

Funeral ceremony sought for 'Magdalens'

By Edward O'Loughlin

THE cremated remains of 133 "Magdalen" women exhumed from graves in a Dublin convent last week have been stored in Glasnevin crematorium to await a decision on how they will finally be laid to rest.

Meanwhile, a group calling itself the Magdalen Memorial Committee has written to the Archbishop of Dublin, calling on him to organise a public funeral for the women.

The Magdalens were "fallen" women taken in by the Sisters of Charity at their High Park convent in Drumcondra, Dublin, between the 1860s and the 1960s. Single mothers, prostitutes, abandoned, orphaned, unwanted or unmarried sisters and daughters, many worked in the convent's laundry business before it shut down around 25 years ago.

They lived hidden lives, virtually as lay nuns, and when they died many were buried in a private plot at the convent, separate from the cemetery where the sisters themselves were interred. The name of Magdalen, the penitent Biblical prostitute, appeared on many of the gravestones: "Magdalen of the Sorrows", "Magdalen of the Sacred Heart", "Magdalen of St Anthony".

The remains of the forgotten women were moved last week after the Sisters of Charity concluded a deal to sell 11.5 acres of the convent grounds to a developer, saying they needed to alleviate debts incurred by the order's current shelter and nursing facilities for 40 women at the site.

The bodies were all exhumed

between Wednesday and Saturday and cremated at Glasnevin. According to the Catholic Press Office, it is intended that the urns will be buried under a single stone bearing the names of the dead women. The Sisters of Charity plot in Glasnevin is not very large, a spokesman explained. However, a spokesman for Glasnevin cemetery said it was still awaiting instructions on what to do with the remains.

Because many of the graves were used more than once, it was often impossible to distinguish which remains belonged to which name on the headstone.

The order's decision to sell has caused some controversy and focused attention on the once-common fate of "immoral" or merely inconvenient women in Ireland. The Magdalen Memorial Committee has also asked the Archbishop to forbid any building on their former graves, and to make a substantial donation towards a public memorial for them "at a prominent place in Dublin as a permanent reminder of past injustices".

The group was founded recently by Ms Patricia McDonnell, angered by the treatment of a female relative who, at the age of 16, was sent to live in a convent on the orders of a parish priest after her parents died in the 1940s.

"These women were treated as worthless in life and now they are worthless in death," she said. "The idea that they should be disturbed from their resting place is obnoxious."

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