

Commission: Magdalene laundries should compensate wards

Cian Molloy | Catholic News Service | Nov. 10, 2010

DUBLIN (CNS) -- The Irish government has asked the country's attorney general to consider a report by the Irish Human Rights Commission that calls for compensating women and girls held in the so-called Magdalene laundries run by 10 religious orders.

Former inmates of the laundries, also known as Magdalene asylums, presented their case to the commission because they were not entitled to the same compensation given to former residents of church-managed orphanages and youth facilities despite often suffering the same hardship and neglect highlighted in the Ryan Report published in 2009.

The report exposed decades of child abuse and neglect in church-run residential institutions.

The laundries housed young women and girls who had become pregnant outside of marriage. Most were placed in them by their families. Such asylums were not uniquely Irish or Catholic, and versions of them operated in the United Kingdom, Europe, Canada and the United States.

In Ireland, the laundries also were used to detain girls accused of petty crimes. The laundries operated in independent Ireland from the 1920s until 1996. Observers estimated that about 200 former Magdalene inmates survive.

While the government has acknowledged that the Magdalene women suffered abuse, it ruled that they were not eligible for compensation from a special government-run fund set up for the residents of church-run orphanages because the laundries were not the responsibility of the government nor were the laundries visited by government inspectors.

In the report published Nov. 9, the human rights commission argued that the government bears some responsibility for the women's plight because many were sent to the laundries by the courts. The commission said the government must answer questions about arbitrary incarceration of citizens, forced labor and servitude.

James Smith, associate professor of English and Irish studies at Boston College and a consultant to Justice for Magdalenes, an advocacy group for women sent to the laundries, welcomed the commission's ruling in an interview with Ireland's RTE Radio.

"They (the women) have never received an apology from church, state, families or from the wider society who patronized these institutions," he said. "We ask the state to act on these recommendations immediately. This is a population of aging women who are in the final years of their life and this means so much to them. We hope that the religious congregations will meet Justice for Magdalenes to effect reconciliation."

Editor's note: The Irish Human Rights Commission's conclusions and recommendations can be found online at

www.magdalenelaundries.com/IHRC%20Statement%2009-11-10.pdf.

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