

Magdalens reinterred in common grave

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By Paul O'Kane

THE BROWN urns which held the ashes of the dead were almost identical.

The only minor characteristic which differentiated one urn from the 132 others was the thin white strip fixed around the front. It carried the name of the deceased, and the year in which she died. On many of the urns it simply read "Unknown".

The remains of the 133 women who had worked in the laundry run by the Sisters of Charity in High Park, Drumcondra, were reinterred in a common grave in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, on Saturday morning. The reburial, which was accompanied by a

short Service at the graveside, followed a decision by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity in Drumcondra, Dublin, to sell off a graveyard to repay their debts. The debts had been incurred by the High Park convent 10 years ago due to the building of a centre for marginalised women.

The High Park graveyard contained the bodies of women who had worked in the laundry before it closed down 25 years ago. All 133 bodies were exhumed and cremated at Glasnevin. Since many of the graves were used more than once, it was sometimes impossible to distinguish which remains belonged to the names on the headstone.

The first body is believed to have been buried in 1866, while the most recent burial took place in 1983. They were "fallen" women; unmarried mothers, prostitutes, the orphaned, the destitute, the homeless, and the simply unwanted. They were commonly known as Magdalens, as the urns holding their mortal remains testified. One nameplate read: "Magdalen of St John", another, "Magdalen of St Alphonsus".

Saturday's reburial was a private ceremony attended by about 25 nuns, their chaplain, Father Tony Coote, and a small number of lay people. Led by Father Coote, the 10 cars of mourners

made their way slowly under the shadow of the high cemetery wall to the High Park plot. The 133 urns took an alternative route to the plot, transported in the rear of a jeep.

The urns were slowly removed from the vehicle one-by-one by a member of the cemetery staff and carefully passed along a line of nuns towards an opening dug underneath the side of the plot.

They were then handed down to another member of the cemetery staff, who carefully position the urns in their final resting place.

As this process began, at about 10 a.m., the small group sang "Jesus remember me, when You

come into Your Kingdom", the first of several refrains. Their soft female voices created a solemn atmosphere, enhanced by the sweet sound of nearby bird-song and the wind rustling in the copper birch tree which overhangs the plot. The distant sound of traffic created the only intrusion into this strange, yet moving tableau.

The small group heard a reading from the Gospel according to St John and prayed for all those who have died, before saying a decade of the rosary and laying three wreaths on the common grave.

"In faith we believe these women are already with God,

they are risen with Jesus," Father Coote prayed. "We pray to them; with them, and for them".

Padraig O'Morain adds:

Anger at Saturday's burial, and at the fact that it was held without notification to the families of the women concerned or to the public, was expressed by relatives of the women at a public meeting in Dublin last night.

The meeting, organised by the Magdalen Memorial Committee, heard that a public Memorial Service, organised by relatives, will be held in Dublin next Saturday week. A book of condolence has been opened and members of the public are being asked to sign it outside the GPO.

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