

DEBUNKING THE “MASS GRAVE” STORY

To read Donohue’s full account of this story, see the “Special Reports” section on the Catholic League’s website. [[Click Here](#)]

One of the key players in the “mass grave” story about the Tuam home is Catherine Corless, a local historian. Her research “suggested 796 babies were buried in a tank outside the former Tuam Mother and Baby Home, in Co. Galway, once run by the Bon Secours nuns in Galway.” Research that suggests an outcome is hardly unimportant, but it is not dispositive. Furthermore, while it is entirely fair to surmise what happened, it is quite another thing to declare exactly what happened.

What is not in dispute is the fact that between 1925 and 1961, 796 children died at this home in Tuam. An initial investigation concluded that “No one knows the total number of babies in the grave.” On June 5, the *New York Times* said the local police discounted the “mass grave” story as myth. “These are historical burials going back to famine times,” the police said. They added that “there is no confirmation from any source that there are between 750 and 800 bodies present.” Yet that is precisely what many media outlets, and activists, said.

Eamonn Fingleton, writing in *Forbes*, notes that “experts believe that the babies were buried in unmarked graves within the grounds of the orphanage.” This was not uncommon in Ireland in the first half of the 20th century; this is the way church-run orphanages and workhouses buried their dead.

In many ways, the observations of Brendan O’Neill are the most impressive. He is an Irish atheist with no dog in this fight,

save for telling the truth. O'Neill is anything but politically correct. He saw through the malarkey about the Magdalene Laundries, and he has been equally courageous in challenging tales of "mass graves."

"On almost every level," O'Neill said in his June 9 article in *Spiked*, "the news reports in respectable media outlets around the world were plain wrong. Most importantly, the constantly repeated line about the bodies of 800 babies having been found was pure mythmaking. The bodies of 800 babies had not been found, in the septic tank or anywhere else." The myth was the product of Corless' "speculation" that the children who died in the home were buried in a mass grave.

O'Neill is adamant in his conviction that "it's actually not possible that all 800 babies are in this tank-cum-crypt, as pretty much every media outlet has claimed." He cites a story in the *Irish Times* that says "the septic tank was still in use up to 1937, 12 years after the home opened, during which time 204 of the 796 deaths occurred—and it seems impossible that more than 200 bodies could have been put in a working sewage tank."

Tim Stanley is another reliable source from the U.K., and he is also convinced that the popular understanding of what happened is false. "It is highly unlikely, if not physically impossible," he wrote on June 7, "that 796 bodies would have been placed into one septic tank." He takes note of the fact that "the tank was only in use between 1926 and 1937," thus undercutting wild accusations that the vile nuns treated dead children like raw sewage for decades.

Fingleton draws on his own experience to question the veracity of the conventional wisdom. He does not mince words: "For anyone familiar with Ireland (I was brought up there in the 1950s and 1960s), the story of nuns consciously throwing babies into a septic tank never made much sense. Although many aforesaid nuns might have been holier-than-thou haridans,

they were nothing if not God-fearing and therefore unlikely to treat human remains with the sort of outright blasphemy implied in the septic tank story.”

Adding considerable weight to the observations of O'Neill, Stanley, and Fingleton is Dr. Finbar McCormick. He teaches at the School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology at Queens University in Belfast. He berates the media for using the term “septic tank” to describe the child burials at the home. “The structure as described is much more likely to be a shaft burial vault, a common method of burial used in the recent past and still used today in many parts of Europe.” He specifically says that “Many maternal hospitals in Ireland had a communal burial place for stillborn children or those who died soon after birth. These were sometimes in a nearby graveyard but more often in a special area within the grounds of the hospital.”

So if the public has been duped, how did this story begin? It began innocently enough in 2010, but it took on a strong ideological bent in early 2014. The key players are Corless and Martin Sixsmith.

In 2010, Catherine Corless read an article in the *Tuam Herald* that caught her eye. The piece, “Stolen Childhoods,” recounted the fate of a former resident in the Mother and Baby home in Tuam that was run by the Bon Secours Sisters. She had already done research on this home, so she naturally followed up and contacted the man identified in the article. This provided her with other leads. Two years later, in November 2012, Corless published her findings in a local journal.

What is most striking about Corless is not what she said in 2012, but what she is saying today. In her journal article, there is no professed anger at the nuns, or the Catholic Church. But today she is in rage. While she does not explain her change in tune, it is evident that her encounter with Sixsmith earlier this year proved to be a game changer.

Sixsmith is the English atheist who wrote the patently dishonest book about Philomena Lee; the movie about her life was based on his work. Since then, he has taken every opportunity to fan the flames of anti-Catholicism, and even arranged to include the "mass grave" hoax in a documentary about the horrors of Irish nuns. Once he hooked up with Corless, she became increasingly strident in her denunciations of the nuns and the Catholic Church.

Corless was now on a tear. Her previous comments on the possibility of a mass grave, which were tentative, gave way to absolute certainty. "I am certain there are 796 children in the mass grave." Just as important, she was now convinced of the mendacity of the Catholic Church. "I do blame the Catholic Church," she said. "I blame the families as well but people were afraid of the parish priest. I think they were brainwashed." No longer a Catholic, she confesses, "I am very, very angry with the Catholic church."

The notion that a mass grave existed in the site of the Home is oddly enough credited to the same person who says there never was one. His name is Barry Sweeney. Here's what happened.

In 1975, when Sweeney was 10, he and a friend, Frannie Hopkins, 12, were playing on the grounds where the home was when they stumbled on a hole with skeletons in it. Corless had heard about some boys who found skeletons there, but did not know their identity until this year. On St. Patrick's Day, Sweeney was drinking at Brownes bar, on the Square in Tuam, when he learned of Corless' research. The two subsequently met.

In her journal article, Corless makes mention of a "few local boys" who "came upon a sort of crypt in the ground, and on peering in they saw several small skulls." So how did she make the leap in 2014 that she is "certain" there are 796 bodies in a mass grave when just two years ago she wrote about "several

small skulls"? The leap, it is clear, was not made on the basis of the evidence.

More important, Corless did not jump to the conclusion that "the bones are still there" because she learned from Sweeney about some new evidence. We know this because he contradicts her fantastic story. He is quoted in the *Irish Times* saying "there was no way there were 800 skeletons down that hole. Nothing like that number." How many were there? "About 20," he says.

It is a credit to Douglas Dalby of the *New York Times* that he did not bury this new information the way most other media outlets did. On June 10, he wrote that "some of the assumptions that led Ms. Corless to her conclusion [about the mass grave] have been challenged, not least by the man she cited, Barry Sweeney, now 48, who was questioned by detectives about what he saw when he was 10 years old. 'People are making out we saw a mass grave,' he said he had told the detectives. 'But we can only say what we seen [sic]: maybe 15 to 20 small skeletons.'"

It does not speak well for Corless that she is flatly contradicted by one of the few persons whose credibility no one questions. Any objective researcher would have adjusted his thesis after encountering a central figure such as Sweeney. Even more bizarre, her initial assessment was sober in analysis. But meeting Sweeney was too late to matter: Corless had already met Sixsmith, and she wasn't about to let the facts get in her way. Ideology, as we have seen repeatedly in history, has a way of trumping the truth.

It is not just writers such as Fingleton who see an anti-Catholic bias at work (he calls the whole story a "hoax"). Dalby quotes a member of the committee that was organized to memorialize the dead children, Anne Collins, as saying she has had it with the ideologues. "Ms. Collins said the news media and 'church bashers' had hijacked the situation, and she

disagreed with the widespread condemnation of the nuns.”

Tim Stanley is right to finger a double standard that is present among elites. “Whenever a Muslim does something cruel or barbaric (such as female genital mutilation), politicians and the media are quick (rightly) to assert that this is a cultural practice rather than a religious one. But whenever a Catholic is guilty of a crime, it is either stated or implied that it is a direct consequence of dogma.”

Finally, let’s assume that a mass grave of dead babies on the grounds of the Tuam home were found. This would be cause for harsh criticism. But why is it that when aborted babies are taken to a “waste to energy” facility, and then incinerated as “clinical waste” by British hospitals, there is little outrage? This isn’t a horror story out of the early 20th century: It was reported on March 14, 2014. The headline in *The Telegraph* read, “Aborted Babies Incinerated to Heat U.K. Hospitals.”

The Sixsmiths of this world are not at all angry about the mass killings and the mass burnings of unborn babies going on today right before our eyes. No, they are too busy fabricating stories about nuns sexually assaulting young women, stealing their kids, and dumping their bodies in septic tanks. It tells us a great deal about the current state of anti-Catholicism that such bull is not only accepted, it is welcomed as affirmation of the venality of the Catholic Church.