News
Social Justice



A huge cross is seen overlooking the Eastern Irish coastline of Counties Wicklow and Dublin in Bray, Ireland, Aug. 19, 2018. (OSV News/Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne)

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A full excavation began July 14 at a site near a former mother-and-baby home in the west of Ireland, believed to be the final resting place of up to 800 infants.

The infants died in the home — run on behalf of the Irish government by the Sisters of Bon Secours — during a period from 1925 to 1961. St. Mary's in Tuam, Irish County Galway, had been established along with a network of other such institutions at the request of the new government after independence in 1922 as a refuge for unmarried pregnant women and their children.

The issue is a controversial and emotive one, with some claiming the high death rate at the home is an indication that the children were neglected by the sisters while others argue that the infant mortality rate was also high in the wider Irish society at the time due to poverty and prior to the widespread availability of antibiotics in the 1950s.

The story came to international attention in 2014, after local historian Catherine Corless discovered there were no burial records for 796 children resident in the home for whom death certificates were present.

In 2017, investigators found what they described as "significant quantities of human remains" at the site. The bodies were in underground chambers in an unused sewage system. Corless, who lives near the site of the home, has criticized the coverage of her research after some media outlets accused the sisters of "dumping" the remains of the children in a septic tank.

"I never used that word 'dumped,'" she insisted. "I never said to anyone that 800 bodies were dumped in a septic tank. That did not come from me at any point. They are not my words," Corless told The Irish Times in 2014.

The Associated Press, following reports of local meda, also falsely reported in 2014 that the children were unbaptized and that Catholic teaching dictated that children born out of wedlock should not be baptized.

AP later admitted that it had gotten many facts wrong about the story.

"In stories published June 3 and June 8 about young children buried in unmarked graves after dying at a former Irish orphanage for the children of unwed mothers, The Associated Press incorrectly reported that the children had not received Roman Catholic baptisms; documents show that many children at the orphanage were baptized.

"The AP also incorrectly reported that Catholic teaching at the time was to deny baptism and Christian burial to the children of unwed mothers; although that may have occurred in practice at times, it was not Church teaching. In addition, in the June 3 story, the AP quoted a researcher who said she believed that most of the remains of children who died there were interred in a disused septic tank; the researcher has since clarified that without excavation and forensic analysis it is impossible to know how many sets of remains the tank contains, if any."

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Infant mortality in Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s was in the region of 70 per 1,000 or 7%, as high as what countries in sub-Saharan Africa have now. For much of the period covered, mortality rates among so-called "illegitimate children" were five times that of the rest of the population.

David Quinn, director of the Iona Institute, a Dublin-based religious think tank, told OSV News July 15, "There was a rush to believe the worst about the nuns and about Catholic Ireland."

"The fact that some terrible things did happen in church-run institutions is no excuse whatsoever. Journalists are supposed to check facts," he said. "That is absolutely basic to journalism. Mistakes will obviously be made from time to time, but when a whole plethora of various serious mistakes are made in the one story, and I'm not just talking about AP here, then we've got a problem."

Daniel MacSweeney, who is heading the excavation, has described the project as "unique and incredibly complex." He told reporters at a July 7 press conference the remains are largely "commingled" — in other words, the bones are mixed up.

It is thought the excavation will go on until 2027, with follow-up work continuing for another three years. About 80 people have so far come forward to give DNA samples in the hope the bodies of their relatives may be identified.

The Sisters of Bon Secours have opened up their archives to the commission, established in 2015 by the Irish government, in the hope it will help the experts' work. A government inquiry has already found that the sisters were not in charge of the burials. It said that this responsibility lay with local state authorities who actually owned the home and should also have been recording the burials, which it neglected to do.