

PRESS RELEASE
25th June 2010

Note to Editors: Photo opportunity and further interviews available at 42 St. Stephen's Green between 4 and 6 p.m. during UCD School of Social Justice and Women's Studies Public Lecture by Prof. James M. Smith (Boston College/JFM Advisory Committee).

Government exploring an apology for Magdalene survivors while denying any State liability

Justice for Magdalenes (JFM), the survivor advocacy group, met with Department of Justice officials who the government have designated "to take the lead role and coordinate" the State's response to the Magdalene issue. JFM's ongoing work details extensive, cross-departmental, State involvement in the operation and function of the Magdalene institutions.

At today's meeting Prof. James M. Smith (Boston College/JFM Advisory Board) presented further evidence of complicity on the part of the Department of Defense, the Department of Social and Family Affairs, and the Department of Finance.

Dept of Justice officials said that the State "accepts that there was abuse in Magdalene laundries," as documented by the Ryan Report and other individual survivors' testimonies. They said that they are prepared to work towards an apology, but an apology that would be vetted by the Attorney General to ensure that the State was not admitting any liability. Claire McGettrick (JFM Coordinating Committee & PRO) says: "The State is relying on the fact that an elderly and aging group of marginalized women, often with limited financial resources, will not be in any position to pursue justice through the courts."

JFM, in turn, pointed out that under the remit of the Department of Justice alone women and young girls were sent to the Magdalene laundries as an alternative to prison as well as being sent there on probation and on remand.

Prof. Smith appealed to Justice officials to challenge the religious congregations to make available all their records in their role as guardians of citizens' rights and defenders of the Constitution. The officials indicated that they are prepared to facilitate this process.

Further evidence of State complicity presented at today's meeting involves the Department of Defense (who tendered contracts for Army laundry to institutional laundries after 1941), the Department of Social and Family Affairs (who acknowledged in recent months that despite there being a Statutory obligation dating to 1953 governing the withholding and remitting of social insurance contributions, "[t]here do not appear to be returns available in relation to any organisations collectively described as Magdalene Laundries," and the Department of Finance (who approved the payment of capitation grants to the laundries for women on remand and on probation absent any mechanism of inspection and regulation). Such evidence, Prof. Smith asserts undermines the Government's stated position that the laundries were "private and charitable" institutions.

JFM informed the Department of Justice that JFM has submitted a formal application to the Irish Human Rights Commission requesting an inquiry into the State's obligation to provide redress for this population of survivors. This action was taken as a result of JFM's dissatisfaction with the Government's response to date, in particular recent statements from An Taoiseach, Mr. Cowen, and the Minister for Justice, Mr. Dermot Ahern.

[ENDS]

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