

Debunking "PHILOMENA"



Now that it has been nominated for four Oscars, "Philomena" is bound to attract a lot of attention. It should also attract attention for what it really is: a cruel caricature of nuns that is based on half-truths and out- and-out lies. That it appeals to the worst appetite in anti-Catholic bigots is not debatable. "A film that is half as harsh on Judaism or Islam, of course, wouldn't be made in the first place," writes Kyle Smith in the New York Post, "and would be universally reviled if it were."¹

The movie is a screenplay adaptation by Steve Coogan of Martin Sixsmith's book, *Philomena*; Coogan helped produce the film, and also plays Sixsmith in it. Directed by Stephen Frears, it is the contrived story of Philomena Lee, played by Judi Dench.

The film smears the Irish Catholic Church much the way "The Magdalene Sisters" did. That tale of woe was clearly discredited with the release of the McAleese Report last year, a study authorized by the Irish government.² The "Philomena" yarn is spun from the same cloth: mean- spirited Irish nuns oppress poor Catholic girls.

Just as we would not expect a Palestinian-made movie of Israel to be fair, Irish Catholics do not expect that a film crafted by the English to ring true. Coogan, Sixsmith, Dench, and Frears are all English, and Lee long ago adopted England as her home. Some things never change.

The Weinstein boys, Harvey and Bob, are the perfect duo to distribute the movie in the U.S. Their previous gifts to Catholicism include the film, "Priest," a tale of five morally debased priests; a flick that stars Sinead O'Connor as a foul-mouthed Virgin Mary, "Butcher Boy"; one that features a descendant of Mary and Joseph who works in an abortion clinic, "Dogma"; a movie that ridicules Catholics about sex, "40 Days and 40 Nights"; a big screen portrayal of vicious nuns, "The Magdalene Sisters"; a depiction of Santa as a vulgar, drunken, sexual predator, "Bad Santa"; and "Black Christmas," a dark comedy made especially for the holidays.

"The poignant true story of a mother and the son she had to give away." That's on the cover of Sixsmith's book. But it is not a true story. Sixsmith knows that it is not true, but tries hard to convince us that it is. On p. 2, in the last paragraph of the Prologue, he starts by telling us "Everything that follows is true," but he can't finish the sentence without qualifying it. The sentence continues, "or reconstructed to the best of my ability." The word "everything" is an absolute; it allows no exceptions. Yet he immediately says "or," which obviously negates his absolutist claim. Also, he is writing about events that occurred a half-century ago; this counts because he just stumbled on this story 10 years ago. No wonder he had to do a lot of reconstruction.

"Gaps have been filled," Sixsmith tells us, "characters extrapolated, and incidents surmised"; this is also how the film starts. The gaps, it turns out, are gargantuan, but he is a master at filling them. In Smith's review, he properly notes that the book "reads like a novel," containing "long stretches of seemingly invented dialogue supposedly spoken more than 50 years ago by people now dead and offers no footnotes or source notes."

The dialogue is intended to put the worst possible spin on the nuns. The poor girls weep so much that the word "cry," in all its tenses, is used 32 times. Similarly, he peppers the book with sentiments such as "guilt," "shame," "embarrassed," and "afraid." It wouldn't be a book designed to make the Catholic Church look bad if it didn't promiscuously drop the words "sin," "sex," and "secret"; they are invoked 19, 17, and 30 times, respectively.

Here's more proof that the story is contrived: Frears told Charlie Rose that Coogan "wrote himself into it [the film]—wrote his autobiography into it really. All that stuff about lapsed Catholicism, that's him." Rose, ever obliging, repeated the myth that the movie is "based on a true story," even though Frears explicitly gave him evidence to the contrary."³

On the back of the book there is more bunk. Philomena Lee got pregnant as a teenager and was sent to a convent where "the nuns took her baby from her, swore her to secrecy and sold him, like thousands of others, to America for adoption." But as we shall see, the nuns never "took" the baby, and never sold him.

Contrary to the impression given by Sixsmith, the nuns did not operate an adoption assembly line; rather, they cared for children who were given to them, and sought to place them in a loving home. The data show that the "thousands" of kids that the nuns allegedly put up for adoption at this time is badly inflated. "Among perhaps 40,000 out-of-wedlock children raised by adoptive parents in Ireland," a newspaper account on this subject says, "an average of 110 babies a year went to the United States

from 1948 to 1962."⁴

This is not to say there was no secrecy. However, it was Philomena, not the nuns, who was tight lipped: she swore herself to secrecy, never telling her children what happened when she was a teenager. Alcohol changed that. In an article he wrote, Sixsmith explains how her daughter, Jane, learned of the secret in 2004. "Just before Christmas," he says, "her mother Philomena, tipsy on festive sherry, had revealed a secret she's kept for 50 years: she had a son that she had never spoken about to anyone."⁵

Sixsmith does not say whether Philomena was also bombed when they first met, though he says it was at a New Year's Eve party that same year. Lucky for her, she found an atheist willing to buy her tale.⁶ More than anyone else, Sixsmith, an ex-BBC foreign correspondent, is responsible for distorting the truth of what happened.

One of the most incendiary, and false, accusations made in the movie is the charge that Philomena's baby was stolen and sold. CNN anchor Brooke Baldwin invited Philomena and director Frears to discuss what happened. Baldwin quoted from a news release I wrote. "A half- century ago an Irish woman gave birth to a son out-of-wedlock and gave him up for adoption. He was born in an abbey, a venue that allowed the mother to avoid being stigmatized."

In response, Frears took issue with my account. "First of all, I question the words 'gave up,' 'gave up for adoption,' since I don't think Philomena was consulted about the child being taken away." He then accused the nuns of effectively kidnapping the boy and selling him for profit. "The child was actually taken and sold."⁷ On both counts, this is a malicious lie, and it is easy to prove.

The lie has been repeated by virtually everyone connected with the film. Dench writes that "Philomena was forced to give away her child as a condition of being released from the near slavery she found herself in."⁸ So was the child "taken," or was she "forced to give" the baby away? Actually, neither account is accurate. Still, if the full truth is not to be told, the guilty parties should at least get on the same page. Also, the nuns did not find Philomena—her widowed father found them; as one reviewer put it, her family has been conveniently "airbrushed out of the picture."⁹ And if she lived like a slave, how did she manage to leave the abbey and eventually become a psychiatric nurse? Not too many former quasi-slaves are able to climb the socio-economic ladder.

If those associated with the film are comfortable distorting what really happened, it should not surprise us to learn that others will add their own spin. The movie review website, Rotten Tomatoes, accepts the flawed account, telling us that the evil nuns were "following church doctrine."¹⁰ Only someone who is profoundly ignorant of the Catholic Church would make such a preposterous statement. Not only is there no "doctrine" involved, there is no Church playbook on this subject. The nuns did what they did because it was their convent; they made the rules, not some Vatican bureaucrat.

Predictably, Sixsmith offers the most irresponsible account. In a lengthy piece he did for his English fans of the Irish Catholic Church, he contends that "the Irish Catholic hierarchy had been engaged in what amounted to an illicit baby trade." This is a serious charge. The proof? He offers absolutely nothing. Yet he continues to smear the hierarchy by saying "it considered the thousands of souls born in its care to be the church's own property. With or without the agreement of their mothers, it sold them to the highest bidder."¹¹

Sixsmith never tells us how the hierarchy of the Catholic Church managed to have children "born in its care." More important, to say the Church owned them as their property suggests the bishops were involved in some kind of slave trade. Why is it that no one knows about this save for Sixsmith?

Moreover, if the bishops—never mind the nuns—really took children from their mothers without their consent, that would constitute kidnapping. Why, in the whole history of Ireland, was no one arrested? And were the kids sold at an auction? That's what is meant by saying the Church "sold them to the highest bidder."

This is more than yellow journalism: it is hate speech born of bigotry. No wonder Sixsmith's book contains not a single footnote, endnote, or attribution of any kind; there is no way he could substantiate this balderdash.

One of the reasons why Sixsmith is able to get away with his vile accusations is the absence of adoption records that could settle the matter. Even here he finds reason to condemn the nuns. For example, he writes that "much of the incriminating paperwork disappeared in unexplained circumstances."¹² He knows this is not true: the circumstances have indeed been explained, but he refuses to believe them. The New York Times correctly noted that "many of the documents from that period were lost in a fire."¹³ Moreover, Sister Julie Rose, the assistant congregational leader of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, flatly denies that the order destroyed any records.¹⁴ No one has come forward to dispute her statement.

The notion that the nuns were in the adoption business, selling kids to "the highest bidder," is easy to disprove. "No children were sold by any mother or the congregation, to any party," says Sister Julie, "nor did the congregation receive any monies in relation to adoptions while we were running the mother and baby home."¹⁵ The terms are even spelled out in the book. "While neither the NCCC [National Conference of Catholic Charities] nor Sean Ross Abbey [the convent where Philomena lived] charge any fees, it is customary for the adopting party to make a donation to the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the size of which may be determined in consultation with the Superioress of the Order."¹⁶

Making a donation to cover the expenses incurred, and selling children to "the highest bidder," are hardly identical. Indeed, it's the difference between a charity and an auction. While Dench likes to say in interviews that her Philomena character was "forced" to give up her child, and the movie adds to this impression, there is a key moment in the film where Dench admits, "No one coerced me. I signed of my own free will."¹⁷ Apparently, Dench can't even get her own story straight.

There are more contradictions that undermine the negative narrative of those associated with the movie. The terms of the adoption are published in the book. Philomena states for the record that she is the mother of Anthony Lee, noting that "I hereby relinquish full claim forever to my said child Anthony Lee and surrender the said child to Sister Barbara, Superioress of Sean Ross Abbey, Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, Ireland. The purpose of this relinquishment is to enable Sister Barbara to make my child available for adoption to any person she considers fit and proper, inside or outside the state."¹⁸

There is nothing draconian about these terms. Consider what happened: In 1952, a teenage girl with her illegitimate child gives him up for adoption because she cannot care for him. She does so of her own volition. In fact, the adoption papers clearly state, right below her signature, that she exercised her free will: "Subscribed and sworn to by the said Philomena Lee as her free act and deed this 27th day of June 1955." It is also important to note that while Philomena was young, she was not an adolescent when she signed the adoption papers: She was 22.¹⁹

Instead of criticizing the nuns, Philomena should be thanking them. Her mother died when she was six, and her father was not fit to raise six children; he put Philomena and her two sisters into a convent school, and kept the three boys at home.²⁰ Who else would take them? Moreover, when Philomena left the convent after relinquishing her son, the nuns didn't throw her out—they got her a job. "After Anthony's adoption," writes two reporters for the *New York Times*, "they [the nuns] also set her life on a new course, finding her a job in a boys' school in Liverpool, England."²¹

What exactly were Philomena's alternatives when she found herself pregnant with no husband to support her? Even Sixsmith concedes that the Irish government was in no position to help. He writes that "the government had allowed the Catholic Church free rein in handling the nation's illegitimate children."²² Sister Julie is more pointed. "We can only say that our congregation, which is based in England, was asked by the Irish State in the 1920s to open and operate Mother and Baby homes there."²³

The nuns were not tending to the cream of the crop. Here's a sample of the kinds of girls the nuns cared for, as acknowledged in the book: "the red-headed Cork girl engaged to a car mechanic who disowned her when she fell pregnant"; "the mentally retarded teenager from Kerry who cried the whole time"; "the farmer's daughter whose father had always slept in the same bed with her"; and "the schoolgirl who had been raped by three cousins at a wedding."²⁴

It wasn't until 1952, the year that Philomena got pregnant, that Ireland legalized adoption; welfare benefits to single mothers were not given until 1972.²⁵ The fact is that the nuns did what they could for the girls in their care, when no one else would accept them. To cite one example, Brendan O'Connor, conceived out-of-wedlock and abandoned by his parents, was taken in by Irish nuns after he was born in 1937; they placed him with a Catholic family. He told his story to a reporter for the Los Angeles Times many years later: "If the nuns had not been there, he asks, what would have become of him and other babies?"²⁶

Philomena's daughter, Jane Libberton, does not contest the truth. "Mum was left with no choice at that time but to sign him away for adoption because there were no other options. It was just the way that society was at the time."²⁷ But the nuns had an option: they could have turned her away. For Philomena, her choices were stark: the street or an abbey. A fair account of her travails would punctuate this; instead, it is not even acknowledged.

Another falsehood is Philomena's never-ending search to find her son. Coogan, who plays Sixsmith, says the film "tells the story of Philomena and the journalist who helped her as they set off on an extraordinary journey to find the son who was taken away from her 50 years ago."²⁸ The book says that both Philomena and her son visited the abbey looking for each other in 1977. Sister Julie says that their records show that no such visit was made, either by Philomena or her son.²⁹

Even more disturbing is the lie, floated in the movie, that Philomena and Sixsmith came to the U.S. to

find her son. This is an important statement, designed to win over the audience. "In fact," writes reporters for the New York Times, "much of the movie is a fictionalized version of events. Ms. Lee, for instance, never went to the United States to look for her son with Mr. Sixsmith, who is played by Steve Coogan, a central part of the film."³⁰ (My italics.)

Catholic-bashing movies depend on at least one villain, and in this film it is Sister Hildegarde McNulty; she was in charge of the adoption process.

The closing scene is a shocker, one that elicited "gasps of dismay" when shown in London.³¹ It shows Sister Hildegarde being confronted by Sixsmith. He is indignant at her for allegedly obstructing Philomena's quest to find her son. The nun is depicted as a moral tyrant: she castigates Philomena for giving in to her "carnal desires." In a mean-spirited way, she lets Sixsmith know how virtuous she is in contrast to Philomena. "Let me tell you something. I have kept my vow of chastity my whole life. Self-denial and mortification of the flesh is what brings us closer to God. These girls have nobody to blame except themselves."³²

This is pure bunk—it never happened. Sister Julie wanted to know why this scene was included, and sought an answer: "The film company confirmed to us in writing at an early stage of production that a second meeting with Sr Hildegarde (which never occurred in reality) would be incorporated into the film and dramatic license was the reason given to us." Also, the real Sister Hildegarde was known for reuniting families.³³

To prove what a lie this final scene is, consider how one Irish reporter put it. "Even in a film that brings the viewer through an emotional wringer," writes Ronan McGreevy, "the scene has the power to shock. Except the meeting couldn't have happened. Sr Hildegarde died in 1995. Mr Sixsmith did not start helping Philomena Lee find her son until 2004."³⁴ But who cares about the facts when the goal is to smear the Irish Catholic Church?

Philomena's son became a lawyer working for the Republican Party. But he lived a life of reckless drinking and sex, and died of AIDS. There was no meeting between him and his mother.

When those associated with the movie are pressed on the many lies that are told, they conveniently dodge the issue by saying it is not a documentary. Yet the movie audience, and readers of the book, are led to believe that this is a true story. Moreover, interviews with everyone associated with it also

contend the script is true, always allowing for a few artistic embellishments. This is dishonest. Indeed, it is scurrilous.

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Bill Donohue - Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights