

Back in the third century there was a boy named Tarcisius. He was about 12 years old and he was what we would call an altar server. Being a time of persecution, they could not celebrate Mass openly, so they went underground – in the Catacombs of Rome. Usually after Mass the deacon took Communion to prisoners, but one day the deacon was not there. For his replacement they made a remarkable choice. On account of his maturity, faith and piety, they chose Tarcisius.

The priest placed the consecrated hosts in a special container, then gave them to Tarcisius who held them under his clothes, near his heart. On the way he passed by some boys were playing ball. Needing an extra player, they called Tarcisius to join them. When he said he could not, they asked him what he was holding. He did not want to show them the “Sacred Mysteries,” so they gathered around him and began hitting him. Eventually a man came who shouted and chased the boys away. But Tarcisius was beaten that he died from his injuries.

Like Tarcisius, many Christians have given their lives for the Eucharist – especially in the past century during World War II. Hitler not only wanted to murder all the Jews of Europe, but to destroy the power of the Catholic Church. Thousands of Catholics, including priests, were sent to concentration camps for openly promoting the faith. Pope John Paul beatified one of them. His name was Karl Leisner. As a theology student he organized Catholic Youth Groups. The Nazis would not tolerate any competition for the minds of young people, so they arrested Karl and sent him to the Dachau concentration camps.

There, on December 17, 1944, a French bishop (smuggled into the camp) ordained him a priest. At this point Fr. Leisner was so ill with tuberculosis that he could not celebrate his first Mass until a week later – Christmas. He did so at great risk and sacrifice for himself and fellow prisoners. He survived until the Allies liberated Dachau, but died some months later, August of 1945.

People like St. Tarcisius and Blessed Karl Leisner gave their lives for the Eucharist. What about us? The persecution of Christians is growing but for now we still live in relative comfort and perhaps for that reason have become casual about the Blessed Sacrament. If we make it to Mass, great. If not, no big deal. Sometimes our behavior, even our dress reflects a casual attitude toward the Body and Blood of Christ. Most make certain they come to Mass clean, but what about our souls? Do we prepare ourselves by repentance and prayer?

Without ignoring all the scandals and headlines that have plagued the church over the last few decades, I often suspect that the real crisis of the Catholic Church our time has largely been a crisis of reverence for the Eucharist. The problem isn't so much a theological one but it has more to do with the kind of society we live in and how it influences us.

Today's society moves rapidly and that leads us to expect instant results. Because of the fast pace, we have become impatient. A humorist said that we are so impatient today that they have had to invent a new measurement of time. Scientists used to say the smallest fraction of time was the nano-second, but now they need something even smaller.

It is time between when the stoplight turns green and the guy behind you honks his horn! You and I know the joke contains an element of truth. Our lack of patience can affect us when we come to the Mass.

How many times do we check our watches to guess how much longer this will take? As we approach the eucharist are we focused on the amazing experience that awaits us or are we too busy thinking about the rest of the day? After receiving the eucharist do we pause to just share time with the Lord or do we rush to escape the church. We lose the value of Communion if we "eat and run."

A priest I heard of, if he sees someone leave early, he stops them and reminds them that only one person left the Last Supper early! Or perhaps it would be better to do what St. Philip Neri did: He saw someone leaving church right after Communion and he sent servers with candles and bells to accompany the man. The guy stormed back into the church and confronted the priest. "What kind of joke is this?" he demanded.

St. Philip Neri said, "It's no joke. The rules of the liturgy say the Blessed Sacrament should be treated with reverence. You left the church immediately with no prayer of thanksgiving. You were carrying the Blessed Sacrament within you. So I asked the boys to accompany you to honor Him."

We don't have much of a problem with a lot of people escaping mass right after communion, at least physically, mentally – I think some folk quickly, too quickly, move on to other things.

After Communion you and I are tabernacles - the physical presence of Jesus continues in us for a brief time. That's why we have the Communion hymn, a time of silence, the Communion Prayer - and even the announcements - to build up the Body of Christ in practical ways.

This feast of the Body and Blood of Christ ask us to review the way we approach and receive and experience this great gift.