquiry confirmed that from 1974 to 2004 child sexual abuse was widespread in the archdiocese.
educated or qualified in any of the sciences to see these people had been broken from the traumas they had suffered.”

The Statute of Limitations (Amendment) Act 2000 soon followed, altering legislation retrospectively to facilitate the litigation of historical cases. In recognition that a survivor of child sexual abuse is often unable to speak out for many years, the amendment relaxed the usual three-year limit to seek compensation where the abuse of a child has led to a personal injury.

After the apology, groups such as One in Four, Irish Survivors of Child Abuse, and the Aislinn Centre (founded by Christine Buckley) campaigned vigorously for the government to take action. Christine established a network of care-leavers who kept knocking on doors until they were listened to.\textsuperscript{5} In addition to lobbying the government and politicians, survivors of abuse began litigating against the perpetrators, the Department of Education and the religious orders.\textsuperscript{6}

**Public Inquiry**

Established under the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act 2000, the new independent public inquiry began an extensive investigation of abuse in care across much of the 20th century. Four areas of abuse were examined – physical, sexual and emotional abuse, as well as neglect, and the inquiry was an opportunity for survivors to tell their story.

While the Commission drew some criticism, it nonetheless became one of the most significant inquiries into child abuse globally.\textsuperscript{7} It was the first inquiry of its kind with a therapeutic - rather than merely a fact-gathering - objective. A sub-committee of the Commission, the Confidential Committee, heard from 1,090 witnesses, mainly in their 50s, 60s and 70s, who spoke in confidence and were not interrogated.\textsuperscript{8} Another sub-committee, the Investigative Committee, collected evidence and ruled on cases of child abuse. Survivors from 215 church-run institutions reported that their adult lives had been blighted by childhood memories of abuse. They gave accounts of troubled relationships and loss of contact with their families, parenting difficulties, and lives marked by poverty, social isolation, alcoholism, mental illness, aggressive behaviour, and self-harm.\textsuperscript{9} The scale and severity of the abuse rendered the Commission’s therapeutic goals somewhat superficial and naive, but the model

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\textsuperscript{5} *Supporting Adult Care-Leavers: International Good Practice*, Suellen Murray, Bristol Policy Press, 2015, p. 186.

\textsuperscript{6} Louise O’Keefe became a leading campaigner using the law to seek redress for sexual abuse committed within religious schools. You can read a case study of her 16-year legal battle at: https://archive.crin.org/en/library/publications/ireland-nothing-going-change-past-we-can-protect-children-future-0.html.


\textsuperscript{8} *Supporting Adult Care-Leavers: International Good Practice*, Suellen Murray, Bristol Policy Press, 2015, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, p. 27.
of listening to survivor testimony shaped the approach in subsequent inquiries internationally.

Catholic institutions were evasive, initially resisting calls to present their evidence. After two years, the Christian Brothers, the largest provider of residential care for boys, revealed to a public hearing that its archive in Rome contained evidence of 30 canonical trials of male clergy, based on proven incidents of sexual abuse against children in their care from the 1930s onwards. Seán Ryan, chair of the Commission, recalls:

“They adopted a very aggressive defensive stance... It would have been easier if they had said, ‘We know these institutions were abusive, we know they couldn’t work.’ I remember certainly there was a case where they’d be writing [...] to the superior in Italy and he’d be writing back about ‘the usual problem’.”

By the time the inquiry ended, the Commission had investigated residential institutions run by 18 religious organisations between the mid-1930s and the 1970s. The Commission found that Catholic clergy had, for decades, terrorised thousands of boys and girls in institutions, with practices including chronic beatings, rape and humiliation, and that government inspectors failed to stop the abuse.

More allegations were directed against the Christian Brothers than all other orders combined. The Commission found that the sexual abuse, which was commonly associated with physical violence, ranged across “inspection of genitalia, kissing, fondling of genitalia, masturbation of witness by abuser and vice versa, oral intercourse, rape and gang rape”. When confronted with evidence of sexual abuse, the typical response of the religious authorities was to transfer the offender to another location, where they were free to abuse again. Girls supervised by orders of nuns, chiefly the Sisters of Mercy, suffered less sexual abuse but endured pervasive and severe assaults and cruelty. Prevalent emotional abuse was also recorded in the report.

Ten years after the Commission was instituted, its final report, known as the Ryan Report, ran to 2,600 pages and made 20 recommendations, all of which were accepted by the Irish government. The Christian Brothers followed this with an apology to survivors but avoided mention of compensation. Seán Ryan recalls: “To anybody who knows anything about words it was obvious that [the apology] was written by a lawyer... It was calculated to say nothing.”

**Reparations**

The Residential Institutions Redress Act (2002) began to incorporate the Commission’s recommendations, establishing the Residential Institutions Redress Board (RIRB) to assess applications for “fair and reasonable awards” to survivors of institutional abuse. Where evidence of injury met loose plausibility criteria, RIRB made an award without interrogation;
other claims (33 percent of the total) proceeded to a quasi-judicial evidentiary hearing. Awards were made according to the severity of abuse - sexual, physical, emotional abuse and wrongful neglect - and the severity of the injury resulting from abuse. The latter was understood to mean physical or psychiatric illness and psychosocial effects such as problems with family attachment, substance abuse or loss of opportunity. Applicants to the RIRB benefitted from comprehensive support, including legal advice, record-searching and counselling. Survivor-led organisations, such as the Aislinn Centre, Right of Place and One in Four, also offered survivor-specific support. The redress scheme was widely advertised in magazines, newspapers, television, and radio.

By 2014 the redress scheme had made awards to 15,579 people, each receiving an average of €62,250 at a total cost of €1.5 billion. The funding came from the Department of Education and was not capped. From 2014 to 2018, those who received payments from the RIRB or other settlements could also apply for additional support from Caranua - a special fund for health, housing and educational support which includes dental treatment, home care, counselling and psychiatric services.

The Irish government sought monetary agreements with the religious orders involved which eventually agreed to pay €128 million, mostly in property, to the compensation fund in return for indemnity against all future legal actions against them. This led the Commission to abandon its intention to name alleged abusers, a decision that was heavily criticised by survivors. Application to the RIRB also required survivors to cease any civil proceedings of their own. In 2009, following the publication of the Ryan Report, the religious orders agreed to revise their contributions, offering a further €350 million, but the Christian Brothers later withdrew their share of the offer. As of June 2019, the religious orders have paid a total of €105 million in property, not even reaching the target of the 2002 agreement.

**Church-specific inquiries**

While the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse was a nationwide attempt to look at child abuse at industrial schools and other institutions operated by Church orders, three smaller inquiries into child abuse, including sexual abuse, specifically in Catholic dioceses were also conducted.

In 2008, an inquiry was launched into child protection practices in the Diocese of Cloyne, after Ireland’s National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church criticised the poor handling of abuse complaints. The eventual Cloyne Report, published in 2011,

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reviewed allegations of clerical child sexual abuse between 1996 and early 2009 concerning 19 clerics, and revealed that the Diocese had failed to report allegations of child abuse to police as late as 2005, in contravention of the Church’s own procedures. Similar findings were made by the earlier Ferns and Murphy inquiries into the handling of allegations of historical sexual abuse by both church and state authorities.

Despite the severity of the crimes, very few perpetrators have been convicted. According to a 2011 report by Amnesty International Ireland, no criminal charges had been brought against those Catholic Church leaders who concealed crimes and allowed known sex abusers to continue to have access to children and to abuse with near impunity.

Impact

Dubbed a ‘21st century Irish hero’, Christine Buckley pioneered campaigning for the needs of care leavers and galvanised the movement that led to Ireland’s state apology, a national public inquiry and a redress scheme for those who had experienced abuse at the hands of the Church. Ireland’s former Minister for Justice Alan Shatter described her work as “pivotal in changing Irish perceptions of institutional abuse and led to a new era of child protection in this State.” Christine passed away in 2014.

2019 marks 20 years since the state apology and a decade since the Ryan Report, but what have they meant to the people of Ireland? The Ryan Commission and other public inquiries led to a range of legislative reforms that have been instrumental in the overhaul of child protection system in the country. These include the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011 and of the Child and Family Agency in 2014.14 Public inquiries also played an important role in garnering support for a constitutional referendum in 2012, which enshrined the rights of the child in the Irish Constitution.15 Demands for greater accountability also led to mandatory reporting being introduced to override the ‘secrecy of the confessional’ in the Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information on Offences Against Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012.16

The impact on the Catholic Church has also been profound. Since the extent of the abuse began to reach public attention, the reputation of the Church has been damaged, its authority challenged, and its historically close relationship with the State compromised. Coinciding with a fall in church attendance, a recent Europe-wide conservative attack on LGBT rights and reproductive rights - particularly in Catholic-majority countries - has failed to gain strong ground in Ireland. The dramatic change in state-church relations is believed to

15 Ibid.
be one of the reasons that the same-sex marriage vote passed in 2015 and abortion was legalised in 2018.

Challenges remain though. Ireland’s criminal justice system has not been effective in providing remedy for the traumatic experience of childhood sexual abuse, and very few of the offences have come before the courts. Implementation of child safeguarding practices in religious orders remains inconsistent, due to a persistent culture of secrecy and a lack of accountability. The unwillingness of the Catholic Church to provide permanent access to its archives and to increase its financial contribution to the cost of investigations and redress, are also troublesome issues.

Social and cultural shifts have been immense nonetheless. Research polls suggest that an overwhelming majority of Irish people feel a clear sense of responsibility for this dark part of their country’s history. This has led to a national public attitude of zero-tolerance of child sex abuse, an end to victim-blaming, and authorities taking abuse complaints more seriously.

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18 Ibid., pp. 316-318.
19 Ibid., p. 13.