

# IRISH NUNS MALIGNED IN MAINE NEWSPAPER

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on a story in a Maine newspaper where Irish nuns were maligned:

On the front page of the May 13 edition of the *Portland Press Herald*, there was a story about a young boy who was placed for adoption by nuns at the Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea, Ireland. In the course of the article, there is a remark made by a genealogist at the Maine Irish Heritage Center in Portland, that is scurrilous.

Deb Sullivan Gellerson is quoted as saying the following about pregnant young women in Ireland who were in the care of nuns at the Abbey: "These young women became pregnant out-of-wedlock and due to the families being 'strict Catholics' they had to send them away to give birth. Then, the very same religious order *abuses, sells or even kills these children*, yet these abbeys and orphanages continued to operate for generations." (My italics.)

All of this is inaccurate. Few children were abused. None were sold. And none were killed.

What Gellerson has done is to recycle the lies that were told by Martin Sixsmith and Steve Coogan: Sixsmith wrote the book *Philomena*, and Coogan did the screenplay of the movie by the same name (he also helped to produce it and starred in it). To read a lengthy rebuttal see my 2014 article, "[Debunking 'Philomena.'](#)"

The first charge, that the nuns abused the children, was found wanting by the 2013 McAleese Report; it is the most comprehensive report on Ireland's mother and baby homes ever written.

Senator Martin McAleese chaired this Irish governmental committee on the Magdalene Laundries, homes for unwed mothers and other abandoned women run by nuns. The report shows, in great detail, that neither the women nor the children were abused. It is a cruel hoax. See my account, "[Myths of the Magdalene Laundries](#)."

Gellerson, like so many others, is content to believe the worst about the Sean Ross Abbey. She should ponder what people like Ann Tobin have said about the nuns who ran the home, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary.

Tobin's out-of-wedlock boy, Michael, "was presented to me after he was born and I breast fed him. I was treated very well in the hospital." She said the nuns "were very, very good," maintaining that she "never saw a nun strike a girl" during her four year stay. However, she said, "I saw girls striking, pushing, and swearing at nuns but I never, ever saw a nun hitting a girl."

It is also a lie to say that the children were sold. "I remember going into the room with the Sisters and they said a lady in America wanted Michael to bring him up. They asked would it be okay to send him and I said yes."

The lie about babies being sold by the nuns was directly challenged by Sister Julie Rose in 2014; she was an official at the Sean Ross Abbey. "No children were sold by any mother or the congregation, to any party, nor did the congregation receive any monies in relation to adoption while we were running the mother and baby home." There were, of course, donations, unsolicited contributions. That's what adopting couples do—it's a token of their gratitude. But the babies were never auctioned off to the highest bidder.

It is important to note that Philomena Lee was never forced to give her baby up, nor was he sold. When she was 22, she voluntarily signed an oath giving her son up for adoption.

Philomena said, "I hereby relinquish full claim forever to my said child Anthony Lee and surrender said child to Sister Barbara, Superioress of Sean Ross Abbey, Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, Ireland."

As is customary, the nuns received a donation from the adopting couple, but Anthony was not sold.

The movie floated another myth, claiming that Philomena travelled to the U.S. frantically looking for her son. Here is what Suzanne Daley and Douglas Dalby wrote in the *New York Times* on November 29, 2013: "In fact, much of the movie is a fictionalized version of events. Ms. Lee, for instance, never went to the United States to look for her son with Mr. Sixsmith, who is played by Steve Coogan, a central part of the film."

In fact, the first time Philomena Lee set foot in the United States was in 2013 when she went to Los Angeles to hawk her movie. Indeed, Philomena never even bothered to tell her daughter, Jane, about the brother she never knew she had until Philomena had too much to drink at a Christmas party in 2004. As it turns out, Philomena never found her son: he died in 1995 and was buried on the grounds at the very convent that took her in when she was in need.

The most serious accusation made by Gellerson—that the nuns *killed* children—is not even made by Philomena, Sixsmith or Coogan. It is a bald face lie.

Gellerson owes Catholics an apology. It doesn't get much sicker than this.

Contact Gellerson and her superiors: [irishhc@maine.rr.com](mailto:irishhc@maine.rr.com)