

## Submission to Oireachtas as regards the Heads for Burial Bill

My name is Catherine Corless, researcher into Tuam Mother and Baby Home. My research revealed the tragic facts that 796 babies and young children had died in the Tuam Home in the years it was run by the Bon Secours Sisters, 1925-1961. Worse still, many of those babies were indecently buried in a defunct sewage system at the back of the Home, and it was this disclosure, which hit the headlines worldwide, that was instrumental in setting up the Commission of Inquiry 2015-2020, into all Mother & Baby Homes.

The 5th Interim Report published in 2019 by the Commission, gives explicit detail of what the team of Archaeologists found, 17 chambers of the sewage tank filled with the remains of infants, Older babies, and children up to 4 years old, discarded without coffins, one on top of the other in those chambers. The chambers are only accessible by a concrete lid at the top, not wide enough to allow an adult through, so we can only assume that the babies were lowered down by a sheet or ropes. These same chambers contain shutters with openings to the main sewage tank, which was originally designed to separate bulk sewage from water while it was in operation during the workhouse period. Once the babies were interred there, from the late 1930's onwards, heavy rain has flooded the area and the seeping water has caused some mingling of the little remains, and this is evident by water marks in the chambers and you will note in one photograph of the 2019 Interim Report, a little finger attached to a chamber wall. Many of the little remains also have evidence of rodent gnawing.

In March 2017, statements of shock and horror were proclaimed by our Government and President on all National media, by the announcement by then Minister Katherine Zappone, regarding the discovery of multiple babies remains in a sewage facility in Tuam on the grounds of the old Home which was run by the Bon Secours. I naively thought then, that my work was done, now surely there would be immediate action by State, Church and Galway Co. Council to do the right thing, to exhume the babies from this sewage site. Within a month, to my dismay, the Tuam Home tragedy fell silent, the site was restored to its original condition, the chambers were closed in, soil was put back, grass seed sown. Can you imagine the pain that this caused to the families of those in that sewage tank? What would your reaction be if you had a baby brother or sister within those infested chambers?

Outside the walled off area with the grotto that we are so well accustomed to, there are many more burials, some perhaps in boxes, others perhaps in shrouds. They are in the grassed area all around the playground, under the pathways and more under part of the huge playground. We know this from local knowledge, and from the wording in a Galway Co. Council Memo which the Commission included in the 5th Interim Report, and more importantly from a Ground Penetrating Survey (GPS) which was carried out under the instruction of then Minister Katherine Zappone in the Summer of 2017. I have emailed the result of this Survey to all of you Committee members, and you will see from the pages that I have sent, that the radar system picked up over 69 anomalous and 23 subtle responses, many of them measuring 3'3" x 1'6", which strongly suggests little burial plots. Those anomalous are actually marked and numbered on one of the photos in the survey. The Report also suggests that trial excavations be carried out in those areas. Also, we cannot forget the missing babies of Bessborough Mother & Baby Home and Sean Ross Abbey, they must be accounted for. Some ground was surveyed in those places, but they did not account for possible underground passages and vaults or tanks.

DNA testing of remains is crucial and quite possible. The Archaeologists who worked on the Tuam site have stated in the 5th Interim Report, that the babies remains are in excellent condition, and although mingled because of seeping rainfall, have little sign of erosion, or fragmentation, including even delicate infant skull bones. DNA testing should also search for evidence of starvation, injury and malpractice. A DNA Database should be set up as soon as possible from families who wish to give their DNA in the hopes of retrieving their babies remains.

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### Burial Bill: Queries

#### Head 3: Government Order

(7) “Government may assign additional functions to the Agency, remove functions from the Agency or amend the duration specified...”  
Please clarify, especially REMOVE functions.

(8h) INTERVENTIONS:  
“Possible alternative options available to accord dignity to persons buried there”  
Just to reiterate, there cannot be any other option for the Tuam babies, other than Excavate, exhume, DNA Test, reburial with dignity.

#### Head 5: CRITERIA FOR INTERVENTION

(2a) “the human remains are uncoffined”  
Some of the burials of the Tuam babies are outside the sewage tank area, and may be in box coffins, but these areas are being walked on, driven on, and are under a playground with ramps and equipment. Those burials cannot be considered as appropriate burials and must be exhumed also.

#### Head 6: RESTRICTIONS

(6b) “ the lapse of time since the last known burial exceeds 70 years in relation to the Date on which the circumstances of the burials concerned became widely known”  
Please clarify, the Tuam burials were validated in 2017, last burial there was in 1960. The burials go back to 1925. How do we read this? Clarification needed.

Restrictions contd/.....

(10) "Government has formed the view that memorialisation of the site without further Intervention is more appropriate"

Again, this cannot ever apply to the Tuam site.

The 5th Interim Report gives very detailed advice on how to approach the excavation with health and safety in mind.

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Catherine Corless