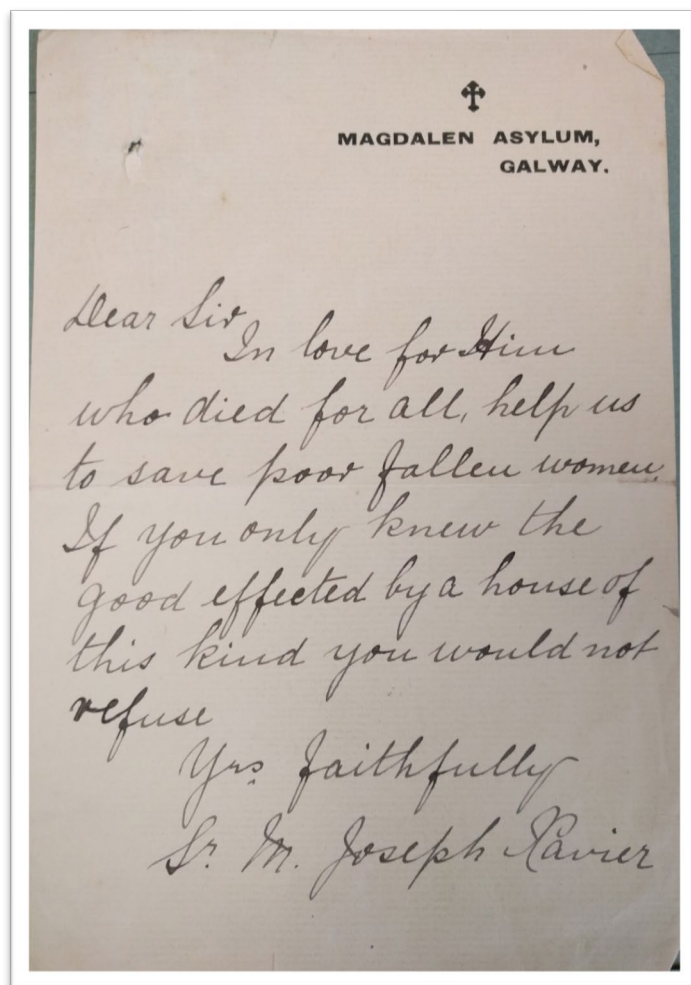


History Hub
From the Archives
2019



A Magdalen Asylum's plea to Francis Sheehy- Skeffington

National Library of Ireland
Ms. 24,143

**Letter from Sister M. Joseph Xavier to Francis Sheehy Skeffington
appealing for help for the Magdalen Asylum Galway**
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‘From vice they pass to virtue, from misery to comfort, from restless remorse to hopeful repentance, from the cold scorn of the world to the sweet care of the Sisters.’ These were the words that accompanied a plea for help from the Magdalen Asylum of Galway in the early 20th century.

Sometime in the early 1900s, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington received a letter from Sister Mary Joseph Xavier, Superioress of the Magdalen Asylum on Forster Street in Galway. Husband of the famous Hana Sheehy-Skeffington, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington was a known women’s right activist who campaigned for women’s suffrage and access to education. The letter which he received from her was a request for financial support for the asylum. Although we do not know if Sheehy-Skeffington ever replied to Sister Mary, or if he provided any financial support, this letter does provide some insight into the asylum, its operations, and fundraising mechanics.

Much of the recent focus on Magdalene Asylums has been on their interactions between the state and the church since the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. A combination of nationalist and Catholic thinking pervaded the institutions of state and society, supporting a burgeoning system of confinement which was epitomized by the Magdalen institutions. Women were sent to the Asylums as part of a greater cultural anxiety surrounding women’s sexuality, and the need for Irish women to maintain an image of purity within the context of Irish nationalism. In recent tribunals and reports, the testimony of many survivors has demonstrated that women were sent to the institutions for a variety of reasons, be they pregnancy, poverty, perceived promiscuity, or even sexual assault. Once inside the institutions, these women found their freedoms revoked and many describe abuse at the hands of their supposed saviours. As more and more women have come forward to tell their stories

and share their experiences, less public attention has been paid to the earlier years of the Magdalen Asylums prior to the foundation of the Irish Free State.

The Galway Magdalen Asylum was established in 1824 by the Lynch Family and was run by a lay society called the Association of Ladies of the Saint Magdalen Society until it was taken over in 1845 by the Sisters of Mercy. The author of this month's document, Sister Mary Joseph Xavier, her birth name Georgina Mac Dermott, became the head of the Asylum in 1892. Sister Mary's letter demonstrates at least one aspect of fundraising for these institutions in the early 20th century. Studies of Irish Catholic fundraising have shown that priests relied heavily on their parishes and wider communities to donate funds for building projects. The Catholic church often appealed to the lay population for donations, so much so that some priests were even trained on methods of fundraising and would travel to other parishes to assist in their efforts. The growth of the Catholic middle class during the 19th century led to a reliance on Catholic lay people for funds for the building of churches and other philanthropic institutions such as schools, libraries, and hospitals. An advertisement for the Magdalen Asylum of Galway was published in the *Ballinrobe Chronicle* in 1892 which appealed for donations from the public. It stressed the 'importance' of the Asylum, and notes that a debt of £1,000 had been taken on by the Sisters to enlarge the facility. This request for donations was repeated in several issues of the *Ballinrobe Chronicle* in 1892. As donations were such a large source of income, it is not surprising that the Sisters would make this public plea for help.

Bequests were another source of funding for the Asylum. A newspaper article from 1908 illustrates this as Sister Mary was involved in a court case over a dispute regarding the Asylum's right to inherit the estate of a Mr. Sebastian Nolan, which was worth over £40,000. In her testimony to the court, Sister Mary Joseph noted that the Asylum also used laundry services and sewing to help keep itself afloat. These services were completed by the inmates of the Asylum, who were not paid despite the heavy and dangerous labour they completed.

Fears about women's sexual immorality, combined with an increasing role of social influence by the Catholic Church allowed Magdalen Asylums to flourish in the 19th century. In a society with little or no social welfare provisions, the asylums were created to remove the vice of prostitution from society but ultimately provided help for poor women. A leaflet that accompanied Sister Mary's letter notes that women came to the Asylum, 'from prison, some from the streets, some mere children, some old in iniquity.' Women who did not choose the Asylums voluntarily were committed from other institutions, their own families, and the judicial system. Whether they were prostitutes, unmarried mothers, or just impoverished, women were sent to these institutions to do penance for perceived transgressions. The intention was to save these 'fallen women' with compassion but, as has been made apparent more recently, Magdalen Asylums would increasingly serve as a system of incarceration and punishment into the 20th century.

This document represents an interaction between the Asylums and greater Irish society that is not often recognized. We cannot know why Sister Xavier chose to write to Sheehy-Skeffington. Perhaps his public role as an advocate for women led her to believe he would support the plight of poor women, or perhaps this was just part of a larger campaign targeted at prominent individuals across the nation. Regardless, this letter demonstrates that the Asylums never operated in isolation from greater society. Just as local priests called on their parishes for donations for the local church, Magdalene Asylums also sought support from the greater public. It was public support that allowed these institutions to continue to remain open. This Asylum marketed itself as a place of refuge and rehabilitation in the full view of the public, and there was much more interaction than may be recognized.

The Magdalen Asylum in Galway closed its doors in 1984, ending a chapter of social control and religious domination in Ireland's past. The story of the Magdalen asylums is a complicated history which continues to be unravelled today. If we can take anything away from Sister

Mary's letter to Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, it is a small insight into the inner and financial workings of these institutions.

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Further Reading:

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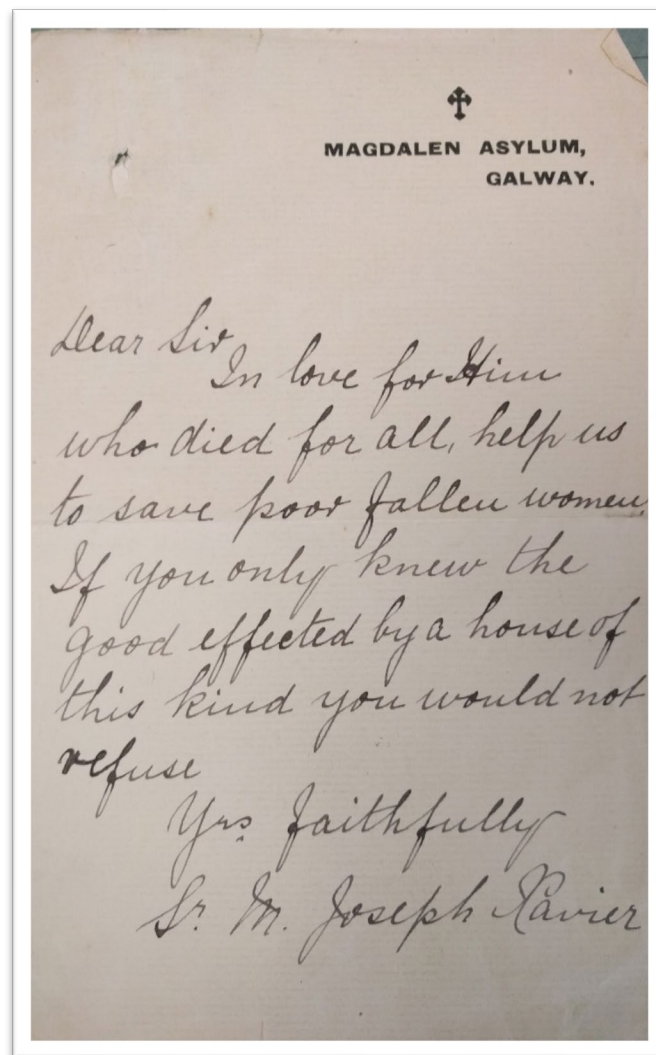
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Letter from Sister M. Joseph Xavier to Francis Sheehy-Skeffington appealing for help for the Magdalen Asylum Galway, with attached, printed leaflet, [? c.1900-1909].

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History Hub gratefully acknowledges the permission of the Sheehy-Skeffington family and the National Library of Ireland to republish this item.



Transcription:

Dear Sir,

In love for Him who died for all, help us to save poor fallen women.

If you only knew the good effected by a house of this kind you would not refuse.

Y[ou]rs faithfully,

Sr. M. Joseph Xavier

MAGDALEN ASYLUM, GALWAY.

THIS is the only Home for fallen women in the Province of Connaught. Until enlarged recently, it was incapable to accommodate half those that came clamouring for admission; and the Sisters had the unspeakable anguish to shut the doors against many a poor sinner with the inexorable words:—

“NO ROOM FOR YOU.”

Driven back to vice, misery and despair, small wonder that many a one sought death as a relief—“Mad from life’s history, glad to death’s mystery; swift to be hurled

ANYWHERE, ANYWHERE, OUT OF THE WORLD!

... picture it, think of it!” The recent enlargement of the Asylum spares humanity from such horrors, and saves the City and Province from the well-known reproach—“Oh! it was pitiful, in a whole city full, home she had none.” Led by various paths to the gates of the Asylum—some from prison, some from the streets, some mere children, some old in iniquity—they pass these peaceful portals, and

A NEW LIFE COMES TO THEM!

From vice they pass to virtue, from misery to comfort, from restless remorse to hopeful repentance, from the cold scorn of the world to the sweet care of the Sisters.

All you that regard the tears of the widow and orphan as so many blood blots upon God’s earth, remember that it is the only Home for these daughters of misfortune, in a sense the

MOST WIDOWED AND ORPHANED IN CREATION!

All you that have hearts to sympathise with suffering humanity, remember that this is the only Hospital for

THOSE FROM WHOSE LEPROSY THE WORLD SHRINKS WITH SCORN!

“He who causeth a sinner to be converted from the error of his ways, shall save his soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins.” (JAMES v. 20.)