

2004-2

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Recommended Citation

Maher, E., "Assuming Responsibility", *Doctrine and Life*, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp.46-51, February, 2004.

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Assuming Responsibility

EAMON MAHER

PETER MULLAN'S MOVIE, *The Magdalen Sisters*, moved and angered me when I saw it some months ago. It is being released in the US at a time when the American Catholic community has been rocked by the horrific revelations with regard to the level of clerical sex abuse there.

Is there a danger that the current climate will serve to blind people to the true message of the film, which is that Irish society at large undoubtedly colluded in the incarceration of the women who ended up as glorified slaves in the Magdalen laundries. The families of two of the characters in the film seem most anxious to offload their pregnant daughters in case they might tarnish the family reputation in the community. Little attention is paid to the reasons why the girls/women have become pregnant in the first instance – one of them has been the victim of a rape by a relative. It is significant that the males involved in the incidents got away with a simple verbal lashing.

Then there is the question of the role played by the State. The sisters were carrying out a function that should have fallen within the remit of the State social services. The vast majority of the women in care of the nuns had not committed any crime and yet found themselves subjected to a life of misery, working unmercifully long hours in hot, humid conditions, separated from their babies and their families, treated as outcasts. How is it that Irish society at the time never thought to criticise the State for abdicating its responsibility to its citizens in this manner? How come the families and communities colluded in this grossly unfair and unchristian practice? 'No one entered a Magdalen laundry without a relative, an employer, a neighbour or friend, knowing it.'¹ This is a valid point. There

1. James Smith, 'Rite and Reason', *The Irish Times*, September 1, 2003.

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can be no doubt that Church, State and society in general were as one when it came to dealing with the women who ended up in the Mag-dalen laundries.

When watching the film, one's natural reaction is to blame the nuns for the cruelty displayed to the women in their care. But one has to think about Irish society a number of decades ago. It was a society that was slowly emerging from decades of colonial rule and attempting to forge a role and an identity for itself. It had no adequate structures in place to deal with people who veered from the accepted path. Women who became pregnant outside marriage, those suffering from mental illness, those abandoned by their families because of the inability of parents to look after them – these were the sort of women who ended up in institutions like the Magdalen laundries. In his autobiographical account of Dublin tenement life, Bill Cullen, known as Liam in the book, gives his impression of what went on inside the walls of the laundry:

On his trips to the Magdalen Laundry Liam became more inquisitive. Watched how the girls were very strictly supervised. Even saw a nun kicking one of the Maggies in anger. Another nun walked with a big stick. Like St Patrick's crosier. And he saw her using the stick to hit and poke the girls.²

Clearly, such treatment was unacceptable. But how much was it out of line with a culture in which corporal punishment in schools was normal? In which children beaten in their homes? The institutions were populated by nuns and religious, among them those who were sadistic and brutal, but some of whom could also display kindness and gentleness. In discussion with an inmate of a laundry, Molly Darcy, Liam discovers that the 'Maggies' were in an awful predicament: 'Scarlet women in their home towns so they can't go back. They know no one in Dublin and it's hard enough for anyone to get a job these days. So they are now slaves. Slaving for the nuns.'³

Molly makes some interesting points here. The women could never go home because of their fearful reputation. They were free to leave the Laundry any time they wanted, but very few were brave enough to avail

2. Bill Cullen, *It's a Long Way from Penny Apples* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2001), p.135.

3. *Ibid.*

of this opportunity. So they were subjected to a life of slavery, as Molly explains once more: 'All because of a moment of human weakness.' Sex was a major taboo in Ireland in the early years of the State. Within the bounds of marriage, all sexual acts, even if reprehensible, were somehow rendered acceptable, whereas one impulsive act, occurring, in many cases, out of fear, or ignorance, or both, merited a lifetime of misery.

When apportioning blame, we need balance. A friend of mine in the US who saw the film, *The Magdalen Sisters*, recently, said that he had known many 'objectionable, tyrannical nuns' in his time but that he had never encountered one 'as sadistic as the superior in the film'. Other nuns are shown to get sadistic pleasure from demeaning the women in their care, by making them stand naked in front of them while they give a running commentary on their figures. A nun is shown performing oral sex on a priest in the sanctuary. My main criticism of the film is that it saw a need to emphasise the sexual element and was less than objective in its portrayal of the religious.

When we, rightly, criticise the Catholic Church authorities for their failure to deal with those priests and nuns who committed acts of barbarism and debauchery, we can do so (at least those of us who are lay people) at something of a remove. Equally, when we accuse politicians (our elected representatives) of corruption and deceit, those of us who are not politicians can remain at a cosy distance from the criticism. We get

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uncomfortable when we are somehow implicated in the process. Priests, nuns and politicians do not act in isolation. They have been allowed in many instances to carry out horrible misdemeanours because they acted in accordance with the *mores* of the time.

An example, taken from John McGahern's exquisite novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, illustrates the

danger of applying today's norms to a bygone age. One of McGahern's characters, Bill Evans, is one of the numerous children of the 1940s or 50s in Ireland to have been born out of wedlock, or of parents who were deemed unfit to raise their children, or had simply died. These children

were sent to places run by priests or religious orders. At the age of fourteen, Bill was sent out to work as a glorified slave on a farm. Although badly treated, his fate could have been worse. Others, as the main character Ruttledge observes, worked as skivvies in boarding schools where 'they scrubbed and polished floors, emptied garbage and waited at tables.'⁴ One incident involving a priest and one of these boys sticks out in Ruttledge's mind. As he was serving food in the school refectory, the boy slipped and splashed food on the soutane of one of the deans. The priest showed no mercy:

The beating was sudden and savage. Nobody ate a morsel at any of the tables while it was taking place ... Many who had sat mutely at the tables during the beating were to feel all of their lives that they had taken part in the beating through their self-protective silence.⁵

Bill Evans is fortunate in that he has friends among the inhabitants around the lake where he is set to end his days. Even though he is poorly treated by the family in whose care he has been placed (Ruttledge's first encounter with Bill occurred when the poor man had been left locked outside his house on a bitterly cold day and had no choice other than to ask his neighbour for something to eat), he is fiercely loyal to them. Having reached middle age, he doesn't like to dwell on the past. When Ruttledge interrogates him on the events of his life, he is promptly told: 'Stop torturing me!' (p. 12) At that moment Ruttledge realises that this is the only way Bill can deal with what has happened to him:

Bill Evans could no more look forward than he could look back. He existed in a small closed circle of the present. Remembrance of things past and dreams of things to come were instruments of torture. (p. 167)

There are some in the community who suggest that Bill is as happy as, or happier than, anyone in the village and I suspect this could well be true. Ruttledge and the parish priest, Fr Conroy, collaborate to ensure that Bill is supplied with a home in the new housing development in the town. The priest visits Ruttledge to discuss the move and there is a note

4. *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), p.10.

5. *Ibid.*, p.11.

of caution in his assessment of Bill's future:

Sometimes I think it may be better to let these mistakes run their course. Attempting to rectify them at a late stage may bring in more trouble than leaving them alone. (pp. 244-5)

McGahern is sensitive in his treatment of Bill and does not see the need to allocate blame for his plight. In many ways, the type of security Bill achieves at the end of his life is appreciated all the more for his having had to wait so long for its arrival. He still can be seen bumming cigarettes outside the church towards the close of the novel, which proves that old habits die hard. The inhabitants around the lake give him room in which to blossom and enjoy the quirks of his character: his sometimes lewd comments, his voracious appetite, his distinctive walk, his love of, and need for, cigarettes. He is a reminder of a race of people who suffered at the hands of an uncaring state and a Church who inherited problems with which it was largely ill-equipped to deal. But, as we are told on page 9, 'His kind were now almost as extinct as the corn-crake.'

The fact that he has been so well-depicted in McGahern's novel ensures some posterity for Bill and 'his kind'. It is hard not to admire the restraint exercised by McGahern in his treatment of Bill's plight. He does no apportion blame (no more than Bill does) but simply outlines the facts and lets readers make up their own minds. The producers of the film, *The Magdalen Sisters*, would have been well-advised to exercise the same type of artistic objectivity.

It is now time for the Irish State and its citizens to accept the acquiescent role they have often played in 'covering up' and supporting scandals like the destruction of lives in the industrial schools and the Magdalen laundries. Until that happens, the guilt occasioned by people like the Magdalen women will never be shared as equally as it should be. Writing in the 1970s, the French priest-writer, Jean Sullivan, penned the following lines which sum up many of the thoughts I have been trying to develop in this article:

Today, because the Church is humiliated and dispersed, out of date with its techniques, and therefore encouraged to rediscover the naked word, I feel all the more indissolubly tied to it. But easy now, no pious proclamations; we never understand perfectly what influences

us. Nevertheless, through my experience of the Church, I believe I've discovered a certain style of living and have worked through the problem by making the affirmation of Simone Weil my own: 'I accept the Church's mission, as depositary of the sacraments and guardian of the sacred texts, to formulate decisions on some essential points, but only as directional signals for the faithful. I don't accept its right to impose its interpretations.'⁶

This is a good summary of what is happening with a number of Catholics in Ireland, who recognise the role of priests as dispensers of the Sacraments and who recognise the Church's role in prolonging the Word, but not as a body for imposing a interpretation of the Gospel's many mysteries. Wouldn't it be useful to have people in Ireland like Sullivan or Simone Weil, capable of supplying thoughtful assessments like these? It would be nice also for us all, politicians, religious and lay people, to assume responsibility for the people like the 'Maggies' and Bill Evans. We have a duty to ensure that injustice does not visit and dominate the lives of the weak and the vulnerable in the future as it did in the past. The greatest sin of all is the sin of abdicating one's responsibility towards the common good, or, as Thoreau put it: 'All that is needed for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.' Let's hope that will not be an epitaph for Irish society.

6. *Morning Light*, trans. Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p.153.