

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Tarcisius

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: August 15

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint Tarcisius

Roman martyr of the 3rd century who died protecting the Eucharist, patron saint of altar servers.

Feast day	August 15
Died	c. 257, Rome
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	altar servers, First Communicants

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Tarcisius, Martyr of the Eucharist

Novena to Saint Tarcisius

Church of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome, Relics of Saint Tarcisius

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

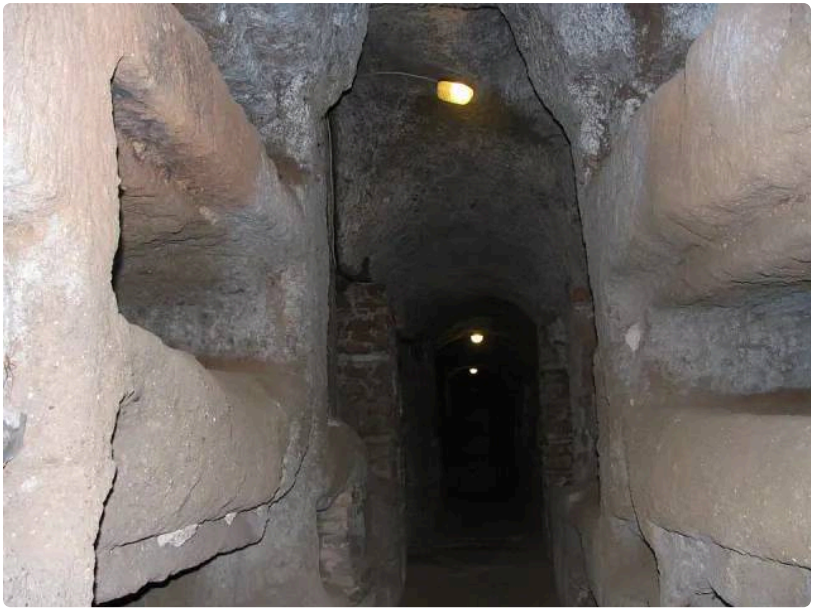
Saint Tarcisius

Saint Tarcisius was a Roman martyr of the 3rd century, killed by a hostile mob while he was carrying the Eucharist. He is known only through a few lines of verse carved a century later by Pope Damasus, but his act has crossed the centuries: he became the "martyr of the Eucharist," a model for children making their First Communion and the patron saint of altar servers. His feast day is August 15.

Who was Saint Tarcisius?

Tarcisius lived in Rome in the middle of the 3rd century, a time when Christians suffered violent persecutions, especially under Emperor Valerian (253-260). His name, derived from the city of Tarsus in Cilicia, the hometown of Saint Paul, was common in Rome.

Beyond that, honesty requires us to say it plainly: we know almost nothing about his life. His memory rests on a single historical source, a verse inscription composed by Pope Damasus, elected in 366, who did much to honor the martyrs of Rome.



The Catacombs of Saint Callixtus, where Tarcisius was first buried.

Key dates for Saint Tarcisius

- **Mid-3rd century**: Lives in Rome, at the time of the persecutions of Valerian.
- **Around 257**: Martyrdom, according to a date added later to the inscription of Damasus.
- **After 366**: Pope Damasus dedicates an epigram to him in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus.
- **767**: Pope Paul I transfers his relics to the Church of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome.
- **1596**: His relics are placed under the high altar of that church.
- **2010**: Pope Benedict XVI proposes him as a model to altar servers throughout the world.

What the inscription of Damasus says

In his Latin verses, Damasus compares Tarcisius to Saint Stephen, the first martyr. He recalls that Stephen was stoned, then speaks of Tarcisius: while he was carrying the sacraments of Christ, an ungodly crowd tried to seize them in order to profane them, and he chose to die under their blows rather than surrender "the heavenly members to raging dogs."

That is all the source says. It gives neither his age, nor his rank in the Church, nor the exact way he was killed. The comparison with Stephen, who was a deacon, has led several historians to think that Tarcisius was also a deacon, or at least a young adult charged with carrying the Eucharist to the sick or to prisoners. This was indeed a mission entrusted to the ministers of the Church.

The legend of the young acolyte

From these few lines, piety wove a more detailed story. According to the legend, Tarcisius was a young boy entrusted with bringing Communion to imprisoned Christians. On the Appian Way, companions and then passersby wanted to know what he was hiding under his cloak. He refused to show the Blessed Sacrament. Learning that he was a Christian, the crowd beat and stoned him. A Christian soldier, Quadratus, drove off the attackers and carried away his body, but the sacred species were no longer found on him.

Fabiola and the 19th-century revival

In the 19th century this story became very popular, especially through *Fabiola*, the novel by the English Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, first Archbishop of Westminster, which made Tarcisius a boy of about ten. Closer to our time, the French writer Serge Dalens told his story in *La Couronne de pierres* (1980). These works did much for his popularity, but they should be read as edifying tales, not as history.



Tarcisius, Christian Martyr, by Alexandre Falguière (1868), Musée d'Orsay.

A cult that has crossed the centuries

Tarcisius was first buried in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, on the Appian Way. In 767, Pope Paul I had his relics transferred to the Church of San Silvestro in Capite, in the center of Rome, where they have rested under the high altar since 1596. On the Appian Way, the church of the Saint Tarcisius Institute, run by the Salesians, also keeps a sarcophagus that serves as its altar.

The 19th century made him a hero of Catholic youth. The marble statue by Alexandre Falguière, now in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, was reproduced in countless churches and schools. His name was given to seminaries, parishes, and even a municipality in Quebec, Saint-Tharcisius. The young Mexican martyr Saint José Sánchez del Río was nicknamed "Tarcisius."

Why is Saint Tarcisius the patron saint of altar servers?

What history keeps of Tarcisius fits in one sentence: he preferred to die rather than let the Body of Christ be profaned. That act alone speaks of his love for the Eucharist and his courage. Because he served the Eucharist with his life, he became the patron saint of altar servers and a model for First Communicants.

Speaking in 2010 to thousands of altar servers gathered in Rome, Benedict XVI presented him as a model of fidelity and love for Christ present in the consecrated bread. He is invoked for children preparing for their First Communion, for altar servers, and for all who bring Communion to the sick, including extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Tarcisius and the novena to Saint Tarcisius.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Tarcisius in art

- **A young boy**, often lying on the ground, as in Falguière's famous statue.
- **The Blessed Sacrament held to his chest**, sometimes wrapped in a cloth or hidden under his cloak.
- **Stones**, recalling the manner of death told by the legend.
- **The palm of martyrdom**.



The Church of San Silvestro in Capite, Rome.

Where to pray to Saint Tarcisius

- **Rome**: the Church of San Silvestro in Capite, where his relics rest under the high altar. The church is today entrusted to the English-speaking Catholic community of Rome, making it a natural place of prayer for English-speaking pilgrims.
- **Rome, Appian Way**: the Catacombs of Saint Callixtus, his first burial place, and the church of the Saint Tarcisius Institute.
- **Paris**: the Musée d'Orsay, where Falguière's statue can be seen.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Tarcisius, Martyr of the Eucharist

The oldest text that speaks of Saint Tarcisius is also a kind of prayer: the verse tribute dedicated to him by Pope Damasus in the 4th century, carved in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus. Below you will find the Latin text and a translation, followed by an original prayer to Saint Tarcisius.

The tribute of Pope Damasus to Tarcisius

> *Tarsicium sanctum Christi sacramenta gerentem / cum male sana manus premeret vulgare profanis, / ipse animam potius voluit dimittere caesus / prodere quam canibus rabidis caelestia membra.*

> *"While Saint Tarcisius was carrying the sacraments of Christ, and a mad hand pressed him to hand them over to the profane, he chose rather to give up his life under the blows than to betray the heavenly members to raging dogs."*

Source: Saint Damasus I, pope from 366 to 384, epigram in honor of Saint Stephen and Saint Tarcisius, Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, Rome (translation by Saintspedia).

Prayer to Saint Tarcisius, martyr of the Eucharist

> *Saint Tarcisius, you carried the Body of Christ with such love that you chose to die rather than give it up: teach me to receive the Eucharist with faith and reverence.*
>
> *Pray for the children preparing for their First Communion: may they discover the joy of meeting Jesus and keep it all their lives.*
>
> *Pray for altar servers, for the ministers who bring Communion to the sick and to prisoners, and for all who serve at the altar.*
>
> *Give courage to Christians who are mocked or persecuted today because of their faith, so that they may remain faithful without hatred.*
>
> *I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Keep me faithful to Christ, present in the Bread of Life. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Tarcisius is celebrated on August 15. Since that date coincides with the Solemnity of the Assumption, many also pray to him:

- at the time of First Communions;
- at gatherings, training days or commissionings of altar servers;
- during Eucharistic adoration, or on the feast of Corpus Christi;
- before bringing Communion to the sick or homebound.

A short prayer for altar servers

> *Lord Jesus, as Saint Tarcisius served you with his whole heart, help me to serve at your altar with reverence, attention and joy. Saint Tarcisius, pray for us. Amen.*

This short prayer is also an original text by Saintspedia. Continue with the novena to Saint Tarcisius, or read the life of Saint Tarcisius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Tarcisius

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by what history and tradition tell us of Saint Tarcisius, martyr of the Eucharist. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, August 15, begin on August 7. Because it centers on the Eucharist, it is also well suited to the weeks before a First Communion, to a group of altar servers, or to the days leading up to Corpus Christi.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day.

Children can pray it with their parents or catechists: the meditations are short and the daily acts are simple. If possible, pray one of the days before the Blessed Sacrament.



The high altar of San Silvestro in Capite, where Saint Tarcisius' relics rest.

Day 1: Living the faith in hard times

Tarcisius lived in Rome at a time when Christians were persecuted. To believe could cost one's life. In many countries today, it still does. Faith is a treasure worth more than comfort or safety.

Prayer: Lord, make my faith strong, and protect the Christians who are persecuted today.

Today: Pray for a country where Christians suffer for their faith.

Day 2: A small life, a great witness

We know almost nothing of Tarcisius, except one act of love. That act was enough for the Church to remember him for more than seventeen centuries. God does not need us to be famous; he asks us to be faithful. The smallest life, given in love, can shine for generations.

Prayer: Lord, let my life, even hidden, bear witness to your love.

Today: Do a good deed without anyone knowing.

Day 3: Carrying Christ

Tarcisius was carrying the Eucharist to those who could not come to the altar. Every Christian who has received Communion carries Christ into the world, into the home, the school and the workplace.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when I receive you, help me to carry you to others.

Today: Bring joy or help to someone who is alone.

Day 4: Reverence for the Eucharist

Tarcisius held the Blessed Sacrament close to his heart and refused to let it be profaned. The Eucharist is not a thing but a Person: Jesus himself, truly present, body, blood, soul and divinity. Our gestures in church, a genuflection, a moment of silence, express that faith.

Prayer: Lord, increase my faith in your real presence, and teach me to receive you with reverence.

Today: Make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, even for a few minutes.

Day 5: Courage under pressure

According to the legend, his companions and passersby demanded to see what he was hiding. Tarcisius did not give in. It takes courage to stay faithful when others mock or insist.

Prayer: Lord, give me courage when I am tempted to deny you or to follow the crowd.

Today: Stand up kindly for your faith, or for someone who is being mocked.

Day 6: Following Stephen

Pope Damasus compared Tarcisius to Saint Stephen, the first martyr, who died praying for his executioners. Christian courage is never hateful; it forgives. Stephen and Tarcisius both died like their Master, without cursing those who struck them.

Prayer: Lord, give me a heart that forgives, even those who hurt me.

Today: Forgive someone in your heart, and pray for them.

Day 7: Preparing for First Communion

For more than a century, Tarcisius has been the friend of children preparing to receive Jesus for the first time. Their joy and their simplicity remind us all of what the Eucharist truly is.

Prayer: Saint Tarcisius, watch over the children who will soon make their First Communion, and over their families.

Today: Remember your own First Communion and give thanks, or pray for a child preparing for it.

Day 8: Serving at the altar

Tarcisius is the patron saint of altar servers. Their service, often hidden and sometimes early in the morning, helps the whole community to pray. Many priestly vocations have begun at the altar.

Prayer: Lord, bless all altar servers, and call some of them to serve you as priests.

Today: Thank an altar server or a sacristan in your parish.

Day 9: Bringing Communion to the sick

The mission of Tarcisius continues today in the priests, deacons and lay ministers who bring Communion to the sick, the elderly and prisoners. Through them, Christ still visits those who cannot come to him, in hospitals, nursing homes and prisons.

Prayer: Lord, comfort the sick and the homebound, and bless those who bring you to them.

Today: Visit or call someone who is sick or elderly.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Tarcisius, martyr of the Eucharist, you loved Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament more than your own life. Watch over children preparing for their First Communion, over altar servers and over all who carry Christ to the sick. Give courage to persecuted Christians. Obtain for me the grace I ask in this novena (name it in silence), if it is God's will, and a deeper love for Jesus in the Eucharist, now and always. Amen.*

If you can, end the novena by taking part in Mass on August 15, the Solemnity of the Assumption, and receive Communion with special attention, thinking of the young martyr who held the Body of Christ so close to his heart.

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Tarcisius or read the life of Saint Tarcisius.

PILGRIMAGE

Church of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome, Relics of Saint Tarcisius

The Church of San Silvestro in Capite, in central Rome, has kept the relics of Saint Tarcisius, the martyr of the Eucharist, since the 8th century. They have rested beneath the high altar since 1596. Less well known than the great basilicas, this church is where you can pray closest to the young martyr, before heading out along the Appian Way to the catacomb where he was first buried.

From the catacomb to the city

After his martyrdom in the mid-3rd century, Tarcisius was buried in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, one of the great Christian cemeteries on the Appian Way, where Pope Damasus had his epitaph engraved. In the 8th century, the catacombs, exposed to looting, were gradually abandoned, and the popes had the relics of the martyrs moved within the walls of Rome. In 767, Pope Paul I founded a monastery and a church dedicated to Saints Stephen and Sylvester, and gathered there the remains of many martyrs, including those of Tarcisius.

The church, rebuilt several times, took its present appearance in the 16th and 17th centuries. Its name "in Capite" comes from a venerated relic, presented as the head of Saint John the Baptist.

Visiting the church

You enter through a courtyard in front of the church. The richly decorated interior is Baroque. The relics of Saint Tarcisius are kept beneath the high altar. The church is now entrusted to Rome's English-speaking Catholic

community. To complete the pilgrimage, you can go to the Appian Way, to the Catacombs of Saint Callixtus and to the church of the Saint Tarcisius Institute, where a sarcophagus serves as the altar.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Tarcisius. In front of the high altar, entrust to him children preparing for First Communion, altar servers and persecuted Christians, then recite the prayer to Saint Tarcisius. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The high altar of San Silvestro in Capite, beneath which the relics of Saint Tarcisius rest.

Other places connected with Saint Tarcisius

- **Catacombs of Saint Callixtus** (Appian Way, Rome): the site of his first burial.

- **Saint Tarcisius Institute** (Appian Way, Rome): the Salesian church, with its sarcophagus and a 19th-century reliquary.
- **Musée d'Orsay** (Paris): the statue *Tarcisius, Christian Martyr* by Alexandre Falguière.

Practical information

San Silvestro in Capite is on the square of the same name, a few minutes' walk from the Via del Corso and the Trevi Fountain. The Catacombs of Saint Callixtus can only be visited with a guide. Opening hours, Mass times and visiting times may vary: check the official websites of the church and the catacombs before you come.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: Alexandre Falguière, CC BY-SA 2.0 fr, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The Catacombs of Saint Callixtus, where Tarcisius was first buried.: Image: User GerardM on nl.wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Tarcisius, Christian Martyr, by Alexandre Falguière (1868), Musée d'Orsay.: Image: Alexandre Falguière, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The Church of San Silvestro in Capite, Rome.: Image: Monticiano, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The high altar of San Silvestro in Capite, where Saint Tarcisius' relics rest.: Image: Sailko, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The high altar of San Silvestro in Capite, beneath which the relics of Saint Tarcisius rest.: Image: Sailko, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License

More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com