

St. Dymphna of Gheel

Many people know St. Dymphna of Gheel as the patroness of people struggling with mental illness. Few seem to know her background or why she is named such.

There are various legends surrounding the story of Dymphna, but the core narrative is this: She was the daughter of a pagan chieftain in Ireland in the 7th Century. Her mother, who had been a Christian and had baptized Dymphna, died when her daughter was 14. Her father was devastated and had a long period of protracted grief. After a fruitless search for a second wife, his attention fell on Dymphna. Her resemblance to his beloved dead wife, coupled with his emotional and mental struggle after his wife's death, drove him to entreat her to marry him herself. Horrified, Dymphna fled with her confessor, an elderly priest by the name of Gerebran, to the city of Gheel in Belgium.

Unfortunately, her father pursued her and found her. His men murdered Gerebran and then, when Dymphna refused to go with him, he beheaded her.

Dymphna's refusal to participate in this incestuous relationship led to her martyrdom. She has been named patroness of people with mental and emotional difficulties – not only because of the toll that her father's mental illness took on her family but because of her own emotional and mental anguish.

Dymphna was buried in Gheel. When her body was discovered in the 13th century, cures and miracles were being attributed to her, especially for people with epilepsy and people with mental illness.

But the most outstanding miracle is one that began centuries ago and still continues to this day. In the 13th century, an institution was built in Gheel where people with mental illness are admitted for a short time. Following the initial treatment, these patients are then placed with families in the village with whom they live and work side by side. The patients receive treatment without formality and gain greatly by the normal lifestyle offered to them by the villagers. The villagers see them as a part of their lives and have for centuries.

In the context of institutionalization, deinstitutionalization, and reinstitutionalization (in prisons) in our country, this truly is miraculous. All of this is attributed to a simple young princess who lost her life in defense of doing the right thing. St. Dymphna is a legend and a model and has left a legacy for care and treatment of people with mental illness that defies the "wisdom" and sophistication of our own time.

Prayer: Wise and diligent St. Dymphna, you found yourself in peril in your young life having suffered the death of your dear mother and the wrath of your father. Orphaned and in flight you took shelter in the wings of your heavenly father. Under your protection and care, many people who have born the cross of mental illness have been consoled and nurtured toward better health and healing. Look kindly on the needs of all who struggle today with mental and emotional problems. Be their staff of stability and security in the winds and storms that assail them. Help them to know and understand that nothing can separate them from the love of God that comes through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.