

**Introduction of devotion to St Dimpna
at
St Patrick's, Church Hill
May 2018**

At the beginning of 2017, Michael Whelan SM, Parish Priest, commissioned an icon of St Dimpna who is the patron saint of people in mental and emotional distress – especially those who have been sexually abused. Her feast day is May 15. The icon will form the focus of an annual devotion to St Dimpna each May, with prayers especially for those who are in distress as a result of sexual abuse.

Archbishop Anthony Fisher blessed the icon at St Mary's Cathedral during a ceremony for reconciliation on Friday evening 2 March 2018.

At the beginning of 2017, an ad hoc committee was formed to offer advice on how we might mark the anniversary year of 2018. The committee consisted of Michelle Morcos, Geraldine Doogue, Justice Francois Kunc, Lionel Rodriguez, Peter McMurrich SM and Michael Whelan SM. The committee met three times. A major proposal by that committee was that St Patrick's establish "a St Dimpna's Community" to provide a hospitable gathering for victims and survivors of sexual abuse who want to be part of the Catholic community but do not feel comfortable attending Mass. These gatherings to occur once a month.

The devotion to St Dimpna and the St Dimpna Community will begin in May 2018.

Saint Dympna (also: Dymphna, Dimpna) was the daughter of a pagan Irish king and his Christian wife in the 7th century. She was murdered by her father. The story of St. Dympna was first recorded in the thirteenth century by a canon of the Church of St. Aubert at Cambrai, commissioned by the Bishop of Cambrai, Guy I (1238–1247 AD). The author expressly states that his writings were based upon a longstanding oral tradition and a persuasive history of inexplicable and miraculous healings of the mentally ill.

Dympna was born in Ireland during the 7th century. Dympna's father Damon, a petty king of Oriel, was pagan, but her mother was a devout Christian. When Dympna was 14 years old, her mother died. Damon had loved his wife deeply, and in the aftermath of her death his mental health sharply deteriorated. When at length he decided to remarry, Damon sought to find a woman who resembled his deceased wife. When no such woman could be found, Damon began to desire his daughter, because of the strong resemblance she bore to her mother. When Dympna learned of her father's intentions she fled his court along with her confessor Father Gerebernus and two trusted servants. Together they sailed towards the continent, eventually landing in Belgium, where they took refuge in the town of Gheel.



One tradition states that once settled in Gheel, St. Dympna built a hospice for the poor and sick of the region. However, ironically, it was through the use of her wealth that her father would eventually ascertain her whereabouts, as some of the coins used enabled her father to trace them to Belgium. Damon sent his agents to pursue his daughter and her companions. When their hiding place was discovered, Damon travelled to Gheel to recover his daughter. Damon ordered his soldiers to kill Father Gerebernus and tried to force Dympna to return with him to Ireland, but she

resisted. Furious, Damon drew his sword and struck off his daughter's head. She was 15 years old when she died. After Dympna and Gerebernus were martyred, the residents of Gheel buried them in a nearby cave. Years later, they decided to move the remains to a more suitable location. According to tradition, when workmen entered the cave to retrieve the two bodies they found that the bones of Dympna and Gerebernus had been miraculously interred in two stone sarcophagi, one of which bore a red tile with the inscription "DYMPNA."

The historical basis for this story is uncertain. There are variations in the legend and it has counterparts in the folktales of many European countries, such as *The King Who Wished to Marry His Daughter* and *Donkeyskin*. The events of Saint Dympna's life may have become entwined with these myths in the centuries after her death when her story was told orally.

The remains of Saint Dympna were later put into a silver reliquary and placed in the Gheel church named in her honour. The remains of Saint Gerebernus were moved to Xanten, Germany. During the late 15th century the original St. Dympna's Church in Gheel burned, and necessity obliged the erection of the magnificent "Church of St. Dympna," which was consecrated in 1532 and now still stands on the site where her body was first buried.

A phenomenon is said to have occurred immediately after the finding of the tombs. A number of people with epilepsy, mental illnesses and persons under evil influences who had visited at the tomb of Dympna were cured. Ever since that time, she has been invoked on behalf of such people.

St. Dympna is the patron saint of the nervous, emotionally disturbed, mentally ill and sexually abused. Her feast day is May 15.

Our Icon

One of Australia's foremost iconographers, Mr Michael Galovic was commissioned to write the icon of St Dimpna for our community. Michael describes the writing of the icon as follows:

The gesso used is the traditional gesso, made of rabbit skin glue and whiting, applied in some 12 layers. Due to its nature, it is a gesso you can not ever buy ready made from anywhere but have to do it yourself. The application takes up to two days after which the surface is smoothed by sandpaper and brought to the marble-like finish. After you have resolved your drawing in detail, I did the work on incision/engraving the lines within the halo of the saint, then prepared the areas for gilding and laid the 22karats and 24 karats goldleaf where applicable. The rest of areas was painted in egg-yolk tempera, meaning you mix the colour pigments with egg-yolk thus securing its longevity and translucence obtained only with this method, not acrylics or oil paint (which came into existence only in 15th century, by the way).

The inscription was made using the font from the Book of Kells and the pattern as well, which took a very, very long time to execute.

Finally, the icon was varnished twice with clear satin varnish, giving to the icon another protection coat and also bringing the vibrancy and life to the otherwise somewhat dull tempera finishing aspect.

This icon is NOT a copy or replica of any depiction of St Dympna, but a unique rendition of this very saint. The concept is based on a small almost illegible print of a Byzantine style icon of a princess, but not of St Dympna. Google up the icon images of St Dympna and you will see the variety and the fact that this is a new, unique rendition.

Icons are not necessarily just copies of old or new models AT ALL. They can be completely new solutions rendered within the framework of what is considered a traditional icon.