Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home (1925–1961) [1]


Between 1925 and 1961, a Roman Catholic order of nuns called the Bon Secours Sisters operated the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home, or the Home, an institution where unmarried pregnant women gave birth in Tuam, Ireland. Pregnant women who delivered their infants at the Home were required to work at the Home for no less than one year without pay. The Irish government and the Catholic Church endorsed the Mother and Baby Home as a means to limit the number of children born out of wedlock by discouraging women from getting pregnant before marriage. During the Home’s thirty-six years of operation, the nuns reported that almost 800 children died in their care. In 2015, researchers discovered a tomb of 796 infant and child skeletons in a septic tank underneath where the Home once stood. The acceptance and use of Mother and Baby Homes revealed the way Ireland treated pregnant women in the twentieth century.

The Bon Secours Sisters were a congregation of Roman Catholic nuns who officially assembled in Paris, France, in 1824. A majority of the Sisters were trained nurses or midwives. The term, bon secours, translated from French, means good will. The Bon Secours Sisters’ original motto was good will to all, and they sought to provide efficient nursing care to the less fortunate, particularly those of low socioeconomic status. In the mid-1800s, the Bon Secours Sisters established convents outside of France in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the United States, the Sisters traveled to Maryland, beginning a convent which, in 1919, became the Bon Secours Hospital. As of 2018, that hospital still operates in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1925, the Bon Secours Sisters opened the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Ireland.

Institutions for unwed pregnant women and their infants, such as the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home, were prevalent across Ireland during the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. According to researcher Catherine Corless, there was a significant stigma in Ireland against unmarried mothers. Many citizens of Ireland practiced Catholicism, a religion that required women to marry before becoming pregnant. Irish citizens considered infants born out of wedlock illegitimate or bastard children. In addition, the government of Ireland passed an 1841 law called the Offenses Against the Person Act, which made abortion [5] under any circumstance illegal in Ireland. The law ordered that women who received abortions be imprisoned for the rest of their lives. Therefore, women who became pregnant outside of marriage had few options.

The Bon Secours Sisters, a group of Roman Catholic nuns, began operating the Mother and Baby Home following the Home’s earlier use as a military barracks. The building that became the Mother and Baby Home was designed by architect George Wilkinson in 1841 to be used as a workhouse, able to house over eight hundred people. In Ireland in the nineteenth century, workhouses were used to house those who were unable to support themselves financially. Those people exchanged free labor for a place to stay and daily meals. Many of those people were chronically or terminally ill or had a disability. In 1846, as Ireland’s Great Famine was occurring, the workhouse opened its doors. According to historian Peter Higginbotham, the building contained an infirmary for the ill and, as he phrased, an idiot’s ward for those with disabilities. After decades of military conflict, the building was left to the Bon Secours Sisters to open an institution for unmarried mothers.

In 1925, the Bon Secours Sisters opened the Home located in Tuam, Ireland. Led by Mother Hortense McNamara, the Home had dormitories for pregnant women and for those who had given birth. The Home had separate dormitories for infants and children and the nuns separated the infant from its mother upon birth. Mothers were required to stay without pay at the Mother and Baby Home for one year following the birth of their infants, working to keep the institution clean and to care for the infants and children. If a woman did not want to stay, she would have to procure an amount of money corresponding to one hundred Euros as of 2018 to give to the nuns, though that was not an option for many women whose families had disowned them due to their pregnancies.

Oftentimes, following their one-year commitment at the Mother and Baby Home, the mothers would be sent to a Magdalene laundry, which were Catholic-run labor facilities that sought to reform women. However, much like the Home, Magdalene laundries were often retrospectively accused of conducting unsafe and dangerous labor practices. In 1927, the Catholic Church and Ireland’s state authorities both officially endorsed the Mother and Baby Home as a reasonable solution to reduce the number of illegitimate children in Ireland. For each mother and infant in the home, the Tuam County Council paid the nuns a small weekly sum.

Later interviews with residents reported the living conditions at the Home. Corless conducted research into claims made about the safety and cleanliness of the Home’s facilities, which enabled her to document former residents’ stories. Many women remembered the high retaining walls as they were driven, oftentimes forcibly, by their family members or local clergymen, to
Sources

1. Barbash, Fred. “The ‘mother and baby home’ at Tuam, Ireland, where friends just ‘disappeared, one after the other.’” The New York Times
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