



Introduction Talk by Margaret McGahon

Groundbreaking Event

June 22, 2024

Today is a big day. You are all very, very welcome. It would be hard to put into words for this team the journey to get to this day, and I'm not going to do it. We don't really even have the time. But it has been some journey, and there has been a lot of turbulence along the way, coupled with a huge amount of support from everybody here and a lot of people that are not here. There's a lot of people present online and also a lot of people who are no longer with us that we need to think about too. We have had some very loyal and faithful companions the whole way through, and there's a few that are really in our minds today.

Now my job on this panel is to speak about the past, so I drew the short end of the stick there! We're going to briefly acknowledge the past, and then we're going to move on towards the future. Today is a wonderful day. We are on this beautiful site. We are so lucky to be here, but we do have to acknowledge that this site has a complex history. That's very important. I'm going to speak a little bit about survivors and then we're going to move forward.

Survivorship is a very complex journey and there are survivors in every room that you go into. It's actually quite common. I think it would be very hard to understand some of the things that have happened here and that are happening globally without understanding two key pressures on a society. One is poverty, at least here, and the other is a degree of clericalism. These are two of the things that have contributed to some of the things that have happened here. I'm not going to go too far into them because I think we all pretty much understand them. But I do want to highlight that when we take the most vulnerable people in a society and we put them in the care of people who are indemnified, sometimes bad things happen.

I don't think that's surprising, and that is the shortest and easiest way that I can interpret that for us. That's what has happened. When we think of things like institutional abuse, that is really what has occurred. One of the things I want to say, and I've been saying this for years, survivors are mad at the Church. They're mad at the state. Do you know who else they're mad at? Do you know the answer? And it's starting to bear out in research. Us. They're mad at society. They're mad at us. What do you think about that?

I was trying to explain this to a group of nurses. We do a lot with trauma-informed care, and I was saying, sometimes you'll get power struggles, you'll get anger, and you'll get all this kind of stuff if they have a history of abuse, particularly institutional abuse. I was trying to say they're mad at you, and one of the nurses said, "Sure, why would they be mad at us? We didn't do anything."

Bingo. We didn't do anything. That's at least their perspective, right? Many of us did try to do things. The bottom line is what occurred in institutions was a minority of the population, the most vulnerable, and in some cases, some of the most indemnified. There was a majority around that who was supposed to bear witness and step in, and didn't. There's a complex sort of bunch of variables that go on when we don't. This is humanity, but I think it's important for us to acknowledge that. We're here today because we're trying to do something. We are trying to do something, and it's important to acknowledge that peace for survivors. I'm working with them all the time. I've been working with them for two decades. Successful survivorship usually ends up at that last place, that need to reintegrate and make peace with the society in which they live.

I've been saying it for years, and it's starting to show up now in research. They have added this fourth and final stage to trauma recovery, which is the confrontation with society. That's us. That's the good news. The good news is that's us, and we can do something about that. This is going to be a place where we do something about that. Okay, that's all I want to say on it. That's the doom and gloom and the heavy piece, and it's really not that bad, but it's important to acknowledge survivors and the journey because there are things for us to learn from that. Now, when we look at the past, I think we have very mixed feelings.

Some of them feel like, "Please, I can't bear another bad Church story." It's really, really hard, and there are a couple of things that have helped me with this along the way. I don't know if you're familiar with the historian Adorno. I'm going to apply this to us in a minute, but he said, "A true patriot is someone who has the courage to look at his country and hate it a little bit." The courage to look at his own country, that he loves, and hate it just a little bit. Hate is a strong word. We'll take hate out of it. We'll say, find certain things unbearable.

We have to have the courage to be able to look into the past and say, "That's unbearable. When I look at that, I find that unbearable." There is raw energy in that for us to take forward into the future. When you find something unbearable, is it because everything is bad? No. It's because there are so many things that are good, that you love, and it feels unbearable that this is "icky-ing" it up. Does that make sense? It feels unbearable because of how much you love and how many beautiful things there are to love, and that's why we're here today. Everybody is here today because of all these wonderful things that we love. The rituals, the practices, the clergy, all the beautiful prayers that were full of love have been answered, and that's why we're here. So it's important, I think, to acknowledge that, but we have to do both.

We have to stare the hard things down so we know how we're going to approach them, and so we know how to approach the hard things in the present as well, by the way. There's a lot of big things going on that we need to be thinking about in the present, a lot of vulnerable people that need to be attended to now. So we have to take those lessons from the past. I think a true Catholic right now is not necessarily someone who's following all the rules or ticking all those boxes. I think it's someone who's looking at the past, feeling a little confounded, feeling like it's really hard because of all these things they love, but then sitting with this difficult past, and being confounded, wondering how to integrate with that, but

sticking around. We've all stuck around, haven't we? Because of the things that we love. We're not going anywhere. That's what a true patriot, a true Catholic is. We're still here and full of love, right?

I have one last little thing. I will leave you with a little anecdote of a survivor that I think is very beautiful and captures why we're here today. There was a laundry that was closing in Dublin, and a woman that had been in the laundry for 14 years. She had recently spoken at the UN about her time in the laundry. The press asked her, "What should the state do at this place? What do you want to see happen here?" She was very emotional, and very fired up, probably stimulated, and she said, "Just burn it to the ground. I don't care what you do with it, burn it to the ground."

Strong feelings, strong emotions, all fair enough. Everybody was silent because nobody knew what to say. They had stumbled into very uncomfortable territory, and the silence was sort of palpable. Her husband was there beside her, and he had this pained look on his face. He was very, very quiet, but he said to her, "You love fountains. We could put a fountain here. Would you like to put a fountain here?" That consoled her. I want to be mindful as well of the families who accompany survivors too, because they bear a lot of these ripple effects. I want us to think about that because that's really a symbol for what we're doing here.

There is a part of us when we see horrible things and there's a part of us that wants to burn certain things to the ground. That's a normal response. Today we mark taking this building down to the ground and that's wonderful. But we're not taking it down to the ground just for the sake of it. We're taking it down to the ground because there are beautiful things here, and we're going to build many fountains here and a big building with classrooms and places for people to pray and places for people to learn.

That's the journey from, "I'm so mad I want to burn it to the ground" to "Maybe we could build a fountain here." There's something lovely in that. It was very moving, if you had seen it. That's what we're trying to do. We're trying to bear the tension of that and build, create. That's what we're here to do. Okay, I think that's all I had to say. What I also want to say is I know there are many people here who have wonderful memories of this place because of all the wonderful things that have happened here, and we're so glad you're here. There are going to be so many more wonderful things that go on here.

The rest gets a lot lighter. Next, we have Jim Towey. How to introduce Jim Towey? I'll let you look at his bio. It's pretty impressive. When Jim is not advising presidents and saints, and running around the States collecting his doctorates, he is very generous with his time and has been a massive support to everybody here and to this team. We're very grateful to have his companionship on this journey. And I think he's got some really lovely things to tell us about his experiences along the way, too.