Life

The story of St. Dymphna was recorded by a French priest in the 13th century according to an old oral tradition and miraculous healings. She was a princess of a small kingdom in Ireland in the 7th century. At the age of 14, she dedicated herself to Christ and vowed to maintain chastity. He mother died soon, and her father missed his wife terribly, which drove him to madness. Counsellors advised him to remarry. As his daughter looked like her mother, he wanted to marry her. To protect her chastity, Dymphna fled with her spiritual director and two servants to the current town of Geel in Belgium and built a hospice for the poor and sick. Later, his father tracked her down and ordered the soldiers to kill the priest first. When Dymphna refused to go home with him, he drew his sword and beheaded her. St. Dymphna was 15 years old. She is the patron of people with mental illness. In 1349, Geel built a church to commemorate Dymphna, and pilgrims from various places went there to seek treatment for mental disorders.

St. John of God was born in Portugal in 1495. At the age of 8, he ran away from home to seek adventures. He was a shepherd until 27 years old. After that, he joined the army until he was 38 years old. Like other soldiers, he took part in gambling, drinking, and pillaging, but on the occasion when he was thrown from a stolen horse, he repented. After the war, he returned to Spain to work in the dock and read spiritual books at night. In order to spread the joy of reading the religious books, he started to run a small bookstore. After he listened to the sermon of Bl. John of Avila on repentance, he was very moved. He tore up the secular publications in his bookstore and gave the religious books and money to neighbours. He tore his clothing and wept over his sins. His friends took him to the hospital, where he was interned with the lunatics and was tied and whipped as treatment. It wasn't until John of Avila visited him and told him that his penance had gone on long enough, and advised him to dedicate himself to work for the glory of the Lord to save souls that he gained peace of heart.

After regaining his freedom, he sold firewood and gave the proceeds to the poor. After that, he rented a house and went out to the street to carry poor people who were sick to the "hospital". He took care of the patients during the day and begged for donations at night. Some people criticized his good works, but more people supported him, and the project of helping the poor and the sick gradually grew and became the Brothers Hospitallers of nowadays. In addition to the hospital, he also researched who were the poverty-stricken people in the province and took the initiative to provide them with material assistance or introduce them to work. The bishop admired his virtues and gave him the title "of God". He also allowed him to establish a religious order. One day, the Royal Hospital was on fire, while others just watched outside, he rushed into the blazing hospital and carried out the patients one by one. In his twilight years, there was a flood. He salvaged the relief supplies and jumped into the water to save people. Eventually his health failed, and he became seriously ill. When he was unable to work and had to leave town to convalesce, he asked the residents to look after his brothers, that is, the poor in the city. He died in 1550 at the age of 55. The church named him as the patron of hospitals and the sick. He is also the patron of firefighters.

Reflection

The experience of St. John reflected on the helplessness of those with mental illness at that time, who were even abused because of "treatment". However, in another place around the same time, patients in similar conditions were treated entirely differently. Since 1480, because of some miracles, more and more people came to the church of Dymphna to pray for healing of mental illness. The church requested the townspeople to take them into their own homes. Thus a tradition began for residents to give ongoing care to these patients, and when a patient is brought to a home, he would become a member of this foster family. These patients normally engaged themselves in manual labor such as in agriculture to reciprocate and became a part of the community. This tradition continues to this day and is regarded as a model of "Community Recovery." Let's reflect on the attitude of ourselves to the brothers and sisters who are suffering from mental illness. Can we treat them with love and accept them into the community like the residents of Geel?

Prayer

St. John not only attached importance to actual works of love, but also paid great attention to prayer. When he was too sick to work and had to rest, before leaving, he still went to the hospital's chapel to adore the Eucharist. When he was dying, he knelt in front of the altar. Let us learn from St. John, regardless of sickness or health, not to forget to pray to the Lord.

May we learn from St. Dymphna and St. John of God to insist on acting in justice and love
without fear of opposition or oppression. We pray especially for the brothers and sisters who have mental illness.
St. Dymphna and St. John of God, pray for us.