CLANN: IRELAND'S UNMARRIED MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN: GATHERING THE DATA

Statement of Witness 78a

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Institution(s)/Agencies:	Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home, Castlepollard, Westmeath; Department of Children; Sacred Heart Society; Adoption Board
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WITNESS STATEMENT OF [redacted]

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

1. I make this statement for the purpose of providing evidence to the Mother and 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 "[redacted]1" which contains various copy documents. References to page numbers in this statement are to pages in [redacted]1.

3. I make this statement as an adopted person.

Circumstances of my Birth and Early Life

4. I was born on [redacted] 1964 at Mullingar County Hospital, County Westmeath. After I was born, I was taken immediately to Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home ("**Castlepollard**") at the insistence of my birth grandfather and remained there until [redacted] 1965. I was adopted by adoptive parents who lived in [redacted]. My birth was registered in my original name, which was [redacted]. I am now 53 years old [[redacted]1/Page 1].

5. My birth mother was living in [redacted] when she met my birth father. I was conceived and she went back to her home in [redacted] to tell her parents. Her father didn't trust my birth father, so he insisted that she go back to [redacted] and tell him that she had miscarried and there was no baby any more. So she did.

6. My birth grandfather was adamant that I was to be taken to Castlepollard. He told my birth mother that she had two options: (1) take me to Castlepollard; or (2) he would throw me into the canal and drown me. My birth mother had no choice but to go into Castlepollard with me, as she feared for my life if she did not. We arrived at Castlepollard on the day of my birth.

7. I lived in Castlepollard for eight months until I was adopted on [redacted] 1965. I understand that I was baptised at Castlepollard shortly after my birth. However, when I contacted Castlepollard Parish Church for a copy of my baptismal certificate, the version they sent had my adopted name on it, which suggests that they did not fill it in until they knew who was adopting me and where I was going to end up. It did not have any names on the certificate for either godparents or sponsors [[redacted]1/Page 2]. I have subsequently requested copies of more documents relating to my birth and baptism from the Department of Children ("**DOC**") in Ireland. I have been asking for copies of documents for many years, but have been told that all records have been handed over to the DOC.

8. I have limited information about the time my birth mother spent at Castlepollard. All the information I have has come directly from her. She never discussed anything regarding medical trials or vaccinations, but she did tell me that they would constantly change the baby formula. She thought that they must have been trialling that out on the babies. She also spoke of having to go to work every day and leaving me. There would be a row of babies outside in their prams, regardless of what the weather was like. There was one woman in charge of all the babies at the home; there were 20 to 30 of them while I was there. The mothers would see their babies in the mornings before work and in the evenings after work. They were not allowed to see them during the day. The mothers would do the first feed in the morning and the last feed at night; the woman in charge of the babies would give them their second feed of the day while the mothers were out working. The babies were locked away at night and the mothers were denied access to see or visit them. The mothers all slept together in a dormitory and would talk about how they were all being treated and what was going on at the time at Castlepollard.

9. My birth mother talked a lot to me about how she was treated at Castlepollard. She said the treatment was terrible and inhumane. She said she was made feel like a criminal for having a baby and was constantly made to feel guilty. My birth mother and all the other mothers were made to feel that guilt all their lives and my birth mother certainly felt it until the day she died. She said she would never be able to publicly acknowledge my existence because of the shame she felt and she was terrified that anyone would ever find out about it.

10. The day after I was adopted, my birth mother was thrown out of Castlepollard. They gave her just enough money to pay for the bus fare home. The nuns at the home made her feel worthless as she had conceived a child out of wedlock and the nuns made sure they constantly reminded all the mothers how worthless they all thought they were. My birth mother said that she did not suffer any beatings at the hands of the nuns, but she spent the majority of her days there on her hands and knees scrubbing stone floors. All the mothers there had to do it as a punishment. She told me it was a very emotionally traumatic time and that it impacted her mental health severely. They had this constant reminder and a feeling pressed on them that they had committed some horrible crime. She told me that it impacted her all of her life.

11. My birth mother had a very difficult life. After she left Castlepollard, she gave birth to my half-sister. Unfortunately, she passed away at the age of [redacted] from [redacted] Following this, she suffered from a nervous breakdown, which she attributed to the death of my half-sister and the stress from carrying around the shame of having me. The following year, she gave birth to my half-brother with her then husband – he survived.

The adoption process and my life with my adoptive family

12. I understand that it was Castlepollard (otherwise known as the "Sacred Heart Society") who arranged my adoption. I am not entirely sure of the process, but my adoptive mother claimed that they made her life hell vetting her before they would allow her to have a child. I don't recall any social workers or otherwise attending the house when I was growing up. There can't have been much follow-up, as I grew up in [redacted]. It was a domestic adoption, but I was brought to [redacted] quite quickly. After I was adopted, my adoptive mother spent a week or two visiting her brothers and sisters with me. She took a lot of photographs of me there and put them into baby albums. The pictures cover me from the day I was born until eight months' old. They are all dated "one week old" and "two weeks old" etc. The reality is that I was in the home at that time. I wasn't adopted until I was 8 months old, but she had created the album to cover up that period of time. I still have those photo albums.

13. I have no real information about my early childhood, other than I slept a lot as a baby. Apparently I was greatly admired for babysitting duties. I was very small for my age – like a lot of the other adopted children, I was likely underfed at Castlepollard.

14. I was never told I was adopted as a young child. I was brought up by a nanny until I was eight years old and I didn't have much interaction with my adoptive mother until I was eight or nine. After that we interacted more with each other. My adoption came to light when I was having a sleepover with my cousins. I had a bit of a panic attack as I thought I had been abandoned by my adoptive parents – I always felt like that for some reason. My adoptive aunt tried to settle me and calm me down and told me that there was no way that my adoptive mother would abandon me. She said that I was very special. I asked her what made me special and she told me that I was adopted and that I had been picked out from the home. After that exchange, my relationship with my adoptive mother deteriorated. I became a chronic bed-wetter for about four years and was expelled [redacted] from school. After that everything just seemed to fall apart.

15. I also had an adopted sister from Castlepollard called [redacted] She was around two years old when she came to us. She was adopted from the home when she was [redacted] years old, but didn't come to us for a while. My adoptive mother rejected her initially, so my adoptive aunt took her in at first and brought her to [redacted] It eventually led to the suicide of [redacted] in [redacted] as she had so many unresolved issues with our adoptive mother and she always had felt rejected by everyone she came across. There were big issues in my opinion with the vetting of prospective parents – a lot of them shouldn't have been allowed children at all.

16. I remember the day they collected [redacted] from Castlepollard; there were pound notes fluttering in the breeze and the priest was fussing picking them up. I was told every baby from Castlepollard was paid for. There was a huge collection box at the front door, which was full of donations. It was always understood that you paid - I don't know how much was paid, but it was quite considerable at the time. I also know that the nuns at Castlepollard approached my birth family for money too – my birth grandmother told me. She was against the whole adoption, but my birth grandfather wanted it. The nuns approached my birth grandmother's [redacted] sisters and asked them to financially support their niece during the time she spent at the home. They asked them to contribute to her upkeep, even though the homes were being paid by the State on a daily basis.

17. My upbringing was tough. We were always a two-tier system in the family. My adoptive parents had an older daughter who was of natural birth. We were kept more to the outside. It's not like they didn't feed us or send us to school, but they treated us very differently to how they treated their own daughter. When [redacted] was a little older and would play up, my adoptive mother would lock her in a cage in the house. She would leave in her there for the whole day sometimes. I would help her to escape, but then there would be trouble for me. She would be locked up for anything – the smallest of troubles.

18. My adoptive mother was an alcoholic and a very nasty one. I know from my adoptive uncles and aunts that long before she adopted us, she was vicious and they were terrified by her. She always made it clear to us that we were never going to make anything of ourselves, as we came from "bad blood". I remember vicious beatings when we were younger, in particular I recall being thrown down the stairs when I was about 14 years old. I had done nothing wrong – no crime, she had just lost it and someone had to pay. I'm not saying that my adoptive father was an evil man, but he lived in that house and saw everything, but did nothing. He lived in "her" house and did what he was told.

19. We were always treated as outsiders by the family and always reminded that we weren't "blood", even by the nicer adoptive aunts and uncles. I recall at both of my adoptive parents' funerals, we were pushed to the back of the church like strangers. The family did not see us as their children. That was only in [redacted] and [redacted] so not that long ago in the grand scheme of things. Those feelings had always been there and will always remain.

Information and Finding Out about my Birth Parents

20. In the early to mid-80s, I left home and was living on my own in [redacted] Ireland. I wanted to resolve who I was and where I was from. I approached the Adoption Board in Dublin to see what I could discover. I am pretty brazen, so I walked right up to the front door, knocked and told them who I was and where I came from. They gave me the name

of "Sacred Heart" and told me to go to Blackrock in County Cork. They sent me off with a slip of paper. The paper had my name, address, date of birth, the day I was placed at Castlepollard and then the date I was picked up from the home by my adoptive mother. I also have a copy of the adoption order which was dated [redacted] 1966 [**[redacted]1/Page 3**]. The Adoption Board gave me a copy.

21. The problems pretty much started after I received that information. I approached the Sacred Heart Society who had moved to Blackrock in County Cork and began my search. They pretty much held me ransom for two years. They said they couldn't find my birth mother and I didn't believe them. Following this, I moved to [redacted] to get a job so I could start to make decent money to send to the nuns. I can't remember how much, but if I had a spare bit of cash I would send it to them. It was something in the region of £700 - £1,000 in total, which at the time was a lot of money. This carried on for a while until I spoke to a friend and his girlfriend. She had been adopted through the same society and Castlepollard. She knew the nun I was dealing with and she told me that the nun would not give me a thing! I wrote another letter and told them that I had exhausted all options and had no more money to send. Two weeks later, I received a letter from the same nun telling me that she had found my birth mother.

22. The nun told me I could write to her, but that it had to go through the Sacred Heart Society – I was not allowed to write directly. It turned out that my birth mother was still living in the same family home as when she had me – she hadn't moved at all, so the nun had her address the entire time and didn't give it to me. When my birth mother first wrote to me, she asked how I could have been so cruel to get in touch two years earlier and then to make no further contact – she said it broke her heart. I explained that I had been looking for her for a long time and that the nuns only told me at a very late stage that they had found her – I had no idea that they had even made contact with her before. My birth mother said it made no sense to her, as she was adamant that if I ever reached out they were to contact her. That was very difficult to hear.

23. I had a brief relationship with my birth mother – she would come down and visit me to have dinner when she could; I lived in the [redacted]. She refused to talk to me about my birth father, but she eventually gave in before she died. My birth mother clearly still had a thing for him, which was evident when she spoke of him. She passed away in [redacted], a couple of weeks after I was diagnosed with [redacted] – it was a very tough year for me. At the time, the surgeon told me that the strain of [redacted] I had was very unusual for someone of my age to have and he asked about my family history – I couldn't really give him one at the time. This often made me wonder, if the [redacted] was a result of any trials I might have been put through or if it was just a rare case – I guess I will never know.

24. I finally met with my birth father at my home in Ireland. It was a very emotional and traumatic experience for me. My birth father recalled when my birth mother told him she had miscarried. He claimed it was the first he heard she was even pregnant. He told me that he would never have let her go into Castlepollard if he knew she was pregnant. I believed him. He ended up married to a woman in very similar circumstances and they were together years later.

Access to Information

25. It is clear from the story set out above that it was difficult to obtain the requisite information about my mother and that the nuns at Castlepollard and the Sacred Heart Adoption Society were deliberately obstructive in the process. The information provided by them was inaccurate and did not aid the process of finding my birth mother. It was only once I told them I had no more money to send that they agreed to help.

I believe that the contents of this statement are true.

Signed [redacted]

[redacted]

Date 2-11-2018