

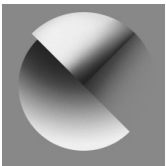


*The Innocents*,  
by Clare O'Hagn.  
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#### ABSTRACT

*The Irish state and Catholic Church established Magdalene laundries and Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland. These institutions forcibly housed unwed women who became pregnant, the last of which closed in 1996. It is estimated that 35,000 women were forced into these institutions and 6,000 babies died in their care. In 2014, a mass grave of babies and children was found in the septic tank at Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway. The following year, a commission was created to investigate these establishments. This visual essay explores the stories of these women and their babies as well as the reaction of a shocked nation.*

# FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES: MOTHER AND BABY HOMES IN IRELAND



#### VISUAL ESSAY

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Visual Communication 2020

Vol. 20(1) 124-133

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DOI: 10.1177/1470357219894044

#### Key Words

Bon Secours • Catholic Church •  
Magdalene laundries • Mother and  
Baby Homes • Republic of Ireland

## INTRODUCTION

In Ireland, the first Magdalene laundry opened in 1767 and was known as the Magdalene Asylum for Penitent Females. It was established by Lady Arabella Denny, a Protestant benefactor, to house 'penitent prostitutes' (Quinn, 2011). However, after the Irish Famine of 1845 (Geber and Murphy, 2012), these laundries became dominated by Catholic religious congregations (McGarry, 2011). After this, the Catholic Church and Irish state transformed Magdalene laundries and what would also become known as Mother and Baby Homes into places to hide away unwed, pregnant women (Barry, 2017). These laundries

and homes operated between 1922 and 1996. An estimated 35,000 women were forced into these homes, and 6,000 babies and children died in them (Meagher, 2018). Babies were taken from their mothers and often adopted by Catholic Americans. They were also subjected to vaccine trials by pharmaceutical companies and their remains were used by medical universities for anatomical study. In 2014, a mass grave of babies and children was discovered at Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway. In 2015, a commission was set up to investigate these institutions (Barry, 2017).

**SIX WAYS TO WASH YOUR HANDS (AYLIFFE, 1978)**  
*for the Mother and Baby Homes Commission Investigation*  
(Churreáin, 2017: 43–44).

**1**

*Wet hands, apply soap and rub palm to palm*  
until a white lather forms like the spit and rage of women,  
who, having lain among waves, were dragged back up again  
by the hair and stripped of their names to pay for the wrongs  
in their bellies, as they stitched lace, pressed linen sheets,  
and each week bowed their heads to the post-partum girls  
all lined up at the font like a row of roots half-pulled  
out of the earth and still holding on to their young.

**2**

*Rub right palm over left dorsum and left palm over right dorsum*  
to ensure the scent of infant leaves your skin: the sour fumes  
of bottled milk, triangled terry cloth, ice-cold smears of cream.  
The scent of sin can cling for years as potent as a bad dream  
of trade-deals, needle pricks, poppies bloomed on the skull.  
The scent of a child in an unmarked grave may get in beneath  
your fingernails and cause all sorts of problems in later life.

**3**

*Rub palm to palm, fingers interlaced and around the wrists*  
to erase all trace of fathers. Never mention cuffs.  
Never mention scars. Raise your head against the sky  
and let the violet clouds overfill your eyes as the names  
of these men become again unknown as birds.  
When you see a wing, like a realm of thumbed pages  
fluttering, take this as a sign: the fathers are no more.

**4**

*Rub backs of fingers to opposing palm with fingers interlocked*  
and loosen the joints of wards, nurseries, bolted pantries  
stocked with canisters of warm milk and cheese sold  
by the yellow quart as the imagined cream of it dripped  
from the mouths of hungry, swollen girls. Rub out the halls,  
statues, sills. Leave only a rusted nail in a cemetery wall.

**5**

*Rotational rubbing of right thumb clasped in left palm and vice versa*  
to disimprint the memory of files. Wash clean the data  
until days, months, years signed by clammy hands run  
like slip-streams into a great shaking lake. This means  
that, even should your lips part to release a holy word,  
all that will spill out is a wet pulp no one understands.

**6**

*Rotational rubbing backwards and forwards with clasped fingers*  
of right hand in left palm and vice versa to wear thin the heart-lines.  
Be a sister and repeat the law like a hymn into the sink.  
Do not commemorate. Do not remunerate. Do not let  
the wounded woman or her child speak in a bare tongue.  
Wash in this way and rid your hands of Mother, Baby, Home.

1  
Wet hands, apply soap and rub palm to palm

A LAUNDRY. B

**MAGDALEN ASYLUM,**  
LOWER GLOUCESTER STREET,  
Dublin, June 12<sup>th</sup> 1910.

Mrs Pearse  
St Bonas College

Folio.....

Amount due to Laundry	13. 14 0
paid	1 0 0
balance	£ 12 14 0

In Full Settled Accounts in Compliments

Invoice from the  
Magdalene Asylum to  
Mrs Margaret Pearse for  
laundry services provided  
to the amount of £12-14-0.  
National Library of Ireland,  
Pearse Papers, 1890-1932.  
Reproduced with  
permission.

2

*Rub right palm over left dorsum and left palm over right dorsum*



*Home Babies, Pâte de Verre, Nylon Fibers*  
by Alison Lowry.  
Suspended sand-cast  
pâte de verre (glass paste)  
christening robes.  
© Photograph:  
Serena Clark.

*"They lived amid the absence of affection  
and the ever-present threat of infectious  
disease... 'Like chickens in a coop'"*

Julia Carter Devaney (Barry, 2017)

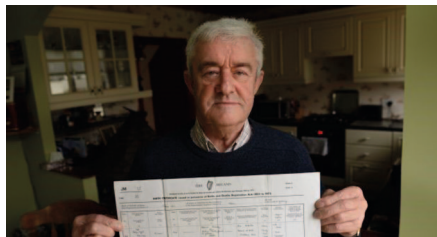
### 3

*Rub palm to palm, fingers interlaced and around the wrists*



Catherine Corless, the historian that discovered the mass grave at the former Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, County Galway. © Photograph: Niall Carson. Reproduced with permission.

*“On (Catherine Corless’) mother’s birth certificate, in the space reserved for the name of the father: nothing” (Barry, 2017).*



Dara Mac Donail of *The Irish Times*. Reproduced with permission.

*Michael’s mother died in October 1999 but with no mention to his biological father. ‘She never said and I never asked.’ (Burns, 2019)*



5

*Rotational rubbing of right thumb clasped in left palm and vice versa*



Terry Harrison and a photograph of her baby, Nial John Dunne Kiernan. Nial was born in St Patrick's Mother and Baby Home. After his birth he was taken from her.  
© Sam Boal/RollingNews. Reproduced with permission.

*"These are real, joyful young women who had sex and got pregnant and then got shoved into a home to be made a slave for the rest of her life. These were real, vulnerable, little babies that were snatched from their mothers and stolen and sold...We are real. They are real. Nothing (the Catholic Church) have said has acknowledged that we are real..."*

Marian Keyes (The Journal, 2018).



Survivors gathered outside St Patrick's Mother and Baby Home, County Dublin.  
© Dublin Live. Reproduced with permission.



*She told me, and she  
was brief: 'Holy Father,  
we found mass graves  
of children, buried children,  
we're investigating ... and  
the Church has something  
to do with this'.*

Pope Francis  
(Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 2018).

*Caught between terror and dishonour,  
Ireland made our abused people invisible ...  
We made you invisible. We made you  
inaudible. We made your stories unreliable.  
And then, somehow, through the courage  
of a handful of extraordinary people,  
the truth about the Church's crimes began  
to be exposed, but the Church slandered  
and libeled those heroes.*

Marian Keyes (The Journal, 2018).



Mural in South Dublin  
painted in response  
to Pope Francis' visit  
to the Republic of Ireland  
in August 2018.  
© Photograph: S  
erena Clark.

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## FUNDING

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article, and there is no conflict of interest.

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