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# People

## ORPHANS LEARN NEVER TO CRY

In an open letter to Cardinal Cahal Daly, a Donegal orphan describes the brutal treatment he received at the hands of nuns and Christian Brothers. Beatings were the order of the day and sexual molestation was commonplace. He asks why such treatment was inflicted on helpless children and whether the church could not admit and apologise for the grievous wrongs done. He spoke to Eamonn McCann

As far as I know, I was one of 14 children, nine brothers and five sisters. I know the names of all of them now, except for one of my brothers. I know that I was born in May 1948 in (a village in Donegal) and that at 14 days old I was put into the Nazareth House in Fahan, Co Donegal.

I got to know my birth-father after coming out of the orphanage. I say "birth-father" as opposed to father because he was a despot if ever there was one, a most violent man. If I ever arrived in the village in later years and had money for him I was accepted. But I was never ever accepted as a son. He never reared any of the 14 children he fathered. They were put into orphanages as they came on stream.

At two years of age I was transferred from Fahan to St Joseph's, Termonbacca, Derry and put in the baby section. At six years of age I was transferred to Termonbacca proper, where the ages ranged from six to 16. There were 72 boys there. Life was deeply austere. The nun I remember most was Sister J. She had the most violent, vindictive streak. There were plastic tops on the tables with rubber rods along the side which she would extract to come down on the children with if you stepped out of line. You would be beaten on the body, the face, the legs.

Her second mode of attack was her fist. Her knuckles were always cut and scabbed and saturated with iodine, from the beatings she handed out. She wore mittens in summer and winter. To hear the roars and screams of the orphans was terrifying. When you got to 14, 15 or 16 you could be appointed a monitor and allowed to keep order, using violence. I remember sitting in the dining hall one day and — maybe I smiled or something — a monitor called Billy L came down on my head with a stick. I remember my head falling on the table and a gurgling sound and the hot blood pumping.

I wet the bed as a kid, very severely, the reason



CHRIS REID

being that I was terrified of the dark. I spent many hours at night in bed, lying awake in saturated urine, in fear of the morning ritual. I'll always remember the remarks of the nuns in the morning. "You dirty tramp, get out". Then you had to run what was known as "the gauntlet", down a long, long passageway from the dormitory to the toilets, and as you ran and stumbled you'd be thumped anything up to a dozen times by the nun and the monitors, by Sister J in particular, the notorious one.

You couldn't wash your body, you just got into your clothes and went to school with the smell lingering. You were never allowed to forget that you wet the bed.

The worst day was Saturday, because then we had to scrub and polish the orphanage, especially the passageway. We had to get down on our hands and knees and take our shoes and socks off because the toe-caps would have been destroyed and holes left in the socks. There would be up to 10 rows of orphaned kids four or five abreast with a scrunched-up blanket and brown liquid

polish. The river Foyle was to our left, so they had these words, "river ... back, river ... back", as we pushed the blanket to and fro together and inched along the passageway. The monitors would keep time and would come down on you if you faltered on the head, shoulders, arms, backside.

The bishop used to come once a year, at Christmas, which meant that from October we would be up until 11 o'clock at night rehearsing for his concert. Everything had to be perfect, songs, hymns, the Christmas crib. I dreaded it. Then he would come in all his splendour and we would all line up and kiss his ring, calling him "My Lord". The nuns pampered the Bishop right, left and centre.

I remember making a very conscious decision that they would never make me cry. They had taken everything from me, but this one thing I promised myself they wouldn't do to me. Orphans learn things like that, never to cry. It used to gall Sister J.

I had a birth brother by the name of K at

Termonbacca but it was never pointed out to me that he was my brother. I knew him, but not that he was my brother. I only found out when I was about eight.

I originally went to school at the Nazareth House in Bishop Street, where we were put in the same classes as the girl orphans who stayed there.

We weren't allowed to speak with the girls. We sat at opposite sides of the class and walked on opposite sides of the corridors. There was an invisible line always there between us.

I abhorred lunchtimes at Nazareth House. At the end of a passageway there were stairs down to a room where we spent our dinner-hour while the girls were getting their lunch upstairs. The monitors were there to make sure we didn't talk. We just sat there. We didn't eat between leaving Termonbacca in the morning and going back up after school in the afternoon, that would be nine hours, from breakfast. The aroma of the kitchens would filter through the passageway and down to the room we sat in, the pangs of hunger were devastating.

When I think about it now the most horrific thing was that I had five birth-sisters there. At some time I must obviously have been sitting in the same classroom as one or more of them, but I was never told. When you put that alongside all the talk now of charity, and of keeping families together, it doesn't bear thinking about.

I can't even remember being shown any affection. Nobody ever put their arm around you and said, "You are a good kid". Everything that was done was done to keep you subservient. It is all deeply embedded in my memory.

AROUND 1958, for some reason we were not told about, we were transferred from Nazareth House to Bridge Street school. It was ordinary teachers there, not religious. There was a Mr Hutton, the headmaster, and his wife, Mrs Hutton, and a Miss Jackson, a relief teacher, and a Mr Don Doherty. He was particularly excellent, brilliant to the orphan kids. We weren't beaten there, or belittled as orphans. I have fantastic memories of Bridge Street. We used to walk down from Termonbacca and along Foyle Road, in a long line. I remember passing the GNR railway station and we'd shout "Up the IRA, down the GNR". The IRA campaign had started in 1956 and as children we thought it was fantastic. It would be different now. The GNR workers always had great time for us and would bring us over biscuits and stuff. I now realise their kindness to us orphans was because they knew the horrors of Termonbacca.

There was a shirt factory on Foyle Road, and we used to wave over at the women and they would bring us over sweets and biscuits too. I have a great love for the civilian people of Derry on account of that. Those were the happiest times of my childhood, the best part of 40 of us going along Foyle Road to Bridge Street, and laughing and waving at people.

There were still bad times, too, going back to Termonbacca after school. There was a senior monitor called MM, who I believe is now in a mental institution in mid-Ulster, who, apart from the physical attacks, made homosexual assaults on the kids. I remember one specific occasion he took us on a route back from Bridge Street in through bushes and hedges alongside Braehead. It was a short-cut. I loved it in the summer because you could play and pick the berries. But this time, MM, who would have been maybe 17, lined up all the kids and had us stripped naked. Looking back and perceiving it now, it is reminiscent of those pictures of Jews lined up naked in the concentration camps. That was all that happened to me personally.

Before I was 12 I started to run away from Termonbacca. I spent many a night sleeping at the shirt factory on Foyle Road, where there was a big boiler house. On numerous occasions I was brought back by the RUC. I pleaded with them more than once and told them what was going on, but they didn't want to know. It was back to Termonbacca by the scruff of the neck and handed back to the nuns.

I was flogged every time, beaten with the rubber rod or with fists by the nuns. I was beaten until I could hardly walk, but I still didn't cry. It was the only dignity I had left. When I could walk properly I would run away, again and again.

Then came April 1960 which lives long in my memory. It was a beautiful spring morning in Derry. I was told, "You are not going to school, today". I stood there with my brother K for about half an hour. Then we were put into a car driven by a woman who must have been a social worker of some sort. She never spoke. We weren't told where we were going. I don't remember a single thing about that journey. I remember looking back and seeing Sister J standing at the front door, with a look on her face as if to say, "I fixed you".