

# TWISTED SISTERS

Many Irish women had their lives ruined by children's homes, where they were beaten, humiliated and abused. But because their tormentors were often nuns their stories have remained strictly taboo. Now they are asking for confessions. Peter and Leni Gillman investigate.

What distresses Julie Smith most, when she looks back at her childhood at Goldenbridge, is the arbitrary nature of the cruelty she was subjected to. "You were beaten for things no child in the world should ever have been beaten for." The slightest infraction brought a beating: talking in the dormitory, not noticing that the hem of your dress had come down, reading a girls' comic like *Bunty* or *Jackie*, which the nuns called "the devil's work". The beatings were delivered with a stick some 18in long,  $\frac{3}{4}$  in thick, rounded at each end. "This unmerciful shock would go up your arm — we always felt it had something electric in it." Trying to avoid the blow only made matters worse. "If you didn't hold out your hand, she would hit you on the elbow to make you straighten your arm."

"She" was Sister Xavieria, head nun at Goldenbridge, a home in Dublin to some 250 children run by the Catholic religious order the Sisters of Mercy. Julie, who was at Goldenbridge from 1952 to 1965, remembers her as "a very frightening person", swathed in a black habit so that for a long time Julie thought she was a man. Julie received her first beating when she was six, after she had lost a buckle from one of her shoes. It was the day of her first Communion, she was wearing a pair of smart patent leather shoes, and somehow lost the buckle on an outing with two older girls to Phoenix Park.

"From that day on, I was never without a beating," she says. She can still see no rhyme or reason to the punishment — "Nothing was ever explained" — and is convinced Sister Xavieria simply hated her. "But she never told me why her hatred towards me was so driven. No matter what you did, or how you tried to do your best, your best was never good enough."

Christine Buckley, a Goldenbridge child from 1950 to 1964, remembers seeing Sister Xavieria dragging Julie by her hair and "whacking the head off her" when they passed in the corridor. She believes Sister Xavieria detested Julie because "she was very pretty, and she had spirit". Julie suspects she was singled out because she was "bold", as the Irish put it. "I was one of those who wouldn't let them break my spirit. They saw something in me they wanted to break".

Julie lives in an isolated house at the end of a muddy lane in Ballycunnane, a village set in farming country near Wexford. Aged 50, married with three children, she has never related her story in such detail before, not even to her own family. "It's 30 years on and yet these memories just haunt me," she says. "But you couldn't tell anyone what happened, because nobody would have believed you." Julie is one of six women we interviewed who spent their childhoods in Goldenbridge. They describe a regime where brutality and humiliation were commonplace; a Dickensian time warp, where children's lives were regimented to the last detail, expressions of affection were suppressed, and transgressions were rigorously punished. Some have waited decades before giving their accounts, the outcome of irrational feelings of guilt and shame

they still suffer, which has led some to withhold their names. For what is almost unthinkable is that they should have been the victims of nuns, symbols of charity and compassion in Ireland's history. The Sisters of Mercy have been especially revered: Ireland's president, Mary Robinson, attended the reopening of the order's headquarters in Dublin in 1994, and their founder, the Victorian benefactor Catherine McAuley, is depicted on the current Irish £5 note.

The outcome of the most recent attempt to reveal the truth about Goldenbridge is particularly illuminating. In 1996, the Irish television network RTE showed a documentary that portrayed many of the brutal practices at the home. It was followed by calls for a public inquiry and promises of help by leading politicians, including the then taoiseach, John Bruton. Three years on, there has been no inquiry, and the politicians' promises have gone unfulfilled.

Meanwhile, ample evidence has emerged that the pattern of cruelty extended far beyond Goldenbridge, both to other Sisters of Mercy homes and to other institutions for children and young people. Yet it has been left to the victims to seek the full truth and pursue redress. Having been denied an inquiry, their only recourse is to do so through the Irish courts. They have lodged a claim for compensation against both the Sisters of Mercy and the Irish government, which have responded by seeking to have the case dismissed on the grounds that it all happened too long ago.

Goldenbridge was the collective name for a convent, school and children's home that was opened in 1856, two miles from the centre of Dublin. The convent, white and elegant with high gables, still stands today; the children's home, a gaunt, institutional two-storey building at the end of a long, winding path, was demolished in the 1970s. In the 1950s, the home contained about 100 children, mostly girls. (Boys were transferred at the age of 10, later reduced to 7, to industrial schools run by the Christian Brothers.)

Children were consigned there as part of a compact between the Irish government and the Roman Catholic Church. With no welfare state to speak of, the government paid the church (87.5p a week per child in 1950, £2.50 by 1970) to take unwanted children off its hands. There were usually two nuns in charge, assisted by seven or eight lay staff. Although Goldenbridge was often called an orphanage, the term applied to only a minority of the children. Some were sent there because - they were born out of wedlock, others because their mothers had been widowed, abandoned or taken ill.

The grim ambience of the home owed much to its provenance in the era of Victorian reform, when industrial schools were set up throughout Britain for destitute or homeless children. Goldenbridge was formally known as St Vincent's Industrial School, becoming one of around 30 run by the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland. The law required that children were sent to industrial schools by a court order, and — apart from a few voluntary admissions — this applied to the children at Goldenbridge. They appeared in court under a range of bizarre charges, from "seeking alms" to "being in want of proper guardianship". They were usually ordered to be detained until they were 16, and were thus effectively criminalised for the misfortune of having lost one or both of their parents. Children who did have relatives were abruptly taken from them, adding the pain of separation to the cruelty they were about to endure.

Julie was sent to Goldenbridge when she was three, after her father died of TB. She remembers a ' man banging a hammer and telling her she was to stay there until she was 16. Although her mother was present in court, "I wasn't allowed to go to her. I was just put in the Black Maria and taken to Goldenbridge." Her first memory is of

seeing a girl aged seven or eight being held by two older girls as she was beaten by a nun. She remembers high-ceilinged rooms, polished floors, curtainless windows and a yard whose high walls blocked the sun.

Children got up at 6.30am and went straight to Mass. Julie remembers children fainting from cold and hunger. "They would cart you out and slap your face." Next they had to perform their chores: making beds, scrubbing and polishing floors, cleaning the kitchens. Julie and Christine had to clean and scrub the toilets. When they were blocked they had to clear the sewage pipes, pulling out paper and faeces by hand.

Only at 8am came breakfast, invariably porridge, bread and cocoa. Kathy O'Neill, at Goldenbridge from 1954 to 1971, remembers gagging on lumps of half-cooked porridge. But if anyone retched up one of the lumps, she says, "It was put back in their mouth." Lunch was usually potatoes and beans, perhaps with a greasy stew; tea consisted of cocoa and a slice of bread. Most Goldenbridge women remember waiting in the yard for leftovers from the staff's meals. When the scraps were thrown out, says Kathy, "We would fight like savages. We were so hungry we just didn't care."

At 9am, children attended school. Although classes were taken by lay teachers, the curriculum was dominated by religion. Children had to learn the Mass in both Latin and Irish, and recite parables until they were learnt by heart. Most other subjects — English, Irish, maths, music and knitting — were taught by rote, with beatings the standard punishment for both misbehaviour and mistakes. Some teachers berated the children in lurid religious imagery. They were told there was evil in their eyes, the devil was coming out of them, they were worse than the soldiers who crucified Christ. "For a six-year-old," says Julie, "it was absolutely terrifying."

At 3pm came half an hour's playtime, usually spent in the yard. Then all children aged six and above were put to work making rosaries, threading glass beads onto wires which they shaped and cut with pliers. It took around two hours to make their quota of 60 decades, as the rows of beads were known. Mary Connor (not her real name), at Goldenbridge from 1954 to 1970, remembers how her fingers were perpetually cut and sore. "I hated those beads." The proceeds from selling the rosaries were used to help fund the home. "It was slave labour," says Julie.

Supper was at 6pm, followed by school homework, then bed at 9pm. Talking in the dormitories was forbidden, as was wearing underclothes in bed to combat the cold. Even in sleep there was no respite, for children had to lie with their hands across their chests. Several women still find it impossible to sleep any other way.

Compliance to this grim routine was enforced through a range of weapons and punishments. Some teachers used long rulers to hit children on the palms of their hands — and if they closed their palms they were hit on the knuckles instead. The lay helpers used scrubbing brushes and ladles as well as their bare hands or fists, sometimes administering beatings of extraordinary savagery. Kathy remembers how a helper "freaked" because she was arguing, hitting her so violently that her arms were left swollen and her back covered with bruises. Bernadette Fahy, who was at Goldenbridge from 1961 to 1970, received a similar beating after she was caught talking in the dormitory. She was pulled out of bed by her hair, stripped of her nightdress and beaten until she fainted. The helpers also terrorised children by pushing them into a tumble dryer, which they briefly switched on, and by locking them into a windowless boiler room in the basement.

Most feared of all was Sister Xaveria. From a farming family in western Ireland, she was first assigned to Goldenbridge in the 1940s, and took over as head nun in 1953, when she was 35.

Decades later, Sister Xaviera could still move Julie to terror: when Julie saw a newspaper photograph of her in 1996, "I just couldn't move. My whole insides drained."

Julie dreaded the nightly ritual known as "the landing". Children deemed to have misbehaved would be told to stand outside Sister Xaviera's room at 9pm, and could sometimes wait two or three hours until they finally heard her coming upstairs. The older girls would push the younger ones to the front, and some tried to reduce the pain by licking their hands or smearing them with floor polish (it never helped). Sister Xaviera rarely asked the girls why they had been sent there before beating them. Sometimes, she would announce that she was too tired, and instruct the girls to come back in the morning. "You'd be preparing to be beaten, shaking from fear and cold," says Kathy. "And then you weren't."

"You were always afraid," says Mary, "from the minute you opened your eyes in the morning to when you went to bed at night. Then you'd fear even in your sleep the devil was going to get you."

Julie used to dream of escape. "I wished I was dead, or in hell. Anything to get out of that place."

It is a further element of the children's misfortune that they had been placed in the care of a religious order, the Sisters of Mercy, whose internal imperatives, when combined with the ideology of the Catholic Church, facilitated its brutality towards children. From its founding in the 1830s, it developed a strongly autocratic and hierarchical structure. It was virtually closed to outside scrutiny, and also remained immune from childcare theories emphasising the importance of affection. Instead it clung to a rigid and punitive approach, based above all on discipline and control.

The religious historian Margaret MacCurtain has pointed to the psychodynamics of the order, describing the "tremendous repression" among the nuns, which helped feed the belief that children should be "disciplined into passionless creatures". This was reinforced by the core Catholic ideologies, including a belief in original sin, hostility towards female sexuality, and insistence on notions of penitence, cleansing and atonement, all of which were visited upon the children at Goldenbridge.

As the women relate, all forms of affection and individuality were rigorously suppressed, and the normal childhood ceremonies were ignored. "I never got a hug and I never hugged anybody," says Mary Connor. Children at the home were addressed by numbers — Julie Smith was 61 — or simply as "you". Relationships with siblings were ruthlessly broken. Julie had two brothers at a Sisters of Mercy home at Rathdrum, south of Dublin, but even though she saw them in church during outings to Rathdrum, she was not allowed to talk to them. Birthdays passed unmarked: it was not until she was 11 that Julie learnt that she was born on January 8, 1949. Although children were given presents at Christmas, they were usually taken back the same day.

One of the most disturbing incidents concerned Carmel McDonnell, who was eight when she was sent to Goldenbridge after her family broke up. When she was 11, two of her brothers, who had been sent to a boys' home in Dublin, drowned in a seaside accident. The nun who told her the news gave her two bull's-eyes as consolation and told her to say her prayers. The next day, as she was scrubbing the floor, she was overcome with grief and burst into tears. A lay helper told her, "Stop that nonsense," and smacked her across the face.

The children were subjected to regular rituals that reflected the nuns' preoccupation with cleansing and their antipathy to bodily functions, particularly as the girls reached

adolescence. Every Thursday they would line up to be issued with their weekly allocation of clean clothes. First they would have to hold out their knickers for Sister Xavieria to inspect. It was immensely hard to keep knickers clean, as there was no toilet paper — only newspaper — and sanitary towels were strictly rationed. Sister Xavieria would display dirty knickers on a stick, then force their owners to wear them on their heads until the session was over.

Toilet training and bed-wetting were other obsessions. Toddlers were placed on potties at fixed times and made to stay there, sometimes being strapped down until they had performed. Several women describe incidents when young children strained so hard, they suffered from prolapses of the rectum, which appeared as a bloody mess hanging from their bottoms. Bed-wetting was a serious offence: the culprits were beaten and made to wear their soiled sheets like a shawl. In what was clearly a further misguided attempt to prevent bed-wetting, girls were given nothing to drink outside meal times. Instead they would use their hands or cups made from paper to scoop water from toilet cisterns or the toilet bowl itself.

At regular intervals — perhaps four or five times a year — girls of all ages were ordered to parade naked so that they could be painted with a white lotion intended as an antidote to scabies. "You were embarrassed and wanted to curl up," says Kathy. If girls tried to shield their private parts, "The brush would be slapped and your legs would be forced open."

Accompanying these humiliations was a disturbing preoccupation with female sexuality that appears as a counterpoint to the order's vows of chastity and self-denial. Girls were prevented from linking arms: "It's obvious now they thought we were some kind of lesbians," Julie believes. And if they showed affection towards the young boys at Goldenbridge, they were told they were "man mad". Once in adolescence, it was often the prettiest girls who seemed to be singled out, having their hair shorn on the grounds that they were "vain".

Very few girls were told why they were at Goldenbridge, only that their mothers had not wanted them. Many were told that their mothers were prostitutes and warned that they too would grow up to be prostitutes and have illegitimate children. That puzzled Bernadette Fahy until she concluded that "prostitute" was the nuns' term for any woman who had children out of wedlock. "They regarded us as the evidence of sin," she says. "We were sin itself." That in turn, she believes, licensed the cruelty the children were subjected to, with the further consequence that no matter how much they were punished, their parents' supposed sin could never be expunged.

It was thus by a hideous paradox that, even while they were supposedly in the care of nuns, the girls were vulnerable to outright sexual abuse. One lay helper in her early 20s was notorious for twisting their nipples or grabbing them between the legs. Mary remembers being examined by a doctor who put his hands up girls' vests and down their knickers, while a nun stood by. Girls were also at risk when they were dispatched to spend weekends with local families. One interviewee tells how she was abused by both the father and the adult son from a family in Kildare.

Julie was raped at Goldenbridge. A maintenance man enticed her into an attic and locked the door, but did not remove all her clothes. Since she knew nothing about sex, she didn't know that this was called rape or even that it was wrong. "But I did know I didn't like it." Mingling with her distaste, however, was the unsettling feeling that by the standards of Goldenbridge, she had experienced a rare moment of affection. "He gave me some apples," she says, "and he didn't beat me."

Julie did not dare tell the staff what had happened. Girls feared that if they did complain, they would be blamed or disbelieved, and perhaps punished as well.

They were also in no doubt that to talk to outsiders about Goldenbridge ranked as a serious offence. When Christine was taken to hospital to have her thigh stitched after a particularly brutal beating, she was told to say she had fallen downstairs — and a lay staff member went with her to ensure that she complied.

Occasionally outsiders did come to Goldenbridge. But visiting relatives were not allowed beyond the entrance hall, usually meeting children in a cheerless single-room building known as "the villa". Even then, children were reluctant to talk about what happened in the home. "It was sheer fear again," says Bernadette, "A lot of the families were afraid of the nuns too." The children were thus left with the irreducible feeling that there was nobody looking out for them, nobody they could turn to. If girls ran away, they were invariably returned by the gardai and had their hair cut off — in the belief that since they were vain, they would not want to run away until it had grown again.

In theory, the Irish government was exercising oversight of Goldenbridge. In practice, reflecting the collusion between church and state, this was a charade. Once a year, officials from the Irish Education Board — remembered as "men in shiny suits" — would arrive. They gave the nuns ample notice, so the rosary beads were hidden away, the girls were dressed in frocks, and the dining tables were set with china for a three-course meal. The children were told that, if anyone asked, they were to say it was always like that. The inspectors talked only to Sister Xaveria or her deputy, Sister Fabian. "They never asked us how we were doing or what was going on," says Julie. Sister Xaveria, she adds, "had such power — she had them under her thumb".

Not all girls, the women agree, were treated as severely as they were. Some managed to stay out of trouble by remaining passive and compliant, like a friend whom Mary remembers: "She was very quiet — like the paint on the wall, you wouldn't notice her." There were also the "pets", girls who were singled out for favoured treatment by the staff, and were victimised by the other girls as a result. Some women remember moments of kindness, like the young nun visiting from the convent who put her arm round one of them after a beating.

For Julie, nothing surpassed the day in 1963 when she learnt that Sister Xaveria was leaving Goldenbridge. The only comparable moment in her life was the joy and relief she felt after her youngest son had been born two months premature. "It was a life-and-death thing and he had to have transfusions. The day they told me he was going to live, that was how I felt when I knew she was leaving Goldenbridge."

Sister Xaveria was replaced by her deputy, Sister Fabian. The beatings continued for a time, but at last more enlightened attitudes permeated Goldenbridge. Mary remembers an emblematic moment, when lay helpers stripped yet another girl naked and beat her mercilessly. This time Mary and other girls insisted on showing her injuries to Sister Fabian. The lay helpers left soon afterwards and the beatings came to an end. Children were called by their names instead of numbers, and local residents handed out presents at Christmas which they were allowed to keep. The visitors came back at regular intervals, and Carmel McDonnell remembers how, in their desperation for affection, the children clung to them "like leeches".

The reforms at Goldenbridge were partly in response to an inquiry into the industrial schools ordered by the government in 1968. In 1970, Judge Eileen Kennedy delivered a damning verdict. Children at the schools were depersonalised and institutionalised, deprived of love and security, and lacked stimulation and companionship. Many staff were amateurish, untrained and inadequate, and were the focus of numerous

complaints of abuse. In the immediate aftermath of the report, six Mercy Sisters homes, including Goldenbridge, were closed.

For the women of Goldenbridge, the reforms came far too late. By the time they left, usually at 16, most had endured a decade or more of cruelty. Only a privileged few had received any effective further education from the age of 12. Many lacked social skills and self-esteem and were convinced they were worthless. In contrast to the victims of catastrophic incidents such as fires and shipwrecks, who suffer from post-traumatic shock syndrome and can be helped through modern counselling techniques, most had an entire childhood to recover from. Most telling of all was the effect of Goldenbridge when they came to have children of their own, which brought alarming flashbacks and unlocked long-suppressed emotions.

Julie Smith had an intimation of what was to come when she became a domestic servant with a doctor's family in Dublin. Although the doctor showed her the first real affection she had known, she was plagued with jealousy towards the doctor's children. "I thought, why should they have someone nice to look after them when I didn't?" Her feelings were so strong that she had to leave. Yet they were replicated when her own children were born and she found herself unable to show them overt affection, even to give them a hug. "For some reason or other, I just couldn't."

Mary Connor was convinced everyone could tell she had been at an orphanage: "You thought there was a mark on you." The first time anyone showed her affection, she had nightmares about Goldenbridge. And when her first child was born in 1984, she experienced a surge of turbulent emotions, love mingling with fear. "I used to wake screaming - it triggered off all my feelings."

Kathy O'Neill believed she had constructed a mental shield that would protect her from the traumas of the past. But when she gave birth to her son in 1987, she too was overwhelmed by unknown feelings. "He was so beautiful and giving, he was such a tactile child. I had this feeling that would overtake me — I knew it was love. Maybe somebody gave it to me once and I had locked it away." A year later came a profoundly disturbing incident. Her son was refusing to eat his food and, in a sudden vision of being forcibly fed at Goldenbridge, she lashed out and hit him. "The anger came from way back somewhere. I was so afraid if he didn't eat it, he would die. I just went to pieces. How could you love somebody and feel so much anger and resentment?"

Most of the women suffered from a sense of isolation that compounded their fear of not being believed. It might have helped if they had known that the cruelty they experienced was not confined to Goldenbridge. For a long time, Christine Buckley had believed that Sister Xaviera was a "one-off evil woman". In fact, throughout Ireland there were several generations of women who were subjected to similar brutality and abuse at other Sisters of Mercy homes.

Phil Porter was at the order's home near Cork - first at Cobh, then at Rushbrooke - from 1954 to 1971. "I never heard a child's voice enjoying itself or calling or playing or asking," she says. "There was nearly always someone crying, somebody getting a beating for nothing." As at Goldenbridge, girls were punished for the slightest infraction, such as dropping a knitting needle or walking on the wrong side of a corridor. The head nun used a black strap some 2 ½ ft long. The matron, a lay staff member, dispensed beatings with a long wooden spoon. She also dragged them by their hair or thrust her thumbs into their mouths, stretching their lips and digging her nails into their cheeks.

There were the same humiliating rituals as at Goldenbridge. Knickers were inspected after school once a week, and if they were dirty, girls had to wear them on their heads until bedtime. The food was just as repellent, and if children retched it up the matron would scoop it up, even off the floor, and force it back into their mouths. There were just 10 minutes each day when girls were allowed to speak to each other, from 6.20 to 6.30pm. At night, all girls had to lie facing in the same direction, and anyone found to have turned over — and presumed to have wanted to talk — was beaten.

One of Phil's few positive memories was when she danced in a Christmas show and a priest led her back onto the stage to take a bow. The next evening, the matron pulled her out of the group by her hair and ordered her not to show off. "Everything that could have been happy was squashed."

Patricia Gavin (not her real name) spent 16 years, from 1946 to 1962, at the Sisters of Mercy home at Birr, County Offaly. As a persistent bed-wetter, she was beaten most mornings and evenings, sometimes by the head nun, Sister Stanislaus, sometimes by the lay staff, who would drag her from her bed and push her face into her urine. (Her bed-wetting was finally corrected by surgery when she was 22.) When Patricia was practising her part in a Gaelic play, a nun hit her across her face because she had forgotten a line. Her face swelled up and she had a black eye. That evening, Sister Stanislaus gave her a further beating, and when she performed in the play she had to wear a mask. Today, after reading for a short period she feels pain in her face and sometimes loses the vision in her right eye.

There was the same hostility towards girls as they reached adolescence. When a 12-year-old girl began to sweat under her arms, Sister Stanislaus called her a "filthy bitch" and threw her downstairs. (Predictably, she was sent to hospital with instructions to say it was an accident.) Patricia is convinced that Sister Stanislaus obtained a sexual charge from punishing the girls. "She'd be wrenching your chemise off, getting a stick and smacking your legs open, 'You filthy bitch.'" If they kept their vests on in the washroom, she would pull them off, exposing their breasts. "She loved it."

Teresa Conneely went to the Sisters of Mercy home of St Anne's in Galway in 1960, when she was eight. The worst beatings were dispensed by a nun in her 20s who hit children with her belt, winding it round her hand and swinging back her arm to impart maximum force. Unlike in other homes, the lay staff did not administer beatings. And although girls had to display their knickers every Thursday, there was not the ritual humiliation if they were soiled. But in other respects St Anne's fits the pattern. Children as young as four were hit or had food forced back down them if they were slow to eat. When Teresa had a headache and was sick onto her bedclothes, her head was pushed into the vomit.

The interviews show, at the very least, that cruelty and abuse were not limited to Goldenbridge. The similarities also demonstrate that the Sisters of Mercy must have taken steps to ensure that discipline was enforced consistently throughout the homes, while the variations reflect the autonomy the head nuns were allowed.

Since there has been no full inquiry into the women's accounts, it is hard to tell just how many girls were subjected to such treatment. The industrial schools our interviewees describe were among the 19 Sisters of Mercy schools still in existence in the 1950s and 60s, home to around 5000-6000 children. Victims were not hard to find, with each interviewee knowing several others we could approach. Several too had siblings who had never recovered from their childhood traumas. They also know

of many instances of drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide and early deaths from illnesses such as cancer.

Yet the industrial schools were part of a broader culture of tyranny and abuse that is even now scarcely acknowledged. The cruelty in the Sisters of Mercy homes was paralleled by the treatment of boys at the Schools, from which individual accounts of brutality and sexual abuse trickled out over the years. Eventually, belatedly, some of those responsible began to show contrition. In 1997, the De La Salle Brothers apologised "unreservedly" for ill treatment of boys at their schools. In 1998, the Christian Brothers finally followed suit, expressing their "deep regret" for ill treatment and abuse suffered by those in their care. Soon afterwards, one of their priests was sent to prison after pleading guilty to 53 charges of sexual abuse.

"What is striking is that the cruelty had none the less formed part of popular mythology at the time: one of the most feared warnings, issued by teachers and parents alike, was to threaten to send a misbehaving child to Goldenbridge. The fact that the abuse persisted for so long reflected the unassailable grip of the Catholic Church on Ireland's culture and institutions, demonstrated most starkly through the power exerted by Archbishop John McQuaid.

Autocratic, reactionary and dogmatic, McQuaid was Dublin's archbishop from 1940 to 1972. He used his sway over Ireland's politicians to defeat proposals for free health care for mothers and children, because it threatened the church's hold on such issues as contraception and abortion. He thwarted a bid to allow children in industrial schools to be placed in the care of adoptive parents. He effected censorship over publishers and broadcasters, blocking a television programme about industrial schools that would have included Goldenbridge. The Irish government habitually gave way to his dictats, although there was no constitutional reason why it should.

Even after McQuaid retired, it was to take several decades to break the church's psychological grip. There were occasional glimpses, in memoirs and articles, of life inside the industrial schools, most notably in a 1988 book. *The God Squad*, an account by Paddy Doyle of an appalling childhood at a Sisters of Mercy home at Cappoquin, County Waterford. Doyle's book was followed by dramatic revelations of the church's fallibility. The Bishop of Galway proved to have had a sexual relationship with an American divorcee, to have had an illegitimate son, and to have embezzled thousands of pounds. Then the popular Dublin priest Father Michael Cleary was found to have had a secret life, having had two sons by his housekeeper.

Finally, in 1996, the dam burst. The instigator was Christine Buckley. After Doyle's book was published, she had expected an official inquiry into his revelations. When nothing happened, she appeared on a radio chat show to talk about Goldenbridge. She was heard by a television producer, Louis Lentin, who asked her to help make a programme about life in Goldenbridge. Lentin was well aware of the scale of the taboo he was confronting. "Nothing had ever been directed at nuns before. Priests, yes. But nuns were clean."

Several other Goldenbridge women took part, including Julie Smith, Kathy O'Neill, Bernadette Fahy, Mary Connor and Carmel McDonnell. Some rehearsals revived their old traumas: a sequence showing children being locked into the boiler room left Kathy shaking. On the eve of the viewing, Carmel suffered a devastating panic attack. "It hit me what was going to be on it. Will they be denying the things I have told my friends? Am I going to be shown as a liar?"

The programme, *Dear Daughter*, was broadcast in February 1996. Carmel burst into tears of relief. "Now I knew these things for certain." Julie's family learnt the truth at

last. "My youngest son had the biggest reaction," says Julie. "He was very, very hurt for me."

The programme brought the Goldenbridge women the sense of vindication they had sought. A phone line set up by RTE was inundated, and the women who appeared were telephoned incessantly by other Goldenbridge survivors. When they organised a reunion in Dublin for women who had been in Sisters of Mercy homes, 500 turned up. The Irish press headlined the story for weeks, and politicians pledged their support. The taoiseach, John Bruton, acknowledged that many victims were suffering from "depression, guilt, addiction, personality disorders and relationship problems" and promised that the government would provide "a full counselling and therapeutic service". As for the Sisters of Mercy, they appeared contrite. They issued a "statement of regret" for the "harsh treatment" of children in their care and sought "forgiveness for all our failures", adding: "The fact that most complaints relate to many years ago is not offered as an excuse."

A few days later came a shattering coda, when an elderly couple came forward to describe what had happened when their baby daughter was placed in Goldenbridge in May 1955, because the mother, Christina Howe, was in hospital. Soon afterwards they were sent a telegram telling them their baby was dead. The death certificate recorded that the baby had died of dysentery, but her father insisted on viewing the body and found deep bum marks on the baby's thighs. The nuns had refused any further explanation and the parents had been thwarted in all their attempts to discover the truth. (The order eventually paid them £18,000 compensation, with no admission of liability.)

A month after Dear Daughter, however, the women felt crushed once more, when RTE broadcast a follow-up to its own programme. Its principal message was that the women's accounts were unreliable. A psychiatrist who worked at a Sisters of Mercy hospital in Dublin argued that the women could be suffering from distorted or suggested memories, were vulnerable to some kind of collective fantasy, or had even fabricated their accounts to meet other emotional needs.

Sister Xaviera herself was interviewed in the garden of the order's retirement home in Cork Street, Dublin, where she now lives. It was a revealing and — to the women — carefully judged performance, combining limited admissions with denials of the most damaging details of the women's accounts. Sister Xaviera conceded that she had beaten children with a stick, but denied causing any visible injuries. She "felt dreadful" that children had been forced to wait for punishment on the landing, but often had not known they were there. She "couldn't remember" if children who wet their beds had been forced to wear the sheets around their heads. She said she was "truly sorry" for any "hurt, pain or damage" she caused, but denied Christine's accounts of incidents in which she had been scalded and injured so badly that she needed stitches. She also denied that children were ever put into a tumble dryer.

The programme left the Goldenbridge women feeling cheated and betrayed. "I found it very, very hurtful," says Julie. Kathy felt "fear and sick and anger". Bernadette, now a trained counsellor, says: "I know all about so-called false memories. Our memories are as clear and sharp as ever."

Since the second programme, the women have suffered further setbacks. Bruton declared that a public inquiry could only be held "after careful consideration". His health minister, Michael Noonan, dutifully added that any inquiry would "have great difficulty in establishing the truth or otherwise of some of the allegations". No inquiry was held.

The women were heartened when Ireland's director of public prosecutions ordered a police investigation, even though many found it a painful process revealing intimate details of their treatment to police officers. Then the DPP announced that there would be no prosecutions, on the grounds, according to press leaks, that the evidence was weak and that it would be wrong to condemn Goldenbridge in view of "a change in attitude towards corporal punishment" and therapeutic service", that too has been betrayed.

The paradox is that the government's obduracy occurs when it is guiding Ireland towards a fully secular state, with divorce now legalised — despite the church's outright opposition — and education being prised free from the church. The religious orders are in decline: the number of nuns has fallen by one-third to 12,000 in 25 years, and only a handful of new nuns are "professing" each year. Pdraig O'Morain, social affairs writer for the Irish Times, believes that the government fears an inquiry would probe too deeply into the historic "intermingling" of church and state. With three government departments — Health, Education and Justice — complicit in the scandal, there are too many entrenched interests for the women to overturn.

The response of the Sisters of Mercy to our enquiries has been intriguing. At first sight, the order maintains an impressive public profile. It publishes books and videos about its charitable works around the world, and has a website that provides a guide to its International Centre in Dublin. Yet Irish journalists consider it one of Ireland's most impenetrable organisations, never leaking information or yielding an inside track. What is known is that it has been selling off many of its properties: at Goldenbridge, the home has long since been replaced by an apartment block, and it has just sold the old convent to Dublin City Council for social housing.

When we sought an interview with the order, its public relations advisers asked us for our questions in writing. We listed 51, ranging from historical background to issues of when the order became aware of abuse at Goldenbridge. Three weeks later, we received a remarkable letter from the order's Dublin solicitors, who complained that our questions were "aggressive", "partisan", "extraordinary", "improper" and "entirely inappropriate".

From the order itself we received a rather more temperate statement, although it addressed very few of our specific questions. "The stories told by former residents of Goldenbridge and indeed other similar institutions greatly sadden the Mercy Sisters today," it declared. "As Mercy Sisters we sincerely apologise to people who were hurt in any way while under our care. If we failed them, we are deeply sorry."

It pointed out that the care of children at that time was "totally under-resourced with often in excess of 100 children, many with personal difficulties, under the care of two to three sisters and a small number of untrained helpers". The past 20 years had brought "advances in the understanding and structures in the provision of childcare" and "greater emphasis on the individual needs of children". The order now cared for about 100 children in 16 homes, with a staffing ratio better than 1:1.

In one crucial respect, the statement was unyielding. Once more narrowing the focus to Sister Xavieria, it said that, while she had "apologised for any harsh treatment of young people", she denied "the grave allegations made against her". And so, the Sisters of Mercy concluded, "we believe that the legal and judicial process is the fairest and most transparent way of having the entire matter resolved".

The Goldenbridge women disagree. Bernadette says that they had always hoped for a conciliatory solution, rather than the protracted adversarial battle they now face. Having delivered their initial statements to lawyers acting for the order and the Irish government, they have been asked to supply precise times and dates and the names of

witnesses for their claims — a formidable task after 30 or 40 years. They will also have to counter the threat that their claims will be dismissed on the grounds that the events in question occurred more than three years ago — the legal time limit for such cases. - The most tangible outcome of Dear Daughter consists of a telephone helpline funded by the Sisters of Mercy for former residents of their homes, intended to provide both immediate advice and face-to-face counselling. In 1997 this was merged with a helpline for all victims of religious abusers, which has since taken 4500 calls and provided counselling for 450 people. The women we interviewed regard the helpline with mixed feelings. Teresa Conneely has found the counselling highly beneficial. "I can get rid of the demons," she says. "I'm excited and frightened at the same time." Julie, who takes the bus to Dublin for a two-hour session every fortnight, is still not sure that her counsellor really grasps what she went through. Bernadette and Christine consider the line a poor substitute for the counselling and therapeutic service the government promised. Both are still fielding up to a dozen calls a day from victims unwilling to use the helpline because it is associated with the Sisters of Mercy. "They're terrified of getting a nun on the line," Bernadette says. "They don't want to go back to the people who abused them in the first place."

Dori Mitchell, the helpline co-ordinator, insists that the counsellors are "lay and independent" and believes it has helped "a lot of people to move on in life". But she concedes that too many victims are unwilling to give it their trust. "There's very little one can do to allay that. It's coming from the past, and when people have been abused their trust has gone. It's very, very sad."

Even the supposed survivors of Goldenbridge still often struggle to come to terms with their past and their regret for their stolen childhood years. Reflecting on her lost childhood, says Mary, "It dawns on you what it could have been." Bernadette has just written a book about Goldenbridge, *Freedom of Angels* (published this month by the O'Brien Press, Dublin), which she hopes will help exorcise the past. Carmel views Dear Daughter as a watershed in her life, helping her become far more assertive and self-assured. Kathy was plunged into depression afterwards: "It lasted three or four months and frightened the life out of me." She finds her greatest consolation in her son, now 11. "He's very affectionate and physical. Even now he comes up and puts his arms round me."

In Ballycunnane, Julie feels guilty that she is still unable to show her children open affection. But two years ago her granddaughter, Tara, was born, whom she now looks after during the day. In some way Julie does not fully understand, Tara has helped to liberate her grandmother's trapped feelings. "For some reason or other," Julie says, "I can give this little thing the hug I couldn't ever give my own children." •