Taxpayers’ funding to St John of God mission in Africa is suspended

By Michael O’Farrell
INVESTIGATIONS EDITOR

THE provision of Irish taxpayer funds to the St John of God order in Malawi has been suspended in the wake of the cover-up of child abuse allegations, exposed by the Irish Mail on Sunday.

The order’s Malawi operations are supported by Misean Cara – a missionary charity that distributes a €16m block grant from the taxpayer-funded Irish Aid each year.

Misean Cara’s accounts show the St John of God order got more than €2.2m in public funds since 2009 – an unknown proportion of which went to Malawi.

In order to receive the funds for Malawi the order – currently led by Brother Donatus Forkan – signed contracts that included statements that child safeguarding policies were being implemented.

Signed contracts to say child safeguards were used

Failure to make a declaration of compliance would have disqualified St John of God (SJOG) from eligibility for funding.

However, while Misean Cara’s assurances the order was simultaneously covering up 20 child abuse allegations against Brother Aidan Clooney, principal of Malawi’s St Augustine’s school for special needs children from 1970 to 1992.

As even as payouts were made to his Irish recusants, Brother Aidan was allowed live and work with vulnerable children in Malawi for nearly 20 years – while SJOG told Irish authorities he had no contact with children.

Misean Cara told the MoS last night it has suspended funding of St John of God’s services in Malawi.

“This is in line with our enhanced safeguarding policy and that this policy is fully implemented in respect of this project. As a result, any funding we have provided to SJOG in respect of this project has now been suspended,” it said in a statement.

We will be carrying out an audit of compliance by St John of God with their contractual undertaking to Misean Cara regarding child safeguarding.

The charity said it was “extremely concerned about the issues raised” and “requested a number of clarifications from St John of God”.

The manner in which the order signed the contract was how the order paid the sums to its Irish recusants.

NO RESPONSE: Brother Donatus Forkan, head of St John of God’s mission in Africa, did not respond to the MoS.

The top up scandal – exposed by the MoS in 2016 – led to a damning HSE audit that recommended the repayment of the funds to the Exchequer.

Speaking out: Joe Davina with his wife Sally last week

EXPOSED: The MoS broke the story of Brother Aidan’s Malawi operation

THE St John of God order this week reported further new allegations of child abuse against Brother Aidan Clooney to gardaí and child protection authorities in Malawi.

The latest allegations – brought to the attention of the MoS by sources in Malawi – brings to 26 the number of students who say they were abused at St Augustine’s special school in South Dublin.

Five of those cases have been unsealed in recent weeks by a continuing Irish Mail on Sunday investigation and will now be the focus of a Garda investigation.

In a statement, a SJOG spokesperson – who was nine years old when he was sent to the Blackrock school – alleged that he was beaten and forced to strip by Brother Aidan.

Like other alleged victims in Africa, he claims that Brother Aidan habitually ordered boys to strip and shower in his presence. He also details an incident he witnessed with Brother Aidan: “He told me to take down my underpants. Then he told me to turn around and not to look at him. He was not hitting me during this time – just standing behind me. Then after a few minutes he beat me the a*** off me with his bare hands.”

The experience appears remarkably similar to that of Joe Davina, another former pupil who broke years of silence to speak to the MoS last week.

In a statement last night, a spokesperson for St John of God said it had “reported all allegations it has been made aware of to the authorities and will co-operate fully with any investigation.”

It reiterated its unreserved apology to any individual who suffered any form of abuse while in its care.

Sarah Blakemore, of Keeping Children Safe, a global child protection alliance, said last night: “These shocking allegations underline the responsibility all organisations have to safeguard children.

“Tragically, abusers often target society’s most vulnerable children... The extreme imbalance of power between adult workers, on the one hand, and the children in their care, on the other, makes it essential that robust systems are in place to ensure the work of these organisations is beyond reproach.”

Meanwhile, a spokesperson for Irish abuse survivors group Reclaiming Self called for alleged abusers to be urgently investigated.

Its statement said: “Collusion between the State and Church continues to protect the identities of over 1,000 alleged abusers.

“Those against whom allegations of abuse were made via the [Ryan] Commission to inquire into Child Abuse and the Redress Board need to be identified and investigated.

“There is a particular urgency for alleged abusers who are alive to be investigated, in order to assess, if any, the potential risk posed to children.”

SJOG declined to respond last night to our questions about who signed the Misean Cara contracts and why fundings of its Malawi mission were not told of concerns and allegations about Brother Aidan.

We also asked Brother Donatus to comment on whether SJOG’s decisions in Ireland may constitute reckless endangerment of children in Africa – a criminal offence under Irish law. He did not respond.

An SJOG spokesman last night urged anyone with concerns about safeguarding at its Malawi operations to raise them “immediately with the order and/or authorities.”

In a statement he said: “At this time, we are seeking to establish more detail arising from the recent media reports and ensure all appropriate responses are undertaken.

“We are endeavouring to see if there are any people that need assistance. If identified, we will further endeavour to ensure they have access to the supports they require, should such supports be required.”

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Opposition (and rural FG rump) will scupper plan

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe will have to undertake a series of humiliating ‘U-turns’ if they want to get two national planning strategies through, the Opposition warned.

Controversy is growing over the National Planning Framework (NPF) and Mr Donohoe’s national spatial strategy as he and Mr Varadkar deal with an open revolt from elements of the Cabinet and Fine Gael back-benchers.

However, united opposition to the plan could be scuppered by a devastating intervention from Mr Donohoe who has dismissed Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin, Labour and Independent TDs forged by Alan Kelly and Michael Fitzmaurice poses a far more existential threat to the minority Government’s survival.

The Cabinet will tomorrow hold a special meeting on the NPF, but Mr Kelly told the Irish Mail on Sunday: “The Cabinet are talking about history. That plan is dead. The Government don’t have the numbers, even amongst its own, to get it through.”

Mr Kelly also warned Mr Donohoe ‘can put his spatial strategy in the bin too, that is joined at the hip to the NPF if one goes both go’. He added: “Our coalition will ensure neither plan will get through. Paschal will have no goodie to give out, he will not have a capital plan unless he sheds the current version.”

Mr Kelly also warned: “The rural revolt against the NPF will be worse than water charges. Rural Ireland will revolt against a plan that bears the hallmarks of something devised by six Dublin ministers.”

“Rural Irelands” is not exactly a vote of Eoghan Murphy or the rest – they have completely underestimated how serious this is.

“Towns smaller than 10,000 might as well simply turn out the lights. There will be such a flight from the country within a decade only four counties will be able to field a GAA team.”

By John Brennan

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