



*"Through her heroic efforts to unite mothers and children separated by cruel practices and archaic laws, Philomena is helping make gentle the life of the world" — Ethel Kennedy*

[www.thephilomenaproject.org](http://www.thephilomenaproject.org)

THE PHILOMENA PROJECT

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Dear Secretary Kerry,

In 1952, Irish-born Philomena Lee gave birth to her son Anthony at the State-funded Sean Ross Abbey mother-baby home in Roscrea, Co. Tipperary. Sean Ross was one of three mother-baby homes run by the Sacred Heart Sisters in Ireland, responsible for more than 25,000 adoptions in and from Ireland. Despite the State's funding of the home, for three years, Philomena nurtured and loved her son while working off 'her keep' in the home's laundry, until her son was cruelly taken from her and trafficked for adoption to the US. Anthony was one of more than 2,000 such 'Banished Babies' sent to the US. I am one of those as well, adopted from Ireland to Philadelphia in 1961. My loving adoptive parents were always truthful with my younger adoptive brother and me about our circumstances, and always respected our right to know who we are. I am also the mother of a daughter born in Philadelphia in 1978 who I was forced to relinquish in a closed, coercive adoption orchestrated by Philadelphia Catholic Charities. And I've always believed, as does Philomena, that we are accountable to our children.

For many years, Philomena tried in vain to contact her son, or at least determine if he was happy and well and gave the Sisters her contact information. Each time, she was rebuffed by the Sisters in Roscrea. Likewise, her son Anthony (now named Michael), tried to find his mother, despite being told by his adoptive parents that his mother had 'abandoned' him. Michael had gone on to a brilliant career in Washington, serving as the chief counsel for the Republican National Committee under both Presidents Reagan and Bush. Twice, he visited the convent in Roscrea and was turned away. His last visit occurred in 1995, as he was dying of AIDS. He asked the Sisters if they would not help him find his mother, would they at least allow him to be buried there in the graveyard at Sean Ross? They finally relented, but only if he would consent to make a very sizeable donation, which he and his surviving partner did. He was laid to rest there in 1996.

Even after Anthony's death, the nuns continued to refuse to divulge information to Philomena – in fact, they didn't even tell her he was buried on their property. It was not until 2003, when Philomena shared her story with her daughter Jane Libberton (and she in turn reached out to our organisation), that we discovered photos of Anthony's gravestone and the truth behind the lies.

Philomena's and Anthony's incredible story has become the basis for the Oscar-nominated film *Philomena*, starring Dame Judi Dench and Steve Coogan. But more importantly, it spurred Philomena herself to become a passionate advocate (at 80 years of age) for the rights of all adopted people. In January 2014, Philomena and Jane partnered with our organisation, **Adoption Rights Alliance**, to start **The Philomena Project**.

I had the honour of visiting Capitol Hill in the US with Philomena and Jane, and meeting with key representatives including Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO), Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO), Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), as well as Irish Ambassador Anne Anderson, on the issue of adoption rights and the mother-baby homes in Ireland. The feedback and ongoing support we received from those senate offices and the Irish

Embassy has been phenomenal. I also had the privilege of personally testifying on a NJ Bill in February of this year, which was ultimately passed and restored the rights of NJ adopted adults (including 273 Irish-born 'Banished Babies') to their original birth certificates and identities.

In June, the Irish government announced its intent to launch an official Commission of Inquiry to investigate the practices carried out in these homes and institutions. Adoption Rights Alliance, along with its sister organization, Justice for Magdalenes Research, met with the Irish Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and made a [joint submission](#) to the inquiry process. Communicated in that meeting and in the joint submission is the understanding that this Commission should cover six distinct fields of inquiry, rather than focusing on institutions themselves:

- i. Infant mortality rates;
- ii. Adoption practices;
- iii. Vaccine trials and medical experimentation;
- iv. Forced labour and incarceration of unmarried girls and women who gave birth to babies or were seen to be 'at risk' of becoming mothers;
- v. Conditions in the institutions, including neglect, denial of adequate medical care and cruel punishment of unmarried mothers and their infants and children; and
- vi. Burials of unmarried mothers and their children who remained in recarceral institutions

We have also recommended that the Commission of Inquiry seek international oversight and expertise, as experience with the previous government inquiry into State involvement in the Irish Magdalene Laundries proved unsatisfactory, contentious and did not fulfill recommendations made by the UN Committee Against Torture.

The US Department of State has shown incredible wisdom and restraint with regard to the practice of intercountry adoption, and we applaud the measured approach you and your staff have taken with regard to the best interests of children. To that end, on behalf of Philomena, Jane, and Adoption Rights Alliance, we now urge the US Department of State to provide additional oversight and watch-dog the Irish Inquiry process to insure that the rights of more than 2,000 now US citizens are upheld and protected. These citizens, including myself, were victims of forced, illegal adoptions and child trafficking and many of us subjected to illegal vaccine and other medical trials while resident in Irish mother-baby homes. This issue is not solely an Irish one, and should not be yet another white-washed 'Irish solution to an Irish problem,' as has been the case with prior inquiries relative to the treatment of women and children. It has international consequences, and in particular, consequences for US citizens.

Respectfully,

**Mari Steed**

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