

SAINTS ALIVE! MAY 15: SAINT DYMPHNA



During the past two months, while planted in the front of the television watching the major events on the sporting calendar, I watched an ad campaign run many many times for a snack that was unavailable to a puppet because, well, it was a puppet. Because of the puppet's maniacal desire for the unattainable snack, it was contained in a mental institution. One commercial highlighted that the only way to control the puppet was to strap it down. The ads were intended to be humorous; I found them very offensive because they perpetuated the stereotype of those suffering from mental illness.

Saint Dymphna is the patron saint of those suffering from emotional and mental illnesses.

“A mental illness is a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life” *National Alliance on Mental Illness*.

Just as physical illnesses fall on a long continuum of afflictions, from sinus infections to terminal cancer, mental illnesses vary in their severity. One in four adults experiences a mental health disorder in a given year. One in 17 lives with a serious mental illness. *National Institute of Mental Health*

One is not defined by his or her mental illness but suffers from it. For example, one suffers from bipolar disorder; one is not “bipolar.”

Science has much to learn about mental illness, about the interplay between genetics and environment. For example, a significant stress-related life event can trigger one's predisposition to a serious mental illness.

Dymphna was 14 years old when her mother died. Dymphna's father suffered tremendous grief from his loss that resulted in a serious deterioration of his mental health. This manifested itself in his fervent desire to marry his daughter because of her resemblance to her mother. When she resisted, her father cut off his daughter's head with his sword. Dymphna was 15 years old when she died.

Dymphna's father suffered from a serious mental illness.

“Our [Catholic] faith requires a greater sensitivity and commitment to our fellow humans who suffer from mental illness as well as a greater responsibility on our part to recognize their importance to the community and especially communities of faith. In a society that judges a person on the value of what he or she produces, the person living with mental illness is easily seen merely as a burden on society. The temptation is to isolate or marginalize. As Christians, then, we are called unceasingly to affirm their dignity as human beings made in the image and likeness of God, and to recognize their value to the community,” *The Person with Mental Illness: Bearing God's Image*, by Rev. Richard Gill, L.C.

How can we show greater sensitivity to those suffering from mental illness? We can begin by educating ourselves and our parish on how to be a welcoming, inclusive community.

We can advocate for an end to the stereotypes perpetuated by society in language and portrayed in our media.

We can pray: Hear us, O God, Our Savior, as we honor St. Dymphna, patron of those afflicted with mental and emotional illness. Help us to be inspired by her example and comforted by her merciful help. Amen.



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