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Past Traumas: Representing Institutional Abuse

On behalf of the State and of all the citizens of the State, the Government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims of childhood abuse for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue.

(Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, 1999)

The Taoiseach’s apology of the 11th May 1999 marked a transformation in attitudes. How did this change take place and why? It seems to us that this is a legitimate area of inquiry and we want to ask those who apologised to victims of abuse and who contributed to the redress fund – we want to ask them: ‘How did you come to apologise?’

(Judge Sean Ryan, 2004)

On 11 May 1999 the Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, convened a press conference at which he delivered a public apology to the children who had been abused while in the care of the State. The family is enshrined in the Irish Constitution as ‘a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights’ which the State ‘guarantees to protect’.

However, should the family fail, the State will intervene, as decreed in Article 42.5: ‘In exceptional cases, where the parents for physical or moral reasons fail in their duty towards their children, the State as guardian of the common good, by appropriate means shall endeavour to supply the place of the parents, but always with due regard for the natural and imprescriptible rights of the child.’ However, it became increasingly clear in the 1990s that since independence the State
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had in fact profoundly interfered with the integrity of the family in inappropriate ways, which violated the ‘impresscriptible’ rights of the child. Following the Taoiseach’s apology in 1999, the government proposed a referendum on strengthening the rights of the child in the Constitution. Though a decade later, in 2009, proposals were published for the 28th Amendment to the Constitution on the rights of children, there has been no official commitment as to when this referendum will take place.

The system of childcare institutions was – and in many cases still is – in the charge of a number of religious congregations, in particular the Christian Brothers. Though government bodies such as the Department of Education had been aware for decades of the serious problems within this system, evidence was ignored or covered up. An official, public response was finally provoked by the broadcast in 1999 by RTÉ (the Irish public broadcaster) of a three-part series, entitled States of Fear, on the scale and extent of abuse in these institutions. The Taoiseach’s apology, and the resulting foundation of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and the Residential Institutions Redress Board (established in 2002), was at last a public recognition of past wrongs and a step towards writing a parallel history of victimisation.

States of Fear was by no means the first revelation of institutional child abuse. In the 1950s and 60s there were isolated voices raised against the system, but since the early 1980s a growing number of voices raised this issue, and called attention to the government’s failure to intervene, detect or rescue. From fictionalised works such as Nothing to Say by Gerard Mannix Flynn (1983), and investigative books like Children of the Poor Clares by Mavis Arnold and Heather Laskey (1985), to harrowing individual stories of survivors like The God Squad by Paddy Doyle (1988), an increasing range of personal stories of abuse regularly emerged, effecting a shift in public and governmental attitudes, referred to by Judge Ryan.

In the 1980s, the difficulties of bringing these stories to public attention is attested to by Mavis Arnold and Heather Laskey who submitted their book to over fifteen publishers before they were able to publish their history of the orphanages run by the Poor Clares, and even then it was only published with significant changes, specifically with the ‘political’ material taken out. Underlining the culture of silence on the issue of institutional abuse, Cathal Black’s docu-drama Our Boys, about the Christian Brothers, was made for Irish television in 1981, but was not screened until 1991. However, these singular examples of remembrance culture, over time, have had the cumulative effect of generating wider