

## Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

### Witness Statement of

**George Higgins**

**Support person present: Yes**

### Background

1. My name is George Higgins. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1930 and I am 86 years old. My address is known to the Inquiry. I am married to [REDACTED] and have been for 61 years. We have a son [REDACTED] who is [REDACTED] a truck driver and we have a daughter [REDACTED] who is [REDACTED] a retired practice nurse. We have three grandsons.

2. What I'm about to talk about, I have been living with for years and hope this might bring closure. I'm also here for the benefit of others and if what I tell you helps somebody else then all well and good. The individuals involved are now all dead but the organisation that sponsored what happened to me in care still exists and that is the Catholic Church.

3. The institution I was in as a child was known as Bellevue which was a home run by nuns. Personally I don't know the name of the order although I can see them now and have nightmares over them with their big white wimples and a sort of navy blue dress with a rosary around their waist and a massive big cross. That to me is the image I have of them. As far as I'm aware it was never known as Nazareth House but I'm led to believe that the nuns come under Nazareth House. It was in Rutherglen in Glasgow. I was there for seven years from the age of two until nine from 1932 to 1939.

### Life before going into care

4. My father was 20 years older than my mother when they married in 1916. He was born in the 1870s and she was born in 1894. So when they married she was 22 and he was already in his 40s. He had no particular profession but from family history I gather he was a steward on the liners with Cunard and my mother was in service.

5. My mother and father had no children during the first few years of their marriage, for whatever reason I don't know [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

6. [REDACTED]

7. From what I've heard from family members, my parent's marriage must have been a sort of acrimonious arrangement. Though I hesitate to call it a marriage because from what I gather he knocked my mother about a bit and obviously it fell apart in the early 1930s and they separated. Due to his religious beliefs he would not divorce my mother and the day after he died, years later when I was 16, she remarried.

8. In those days the law was with the father and the mother was just a chattel. He had the final say in everything. So [REDACTED] my mother had absolutely no say in what would happen [REDACTED]. My father was a Catholic and they were married in the Catholic Church in Glasgow but I never heard the word church or anything relating to faith being mentioned so he was a Catholic in name only, very much lapsed like I am. However, he arranged [REDACTED] to go into Bellevue and my mother was not allowed to visit [REDACTED]. I think he arranged it through a man called Mr Dearie. I think he had some sort of connection to the City Council or the Catholic Church and Bellevue but he was not a Catholic.

### **Bellevue**

9. To be put in Bellevue like that between the age of two and nine years was a disaster for me. Those years form your personality and that forms the rest of your life, when you're supposedly and hopefully in a loving family. But when you are already in a broken family and then you're put in a convent, if that's what they call it, well that's how I've ended up the way I am. I don't know that I would have ended up any different living in an acrimonious family but the word love was never in the nuns' vocabulary at all. So to me it has been a distinct disadvantage which my family know about. Love is there within me but to physically show it or demonstrate it in any way is just not in my nature. And that to me is one of the things that happened to me.

10. While [REDACTED] in the convent [REDACTED] allowed to see my mother because she had no say or control whatsoever. She would sometimes come to the convent and [REDACTED] would see her at a distance through the gates but she wasn't allowed in and being an infant I just didn't know what was going on.

11. My memories of my time in the convent are not necessarily in a chronological order. You have to realise that I was only a young child at the time and what I have is a collection of memories rather than an ordered recollection of my time there.

12. In the convent the boys were segregated from the girls. Since I was only 2 years old when I went into the convent I don't think there was segregation at that infant stage and I can't remember at exactly what age I was segregated. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] And because of the fasting that you had to do for communion, every Sunday

morning at mass I would hear a thump as [REDACTED] fainted before they'd take her out.

13. My first recollection as a child there was of being scared. I was so scared.

14. The way that manifested itself was in bed wetting, that and soiling the bed as well. The nuns weren't trained to look after us and I don't know who paid them or paid for us being there. Their idea of trying to correct what was in their eyes misbehaviour or mistakes was rather severe.

15. The one person whose name I do remember is a woman called [REDACTED] BAO. She was in charge of my dormitory. In my mind her image was straight out of the 1920s with her fold-over pinafore, [REDACTED] I'd say she was in her mid 30's and was [REDACTED]. She slept in our dormitory and was responsible for us. She wasn't a nun but was a helper and would report to them. If you wet the bed she was the first one to know.

16. If we wet the bed [REDACTED] BAO would obviously tell her superiors who would come up to the dorm and see the wet sheets. I remember when it happened to me the sisters wrapped the wet sheets round my neck and walked me down to the laundry. The washing machine there was like a big perforated drum. It looked a bit like the deep fat fryers you get in the chip shop. There two of them lifted me up while still wrapped in the wet sheet and bundled me into the washing machine. I can still see myself in the machine looking out through the perforations in the drum at these two women standing there. They didn't turn it on but I was terrified. If you want a nightmare, there's one there for you. I think I was 3 or 4 years old when this first happened to me. I still have flashbacks to it.

17. Being bundled into the washing machine was not an isolated incident, it didn't happen every time I wet or soiled the bed but it happened at least a couple of times and perhaps more because if it's the norm then you don't remember how many times. This was like their cure. They simply didn't have the training for dealing with children with problems. I had problems, we all had problems. We were all from broken homes. The nuns were unintentionally stupid and hurtful purely because they weren't trained.

18. I don't know, or at least don't remember seeing if this happened to others but I'm sure it did. Surely they weren't just going to single me out for such treatment. I don't know if others saw me being marched to the laundry wrapped in my wet sheet but I'm sure they would have.

19. Bed wetting was an issue for me throughout my time in the convent and even after I left it continued to be a problem.

20. If you soiled the bed you physically moved what you had done and tried to hide it. I even remember one time hiding it behind a radiator. That shows you how scared you were in there and nobody to turn to.

21. You were on your own. There was no-one there to confide in about anything. I didn't have anybody. [REDACTED] The whole place was about fear. There was nobody you could complain to about what was considered a cure in their eyes and not a punishment. There was no love in the place. There was no "how are you today George?" and no cuddles. There was nothing like that. I certainly didn't know what love was or know what it was for someone to put an arm round me. And the last place you're going to get it is in a convent, or at least in that particular convent.

22. It was not unusual to get a thump in the back from one of the nuns. This wasn't a casual thump. I don't know what their reason for doing it was, to grab your attention maybe or to make you hurry up with your food, I don't know. It was usually when you were sitting down at the meal on this sort of long bench. And remember, the size of them to a child was threatening. They would form a fist and punch you at the bottom of your spine with their knuckles. I'm sure this is what caused my back problems in later life.

23. I remember making my confirmation in the convent. That was a big day in the Catholic Church. The pipe band came up, the whole lot. I can still see it all. Clothes that had clearly been worn by other children would come out of the moth balls and be given to you but taken off you right after the service and would go straight back into the cupboard. This was obviously done because you were on public view that day and they wanted you to look good, probably to make them look good.

24. The Catholic religion was a big part of the convent. It was drilled into you and to this day I can still recite the catechism. Every Sunday morning we were taken to church and even at that early age we had to go to confession too but what the hell I was confessing I don't know.

25. We didn't so much have religious instruction, it was basically the catechism. It was "Who made you? God made you. Why did God make you?" and answers like that. It was rote learning and stock answers like that that you learnt by heart to the extent that I still know many of them to this day. You weren't given an educated reason as to why these were the answers, you simply had to learn them and it stuck with you.

26. Even when I came out the convent and we were evacuated to Rothesay, I was so brainwashed that unbeknown to my mother I went to St Andrew's RC Church there with the intention of becoming an altar boy. I received instruction and that was the same principle as your catechism. You didn't even know what the hell you were saying as it was in Latin. That was how brainwashed I'd been left, it was still in me.

27. The Catholic religion for me, because of my convent days and the way it was instilled into me, was a religion of fear. If you didn't go to church on a Sunday then that was a mortal sin and you were going to Hell. At that age you believed it. That's how strong that religion was that it could affect the rest of your life.

28. There was no intelligent conversation with the nuns. The only communication was along the lines of "do this, do that". You were there to do as they told you. They certainly weren't trained. The nuns that were there, for them this was obviously a

career with three meals and a bed under the auspices of Him upstairs. That was their life.

29. My recollection of the convent was that it was very Dickensian in the surroundings that were there. They used big words I hadn't heard before like "refectory" and "dormitories".

30. Food in the convent was always a big problem for me. I'm not saying it was poor quality or badly cooked as others were able to eat it but to me personally it was of poor quality and inedible. Maybe I just had a delicate palate but I have no recollection of getting any pleasure from the food. It would make me sick if, for instance, it was something I didn't like but was forced to eat it anyway. I had a particular problem with meat that had fat on it. It would, and still does, make me nauseous.

31. We ate in what I thought at the time were big refectories. You'd sit on long benches at long tables. If you refused to eat what they gave you, you got a thump in the back and if you left anything they would make you stand on a stool in the middle of the refectory with the remains of your food until you did eat it. I remember many a time standing on the stool crying while holding a plate of congealed soup or congealed dinner. When I felt it the most would be when everyone else had finished and gone away and I was left alone still standing on this stool in the middle of the refectory. But I never did eat it if I didn't like it as I would have retched and they always gave up in the end.

32. Bathing was communal. There was no interest taken in our personal hygiene. You could maybe share your bath with up to 20 others. I have no recollection of getting into a bath, on my own, in crystal clear water.

33. I have no memory of any particular nun being solely responsible for our health or any particular nun being referred to as the nurse. They were all equal as far as I was concerned, you didn't know what the hierarchy was or who was who. I don't recall any particular system of healthcare being in place for us.

34. To clean wax out of your ears it was standard practice for them to pour peroxide drops into your ears to cure the problem. This happened to me and to everybody. This practice has affected my hearing all my life and I now have two hearing aids. Whether it was as a direct result of that I don't know. [REDACTED]

35. Lice were not an uncommon problem and the treatment they used was awful. It was [REDACTED] BAO or a nun who treated us for that. She would have a tin full of paraffin that she would dip a comb in then run it through our hair to try and get rid of the lice.

36. I remember on one occasion lying in isolation in the convent and nobody was allowed near me. They must have had an area, a mini-infirmary or something. I can't recall what disorder I had. Maybe it was measles or something like that.

37. There was no dental care provided and no interest given to our dental hygiene. Due to neglect, not on my part but through whoever should have been looking after them, my teeth were in a poor state when I left the convent and I had to get several of my teeth taken out when I joined the army and get partial false teeth. Later I had to have all my teeth taken out. So I was left with false teeth for most of my adult life as a result.

38. It was the same with my eyesight. An optician has told me that if things are not caught before the age of eight forget it. This too was neglected in the convent. No care was ever given to it and this is the reason I ended up wearing glasses at 14 years of age, because of neglect.

39. I put my dental, eyesight and hearing problems down to neglect at the convent.

40. I used to bite my nails right down to the quick till they were bleeding. This started when I was in the convent and I think stemmed from anxiety. I only stopped this habit in my fifties.

41. There was a visitor's day in the convent. I can still see the room we were in and sitting on the floor. I remember the low bench seating and watching other children with their parents. I don't think it was as much as weekly otherwise it would be more imprinted on my memory so I reckon it was maybe once a month if that. I only recollect my father coming once, that's the one that stands out in my mind and with my mother not being allowed in. [REDACTED] vision of the outside world was standing at the gate looking at her outside through the bars. That was the norm and that was all [REDACTED] saw of her. I don't know if that had been the convent's decision or my father's.

42. I have no happy or fond memories of that place or any of the individuals responsible for my care. If I was to suggest I had any pleasant memories about Bellevue it would be the few times when we got hold of stolen bread. I don't know where it came from or who stole it but I loved it, especially if you were able to make toast on the wee stove. Imagine that, the only pleasurable thing I can think of is a bit of stolen bread.

43. In terms of Christmas and special occasions, I vaguely recall making paper chains in the classroom. I do not recollect a Christmas tree and I don't recall ever being given a present. I think the first present I ever received in my life was a copy of "The Merchant of Venice" from [REDACTED] and I think I was about 14 by then. I didn't even know when my birthday was.

44. The school was within the convent grounds although I have little or no recollection of school, teachers and classes until I came out of the convent and started at St Francis' school in the Gorbals. Only a few bits stick out in my mind, for example I do remember being in class in the convent and as I mentioned at Christmas time making those paper chains to hang up. I remember there was a communal sort of toy box and playing with the equivalent of Lego except it was tin metal and you put together little houses with roofs on them. It was German made. That was in the school not the convent itself. I remember at visiting times some

children would receive some toys, well of course that never happened to me but to see others getting toys when I got none it was hard.

45. In the convent there were no books or magazines or comics and no radio. I didn't know any of these things existed until I left the convent. There was nothing educational nor any toys or games. You got accustomed to it, so to come out into the world of Glasgow and the Gorbals was such a culture shock to me.

46. There was no organised sport or anything like that in Bellevue. The only recreation that I remember was getting out into the very small playground which had a shed to keep you out the rain. But I think that was when we were at school. I don't remember being able to kick a ball about.

47. I do recall getting taken to Langbank for a few days. I think it was like our annual holiday. Whether it was for a week or a fortnight I don't know. It was a wooden structure internally like a sauna with I think bunk type beds. It was still quite religious and you had to say your prayers before you went to bed. It was our one escape. What I recall is that it was near the beach and that the regime from the convent didn't follow us. I just recall it was a more open atmosphere.

48. I have no great recollection of the routine in the convent and don't remember being forced to do any manual work but that may be because I was too young or perhaps I've put it out of my memory. I have no recollection of there being anybody at the time that I could talk to or confide in. The problem is that I'm trying to look back on the time of my life when not only was I just a child, it's a time of my life I've spent most of my life trying to forget.

### Reporting of abuse

49. I was never able to tell anyone or talk to anyone about what happened either at the time or after I came out of the convent. Just as love was missing due to my early life experiences, so too was the power of communication. Between the age of nine and probably 14, I doubt if I could have held an intelligent conversation or even strung two sentences together. Coming out of the convent and going to St Francis' school my education wasn't just lacking, it was non-existent. I had no prospect of passing the 11 plus or "qualie" as we knew it. When I joined the army the sergeants in the Education Corp found I was totally out of it, I'd learned nothing.

### Leaving institution

50. I don't know why [redacted] came out of the convent in 1939 but to come out into the Gorbals in Glasgow with its lifestyle and all that that entailed was pretty horrific for me. I was nine when [redacted] I went to stay with my father. [redacted]

[redacted] We lived in a single end in a tenement at [redacted] Hospital Street in the Gorbals which has since been demolished. The [redacted] were in one room which had one bed and one table and every night my father would put a mattress on the table and [redacted] would sleep on that and [redacted] on the bed. In those days all the

other kids of my age who stayed round there were street wise and I was a sitting duck for them and I've got the scars to prove it. I was completely naïve about life and this was entirely because I'd spent my formative years in the convent.

51. After the war started in 1939 my father got evacuation papers to send us to America or Australia. My mother got wind of this [REDACTED] I don't know why I was left with my father who was in his 60s and by then working as a night watchman whenever he could. I remember going to owners of big building companies and him pleading to get a job. When he got a job I was out with him all night and I'd be filling up paraffin lamps and God knows what. I'd be about 10 at this time.

52. We stayed in the Gorbals until an incident when my father came home one day and this drunk man was in our room with me. My father picked up a Billy stick which is an American police truncheon and laid into this fella, he really laid into him and left him for dead. After that we scarpered to Townhead.

53. At some point after the war started my mother came up and demanded that I go with her. She took us to Rothesay, [REDACTED] where she was back in service cleaning for a doctor. We stayed in rooms there till the end of the war when [REDACTED] I went back to my father [REDACTED]

54. Both my parents died shortly after that [REDACTED] at the age of 17, I went to Maryhill Barracks and joined the army in 1947. It was a means to escape. I actually tried to join the Navy but, because of the state of my eyesight and hearing, they wouldn't take me. I spent 5 ½ years in the army mostly in Germany. [REDACTED]

55. I never did go back and report what had happened at the convent to anybody mainly because I spent my life trying to repress it. I didn't see any value in doing so and certainly I have never been interested in any financial gain. But when I read about these cases happening in Scotland it was then I took an interest. I started reading newspaper articles and that's when I heard about the group "In Care Abuse Survivors" (INCAS) who I got in touch with and learned who was acting on behalf of the survivors.

56. Prior to that obviously my wife [REDACTED] knew all about it but it was not every day conversation. The only other time it cropped up was when I spoke with [REDACTED] when reference may have been made to it but certainly not a detailed conversation. When I tried to have a detailed conversation about it over the past few years, purely for the benefit of this, it's not been forthcoming [REDACTED] So I suppose, apart from [REDACTED] the first person I spoke to about it was the solicitor Cameron Fyffe about 10 years ago.

## Records

57. I don't have any records from my time in Bellevue and I think it unlikely that any exist after so long.

**Impact**

58. I frequently suffer flashbacks, dreams and nightmares of my convent days which sometimes even cause me to fall out of bed. Sometimes it also causes me sleepless nights. Bellevue is a part of my life that's followed me all the way through. My father has a lot to answer for.

59. I was in Bellevue for seven years and was never prepared for the outside world and therefore, when I eventually left at the age of nine, I was already at a great disadvantage. I suffered emotional cruelty. I never had anyone that I could trust.

60. The big effect my early life experiences have had on me is that it has given me an inferiority complex that I've had to live with all my life. This was particularly bad when we left the convent in 1939 and I was exposed to challenges of life in the Gorbals.

61. The problem continued to pursue me even when I went into the army where I was still in a convent frame of mind. I was vulnerable and still not streetwise and I had a rough time when I went into the army. Physically I just couldn't defend myself.

62. I had very little confidence and poor self-esteem. I was never shown how to play or provided with an atmosphere for exploring or stimulation and never given any affection or caring.

63. My wife [REDACTED] also comes from a broken family and our early life experiences impacted upon how we parented. Our two children suffered with parents who didn't know what the word love was. As a result I have never been able to show affection to my own family or be tactile with them which causes me great sadness.

64. For most of our married life it has been extremely difficult for me to communicate my feelings towards my wife and it's only in our latter years, after 60 years, that I think we now know each other. But she has had to take the brunt of my poor upbringing and inability to communicate what I feel.

65. I've never sought any professional help for what I endured as a child. It's been lying dormant for years and is all sort of coming out again now and nearly 80 years later it's still part of my life. But much of my not recalling all of it is partially because I was so young at the time and partially because I've tried to repress it.

66. It also left me with no religion now.

## Effect on Physical Health

67. I have had the stressful effect of all this suffering [REDACTED] on my mind all my life. I ultimately worked as a salesman for Cadbury's Fry. That was a high pressure environment and it got to me. I developed high blood pressure and accepted the offer of early retirement at 55 which was the biggest relief of my life. Otherwise I don't think I'd have survived it. For me it relates back to things such as not having self-assurance, having an inferiority complex and lacking the power to communicate properly which is what sales is all about. If I'd had a normal upbringing I might have turned out differently. I might have had the resilience to cope better in that pressured environment where there's so much responsibility but I was fractured both mentally and physically.

68. As a result of all the problems over food and being forced to eat unpalatable food I have suffered continually with stomach problems and eventually suffered a duodenal ulcer which haemorrhaged resulting in surgery. I still have a restricted diet and lack of enjoyment of meals which caused many problems within our household.

69. I believe that the continual prodding and poking to my back by the nuns when I was a young child caused a weakness which meant I was unable to participate in any sports activities and eventually culminated in severe problems when I began work initially as a driver for Cadbury's Fry which involved heavy manual labour. My back has always been my physical weakness. I put that down to what the nuns did as I can't think of any other reason that I would have had a back complaint.

70. After years of suffering I had a laminectomy surgery to remove a slipped disc pressing on a nerve.

71. I still have back problems from time to time. It limits my activities and has always prevented me from playing with my children and now my grandchildren.

72. In addition to these physical problems are the problems I've had with my teeth, hearing and eyesight which I've already mentioned.

73. In terms of lessons to be learned, I think that things are different now from what it was like when I was a child given that social workers are empowered to investigate and do what should have been done back then but which didn't exist in my day. I feel it is time, and the publicity of what happened back then that has allowed change to happen. What I would recommend is what I understand is actually happening now anyway. That is change and learn to bring to the public knowledge any wrongdoing against children.

74. However, with social workers you're still dealing with individuals who are humans and when you deal with humans things go wrong.

75. I don't expect to get anything out of this inquiry but I hope that hearing about my experiences will help others and prevent children suffering what I went through. I would look for retribution, not justice or truth, though hopefully they will follow

retribution. I didn't want to be involved with this but it was my wife who convinced me in the hope that it will help others and that things will improve.

76. I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of the evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement to be true.

Signed



Dated

11/9/16