

A memorial is seen July 7 in Tuam, Ireland, where an excavation is underway for the remains of 796 babies at the site of a former mother-and-baby home run on behalf of the Irish government by the Catholic Sisters of Bon Secours. The home closed its doors in 1961. (OSV News/Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne)



by Sarah Mac Donald

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TUAM, Ireland — September 10, 2025

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In 2012, after years of research, amateur historian Catherine Corless published an astonishing story in a local history journal detailing that 798 children had died at St. Mary's Mother and Baby Home in this small town in Galway County.

Even more shocking was Corless' determination that all but two of the infants and young children were likely buried in a mass unmarked grave, part of which may have functioned as a sewage system.

Now, 13 years after the publication of her article, "The Home," an excavation on behalf of Galway County Council is underway to try to recover the remains of the children buried at the home, which was run by the Bons Secours Sisters from 1925 to 1961. Six weeks into the excavation began in mid-July, the realization that the dig is actually happening "is still sinking in," Corless said in an interview.

The first tranche of artifacts recovered has not produced any infant remains. But the excavation has a long way to go before it is completed by 2027, and Corless expects that as excavation to other parts of the site, the ground will begin to reveal its secrets.

"The excavation team are starting on the perimeter of the site where the oldest part of the original 10-foot-high wall from the workhouse era stands. We know that there are no burials along this stretch near the wall," Corless said. "They are then moving to the other side of the site to inspect the area where the workhouse deadhouse was situated to secure that. It may be some weeks yet before they begin to start on the excavation for the babies."

Meanwhile, more than 110 people have so far offered their DNA to an identification program, in the hope that some of the recovered remains can be identified and linked to family members still alive. Identified remains will be given over for a more appropriate burial in a family plot.

> 'Surely, they would have known something about the burials of those children who died? Of course they did!'
> —Catherine Corless
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That is the hope of the tenacious Corless. It also is a hope shared by Anna Corrigan of the Tuam Babies Family Group, which represents relatives of the infants believed to be buried at the site. Both Corless and Corrigan brought the existence of the unmarked mass grave, and the possible use of a septic tank for burials, to the media's attention over a decade ago.

The revelation that there were no burial certificates for 796 children born at the home — two were buried in a cemetery — sparked a public outcry and catapulted the self-effacing Corless into the national and international spotlight.

Corless has since won awards for her research and commitment to getting to the bottom of where the children were buried. Referred to as a "tireless crusader of dignity and truth" by Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin, her pursuit of the facts has drawn the ire of some angered by the bad publicity for the Irish Catholic Church, the Bon Secours Sisters and the town of Tuam itself. It has not been plain sailing for Corless.

The excavation in Tuam is being overseen by the Office of the Director of Authorized Intervention in Tuam, the independent body the Irish government established in October 2022.

Led by Daniel MacSweeney, the team of specialist archaeologists will excavate and exhume whatever human remains it finds of infants who died in Tuam's Mother and Baby home between 1925 and 1961. The home, known as St Mary's, was run by the Bon Secours Sisters on behalf of Galway County Council for unmarried mothers.



Daniel MacSweeney, director of Authorized Intervention, speaks during a press conference in Tuam, Ireland, July 7 ahead of a visit to the excavation at the site of the former Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam. (OSV News/Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne)

The excavation began on July 14 after a number of delays. It has initially focused on two areas: the former workhouse yard and the high stone boundary wall at the eastern side of the site. Corless is unsurprised by the absence of infant remains in the ODAIT's first trawl. Research had indicated that there was a low likelihood of human remains being present in these two initial areas of the excavation.

It was February 2014 when Corless highlighted in an interview in the Connaught Tribune her campaign for a permanent memorial for the children who had died in the home, specifically a plaque with the names of the 796 for whom no burial certificates had been found.

The archaeologists have been working behind a specially built fence with sealed gates in a housing estate on the outskirts of the town of Tuam. Despite the obvious challenges of this delicate recovery process of whatever tiny fragile skeletal remains the ground offers up, some of the surviving relatives of the 796 infants hope that their remains will be identified.

Archbishop Francis Duffy of Tuam has paid tribute to the team leading the excavation at the burial ground of the former mother and baby home.

In an interview with NCR in July, just after the excavation commenced, Duffy acknowledged that "many people have been waiting for a long time" and "have been looking forward to this day."

"I know there were expectations that it might have happened sooner but I think it is better as it is now and to have it done very professionally," the bishop added. "The results should be positive for many people."



Archbishop Francis Duffy of Tuam, Ireland, seen in a July 31, 2022, visited the site of the former mother and baby home the day before he was formally installed as archbishop in January 2022. (CNS/Sarah Mac Donald)

Duffy said a lot of thought had been put into the excavation.

"I think for some people there will certainly be a good element of closure in it — it has been long awaited," he said.

The bishop recalled that on his first day in Tuam, the day before he was formally installed as archbishop in January 2022, he visited the site of the former mother and baby home.

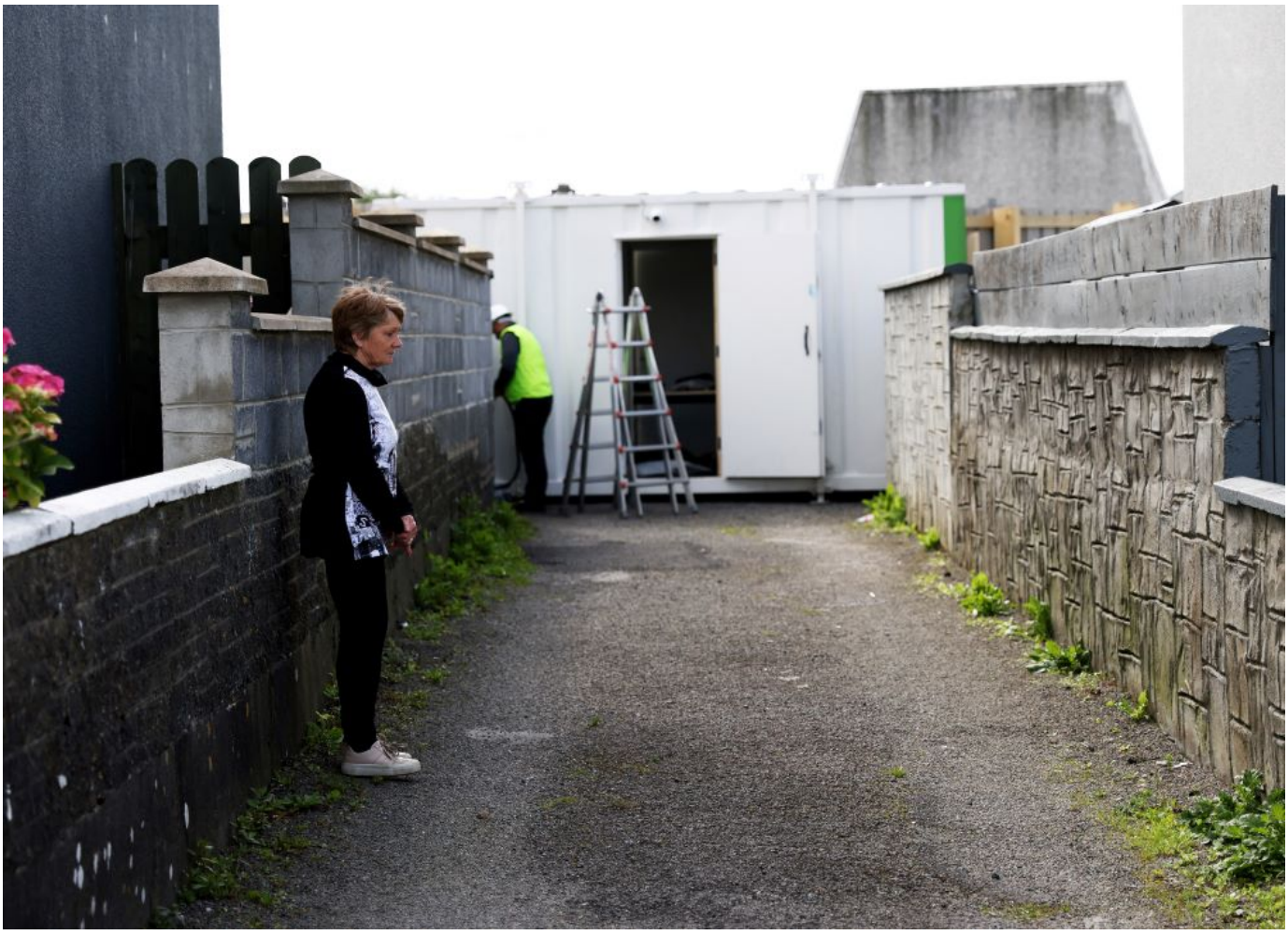
"I felt strongly that I should honor the deceased and I went and said some prayers there," Duffy said. "Afterwards I met different groups who had different views and it was good to meet with them and listen to their stories. It was very moving."

There is a dark irony in the fact that Tuam's name derives from Tuaim, which in Irish means burial place, an allusion to a Bronze Age burial site in the locality.

But these days there is only one burial site on people's minds. The preliminary investigation of the ground in 2017 indicated the presence of up to 70 burials. Tests on a small number of remains established that they were children ranging in age from premature babies to 3-year-olds.

If the excavation yields few burials, then the focus will turn to locating the remains of the other children for whom there are no burial certificates.

The specter of illegal adoptions to the U.S. remains in the background for now. Some in the Tuam Babies Family Group, including spokesperson Anna Corrigan, believe such adoptions may explain the absence of so many burial documents and the unusually high mortality rate prior to the 1950s.



Historian Catherine Corless visits the excavation site of St Mary's home for unmarried mothers and their children, in Tuam, Ireland, July 7. An article Corless wrote about the former mother and baby home drew global interest in what happened to hundreds of babies who died there. (AP/Peter Morrison)

Corrigan notes that the infant death rate in the home dropped after 1952 when adoption became legal. Should her suspicion be right, it opens a pandora's box in relation to the falsification of death certificates — a criminal matter.

Corless, a 71-year-old mother and grandmother, has been challenged by some over the necessity of the excavation and told, "aren't they only bones — leave them there, don't disturb the dead."

In late August, the former diocesan secretary of the Archdiocese of Tuam, Fr. Brendan Kilcoyne, criticized the excavation and said "a fortune of money" was being spent on the excavation works despite the completion of a "first-class" government inquiry.

Speaking on his podcast, "The Brendan Option," Kilcoyne said there was an "outrageous myth" that children at the institution had "met an untimely end through bad action." He described the Bon Secours Sisters as "outstanding."

Pushback has made Corless even more determined to pursue the truth.

"How 796 little souls were just thrown there was never a moral issue for the church. Let sleeping dogs lie was a great thing with the church," she said. "I was putting them to shame by bringing this out. But I had one focus, and I knew what I was doing. I had primary records."



Heavy machinery is used for excavation work July 7 in Tuam, Ireland, where the bodies of 796 babies are thought to have been buried at the site of a former mother-and-baby home run on behalf of the Irish government by the Catholic Sisters of Bon Secours. (OSV News/Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne)

Many people, including Corless, find it inexplicable that infants, though they were baptized, are believed to have been thrown into an unconsecrated pit.

It is even more incomprehensible in light of the site's proximity to the town's main Catholic cemetery, located a few hundred meters away.

Corless believes the cavalier disregard for the deceased, so contrary to the ethos of respecting the dead, can only be explained by the conservative socioreligious climate of the time, which considered children outside marriage as a sin.

"The mentality," according to what Corless has heard people say, was "that these children were 'the sin of the mother.' "

In 2014, announcing a Commission of Investigation, the then Prime Minister Taoiseach Enda Kenny said children born to unmarried mothers were treated as "an inferior sub-species" for decades in Ireland.

The Bon Secours congregation in 2021 offered their "profound apologies" to the children and women who lived at the home in Tuam.

Admitting that their sisters "did not live up to our Christianity when running the home," the congregation also acknowledged that "infants and children who died at the home were buried in a disrespectful and unacceptable way."

Corless said she was able to speak to the cemetery caretaker to gather information. He has since died.

"When I started out looking for the burial place of the home babies, I was looking for an 'angel's plot' in the town cemetery," Corless said. "The cemetery caretaker was from the local area and knew bits and pieces; he was very helpful to me. He brought me over to where the grotto is and explained that this had been a wild area until they started building the houses."

The grotto is on the site of the former home in a housing estate built in the 1970s, Corless said.

"He pointed to the playground and said, 'there are burials here,' " Corless said. "I thought he was talking about burials from the famine workhouse, but he told me the story of the two lads who found bones in this area."

The youths had found the bones in 1975, Corless said.

"I thought they must have been bones from the famine and he said, 'No, the Tuam babies are buried here,' " Corless said. "The question then was how many home babies were buried there."

Corless approached the Bon Secours Sisters and the leader at the time, Sr. Marie Ryan, told her that as the home in Tuam closed in 1961 the congregation "had no records" of burials as all the files had been handed over to Galway County Council.

"Galway County Council said they knew nothing about burials," Corless said.



Dublin Road Estate in Tuam, County Galway in Ireland, was built on the grounds of the former Mother and Baby Home. (Sarah Mac Donald)

So Corless went to the then-archbishop of Tuam, Duffy's predecessor, she said, "and sat down with him and his historian, and he told me they had nothing to do with the home beyond a 'pastoral level.' "

But Corless has doubts about what she was told. She said priests from the diocese said Mass in the home daily during its operation and they heard confessions and they baptized all the children.

"Surely, they would have known something about the burials of those children who died? Of course they did! The more I researched the more I realized that this is a complete coverup between the lot of them. When I saw that it was a cover-up, I knew I couldn't stop.”

Asked what she believes the excavation will bring to light Corless said, “We know for certain that there are remains in the chambers and we know for certain that some of

the babies up to 1937 did get burials.

“In the grass area and under the playground we know there are boxes that were burials. Whether there are boxes on top of each other or not we don't know. The ground penetration survey showed up about 70 anomalies the size of a grave in the grassy area and a lot of the playground. There are little dips in the ground. There is definitely something there."

The sewage tank is the last section the excavation will target.

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Corless examined the survey maps and plans for the housing estate that was built over the grounds of the former mother and baby home when St Mary's buildings were demolished in 1972.

"I found fantastic evidence including memos written to Galway County Council. One memo stated: 'Be careful putting down tarmacadam on top of the children's burial ground.' On the architect's drawings 'burial ground' was written across this area."

But Galway County Council denied that they knew anything about burials, Corless said. So did the Bon Secours Sisters, and the church,

One of the most disquieting features of Tuam was the high mortality rate among children born there. Between 1942 and 1947, 305 children died in Tuam. Between 1925 and 1961, a child died on average every two weeks.

In her research, Corless noted the poor hygiene and poor nutrition which contributed to the spread of diseases like tuberculosis, whooping cough, flu and measles.

The Final Report into Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland noted that the high mortality rate was known to local and national authorities and was even described in public reports.

When the report was published in January 2021, the government of Ireland issued an apology over the "appalling level of infant mortality" identified in the report.

The report noted that, "Although the first report of the registrar general of the Irish Free State highlighted the appalling excess mortality of children born to unmarried mothers" there is little evidence that politicians or the public were concerned about

these children. "No publicity was given to the fact that in some years during the 1930s and 1940s, over 40% of 'illegitimate' children were dying before their first birthday in mother and baby homes.



Senior forensic consultant Niamh McCullagh holds a map July 7 showing the planned excavation of the site in Tuam, Ireland, where the bodies of 796 babies are thought to have been buried at the site of a former mother-and-baby home run on behalf of the Irish government by the Catholic Sisters of Bon Secours. (OSV/Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne)

The high level of infant mortality in the Tuam home did not feature at the meetings of Galway County Council, though the Council held meetings in the home.

Corless has primary documentation from a store in Tuam — ledgers and account books — which show that the home was providing cigars, brandy and high-quality food for those Council meetings. At the same time, the children were malnourished.

Anna Corrigan of the Tuam Babies Family Group believes her two brothers, John and William Dolan, may be buried at the site. A reference to her brother John in an inspection report of 1947 was "horrific," she told NCR.

"John was born January 1946 and he died in June 1947. He was almost 9 pounds in weight at birth and there didn't appear to be any problems. My mother had to leave the home after a year, and the inspection report was made a month after she left."

It described John as emaciated and listed his cause of death as measles. "Money was being paid by Galway County Council to the Bon Secours nuns and there was a doctor in situ because the doctor was paid by the Council to attend the local clinic and the home. My mother was sending five shillings a month back to the home for John's upkeep. I couldn't find one piece of paper of any doctor's report on John. I found that horrendous because there should have been where the baby was deteriorating to such an extent that he was described as 'a congenital idiot' when he died. That there is no paper trail for his medical condition I found that horrendous."

The lack of medical certification is not the only missing documentation relating to John. There is no burial certificate.

However, her brother William is an even greater mystery. Marked "dead" in the nuns' ledger in 1951, no death certificate or medical certification of death has been found. Corrigan believes that he may have been adopted illegally in the U.S., which would explain why no death certificate was issued for him. She holds out hope that he may be alive and that they may find each other.



Anna Corrigan looks on at the excavation site of St Mary's home for unmarried mothers and their children, in Tuam, Ireland, July 7. A member of the Tuam Babies Family Group, Corrigan believes her two brothers, John and William Dolan, may be buried at the site.(AP/Peter Morrison)

According to Corrigan, the Bon Secours Sisters, through their then leader in Ireland, Sr Marie Ryan, wrote to her in April 2013 before the story had become an international headline and told her that a grave existed in Tuam.

"In the letter she said: 'As I understand it, there would be therefore a very good possibility that his remains (John's) were buried at the small cemetery at the home itself. This was located at the back of the home and was operated as a general grave.'"

The sisters later denied knowledge of this through PR consultant Terry Prone who denied there was a mass grave and "claimed only famine-era bones existed." Corrigan said.

Corrigan said two letters to Pope Francis went unanswered. She also never received a response from a 2017 letter to the then archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin.

Corrigan has launched High Court Civil Proceedings against the Bon Secours Sisters and other organizations over the circumstances surrounding the death and disappearance of her brothers. Through her solicitor she has said: "I won’t rest until I see justice for my two brothers."

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