

MYTHS OF THE MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES

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Prejudice, as the psychologist Gordon W. Allport stressed, is always an “unwarranted” attitude. If someone experiences severe discomfort by eating certain foods, there is nothing prejudicial about refusing to eat any more of them. But there is something prejudicial about making sweeping generalizations about an entire category of food, or a community of people, when one’s experiences are limited. One contemporary example of prejudice is the popular perception of the nuns who ran Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries.

From the mid-eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, the laundries housed “fallen” girls and women in England and Ireland. Though they did not initiate the facilities, most of the operations were carried out by the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Mercy, Good Shepherd Sisters, and the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity. The first “Magdalene Home” was established in England in 1758; Ireland followed in 1765 (the first asylum being a Protestant-run entity).

The popular perception of the laundries is entirely negative, owing in large part to fictionalized portrayals in the movies. The conventional wisdom has also been shaped by writers who have come to believe the worst about the Catholic Church, and by activists who have their own agenda. So strong is the prejudice that even when evidence to the contrary is presented, the bias continues.

There is a Facebook page dedicated to the laundries titled,

“Victims of the Irish Holocaust Unite.” Irish politicians have spoken of “our own Holocaust,” and Irish journalists have referred to the “Irish gulag system.” But the fact is there was no holocaust, and there was no gulag. No one was murdered. No one was imprisoned, nor forced against her will to stay. There was no slave labor. Not a single woman was sexually abused by a nun. Not one. It’s all a lie.

How do we know it’s a lie? The evidence is fully documented in the McAleese Report on the Magdalene Laundries, formally known as the “Report of the Inter-Developmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalene Laundries.” The Report, which was released February 5, 2013, was chaired by Senator Martin McAleese.

An analysis of the McAleese Report will show how utterly false the conventional view of the Magdalene Laundries is. First, however, we need to understand the genesis of the popular mythology. Nothing helped to put a monstrous face on the laundries more than the movie, “The Magdalene Sisters.”

“The Magdalene Sisters”

The 2002 movie is often described as a “fictionalized” account of what happened inside the laundries. The *New York Times* prefers to speak of “semifictionalized” stories that have been recounted on the screen. As we will see, the McAleese Report does not validate the cruelties portrayed in the film, but the problem is few have even heard of the Report, much less read it. It’s the movie’s thesis that is embedded in people’s minds, and it is one of unrelieved horror: sadistic nuns who punished young women with impunity, all in the name of Catholicism. Here is a sampling of how the movie was received.

- “Slave Labor in Irish Convents as Terrible as Prison.” This was the headline in the *New York Times* story of September 28, 2002. The movie review spoke about “the

victims of a stringently moralistic brand of Irish Catholicism,” referring to the “religious labor camps” run by the nuns. “Some 30,000 women are thought to have passed through their gates.” Whom did they meet? “Most prison movies have a monster authority figure, and so does ‘The Magdalene Sisters.’” Specifically, the audience meets the “ogre” head nun, Sister Bridget, “a twisted diabolical autocrat.”

- Exactly two months later, the *Times* ran a story, “Irish Recall Sad Homes for ‘Fallen’ Women.” It said the movie depicted “the casual cruelty and commonplace despair in the homes,” explaining that a host of television documentaries “have revealed an array of abuse and cruelty by institutions run by the Catholic Church, often with the collusion of the state.”
- On August 3, 2003, the *Times* carried a piece by Mary Gordon, a long-time critic of Catholicism. After restating the themes of the two *Times* articles from the previous year, she opined that the “moral horrors” were not examples of mere “sadism”; rather, they reflected the even more pernicious “belief that they were intended for the victims’ own good.”
- In 2003, Roger Ebert took to the pages of the *Chicago Sun-Times* commenting how “these inhuman punishments did not take place in Afghanistan under the Taliban, but in Ireland under the Sisters of Mercy.”
- The first of three articles by the Associated Press in 2003 referred to “the nuns’ deep-seated greed and corruption,” and to Sister Bridget’s “whip to keep the girls in line.”
- The second article said “some 30,000 women were virtually imprisoned,” and that they “sometimes suffer[ed] physical and sexual abuse.”
- The third article cited the 30,000 figure as well, and described the laundries as “forced-labor” establishments.
- An August 15, 2003 review in the *Washington Post* said

the laundries were “veritable prison camps” that were run by “an unmovable monster,” Sister Bridget.

- On the same day, in the same newspaper, it said that in watching the film “it’s difficult not to be reminded of a World War II concentration camp.” It spoke of the “30,000 women [who] were incarcerated,” and the “ghastly images” that it “uncomfortably shares with so many fictionalized Holocaust films.” Indeed, “the nuns begin to resemble Nazi guards.”
- A 2003 review in the U.K.’s *Guardian* picked up on the Nazi angle by speaking of “Dr. Mengele.” It also described “the beatings, the breast-binding, the head-shaving, the forced fasting [and] the weekly mortification sessions, when the women were stripped and laughed at for their vanity.”
- On August 1, 2003, the *New York Daily News* concluded that “the whole system was sadistic and indefensible,” saying “the church” was deserving of all the scorn.
- On the same day, the *San Francisco Chronicle* pulled no punches, saying, “For some, the asylums were like a roach motel—girls checked in, but they never checked out, except 40 or 50 years later, in a pine box.”
- *Newsday* offered its review the same day, speaking of the “moral fascism” of the laundries.
- The *New York Post* also chose August 1 to say, “You’ll walk away amazed at the heartlessness of the people running the asylums and wondering how such a gruesome practice could have existed into the late 20th century.”

Yes, it would be amazing if this heartlessness were tolerated as recently as the late 20th century. What is truly amazing is that so many movie reviewers would come to rock-solid conclusions, believing the worst about the nuns. Indeed, they acted as though the movie portrayed indisputable historical facts. What made it easier for people to believe the movie’s narrative was the news stories coming out of Boston at this time: the priestly sexual abuse scandal, with Boston as the

epicenter, erupted as front-page news in 2002.

Regrettably, reviews are still coming in, years later, offering the same conclusion. In 2011, a feminist magazine at Yale put it this way: "The abuse committed by the nuns and priests overseeing the laundries was physical, sexual and psychological. Oftentimes the women had their heads shaved, and were stripped naked to be examined. They were subject to a variety of horrific tortures, beatings for disobedience, and sexual degradation." In fact, none of this is true.

Peter Mullan

The man behind "The Magdalene Sisters" is Peter Mullan. The Irish writer and director said he got the idea for the movie by watching the 1998 TV film, "Sex in a Cold Climate." That was a 50-minute documentary that described the lives of four women who lived and worked at the laundries. It made a big splash at the time, especially because it featured Phyllis Valentine, a woman who said she was interred in the laundries because she was deemed "too pretty" by the nuns.

If, of course, it were true that the nuns rounded up "pretty girls" for placement in the laundries, that would indeed be a big story. It would also suggest that other such cases must have surfaced by now (unless we are prepared to believe that Valentine was the only "pretty girl" encountered by the nuns). But they haven't: only Valentine has made this claim. In her case, we know that at age 15 she was moved from the orphanage where she was raised to the laundry. Such a transfer was standard practice, whether the girls were homely or pretty. By the way, the laundry was literally next door to the orphanage. It should come as no surprise that not a single nun who worked at either the orphanage or the laundry was asked to verify the "pretty girl" tale.

To say Mullan hates Catholicism would be an understatement. His comment that "There is not much difference between the

Catholic Church and the Taliban" is unqualified. Anyone capable of saying the Catholic Church is a terrorist organization can be trusted to portray it that way. So when he says that "The film encapsulates everything that is bad about the Catholic Church," he is simply telling the truth. That was his goal, and he succeeded. He sought to throw as much mud as he could, and hope that at least some of it would stick. Mullan is so riddled with hate that he contends, "The worst thing about the Catholic Church is that it imprisons your soul, your mind and your d***." This is the man whose depiction of the Church is taken at face value by movie reviewers.

Recently, a writer for the website Decent Films, raised some serious questions about the movie's controversial elements. Steven D. Greydanus noted that "Mullan's black-and-white (or rather black and more black) depiction of clergy and religious is absolute: Not a single character in a wimple or a Roman collar ever manifests even the slightest shred of kindness, compassion, human decency, or genuine spirituality; not one has the briefest instant of guilt, regret or inner conflict over the energetic, sometimes cheerfully brutal sadism and abuse that pervades the film." It should be noted that other reviewers admitted that they actually liked the fact that not one redeeming character was presented in the film.

Perhaps the most maverick statement about the movie was made by Valerio Riva, a member of the administrative board of the arts council that runs the Venice Film Festival (the movie won the festival's top award in 2002). He called Mullan's work "an incorrect propaganda film." In fact, he said "the director is comparable to Leni Riefenstahl," Hitler's favorite director and Nazi propagandist.

Boston College professor James M. Smith is one of the few academics to research the laundries. He is hardly an apologist for the asylums, so what he says bears consideration. In his research, he never met a single woman who lived and worked in

the laundries who described the kind of unconscionable conditions that Mullan describes. To be exact, sexual abuse manifestly did not occur. Moreover, none of the women Smith met said they were stripped naked and examined by nuns. Perhaps most important, he charges that Mullan never solicited or incorporated any comments made by the nuns who ran these facilities.

Patricia Burke Brogan backs up Smith's observations. A former novice who wrote a play on this subject, "Eclipsed," she admits she never witnessed any physical beatings. Speaking specifically about Mullan's movie, she said, "I could not stand it. Some of the parts were really over-the-top. The nuns were monsters." It is not shocking to learn that when Mullan is asked to respond to those who challenge his account, he refuses to offer a specific rebuttal; he simply replies that his movie understated the horrible conditions.

Investigations Launched

Media commentary about the laundries eventually led to an investigation about the treatment of wayward youth in every Irish institution. In 2009, Ireland's Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse published its findings; it became known as the Ryan Report (after the chairman of the Commission, Justice Seán Ryan).

News stories about the Ryan Report quickly emerged maintaining that abuse was rampant in these institutions. Upon closer inspection, however, we learn that the Ryan Commission listed four types of abuse: physical, sexual, neglect and emotional. Most of the evidence showed there were no serious violations. For example, physical abuse included "being kicked"; sexual abuse was considered "kissing," "non-contact including voyeurism" and "inappropriate sexual talk"; neglect included "inadequate heating"; and "lack of attachment and affection" was deemed emotional abuse.

Even by today's standards in the West, these conditions are hardly draconian; in the past they were considered pedestrian. And consider the timeline: fully 82 percent of the incidents reported took place before 1970. As the *New York Times* noted, "many of them [are] now more than 70 years old." Keep in mind that corporal punishment was not uncommon in many homes (and in many parts of the world), never mind in facilities that housed troubled persons.

Nonetheless, Irish commentators (see the website culchie.works) continue to carp, condemning those who say we need to "place it in the context of the time." They argue that this leads us down a dangerous road. "Do we excuse Nazi genocide of Jewish and other people because it was 'just the way things were done then'?" This is exactly the kind of obscene hyperbole that makes a mockery of what happened in Nazi Germany: delinquent Irish women who lived in quarters with inadequate heat are placed on a par with innocent Jews who were baked in ovens.

A year after the release of the Ryan Report, the Irish Human Rights Commission expressed its dissatisfaction with government probes into these institutions. It specifically called for an investigation of the Magdalene Laundries; the Associated Press (AP) labeled them "prison-style Catholic" homes. A year later, in 2011, the United Nations joined the fight: an AP story explained that a U.N. panel urged Ireland to investigate allegations that for decades girls and women were "tortured" in Catholic laundries.

Ironically, of the ten nations on the U.N. Committee against Torture, half of them were guilty of bona-fide instances of torture. In its annual tally of freedom around the world, Freedom House had just accused Morocco of "arbitrary arrest and torture." The year before, Amnesty International said that "Senegal security forces continue to torture suspects held in custody, sometimes to death." Human trafficking was cited by a Cyprus news agency as a "huge problem in the north of the

island,” adding that “cabaret owners routinely threaten women with torture in chambers beneath their nightclubs.” The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims concluded that “torture and ill-treatment” are “still highly prevalent” in Ecuador. Similarly, Freedom House observed that “torture remains widespread” in China. These were the nations accusing Irish nuns of torturing women in the laundries!

Responding to the growing interest in this subject, Justice for Magdalenes, a non-profit organization, undertook its own investigation; its findings, “State Involvement in the Magdalene Laundries,” represents the work of several researchers, including professor James M. Smith. This document was submitted in 2012 to those working on the McAleese Report.

The word “torture” typically conjures up images of relentless and extraordinarily brutal acts; it is not generally invoked to describe unpleasant conditions. Yet in the 14 instances where “torture” is mentioned in the document, there is not a single instance where a woman used this word to describe how she was treated; there were 11 references to the word as part of the nomenclature, e.g., the United Nations Committee against Torture, and three occasions where it was cited in a very general way.

Even more astounding, on p.10 of the document it says evidence of torture is detailed in an upcoming section. Yet the word never appears again until p.82 where the U.N. Committee against Torture is cited in a footnote.

What follows are the first few sentences of paragraph 6 where “torture” is allegedly described: “Seven (7) female witness reports related to continuous hard physical work in residential laundries, which was generally unpaid. Two (2) witnesses said that the regime was ‘like a prison,’ that doors were locked all the time and exercise was taken in an enclosed yard. Working conditions were harsh and included standing for long hours, constantly washing laundry in cold water, and

using heavy irons for many hours.” Drudgery? Yes. But if this is “torture,” then it is safe to say that millions have suffered this fate without ever knowing they did.

The McAleese Report

Information garnered for the McAleese Report constitutes the most comprehensive collection of data ever obtained on the Magdalene Laundries. A full statistical analysis of all available data was conducted by the McAleese Committee, with the assistance of the Central Statistics Office. Additionally, 118 women who lived in the asylums were interviewed. Though their accounts reflect their experiences of the past half century, they match up well with what many scholars have previously unearthed about earlier times. Moreover, the size of the sampling is significant, especially in comparison to the few women that were the source of laundry-bashing movies.

The first of many myths to be dispelled is the notion that the laundries were an exclusively Irish or Catholic phenomenon. Not only did they exist throughout the United Kingdom, they were a fixture in many parts of Europe, North America and Australia. In the United States, the first asylum for “fallen women” was founded in Philadelphia in 1800, and spread from there to New York, Boston and Chicago. Depending on the setting, they were run by Catholics, Protestants, and non-denominational lay committees. In Ireland, no new ones were established after the founding of the State in 1922; the last ones were closed in 1996.

The first laundries were run by lay women, though in time they would be taken over by the nuns. It was the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Mercy, Good Shepherd Sisters, and the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity who played the key role. The first “Magdalene Home” was established in England in 1758; Ireland followed in 1765, the first asylum being a Protestant-run entity.

These were institutions that served prostitutes, and women seen as likely candidates for the "world's oldest profession." Unmarried women, especially those who gave birth out-of-wedlock, were likely candidates. Contrary to what has been reported, the laundries were not imposed on these women: they were a realistic response to a growing social problem. For example, in 1868, it was estimated that there were at least 1,000 prostitutes and 132 brothels in Dublin alone.

Those who sought refuge from the streets found a welcome hand in those who served in the "rescue movements." The nuns soon took over, offering these women an alternative to exploitative conditions. In her research of seven institutions up to the year 1900, Maria Luddy found that the "majority of women who entered these refuges did so voluntarily...just over 66 percent" and that "entering a refuge was, for the majority of women, a matter of choice." The other facility available to them, the workhouse, was rejected because of the inferior conditions. Luddy also found that the decision to stay was made by the women, not the nuns.

Not only is it a myth that the laundries were "imposed" on these women, it is equally fatuous to believe that the nuns forced them to stay. They were not held hostage. Frances Finnegan's analysis of the Magdalene Laundries up to the year 1900 "also confirm a high proportion of both voluntary entries and exits." The actual figures of voluntary entrance and exit are higher than what Finnegan found. "It should be noted that cases where women left to re-join family or friends," the Report says, "or who left to take up employment are not included by Finnegan in the figures for voluntary departure..."

James M. Smith concurs with this analysis. "In the nineteenth century," he writes, "regardless of how they entered these institutions, it was the women themselves who made the decision to stay." Why? "With little or no social welfare system to fall back on, her choices were limited to entering the county home, begging on the streets, or possibly resorting

to prostitution.” So while the laundries were not exactly a hotel, they sure beat the available options. The most common alternative was the workhouse, but as the Report points out, such institutions were explicitly “designed to be grim and foreboding places in order to deter all but the most desperate from seeking refuge there.” Others wound up in the “lunatic” asylums, which were even worse.

Another myth, floated by Mullan and the media, is that the laundries were highly profitable institutions run by greedy nuns. Summarizing Mullan’s comments, a CNN story contended that “The laundries were quite profitable—helped by the almost slave-labor of the young workers.”

The evidence cited in the Report debunks this myth. The analysis of the financial records shows that the laundries “operated on a subsistence or close to break-even basis, rather than on a commercial or highly profitable basis and would have found it difficult to survive financially without other sources of income—donations, bequests and financial support from the State.” Now if Mullan’s account were accurate, we would have to believe that the donations and bequests were made either by evil persons who sought to keep these women locked in slave-labor camps, or by idiots. That the donors sought to help, not hurt, the women is closer to the truth.

The McAleese Report sought information on all ten Magdalene Laundries that were established prior to the foundation of the State. It looked at five issues, the most controversial being routes of entry, state inspections, and routes of exit. “In each of these areas,” the Report concluded, “the Committee found evidence of direct State involvement.” So much for the malarkey that the nuns ran institutions parallel to state-run facilities.

The first big myth that was blown to smithereens was the number of girls and women who entered the laundries: it was

determined that 10,012—not 30,000—spent time there. So what accounts for the fact that the public has come to believe that there were three times as many women in the laundries? It's what they've been told by Mullan and his sympathetic friends in the media. In other words, the same people who distorted what happened in the asylums distorted the number of those who lived there.

Mullan et al. would have us believe that those who lived in the laundries were forced to stay there in perpetuity. In fact, the average length of stay was seven months; eight in ten stayed less than three years. The majority had no knowledge of their parental background, and only 12.5 percent said both parents were alive. Almost one in four had previously been institutionalized. By every measure, these were troubled girls and women.

Until the McAleese Report was published, it was widely believed that the nuns did whatever they wanted, free from state oversight. This view is also incorrect. The laundries were subject to the same Factories Acts that governed similar non-religious institutions; they were routinely inspected. The Report found that the laundries "were generally compliant with the requirements of the Factories Acts, and that when minor breaches occurred, they were remedied when brought to the attention of the operating Congregation."

The majority of women either left on their own, went home, were reclaimed by a family member, or left for employment. Only 7.1 percent were dismissed or "sent away," and less than two percent ran away. One might have thought that if Mullan's depiction were accurate, a lot more than 1.9 percent would have run for the hills. That so few did is further testimony of the bogus portrayal he offered.

Living Conditions

The two most serious accusations made against the nuns who

operated the Magdalene Laundries were a) they tortured the residents and b) they sexually abused the girls and women. Both are totally inaccurate. Not once in the McAleese Report is the word "torture" even mentioned—the charges are a complete fabrication. Exactly one woman claimed to have been sexually abused, but it was committed by a lay woman auxiliary who decided to stay in the institution for life. *No nun ever sexually abused anyone.*

This is not to say that the women never experienced sexual abuse. They did. But it was in their home, or in the Industrial School where they came from (the majority of women interviewed were previously housed in an Industrial School, places that housed neglected youths). Not only were these women not abused by a nun, all of them said they never even heard of another woman being molested by any member of the staff.

Physical abuse was uncommon. "A large majority of the women who shared their stories with the Committee said that they had neither experienced nor seen girls or women suffer physical abuse in the Magdalen Laundries," the Report notes. But they did say that in their time in an industrial reformatory school there were instances of brutality. As for the laundries, a typical complaint was, "I don't ever remember anyone being beaten but we did have to work very hard." Another common criticism went like this: "No they never hit you in the laundry. They never hit me, but the nun looked down on me 'cause I had no father."

One of the biggest myths about the laundries contends that the women had their heads shaven by mean-spirited nuns. Here is what the Report found: "None of the women told the Committee that their heads had been shaven, with one exception. The exception occurred where one woman had her head shaved because she had lice."

Besides the testimony of the women, the Report lists many

comments made by physicians who worked in the laundries. What they had to say is among the most enlightening aspects of the Report: their experiences completely debunk the horror stories told by Mullan and his ilk. What follows is a selection of their remarks. To offer an accurate picture, statements by all of the doctors in the Report are listed.

Dr. Michael Coughlan:

- "I had expected to find a very unhappy, deprived group who would have significant medical and especially psychological complaints and special needs. I was, therefore, surprised to encounter a group of ladies who appeared to be quite happy and content with their current environment and who presented with the type of symptoms and problems that reflected those of the wider Practice population."
- "My expected image of them all looking the same in drab uniform was quickly dissipated when I observed that each one presented dressed in colourful clothes and those who came directly from the Laundry were wearing a type of overlapping protective overall or apron, under which I could notice that they were wearing a variety of more personal choice of clothes."
- "Whenever I sensed that one of the ladies had something personal or sensitive to discuss, I always asked the Nurse or Nun to leave and afforded them the opportunity to elaborate in confidence. Interestingly, I cannot recall any occasion that the patient complained in any manner about her treatment by the Nuns in the Home, neither recently nor in the distant past..."
- "With respect to the question of any evidence of past injuries, broken bones or any other suggestions of physical or psychological abuse in the past, I cannot remember coming across any patient that presented with symptoms or signs that would or should have alerted me to such maltreatment, apart from one case when a

resident got scalded with hot water, which I believe was an accidental injury.”

- “Overall, my experience [with the Magdalene] was a happy and gratifying one. The Residents were a delightful and happy group of ladies, each with their own unique personality and they appeared to me to have a good and friendly relationship with the Mercy Sisters. Equally, my impression was that the Sisters were very caring towards the Residents and I never found any evidence to the contrary.”

Dr. John Ryan:

- “[T]here were a number of incidents of fractures but they were all from falls and usually out in the city, but none were suspicious in any way and I did not come across any evidence of unexplained bruising or scalding etc.”

Dr. Donal Kelly:

- “Many of these ladies were forgotten by their own or orphaned. They were poorly educated and some were mentally retarded. If the Sisters of Charity had not provided them with a home I don’t know who would have cared for them....Never did I witness any evidence of physical or mental abuse.”

Dr. Harry Comber:

- “There was no evidence of any traumatic injuries inflicted during my time, nor did anyone ever show me evidence of any previous injury....The women seemed reasonably happy, although some regretted the loss of opportunity to have a life, families and children of their own....I would be surprised if there was, in the time I was there, any mistreatment of them, either verbal or physical.”

Dr. Malachy Coleman:

- "I always felt that the ladies were well fed and well cared for. Their complaints were routine and normal consistent with those presenting in general practice. I saw no evidence of any traumatic injuries either historically, prior to my taking up the post, or for the time I cared for the ladies."
- "My overall impression of the Good Shepherd Convent in the main, was of an institute run by caring nuns which contained a number of ladies who were unlikely to be able to care for themselves."
- "While the ladies were very deferential to the nuns I did not at any stage get an impression of coercion or fear in the relationship between the ladies and the nuns. If anything I think the nuns did too much for the ladies and so decreased their capacity to care for themselves."

Post-McAleese

When Peter Mullan is asked if his portrayal of women being raped in slave-labor camps is an exaggeration, he replies, "You ask any woman who was there and they'll tell you the reality was much worse." Well, the McAleese Report details the stories of 118 women who lived and worked in the Magdalene Laundries and they say it's all a lie. The doctors who worked there say it's all a lie. What needs to be explained is why.

In the case of Mullan, it's rather easy: he admits that he hates the Roman Catholic Church. But there are others, too, and their motives may not be as easy to uncover.

Let's begin with press coverage of the McAleese Report. The most striking aspect of media reaction to it was how little there was of it. In most instances, the Report was either ignored or treated lightly. Worse, in some cases it painted a negative picture of the laundries, thus calling into question

whether anyone actually read the Report. Sadly, this was true of the Catholic media, as well. *Our Sunday Visitor*, however, was a prime exception; it did a very fair analysis of the Report by Michael Kelly.

It has been my experience that when bad news about the Catholic Church surfaces, it is seen as good news by three groups: hard-left Catholics; hard-right Catholics; and anti-Catholics.

Catholics of a left-wing orientation typically respond to bad news about the Church by saying this proves that Vatican II did not go far enough; Catholics of a right-wing orientation typically respond to bad news by saying this proves Vatican II went too far (or that it should never have been held in the first place).

In the case of the Magdalene Laundries, of course, it makes no sense to invoke Vatican II (the Council was convened between 1962 and 1965). What brings critics on the left and right together is an abiding tendency to believe the worst about the Church. Why? Because in doing so it validates their position.

For example, hard-core left Catholics are highly critical of the Church's teachings on sexual ethics, which they regard as repressive. They want a more expansive, and tolerant, view of sexuality. They naturally incline, then, to a hypercritical perception of priests and nuns who hold to traditional Church teachings on sexuality. So in their view, it is not hard to believe that the nuns who supervised the women in the laundries were scolds, if not worse.

Hard-core right Catholics look at the Church through the lens of purity, and are aghast whenever they learn of sinful behavior, particularly sexual misconduct, on the part of priests and nuns. Their purist streak accounts for their deep-seated—and wholly justifiable—anger at sexual abuse on the part of the clergy and the religious. Yet this disposition

also inclines conservative Catholics to swallow too readily wildly exaggerated, and even totally fabricated, allegations of abuse such as Mullan's moonshine about the Magdalene Laundries. For example, Michael S. Rose, who has chronicled contemporary priestly sexual abuse, was quick to believe Mullan's account.

Left-wing and right-wing Catholics of a strong bent have something else in common: when bad news about the Church breaks, they congratulate themselves for holding to their convictions. At bottom, it is their appalling self-righteousness that unites them; they have more in common than they know.

Regarding the anti-Catholics, most of those who were unmoved by the McAleese Report either work in the media or are activists who belong to a professional victims' group. As soon as the Report was released, they got a boost from Enda Kenny, Ireland's Prime Minister. He made a public speech lamenting the history of the laundries, stopping just shy of a formal apology. Astonishingly, he gave no evidence he had read a word of the Report. Immediately, professional victims' groups took aim at him, saying his remarks were insufficient.

The *New York Times* was particularly delinquent. The day after the Report was released, February 6, it issued a story on how unsatisfied the activists and the "survivors" were with Kenny's statement. It said practically nothing about the myths that the Report debunked. Instead, it continued the myth by writing about the "virtual slavery" that existed in the laundries. The next day the *Times* wrote again about the "slave labor" that took place. To this day, the *Times* has not written one story on how the Report convincingly disputes the lies that have been told about the Magdalene Laundries. Had the Report verified the worst accounts, it is a sure bet it would have been front-page news. The same is true of the BBC: it ran many stories on the laundries, but had virtually nothing to say about the McAleese Report.

The pressure on Kenny to issue a formal apology—Mullan is the one who should have been pressed to apologize—continued to mount. On February 19, he caved. This, in turn, invited anti-Catholics to focus not on the Report, but on the professional victims. On March 1, John Spain, writing for IrishCentral.com after the Report was released, continued to write about “The ‘National Shame’ of the Taliban Tabernacle—Ireland’s Recent History of the Magdalene Laundries.” Instead of quoting from the Report, he simply gave voice to a few women who brand themselves “Magdalene survivors.” He couldn’t quote from the Report because that would have undermined his agenda.

There is a long history of activists who have lied with alacrity about their cause, and this is especially true of those who claim to represent victims, or survivors, of abuse. In the 1980s, no one championed the cause of the homeless in the U.S. more than Mitch Snyder. Never mind that he never supported his own family: he was treated as a hero because he lectured the nation on its heartless response to the homeless. The truth is Snyder literally lied his way to fame. When he testified in 1984 before a Congressional committee, he was asked how he came up with the figure of three million homeless Americans (this number was cited by everyone who wrote or taught about the subject at the time). He admitted he simply made it up. More recently, David Clohessy, the director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), admitted under oath that he has lied to the media about his work.

There are, of course, honest parties to this discussion, observers who have long been critical of the laundries, but who upon reading the McAleese Report, sought to correct the record. No one has done so with greater valor than Irish writer Brendan O’Neill.

When O’Neill read that the *Irish Times* was trying to look at the good side of exposing abuse, even if it didn’t happen, he was taken aback. Worse was a playwright who told the newspaper that even if the stories weren’t true, they “served an

important function at the time—that is, to raise awareness about the problem of abuse in Catholic life more broadly.” To which O’Neill responded, “This sounds dangerously like a Noble Lie defence—the idea that it is okay to make things up, to spread fibs, if one is doing it in service of some greater good.”

“Anyone who points out that reports and depictions of abuse in Catholic institutions have been overblown risks being denounced as an abuse apologist or a sinister whitewasher,” says O’Neill. He insists, not without reasons, that those “who are genuinely interested in truth and justice should definitely be concerned that films and news reports may have left the public with the mistaken belief that women in Magdalene Laundries were stripped and beaten and that thousands of Irish and American children were raped by priests.”

What makes O’Neill’s account so persuasive is that he is an atheist; he has no vested interest to serve. His honesty is refreshing. “Catholic-bashers frequently accuse the Catholic religion of promoting a childish narrative of good and evil that is immune to factual evidence. Yet they do precisely the same, in the service of their fashionable and irrational new religion of anti-Catholicism.”

The horror stories associated with the Magdalene Laundries cannot withstand scrutiny, but they will continue to have a life of their own. That’s the way prejudice works. Unwarranted negative attitudes, especially when employed about a familiar whipping boy, are hard to shake. All we can do is pursue the truth and educate fair-minded people about what really happened. We certainly can’t count on the likes of the *New York Times* or the BBC to publish the truth.