



2021 Walk to Bethlehem



St. Dymphna, Irish Martyr

Dymphna was born in NE part of Ireland in the early 600's to a pagan father, Damon, and a devout Christian mother. Damon allowed Dymphna and her mother to practice their faith to such an extent that Dymphna consecrated herself to Christ and took a vow of chastity at the age of 14. Soon afterward, her mother died and her father - who had loved his wife deeply - began to suffer a rapid deterioration of his mental stability.



So unhinged and distraught was Damon, that his counselors suggested he remarry. Though he was still grieving for his wife, he agreed to it if a woman as beautiful as she could be found.

Damon sent messengers throughout his realm, areas of Ireland and neighboring countries to find a woman of noble birth who resembled his wife and would be willing to marry him. When none could be found, one of his counselors whispered an evil and sinful suggestion: marry Dymphna, his own daughter, who was a living likeness of her mother. So twisted and delusional were Damon's thoughts that he recognized only his wife when he looked upon Dymphna, and so he consented to the arrangement.

He broached the topic to his daughter. Dymphna, as would be expected, was greatly horrified at the suggestion, and asked for a period of forty days to consider the proposal. She immediately went to Father Gerebran, who advised her to flee from her native country, and since the danger was imminent, he urged her to make no delay. Dymphna, along with Father Gerebran and two or three servants, fled to the continent and settled in what is known today as Geel (or Gheel), Belgium.

When her father found Dymphna was in Belgium, he traveled to Geel and captured her and Father Gerebran. Damon ordered his minions to behead the priest, which they did. Then, he attempted to convince Dymphna to return to Ireland and marry him.

When Dymphna refused, Damon became enraged and drew his sword. He struck Dymphna's head from her shoulders and left her there. When she died, Dymphna was at the tender age of 15. After her father left Geel, the residents collected both Dymphna and Father Gerebran's remains and laid them to rest in a cave.

In defense of her purity, Dymphna received the crown of martyrdom around the year 620 (though some reports claim it occurred as late as 640) and became known as the "Lily of



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Éire.” In 1349, a church honoring St. Dymphna (see below) was built in Geel, and by 1480, so many pilgrims were arriving in need of treatment for mental ills, that the church was expanded. The expanded sanctuary was eventually overflowing again, leaving the townspeople to accept them into their homes, which began a tradition of care for the mentally ill that continues to this day. Generations of experience have given to the people of Geel an intimate and tender skill in dealing with their charges, and their remarkable spirit of charity and Christlike love for these afflicted members of society gives to our modern-day world, so prone to put its whole reliance on science, a lesson in the principles of true Christian charity.

According to the records in Geel, the bodies of the two martyred saints lay on the ground for quite some time after their death, until the inhabitants of Geel removed them to a cave, which was the customary manner of interment in that part of the world at the time of the martyrdoms. But after several years had elapsed,



the villagers, recalling their holy deaths, decided to give the bodies a more suitable burial. When the workmen removed the heap of black earth at the cave’s entrance, great was their astonishment to find two most beautiful tombs, whiter than snow, which were carved from stone, as if by angel hands. When the coffin of St. Dymphna was opened, there was found lying on her breast a red tile bearing the inscription:

“Here lies the holy virgin and martyr, Dymphna.”

Miracles and cures began to occur in continually increasing numbers. Gradually St. Dymphna’s fame as patroness of victims of nervous diseases and mental disorders was spread from country to country. More and more mentally afflicted persons were brought to the shrine by relatives and friends, many coming in pilgrimages from far-distant places. Novenas were made, and St. Dymphna’s relic was applied to the patients. The remarkable cures reported caused confidence in the saint to grow daily.

St. Dymphna was canonized by Pope Innocent IV in 1247 and her feast day is May 15th. She is a patron saint for those who suffer with mental and neurological illness and disorders (given her father’s mental illness); those who are depressed; runaways; victims of sexual assault and incest and those who experience sleep disorders.