

# PROVIDENCE Journal

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## MARIJUANA 'MINISTRY': Cannabis, Catholicism clash in R.I.

### Saturday

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West Greenwich woman's use of Virgin Mary icon in her pot 'ministry' leads to her arrest and her lawsuit claiming religious infringement by law-enforcement officials and defamation by a Vermont man who reclaimed the portrait.

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Some devotees of the Our Lady of Guadalupe portrait report seeing tears miraculously appear on the 500-year-old image of the Virgin Mary.

Anne Armstrong, of West Greenwich, viewed a replica of the venerated illustration and saw marijuana blossoms adorning Mary's dress.

Her interpretation ultimately landed her behind bars.

For of all things: too much pot in her possession.

The story of the icon and how it played a role in Armstrong's arrest is now part of a federal suit she has filed claiming religious infringement by law enforcement officials and defamation by a Vermont man who has the 6-foot replica in question back in his custody.

Armstrong is one of the leaders of the Healing Church, which uses marijuana and its derivatives in religious rituals. In recent years, church leaders have filed several court complaints challenging government interference with their religious activities.

Cannabis use dates back to the earliest days of Christianity, Armstrong says, and her church's mission is to spread the word of the plant's healing powers.

Armstrong, who is 56, converted to Catholicism in 1991 and became a believer in the curative powers of the famous image of Mary; in the 1990s, she says, she used to print the image on T-shirts and hand them out outside abortion clinics.

But it wasn't until last year, on a September pilgrimage to Washington, D.C., to see the pope, that Armstrong says she took a closer look at Mary's dress, in a photograph, and saw marijuana blossoms.

It seemed symbolic, she says; cannabis "is a gentle remedy" for the world's pain, and relieving that pain "is the basis of Christianity."

**The original image** — said to have miraculously appeared on a peasant's poncho in Mexico in 1531— is enshrined at the Minor Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. But since the 1990s, a few full-size, 6-foot replicas have traveled the world.

One such replica, says a West Greenwich police affidavit, was in the custody of Dan Lynch of St. Albans, Vermont.

Lynch runs a nonprofit religious organization called Dan Lynch Apostolates, which promotes the teachings of Jesus Christ and conversions to Christianity.

Last spring Armstrong says she read that Lynch was looking for "guardians" who wanted to take temporary custody of the replica to promote similar missionary work and church services.

Armstrong applied, and on May 19 the replica of Our Lady of Guadalupe arrived at her West Greenwich door on Hudson Pond Road, home of the Healing Church.

But here is where Armstrong's and Lynch's versions of the story part.

Lynch "I guess didn't read my emails," says Armstrong, because in them she explained the unusual nature of her "cannabis ministry."

Armstrong carted the replica to Roger Williams National Memorial in Providence where church members prayed cannabis-incensed novenas; to a WaterFire celebration where they explained to throngs what was really on Mary's dress; to a White House demonstration to end marijuana prohibition in the United States; and in June to Providence's annual gay-pride event, Pridefest, as a show of support following the shooting rampage at an Orlando gay bar.

She also intended to bring the image to the chapel at the United Nations because, she says, it has the power to cure the Zika virus.

**When Lynch got wind** of some of Our Lady's travels, he was not pleased.

Though he declined comment for this story, on his agency's website he described Armstrong's use of the image as sacrilege.

Under the headline: "Missionary image held Hostage!" Lynch wrote that Armstrong and her "cohabitant," Alan Gordon, "sacrilegiously used the image to promote their personal cause for the use of marijuana as a remedy for the healing of the world."

Lynch seemed incensed that Armstrong had claimed the design "on Our Lady's dress were marijuana flowers!"

Lynch said he posted messages on Armstrong's Facebook page informing her that her plans were sacrilege, and "I ordered her to remove all videos, photographs and mention of the Missionary Image from the Facebook page" and return the replica immediately.

Armstrong refused, Lynch wrote and "accused me of interstate wire fraud and defamation."

On June 15, Lynch, who is 72, drove to West Greenwich, stopping at the police station and asking for an officer to accompany him to Armstrong's home to retrieve the image.

Lynch and Sgt. Richard Brown knocked on Armstrong's door. Brown advised her to return the image to Lynch.

"Ms. Armstrong refused," Brown wrote days later in his affidavit for a court warrant to search the house. And she set several conditions for its eventual release, Brown wrote. Among them: that she receive clarification from the Cardinal of Mexico that Lynch had proper right to the replica and that "the image would be taken to the United Nations in order to get the approval to allow the use of cannabis oil to cure the Zika virus."

Brown and Lynch left without the image, but not without first noticing marijuana growing outside the house, Lynch said.

Back at the police station, Lynch filed a formal complaint for the return of the image. And on June 23, Brown returned to Armstrong's house with a search warrant and removed the missionary image. Neither Armstrong nor Gordon was charged with any crime.

But Armstrong's problems with the law weren't over.

**Four weeks later**, state and local police officers returned to the Hudson Pond Road house and arrested the pair, seizing 12 pounds of marijuana, 59 pot plants and 10 pounds of hash oil and equipment to make it.

Police said neither Armstrong nor Gordon had valid medical marijuana cards. (Armstrong said she once was registered as a patient and caregiver.) But proper registration would not have mattered, since the police said they were growing marijuana outdoors in violation of the state medical marijuana program, and they were in excess of any legal amount.

Both were charged with possession with intent to deliver marijuana and possession of more than five kilograms of marijuana, and initially held without bail. It would be two weeks before they were released.

On Friday, Armstrong said the marijuana seized at their house didn't belong to them; it belonged to one patient in the medical marijuana program and three other so-called caregivers who grow marijuana for patients.

The police who came "never asked us who it belonged to," Armstrong said.

Armstrong and Gordon are expected back in court around Dec. 6 for a status conference on their drug cases.

No word yet on their new federal complaint against the police and Lynch.

Though she could face several years behind bars if convicted, "whatever happens will work out for the good," Armstrong says.

She still has faith in the protective power of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, she says. If nothing else, "I get to share her story now with more people."

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### **Forum next week**

The Providence Journal, Leadership Rhode Island and Rhode Island College are sponsoring a Public Occurrences forum on "Pot and Profit in Rhode Island."

When: 6 p.m., Monday, Dec. 5

Where: Rhode Island College

Cost: Free, but registration is required at [potandprofit.eventbrite.com](http://potandprofit.eventbrite.com)

Who: Panelists include First Assistant U.S. Attorney Stephen G. Dambruch, former Denver Post editor Greg Moore and Regulate Rhode Island Director Jared Moffat