



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 4 August 2010

Saint Tarcisius

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I would like to express my joy at being here with you today in this Square, where you have gathered festively for this General Audience, attended by such large numbers of the great European pilgrimage for altar servers! Dear boys and girls and young people, welcome to Rome! Since the vast majority of the altar servers present in the Square are German-speaking, I shall speak to them first of all in my mother tongue.

Dear altar servers, dear friends, dear German-speaking pilgrims, welcome to Rome! I greet cordially all of you and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of State. He is called "Tarcisio" like your Patron Saint. You have had the courtesy to invite him and he, who is called Tarcisius after the Saint, is happy to be able to be here among the world's altar servers and the German altar servers. I greet my dear Brothers in the episcopate and in the Priesthood, and the Deacons who have wished to take part in this Audience. I warmly thank Bishop Martin Gächter, Auxiliary of Basel, President of "Coetus Internationalis Ministrantium", for his greeting to me, for the important gift of the statue of St Tarcisius and for the scarf he has given me. It all reminds me of the time when I too was an altar boy. I also thank Bishop Gächter on your behalf for the great work he carries out among you. I likewise thank your co-workers and all who got together to make this joyful meeting possible. My gratitude also goes to the Swiss sponsors and to all who have worked in their various capacities to make the large statue of St Tarcisius a reality.

How many of you there are! While flying over St Peter's Square in the helicopter I saw all the colours and the joy filling this Square! Thus not only do you create a festive atmosphere in the Square but you also fill my heart with joy! Thank you! The statue of St Tarcisus has come to us after a long pilgrimage. In September 2008 it was unveiled in Switzerland in the presence of 8.000 altar servers; some of you were certainly present. From Switzerland it travelled through Luxembourg on the way to Hungary. Let us greet it festively today, glad at being able to become better acquainted with this figure of the early Church. Later, as Bishop Gächter told us, the statue will be taken to the Catacombs of St Calixtus, where St Tarcisus was buried. The hope that I express to all is that this place, namely the Catacombs of St Calixtus, and this statue, may become a reference point for altar servers, boys and girls, and for all who wish to follow Jesus more closely through the priestly, religious or missionary life. May they all be able to look at this strong and courageous boy and renew their commitment to friendship with the Lord, to learn to live with him always, following the path he points out to us with his word and the witness of so many Saints and Martyrs whose brothers and sisters we have become through Baptism.

Who was St Tarcisus? We do not have much information about him. We are dealing with the early centuries of the Church's history or, to be more precise, with the third century. It is said that he was a boy who came regularly to the Catacombs of St Calixtus here in Rome and took his special Christian duties very seriously. He had great love for the Eucharist and various hints lead us to conclude that he was presumably an acolyte, that is, an altar server. Those were years in which the Emperor Valerian was harshly persecuting Christians who were forced to meet secretly in private houses or, at times, also in the Catacombs, to hear the word of God, to pray and to celebrate Holy Mass. Even the custom of taking the Eucharist to prisoners and the sick became increasingly dangerous. One day, when, as was his habit, the priest asked who was prepared to take the Eucharist to the other brothers and sisters who were waiting for it, young Tarcisus stood up and said: "send me!". This boy seemed too young for such a demanding service! "My youth", Tarcisus said, "will be the best shield for the Eucharist". Convinced, the priest entrusted to him the precious Bread, saying: "Tarcisus, remember that a heavenly treasure has been entrusted to your weak hands. Avoid crowded streets and do not forget that holy things must never be thrown to dogs nor pearls to pigs. Will you guard the Sacred Mysteries faithfully and safely?". "I would die", Tarcisus answered with determination, "rather than let go of them". As he went on his way he met some friends who approached him and asked him to join them. As pagans they became suspicious and insistent at his refusal and realized he was clasping something to his breast that he appeared to be protecting. They tried to prize it away from him, but in vain; the struggle became ever fiercer, especially when they realized that Tarcisus was a Christian; They kicked him, they threw stones at him, but he did not surrender. While Tarcisus was dying a Pretoria guard called Quadratus, who had also, secretly, become a Christian, carried him to the priest. Tarcisus was already dead when they arrived but was still clutching to his breast a small linen bag containing the Eucharist. He was buried straight away in the Catacombs of St Calixtus. Pope Damasus had an inscription carved on St Tarcisus' grave; it says that the boy died in 257. The Roman Martyrology fixed the date as 15 August and in the same Martyrology a beautiful oral tradition is

also recorded. It claims that the Most Blessed Sacrament was not found on St Tarcisius' body, either in his hands or his clothing. It explains that the consecrated Host which the little Martyr had defended with his life, had become flesh of his flesh thereby forming, together with his body, a single immaculate Host offered to God.

Dear altar servers, St Tarcisius' testimony and this beautiful tradition teach us the deep love and great veneration that we must have for the Eucharist: it is a precious good, a treasure of incomparable value; it is the Bread of life, it is Jesus himself who becomes our nourishment, support and strength on our daily journey and on the open road that leads to eternal life; the Eucharist is the greatest gift that Jesus bequeathed to us.

I am addressing those of you who are present here and, through you, all the altar servers of the world! Serve Jesus present in the Eucharist generously. It is an important task that enables you to be particularly close to the Lord and to grow in true and profound friendship with him. Guard this friendship in your hearts jealously, like St Tarcisius, ready to commit yourselves, to fight and to give your lives so that Jesus may reach all peoples. May you too communicate to your peers the gift of this friendship with joy, with enthusiasm, without fear, so that they may feel that you know this Mystery, that is true and that you love it! Every time that you approach the altar, you have the good fortune to assist in God's great loving gesture as he continues to want to give himself to each one of us, to be close to us, to help us, to give us strength to live in the right way. With consecration, as you know, that little piece of bread becomes Christ's Body, that wine becomes Christ's Blood. You are lucky to be able to live this indescribable Mystery from close at hand! Do your task as altar servers with love, devotion and faithfulness; do not enter a church for the celebration with superficiality but rather, prepare yourselves inwardly for Holy Mass! Assisting your priests in service at the altar helps to make Jesus closer, so that people can understand, can realize better: he is here. You collaborate to make him more present in the world, in every day life, in the Church and everywhere. Dear friends! You lend Jesus your hands, your thoughts, your time. He will not fail to reward you, giving you true joy and enabling you to feel where the fullest happiness is. St Tarcisius has shown us that love can even bring us to give our life for an authentic good, for the true good, for the Lord.

Martyrdom will probably not be required of us, but Jesus asks of us fidelity in small things, inner recollection, inner participation, our faith and our efforts to keep this treasure present in every day life. He asks of us fidelity in daily tasks, a witness to his love, going to church through inner conviction and for the joy of his presence. Thus we can also make known to our friends that Jesus is alive. May St John Mary Vianney's intercession help us in this commitment. Today is the liturgical Memorial of this humble French Parish Priest who changed a small community and thus gave the world a new light. May the example of St Tarcisius and St John Mary Vianney impel us every day to love Jesus and to do his will, as did the Virgin Mary, faithful to her Son to the end. Thank you all once again! May God bless you in these days and I wish you a good journey home!

To special groups:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including the groups from Japan and the United States of America. A special greeting to the English-speaking altar servers present: by serving at Mass may you draw ever closer to Christ our Lord. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant blessings.

APPEAL

My thoughts go to the peoples hit in this period by serious natural disasters that have caused a loss of human life, injuries and damage, leaving many people homeless. I am thinking in particular of the widespread fires in the Russian Federation and of the devastating floods in Pakistan and Afghanistan. I pray the Lord for the victims and I am spiritually close to all who are tried by these adversities. For them I ask God for relief in suffering and support in difficulty. I also hope that they will not lack the solidarity of all.

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