

Statement of Witness 25

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WITNESS STATEMENT OF PHILOMENA LEE

I, Philomena Lee, of [redacted] WILL SAY:

1. I make this statement for the purpose of providing evidence to the Mother & Baby Homes Commission of Investigation established by the Irish Government pursuant to Section 3 of the Commissions of Investigations Act 2004.

2. Attached to this statement is an exhibit marked "PL1" which contains various copy documents. Reference is to page numbers in this statement are to pages in PL1.

3. I make this statement as someone who spent time, and had a child, in the Sean Ross Abbey Mother and Baby Home in Roscrea, Tipperary.

Circumstances of my Birth and Early Life

4. I was born on [redacted] 1933 in Newcastle West, Limerick. I am now 83 years old.

5. I was the fourth of six children and as a family we were not very well off. My mother died of tuberculosis aged 36 when I was 6 years old. My father decided that he could not manage with six children and so he put myself and my two sisters into the Mount St Vincent Convent School in Limerick. This was an orphanage/boarding school where we lived all year round save for two weeks per year when we could go home. I entered the convent, which was run by the Sisters of Mercy, in 1939 and left in 1951 when I was 18.

6. When I was 18, I went to live with my aunt in Limerick City. She got me a job working as a cleaner in St Mary's Convent in Limerick. I stayed there for approximately 9 months.

7. In or around October or November 1951, I fell pregnant. While I had received a good education at the convent, I didn't know anything about the ways of the world and had received no sex education whatsoever. On one Friday, night my aunt took me to a carnival and at the fair I met a man who chatted me up and one thing led to another.

8. I carried on working until May 1952 when one day my aunt asked me out of the blue if I was pregnant. I said that I didn't know what pregnant meant and she asked me if I had ever "been with a boy". I said that I had, once at the carnival, and my aunt got very angry and slapped me around the face.

9. My aunt then took me to a doctor and he confirmed that I was pregnant. The doctor recommended to my aunt that she "take me to Roscrea" but I didn't really understand what he meant by that. I don't know how or what arrangements were made for me to go to Roscrea but one day shortly after the doctor's appointment my brother and aunt drove me there. I went with only what I was wearing and knew nothing more than that I was going there to have my baby.

Sean Ross Abbey

10. I only have a vague recollection of my arrival at Sean Ross Abbey which I believe was on 6 May 1952. I was met by a nun and after a short handover I was taken away and my aunt and brother left. I was 7 months pregnant.

11. I slept in a large dormitory with other women and girls some of whom were pregnant and others who had already had their babies. Most of my memories have been blocked out over the years but I recall being cold at night and that the clothes they gave us to wear were heavy and scratchy. No one had any privacy at all. I cannot remember what the food was like, however, I have an abiding memory of always being hungry.

12. The day after I arrived at Sean Ross Abbey I was put to work in the laundry. The working day was approximately 8.30am until 4pm and it was heavy work scrubbing clothes and bedding on boards, washing and ironing all with our bare hands. As far as I could see, we were only washing the Abbey's own laundry and that this was not a commercial operation. We worked a 6 day week. On Sundays we would attend a number of masses but we would not work in the laundry. To the extent that the women and girls had any spare time, I recall that we spent a lot of this time knitting clothes for our children.

13. The regime at the Abbey was pretty severe but, as I tended to do what I was told, I didn't receive many punishments. The key thing that I remember is that the nuns kept on reminding us that we had committed a mortal sin and that our shame should be eternal. We had to attend confession every week and every time we had to confess to what we had done. In effect. Therefore, we never received absolution. All of the women and girls at the Abbey were given a new name, mine was Marcella, and there was little or no discussion of who we really were and what our families might do or from where they came. This was all a part of the shame we were made to feel every day of our time at Roscrea.

14. I do recall that a couple of the girls ran away but on each occasion they were brought back by the Garda. As for myself, I only stepped out of line once so far as I can recall. We had a rare day off on 22 July which was the feast day of Mary Magdalene. We had to go to and from church all day putting our uniform on and off. By the third change I simply refused to change again and the nun who insisted that I did so became really angry and then didn't speak to me for the next 6 weeks. The story clearly got around the other nuns and I was pretty much ostracised until I apologised. To make my apology, I was forced to go down on my knees and apologise to the nun in front of everybody in the refectory. This was just another part of the humiliation and shame that we were subjected to every day.

Giving Birth

15. When I started going in to labour, I was taken to the onsite maternity unit which was known as St Josephs. There was no doctor present, just nuns, and there was no formal medical care or any kind of pain relief. I found the labour agonising but, in accordance with the principle that we had to suffer for our sins, one of the nuns in response to my screams simply said "let her get on with it".

16. It was a breech birth and the nun who was looking after me said she had never done one of those before. At one point during the labour that nun left the room and told the mothers in the adjoining maternity ward that they had to get down on their knees and pray because "Marcella is going to die". Nonetheless, at 7pm on Sunday 5 July 1952, I gave birth to a healthy baby boy (7lbs 12oz) who I named Anthony.

17. I stayed in St Josephs for 8 weeks. I don't remember much about that time other than that I spent it all looking after and breastfeeding Anthony who I loved with all my heart from the first minute I saw him.

The Period until Anthony's Adoption

18. After 8 weeks in St Josephs, I went back to the main building and back to work in the laundry. The work regime was as before but each day between 4 and 5pm we were allowed to spend time with our children under the supervision of the nuns. I lived for that hour every day and Anthony was always really happy to see me when I came into the nursery. I didn't continue breastfeeding Anthony after the original 8 weeks and he was fed by the nuns along with the other post 8 week old children.

19. Some of the others had a little money to buy gifts for their children. I had nothing but there was one very kind nun, Sister Annunciata, who would occasionally give me a bar of chocolate to give him. That same nun also took a few photographs of Anthony and gave them to me (pages 2 to 6).

20. It never occurred to me to ask whether I could go home now I had given birth. This was partly because I had nowhere to go (my aunt had effectively disowned me) but also because I had to stay until Anthony was adopted. It was taken for granted that Anthony would be adopted and it never even crossed my mind that there might be any other option.

21. One Sunday a nun called me upstairs to see Sister Hildegard in the office. Sister Hildegard was the nun who ran the adoption business of the Abbey. Sister Hildegard was in the room together with a tall man who I now assume was a solicitor. Sister Hildegard produced a single page document which she put in front of me pointing at the bottom and

saying "sign there. Your boy is going to be adopted." I wasn't given time to read the document and simply did what I was told.

22. The document that I signed, a copy of which I have now obtained and is at page 1, appears to have been dated the following day and confirms my agreement to Anthony's adoption and relinquishes all rights to him. It also confirms that I will never try to contact him. The contents of this document were never read to me or explained to me. The document purports to have been sworn on oath. However, at no point was I ever asked formally to swear to the document.

23. As it turned out, Anthony was not adopted until about 6 months later but every day after the meeting with Sister Hildegard I was terrified that would be the day he was going to go. No one told me anything about when he might go or to whom he might go.

24. Then, finally, on 18 December 1955 when Anthony was 3½, he was taken away for adoption. I didn't get a chance to say goodbye but the same kind nun (Sister Annunciata) informed me that he was leaving and I ran upstairs and looked out of the window and saw him getting into a car. There was no discussion about it in advance and I was given no information afterwards other than that he had gone. Being parted from him broke my heart.

25. I cried and cried over the Christmas period because I wanted him back. I think it was because I was inconsolable that the nuns decided to get rid of me and got me a job in a school in Ormskirk in Lancashire that was run by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary which was the same religious order as Sean Ross Abbey.

26. I travelled to England in early 1956 and worked in Liverpool for 2 years and then applied for a nursing job in [redacted] I moved to [redacted] in 1958 and got married in 1959. I have 2 children, Kevin and Jane, and also have 4 lovely grandchildren. I stayed in nursing all my working life focussing in the main on psychiatric nursing.

Finding Anthony

27. During the almost 50 years since Anthony was taken away, I only told one person about him. I told my husband before we got married because I didn't want there to be any secrets between us.

28. For several years after they took Anthony away I was terribly angry. However, once I started work at the psychiatric hospital I got over my anger as I came to understand what a destructive force anger could be. Even so, I have never been to confession since. I thought about Anthony every day and prayed that somehow we would be reunited. I didn't do anything to find him because I had been told I shouldn't but I always told the

nuns at Sean Ross Abbey what my address was in case Anthony ever came looking for me.

29. The only contact I ever had from Sean Ross Abbey after I left was that I was sent a photograph of Anthony with his adoptive mother. This arrived when I was in Ormskirk. I assume that it was sent by Sister Hildegard.

30. When I turned 70, I just decided one day that I had to try and find Anthony. I spoke to my brother and he said that I should tell my family and so, in August 2003, I told my daughter Jane the whole story. Jane asked me whether I wanted her to find Anthony and I told her that I did.

31. It was Jane who found out what had happened to Anthony and under what name he had been raised. She did this by contacting an adoption group in Ireland, one of whose members was Mari Steed. That group had produced a tracing guide and using the information in the guide, and benefitting from the fact that I had all the relevant details about Anthony's birth, we obtained his birth certificate. Having got that, Jane and I wrote to all conceivable government agencies asking for information about what had happened to Anthony. I was astonished however at how reluctant anyone seemed to be to assist in tracing Anthony and they all referred me back to other agencies like in an elaborate game of pass the parcel (pages 7 to 15).

32. Finally, in late 2003-early 2004, we wrote to a Sister Sarto at the Sacred Heart Adoption Society (page 14) and received a reply from her asking us to telephone her which we did in January 2004. When we spoke, Sister Sarto informed me that Anthony had been adopted to America, that his name had been Michael Hess and that he had died. Her words were "I'm sorry to tell you he's dead". This was obviously absolutely terrible news and I was extremely upset.

Adoption Process

33. Having learned of Anthony's name in the US and with the help of Martin Sixsmith, the former BBC journalist who agreed to assist in finding information out about Anthony and who subsequently wrote a book about our story, we found details of Anthony's adoption both on the Irish end (pages16 to 66) and in America (pages 67 to 77).

34. It appears that Anthony was not formally adopted until he got to America. Apparently his adoptive parents had been doing a European tour and had been advised by a relative, who was a Catholic bishop, to go to Roscrea and consider the adoption of a child. It seems that Mr and Mrs Hess had resolved to adopt a little girl but when they saw how close that little girl (Kate) was to Anthony they decided to take both of them.

35. I understand from Kate and Anthony's partner that Mr and Mrs Hess paid a significant sum of money to Sean Ross Abbey in connection with the adoption and that they paid annual sums thereafter but I do not know the detail of the sums involved.

36. It appears that there was some limited vetting in America to confirm that Mr and Mrs Hess were suitable adoptive parents. I understand that Mr and Mrs Hess' existing sons were a little resentful of their new adopted brother and sister and that Mr Hess was fairly strict but at the same time I have always understood that Anthony had a very good relationship with his adopted mother.

37. Anthony turned out to have a very good brain and he qualified as a lawyer and rose to being counsel for both the Reagan and Bush administrations. Apparently he never forgot his roots (he always knew that he had been adopted and that his original name was Anthony Lee) and he made strenuous efforts to find his family.

38. These efforts included two trips to Sean Ross Abbey, the first of which was in August 1993 (page 79). When he was at the Abbey, Anthony expressly asked the nuns for details of his mother. By all accounts, and in particular from his partner who was with him, he spoke on both occasions to Sister Hildegard but she told him that they were not able to help. In fact, Sister Hildegard told Anthony that I had abandoned him at 2 weeks old and the nuns didn't know where I was. This of course was a patent lie as I had looked after Anthony for 3½ years at the Abbey prior to his adoption and the nuns at the Abbey always knew where I was in case Anthony came looking.

39. On his second visit, Anthony knew that was dying and I am informed by Anthony's partner that Anthony paid a significant sum of money to the nuns at the Abbey so that his ashes could be buried there in case I ever came looking for him. Even though the nuns knew he was dying and Anthony had directly asked for information about me, they still chose not to put him in touch with me.

40. Anthony died on 15 August 1995 (pages 79 to 87) and I understand that Sister Hildegard died a few months after. It seems I will, therefore, never know why the nuns did not put Anthony in touch with me even when they were taking his money to allow him to be buried at the Abbey. This unspeakable cruelty can never be justified.

41. Finally, in 2014 TUSLA sent me further information showing the entries relating to Anthony and myself from Sean Ross Abbey (pages 88 to 106). These records include a letter from a Sister Gabriel to Sister Sarto dated 15 May 1996 (page 101) which suggests that the nuns were well aware of Anthony's circumstances and chose not to inform me even that he had died.

What should the Commission do?

42. I believe that the Commission should provide a report that acknowledges the extent of the cruel and, in many cases, inhuman treatment of the vulnerable women who passed through the Mother and Baby Homes. The homes were embedded in the state system and I believe were partly funded by the state. The state did not look after the women that were sent to the homes and the removal of their children for adoption, often without the mother's consent or with uninformed or coerced consent, has caused unspeakable suffering. It is simply not good enough to explain this away as a consequence of the moral and beliefs of Society at the time. In my view the Commission should recommend to the Irish state that it apologises to every woman passing through the Mother and Baby Homes and to the children that never knew their families because of their adoption.

43. I believe that the Commission should also take steps to improve people's ability to contact their relatives. At the moment the respect for an individual's privacy is given too much weight when considering another individual's right to know from where they come. I believe that the Commission should recommend a change in the law to allow individuals to find out information about themselves much more readily than they can at present and without the stigma that still seems to be attached to being born out of wedlock.

44. As a former member of the medical and nursing profession I am also well aware of the importance of family history when it comes to making medical decisions, especially in the context of hereditary conditions. It is absolutely vital that all individuals have as full an access as possible to their identity and their records and those of their family members so as to improve treatment decisions for themselves and their family.

45. Finally, I believe that the Commission should recommend the provision of help and counselling for women and children who passed through the Mother and Baby Homes. Many of the mothers who gave birth in the Mother and Baby Homes were thoroughly indoctrinated with a sense of shame at their situation and the fact that they had committed a mortal sin. The Commission should state very clearly that the mothers in the Mother and Baby Homes had done nothing wrong and that they did not deserve the treatment that they received.

Signed .. [redacted] Philomena Lee.

Philomena Lee

Dated 24.2.2017.