

BOOKLET TO PRINT

# Saint Dymphna

*Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage*

Feast day: May 15

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IN BRIEF

## Saint Dymphna

*Young martyr of Irish origin according to tradition, venerated at Geel in Belgium, patron saint of people with mental illness.*

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| **Feast day** | May 15 |
| **Died** | 7th century (according to tradition), Geel, Brabant (present-day Belgium) |
| **Canonized** | pre-congregation (venerated since the Middle Ages) |
| **Era** | 7th century |
| **Patron saint of** | mental illness, anxiety, depression, mental health caregivers, victims of incest, epilepsy, Geel |

## In this booklet


Life

Prayer to Saint Dymphna for Mental Health

Novena to Saint Dymphna

Church of Saint Dymphna in Geel, Sanctuary of the Sick

Credits and sources



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LIFE

# Saint Dymphna

Saint Dymphna is a young martyr venerated since the Middle Ages in Geel, Belgium, in the province of Antwerp. According to tradition, she was the daughter of a 7th-century Irish king and was killed by her own father after fleeing his incestuous desire. Her story rests on a late legend, but her cult gave birth to something unique: the care of people with mental illness in the families of Geel, a practice that continues today. Patron saint of those who suffer from mental illness, anxiety and depression, she is celebrated on May 15.

## Who was Saint Dymphna?

What we know for certain about Saint Dymphna can be said in a few words: in the 13th century, the relics of a young virgin martyr named Dymphna and of a priest named Gerebernus were venerated at Geel. The account of her life was written around the middle of the 13th century by a canon of Cambrai named Peter, at the request of the bishop of Cambrai, from the traditions kept on the spot.

Historians therefore regard the life of Dymphna as a legend, some of whose elements appear in other medieval stories. That takes nothing away from the reality of her very ancient cult, nor from the strength of what it produced: a tradition of care and hospitality toward people with mental illness that is still cited as an example throughout the world.



*Saint Dymphna altarpiece attributed to Goswin van der Weyden (early 16th century), Church of Saint Dymphna, Geel.*

## Key dates

- **7th century**: Life and martyrdom of Dymphna, according to tradition.
- **c. 1240**: Peter, a canon of Cambrai, writes down the legend of Saint Dymphna.
- **14th-16th centuries**: Construction of the Gothic Church of Saint Dymphna in Geel.
- **Late Middle Ages**: A "sickroom" is built against the church; pilgrims are gradually taken in by the families of Geel.
- **19th century**: The Belgian state organizes and supervises family foster care for patients in Geel.
- **1939**: The National Shrine of Saint Dymphna is founded in Massillon, Ohio, in the United States.

## The legend of Saint Dymphna

According to the legend, Dymphna was the daughter of a pagan king of Ireland and of a Christian mother, both beautiful and devout. She was secretly baptized and consecrated her life to God. Her mother died while she was still a teenager. The grieving king looked for a new wife who resembled the one he had lost. His advisers finally pointed out that only his daughter resembled her, and the king resolved to marry her.

Horrified, Dymphna fled with her confessor, the elderly priest Gerebernus, and a few servants. They crossed the sea and settled near Geel, in Brabant, where they lived in prayer and in the service of the poor. But the king tracked them down, according to the story thanks to Irish coins the fugitives had used. His soldiers killed Gerebernus. Dymphna still refused to give in, and her father beheaded her with his own hand. She was about fifteen years old.

### The relics and the first healings

According to tradition, the people of Geel buried the two martyrs where they fell. Later their bodies were found in two stone coffins. Healings of people who were "possessed" or "out of their minds," as people said then, were attributed to Dymphna's intercession. The relics of Gerebernus were taken to Germany and are venerated at Sonsbeck, in the Rhineland, while those of Dymphna remained at Geel.

## Geel, the town that welcomes the mentally ill

From the Middle Ages, people with mental illness and their families came from far away to Geel to pray to Saint Dymphna. They followed a novena, nine days of prayer, in the church, and a sickroom was built against the shrine. Soon there was not enough room. The people of Geel began to take the sick into their own homes and farms for the length of their stay, and sometimes for years.

This custom, born of faith and charity, became a true system of care. In the 19th century the Belgian state supervised it, with doctors and a hospital. Today families in Geel still welcome people living with mental illness, who share their daily life and take part in the life of the town. Psychiatrists from all over the world come to study this model of community care.




*The Church of Saint Dymphna in Geel, Belgium.*

## Why is Saint Dymphna the patron saint of mental illness?

The healings attributed to her intercession and the welcome given to the sick in Geel made Saint Dymphna the patron saint of people with mental illness, nervous disorders, anxiety and depression, as well as of their families and caregivers. Because of her story, she is also invoked by victims of incest and family abuse, and against epilepsy. In the English-speaking world, many Catholics turn to her today for mental health, and her name is given to chapels and programs in Catholic hospitals.

## Symbols and how to recognize Saint Dymphna in art

Saint Dymphna is shown as a young crowned princess, often holding a sword, the instrument of her martyrdom, and a lamp. She is sometimes depicted with a chained demon at her feet, a symbol of the afflictions from which she frees the sick. The paintings in Geel also tell of her flight with Gerebernus and her death.

## Where to pray to Saint Dymphna

The heart of her cult is the Church of Saint Dymphna in Geel, Belgium, where her relics are venerated and the old sickroom can still be seen. In the United States, the National Shrine of Saint Dymphna in Massillon, Ohio, founded in 1939 near a state psychiatric hospital, receives prayer requests from all over the world.

## Praying to Saint Dymphna

Catholics pray to Saint Dymphna for people living with mental illness, anxiety or depression, for their loved ones, and for caregivers. Read the prayer to Saint Dymphna and pray the novena to Saint Dymphna, beginning on May 6. Prayer does not replace medical care: it goes hand in hand with it.

PRAYER

# Prayer to Saint Dymphna for Mental Health

Prayers to Saint Dymphna are widespread in the English-speaking world, where she is often invoked for mental health. The prayer below is an original text by Saintspedia. It draws on her story, that of a young girl who fled the violence of her own father, and on the tradition of welcoming the sick that grew up around her tomb in Geel. This prayer does not replace the help of a doctor, counselor or caregiver: it accompanies it.

## Prayer to Saint Dymphna for mental health

*Saint Dymphna, young martyr of Geel,*
*you who knew fear, flight and betrayal by those who should have protected you,*
*you know what it is to have a troubled heart and mind.*

*I entrust to you (name), and all who suffer in their minds:*
*those smothered by anxiety,*
*those whom depression holds in darkness,*
*those who no longer recognize themselves,*
*those who have been hurt by the people closest to them.*

*Obtain for them inner peace, patience in their treatment,*
*and people who welcome them without judging,*
*as the families of Geel welcomed the sick.*

*Support families caring for a loved one who is ill,*
*and all doctors, nurses, counselors and caregivers.*

*May Christ, who healed troubled hearts,*
*keep us in his love.*
*Saint Dymphna, pray for us. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

## A short prayer in a moment of anxiety

*Lord, I am anxious and I cannot find peace. Through the intercession of Saint Dymphna, take my hand and quiet my heart. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

## When to pray this prayer

You can pray to Saint Dymphna at any time, and especially on May 15, her feast day. In the United States, her feast falls during Mental Health Awareness Month. She walks with those going through a panic attack, depression or mental illness, and with their loved ones. If you or someone you love is in crisis or thinking of suicide, please also reach out right away to a doctor, a crisis line or emergency services.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Dymphna, from May 6 to 14, and read the life of Saint Dymphna.

NOVENA

# Novena to Saint Dymphna

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the tradition of Saint Dymphna and the welcome given to the sick in Geel, where pilgrims once came to pray for nine days near her tomb. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast, begin on May 6; it ends on May 14, the day before the feast of May 15. You can pray it at any time for someone living with mental illness, anxiety or depression, or for yourself.

## How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off. This novena does not replace medical care or counseling: it goes hand in hand with them. A novena is not a formula that obliges God to answer; it is nine days of trust, in the company of a saint who knew fear and violence and who remains close to all who suffer in their minds.

## Opening prayer for each day

Lord Jesus, you calmed the storm, you healed troubled minds, and you welcomed all who came to you. As I begin this day of my novena, I place before you my intention (name it in silence), and all who suffer in their minds and hearts. Give them your peace, surround them with people who understand and care, and never let them feel abandoned. Saint Dymphna, you who found refuge in God when you had nowhere else to go, pray for us. Amen.

## Day 1: God is close to the brokenhearted

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those whose spirit is crushed" (Psalm 34:19). Mental suffering does not separate us from God; it does not stop his love from reaching us.

**Prayer:** Lord, I entrust my intention to you for these nine days. Meet me where I am, even in the dark.

**Today:** Write down your intention and place it near a crucifix or an image of Saint Dymphna.

## Day 2: A wounded child

Dymphna lost her mother very young, then was threatened by her own father. Much mental suffering has its roots in the wounds of childhood.

**Prayer:** Saint Dymphna, watch over wounded children and over adults who still carry the wounds of their childhood.

**Today:** Pray for children who suffer violence in their families.

## Day 3: The courage to flee evil

Dymphna had the courage to leave in order to protect herself. There is no shame in asking for help, or in stepping away from what destroys us.

**Prayer:** Lord, give the strength to ask for help to those who suffer in silence.

**Today:** Write down the name of a person or service you could turn to in time of need.

## Day 4: Not alone

Dymphna did not flee alone: the priest Gerebernus went with her. In times of trial, God often places faithful companions on our path.

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for those who walk with me. Give every person who is ill someone to walk by their side.

**Today:** Thank someone who supported you during a difficult time.

## Day 5: Peace in anxiety

Jesus says: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid" (John 14:27). His peace is not the absence of difficulties, but his presence in the midst of them.

**Prayer:** Lord, calm those who are overwhelmed by anxiety. Give them your peace.

**Today:** Take ten minutes of silence, breathing slowly in the presence of God.

## Day 6: In the night of depression

Depression can take away the taste for life and all hope. Even when we feel nothing, God remains faithful.

**Prayer:** Saint Dymphna, pray for those who are in the night. Keep a small light of hope alive in them.

**Today:** Check in on someone who is going through depression.

## Day 7: The welcome of Geel

In Geel, families opened their homes to the sick. They understood that healing also comes through dignity, trust and shared life.

**Prayer:** Lord, teach me to welcome without judging those who suffer in their minds.

**Today:** Refrain from a joke or a hurtful word about mental illness, and gently correct one if you hear it.

## Day 8: For families and caregivers

Caring for a loved one who is ill is exhausting. Families and caregivers also need support and prayer.

**Prayer:** Saint Dymphna, support families, doctors, nurses, counselors and all who care for the sick.

**Today:** Offer a caregiver a moment of rest.

## Day 9: Faithful to the end

Dymphna chose death rather than betray her faith. Her faithfulness became a source of healing for generations of the sick.

**Prayer:** Saint Dymphna, present to God the intention I have entrusted to you. Obtain peace and healing for those I love.

**Today:** Give thanks for a sign of peace received during these nine days.

## Closing prayer

Lord God, you gave Saint Dymphna the strength to remain faithful in the face of violence, and you made her tomb a place of welcome for the sick. Through her prayers, grant what I have asked in these nine days, if it is your will. Bring peace to troubled minds, comfort to their families, and wisdom to all who care for them. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Read also the prayer to Saint Dymphna and the life of Saint Dymphna.

PILGRIMAGE

# Church of Saint Dymphna in Geel, Sanctuary of the Sick

The Church of Saint Dymphna in Geel, in the province of Antwerp, Belgium, houses the relics of Saint Dymphna, patron saint of those with mental illness. Since the Middle Ages, the sick and their families have come here on pilgrimage. Around this sanctuary grew a tradition unique in the world: the welcoming of people with mental illness into the family homes of the town.




*The Church of Saint Dymphna in Geel, Belgium.*

## A Sanctuary Born of a Legend

According to tradition, Dymphna, the daughter of an Irish king, was killed in Geel in the 7th century by her father, together with the priest Gerebernus who accompanied her. The townspeople buried the two martyrs, and healings of the sick were attributed to her intercession. In the 13th century her legend was written down at the request of the Bishop of Cambrai, on whom Geel then depended, and her cult was already drawing pilgrims.

## The Gothic Church

The present church was built beginning in the 14th century and completed in the 16th century, in the Brabantine Gothic style. It preserves rich furnishings: the shrine containing the relics of Saint Dymphna, a large carved altarpiece devoted to her life, and a painted altarpiece attributed to Goswin van der Weyden, from the early 16th century, which tells her story in several scenes.

## The Sickroom

At the end of the Middle Ages, a sickroom was added alongside the church. The sick stayed there during a novena, nine days of prayer, with rites of deliverance. According to tradition, they also passed on their knees beneath the saint's shrine. When the room was no longer enough, the people of Geel began to house the sick in their own homes. This was the origin of the family care that makes the town famous today.



*Altarpiece of Saint Dymphna attributed to Goswin van der Weyden, Church of Saint Dymphna, Geel.*

## Family Care for the Sick

For centuries, families in Geel have welcomed people with mental illness into their homes, sharing their daily lives with them. In the 19th century the Belgian state organized this system and added a psychiatric hospital to it. It still exists, with modern medical supervision, and is studied around the world as a model of integrating the mentally ill into society.

## Tips for the Pilgrimage

Geel is in the Campine region, about twenty-eight miles east of Antwerp, and is served by train. The feast of Saint Dymphna, May 15, is the occasion for special celebrations. It is best to check the church's opening hours before your visit.

## Other Places Associated with Saint Dymphna

The relics of the priest Gerebernus are venerated in Sonsbeck, in the Rhineland, Germany. In the United States, the National Shrine of Saint Dymphna was founded in 1939 in Massillon, Ohio, near a psychiatric hospital. Chapels and statues of Saint Dymphna can also be found in many Catholic hospitals, especially in the English-speaking world.

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