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The Spirituality of Saint Tarcisius in The Role of Acolytes at Saint Francis Xavier Parish in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

An acolyte, serving the priest during the Eucharist, plays a significant role in ensuring the smooth execution of the Eucharistic celebration, aiding the congregation in participating the Eucharist more devoutly. The Patron Saint of the acolytes is Saint Tarcisius, who dared to sacrifice himself to death to protect the Blessed Sacrament. Therefore, the acolyte needs to emulate Saint Tarcisius in carrying out his duties as an altar server. The acolytes at Saint Francis Xavier Parish, Kidul Loji, Yogyakarta lack a profound understanding of the patron of their ministry, leading to a deficiency in their representation during Eucharistic celebrations. This research aims to understand the extent to which the acolytes embody the spirituality of Saint Tarcisius, recognizing a gap in their knowledge about his life. Conducted descriptive qualitative research, this research focuses on active acolytes from Saint Francis Xavier Parish, totalling 20 individuals. Data collection involves observation, document study, and interviews. The findings revealed that a majority of the acolytes lacked a deep understanding of Saint Tarcisius's life story, resulting in a limited grasp of the spirituality he exemplified. In response to these findings, the researchers suggest that the parish should organize activities to familiarize acolytes with Saint Tarcisius and his spirituality. A proposed recollection activity aims to address these knowledge gaps, offering the acolytes a chance for spiritual enrichment and enthusiasm in carrying out their duties meaningfully.

Keywords

spirituality; Saint Tarcisius; acolyte

INTRODUCTION

An acolyte, defined as a Catholic teenager providing assistance to a priest in the Eucharist [1], serves the clergy, playing a crucial role in serving God and the congregation.[2] Efficient and respectful service is emphasized to help people engage

[1] E. Martasudjita, *Panduan Misdinar* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2008), 12.
[2] Liturgical Guidelines of the Java Region (Malang: Dioma, 1996), 3.

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in the Eucharist actively, while any shortcomings in the execution of their duties can disrupt the worship experience.[3]

Therefore, an effective acolyte is expected to approach the celebration of the Eucharist with reverence and fulfil their role with a deep understanding of their responsibilities. This includes knowledge of the movements, the Eucharistic celebration system, and the required equipment for the mass.[4] Living in accordance with the teachings of the Gospel and embodying the spirituality of the patron saint of acolytes, Saint Tarcisius, is also emphasized. Saint Tarcisius' profound respect for the significance of the Eucharistic Sacrament in the Church serves as a model for acolytes to follow. The self-sacrificing and responsible attitude displayed in Saint Tarcisius' life story is expected to be mirrored in the conduct of acolytes in their service to God.

However, the researchers discovered during interviews with acolytes in December 2022 that many were unfamiliar with Saint Tarcisius, with only a small percentage recognizing the name without further knowledge. This lack of awareness raises concerns for researchers who aim to assist acolytes in the St. Francis Xavier Parish in getting to know and embody the spirituality of Saint Tarcisius. Since acolytes are adolescents aged 9 to 16 years, their mindset is considered simple and still in need of guidance.[5]

The primary issue identified is the insufficient recognition of Saint Tarcisius as a protector among the acolytes, resulting in a failure to fully embrace the spirituality associated with their ministry. Consequently, this study seeks to assess the extent to which Saint Tarcisius' spirituality is integrated into the duties of acolytes in the St. Francis Xavier Parish in Yogyakarta.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach, drawing on observed symptoms, specifically observations conducted from the beginning to the end of the study.[6] In qualitative research, field data is scrutinized through existing paradigms, ideas, and social facts before being articulated verbally.

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[3] F.X. Gabriel, *Buku Pintar Misdinar* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Nusatama, 2001), 65.

[4] E. Martasudjita, *Ekaristi.* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2005), 9.

[5] Martasudjita, *Panduan Misdinar,* 16.

[6] I. Made Laut Mertha Jaya, *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif dan Kualitatif*, 2nd ed. (Yogyakarta: QUADRANT, 2021), 110.

The selection of research subjects involved the use of purposive sampling techniques, considering specific criteria. In this study, the criteria focus on acolytes aged 9-16 actively engaged in acolyte service duties at St. Francis Xavier Kidul Loji Parish. The research took place in March 2023.

Data collection methods included document studies, observations, and interviews. The data analysis process followed schemes of data reduction, presentation, and verification. [7] To validate the data, source triangulation was employed, involving the cross-checking of information with reliable sources, particularly the parish priest and the coordinator of the acolytes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Life Story of Saint Tarcisius

Tarcisius, a 12-year-old living in Rome, Italy, during the third century under Emperor Valerian's rule (253-260 AD), was a devoted Christian serving at the altar. The Christian community faced severe persecution, necessitating the concealment of those receiving Holy Communion from the Romans who harboured animosity towards them.[8]

In secret, Christians gathered for mass in catacombs, subterranean tombs serving as makeshift chapels. Tarcisius, as he prepared to attend one such mass, ensured a safe entry into the catacombs, where many Christians prayed. During the Eucharistic celebration led by a priest, Tarcisius felt a profound sense of calm and gratitude upon receiving the Body of Christ.

The turning point came when the priest announced that Christian prisoners, facing imminent release among hungry lions, desired the Body of Christ before their fate. Fearful and hesitant, the congregation hesitated to volunteer. Tarcisius, however, silently expressed his willingness to undertake the task, prompting the priest's approval. Unbeknownst to him, a recently converted Roman soldier trailed behind to ensure his safety through the Roman army.

As Tarcisius journeyed, he encountered playmates who urged him to join their activities. Despite their insistence and even aggression, Tarcisius steadfastly protected the Eucharistic Sacrament, enduring stoning until he fell unconscious. The former

[7] Sugiyono, Metode Penelitian Pendidikan: Pendekatan Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R&D (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2021), 445.

[8] Maria Setiawati, *Santo Tarsisius* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1989), 35.

soldier intervened, stopping the attack, but Tarcisius succumbed to his injuries on the way to the catacomb.

Tarcisius, originally buried in the Catacomb of San Callisto, now rests in the Church of San Silvestro in Rome. Saint Tarcisius is commemorated on August 15, coinciding with the Feast of the Assumption, and although not included in the Roman General Liturgical Calendar, he is venerated in the Roman Martyrology

Spirituality of Saint Tarcisius

Spirituality is the capacity to develop and express one's response to God's calling in daily life through the influence of God's Spirit.[9] It encompasses attitudes and behaviours that align with God's teachings,[10] involving piety and asceticism as expressions of drawing closer to God.[11] Spirituality also entails a believer's personal relationship with God, reflected in their thoughts, words, and deeds,[12] emphasizing God as the ultimate source in all aspects of life.

Saint Tarcisius, a martyr of the Holy Eucharist in the early Christian Church, is commemorated for his unwavering faith. His life story, documented by Pope Damasus I in a metrical inscription,[13] illustrates his sacrifice when attacked by a group of teenagers for refusing to surrender the pixis containing the Blessed Sacrament. Tarcisius gave his life to protect the Body of Christ destined for faithful individuals imprisoned. His exemplary devotion, discipline in spiritual practices, consistent prayer, and commitment to preventing disrespect to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament at the tender age of 12 set a remarkable precedent.

Saint Tarcisius' spirituality serves as a call to God's people, especially acolytes, urging them to bear witness to their faith in Christ with wisdom, patience, faithfulness, and confidence while guided by the Holy Spirit. Tarcisius' spiritual legacy inspires individuals to manifest their faith in God through testimony despite facing challenges, conflicts, temptations, and humiliations.

Saint Tarcisius exhibited a spirit of devotion beyond mere duty, embodying the essence of a servant performing tasks wholeheartedly. His remarkable courage was evident in a daunting situation, where he willingly assisted fellow believers seeking to

[9] Benigno Wego, SVD, "Spiritualitas Sosial, Mungkinkah?", *Vox* 38/1 (2016): 101.
[10] Groenen, *Spiritualitas dan Hidup Sehari-hari* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1970), 3.
[11] Piet Go, *Spiritualitas Kristiani* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1990), 10.
[12] Y.B. Prasetyantha, *Ekaristi dalam Hidup Kita* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2008), 139.
[13] Martasudjita, *Panduan Misdinar,* 132.

receive the Body of Christ before facing death. This courageous act was a tangible manifestation of his unwavering faith in Jesus Christ, making him an exemplary figure of dedication and courage in the role of an acolyte.

Application of Saint Tarcisius' Spirituality in the Ministry of Acolytes Loving the Blessed Sacrament

The display of love expressed through gratitude is evident in Saint Tarcisius' actions when safeguarding the Blessed Sacrament. He bravely confronted a perilous situation, demonstrating his willingness to sacrifice his life for the sake of the Blessed Sacrament.[14] As an acolyte who chose Saint Tarcisius as a role model, it becomes imperative to exhibit profound love for the Blessed Sacrament. This is achieved through the conscientious fulfilment of duties as a minister of the Mass, adhering to the prescribed movements, actively participating in prayers, acclamations, and engaging in the singing of the Mass.

Serve with Wholehearted Dedication

Wholehearted service implies that every task, no matter how challenging, becomes light and enjoyable when undertaken with genuine dedication.[15] Saint Tarcisius exemplified this by approaching every duty with heartfelt commitment, guided by the belief that even the smallest assistance to the needy holds significant value. This mindset led him to undertake the crucial responsibility of delivering the Blessed Sacrament to imprisoned brothers and sisters. With a generous and sincere heart, he overcame fear, recognizing the profound longing of fellow Christians facing imminent death for the Body of Christ. A genuine desire to serve is essential for acolytes to ensure the reverent execution of their role in facilitating the celebration of the Eucharist.

Selfless Service

Selfless service entails a willingness to sacrifice everything for the duty of service, expecting no personal gain in return. The focal point of acolyte ministry is the Lord Jesus Christ, prioritizing spiritual interests over worldly concerns.[16] Saint Tarcisius embodied this selfless attitude by giving his life to protect the Blessed

[14] Setiawati, *Santo Tarsisius*.
[15] Gabriel, *Buku Pintar Misdinar*, 91.
[16] Martasudjita, *Panduan Misdinar,* 18.

Sacrament from pagans seeking to partake in it, even enduring death by stoning. Every acolyte should embrace this selfless and sacrificial spirit, such as waking up early for daily Eucharistic celebrations and sacrificing leisure time for acolyte activities.

Responsibility for Assigned Tasks

An attitude of responsibility in carrying out priestly duties involves faithful execution, punctuality, thorough preparation, respectful behavior on the altar, politeness, and submissiveness when serving in the priest's residence. If unable to attend for any reason, the acolyte should promptly inform the acolyte administrator. This sense of responsibility extends beyond the priest's home into daily life, encompassing family, school, and community responsibilities.[17]

Humility

Serving as a minister of the Holy Eucharist may bring attention and pride to acolytes. However, it is crucial for them to remain humble. Despite their noble duties, acolytes must stay humble, recognizing their role as servants of God and keeping God at the centre of the Eucharistic celebration. Additionally, acolytes are expected to be open to various tasks, willing to listen, and set aside selfish attitudes for the common good and effective fulfilment of their duties.[18]

Acolyte Activities at Saint Francis Xavier Parish

The coordination of acolyte activities has been effectively structured, involving a weekly meeting every Sunday from 10:00 to 12:00. The agenda encompasses training for routine tasks scheduled at regular intervals, interspersed with debriefing sessions or sessions for deepening faith, facilitated by the chairman of the parish liturgical council. Special exercises are conducted on the eve of Christmas and Easter, with evaluations taking place two weeks after these significant events.

Faith deepening activities focus on themes aligned with the current liturgical period, such as Advent and Lent, drawing inspiration from the annual APP theme. Discussions during debriefing sessions revolve around fostering positive attitudes while performing assigned tasks. However, acolyte participation in routine activities, including weekly training, faith deepening, or debriefing, is not as extensive as

[17] Martasudjita, *Panduan Misdinar,* 17.
[18] Gabriel, *Buku Pintar Misdinar*, 79.

desired. On the other hand, there is notable enthusiasm among acolytes when it comes to preparations for Christmas and Easter.

Interview Findings

In this study, a total of 20 respondents (9 females and 11 males) were interviewed, meeting the criteria of being between 13 to 16 years old and actively engaged in their duties as acolytes.

From the interview results, it was observed that a majority of the respondents lacked in-depth knowledge about Saint Tarcisius as the patron of acolytes. While some were familiar with him, only one respondent could articulate detailed aspects of Saint Tarcisius's life story and express his spirituality, encompassing qualities like courage, volunteering, and adherence to scheduled tasks. A few respondents could elaborate on Saint Tarcisius's life story, highlighting the need for acolytes to exemplify traits such as courage, sensitivity, responsibility, and sincerity. On the other hand, there were respondents who only had a general understanding, knowing Saint Tarcisius as someone who died from stoning and associating him with guarding and protecting the host while actively participating in Church activities.

Several respondents were unaware of Saint Tarcisius's spirituality that could be embodied in the role of acolytes, and some had never even heard of Saint Tarcisius. In summary, 18 out of the 20 respondents were acquainted with Saint Tarcisius to some extent, but many lacked knowledge about his life story or the spirituality that could be lived as an acolyte during duty. Two respondents were completely unfamiliar with Saint Tarcisius.

All respondents expressed their love for the Blessed Sacrament through tangible actions, demonstrating affection for their duties as acolytes, showing love and reverence to the Blessed Sacrament, and welcoming the Body of Christ. Some respondents acknowledged instances where they lacked respect due to distractions or lack of focus during their duties.

In the context of the Eucharistic celebration, many respondents considered their involvement highly significant, emphasizing their role in assisting priests and deacons, serving God by facilitating the celebration, helping the congregation, and representing the people. The primary motivation for becoming an acolyte was love for the Blessed Sacrament, with nine respondents motivated by a desire to serve God. Others joined due to parental or sibling encouragement, or through invitations from friends rather than personal choice.

Regarding their wholehearted approach to acolyte duties, respondents generally gave their best effort, acknowledging occasional mistakes resulting from nervousness or lapses in focus. Some admitted to instances of falling asleep while on duty, and others struggled with coordination while walking, standing, or maintaining eye contact. Though mistakes occurred, the overall sincerity in performing acolyte tasks was evident, with no expectation of rewards. However, the provision of gifts after completing tasks did boost their enthusiasm.

All respondents took their responsibilities seriously, performing their assigned tasks responsibly, despite occasional feelings of laziness. Importantly, none of the respondents expressed arrogance in their role as acolytes, even when holding significant responsibilities visible to many.

Discussions

Introducing the life story and spirituality of Saint Tarcisius is crucial for acolytes to emulate. A profound understanding of Saint Tarcisius's life allows acolytes to grasp the spirituality inherent in his service. Saint Tarcisius' spirituality is significant as it serves as an inspiration for individuals to develop and realize their potential, particularly in answering God's call in everyday life, especially in their roles as acolytes.[19]

Spirituality is reflective of a person's closeness to God, evident in their worldview, words, deeds, and thoughts.[20] Saint Tarcisius' spirituality evolved into a set of spiritual charisms directed toward God, rooted in his dual nature as a person and ecclesiastical figure, authentic and faithful to the foundation of faith. Acolytes strive to cultivate a strong relationship with God by emulating the spirituality of Saint Tarcisius.

In her book, Maria Setiawati (1989) elucidates the spirit lived by Saint Tarcisius, emphasizing God as the foremost priority in his life. Saint Tarcisius dedicated his life to God through his ministry, showcasing qualities such as obedience, faithfulness, filial piety, and self-sacrifice. These virtues designate him as the patron saint of Acolytes. Saint Tarcisius lived as a servant of God, acknowledging his belonging to God, resulting in thoughts, words, and deeds reflecting a profound relationship

[19] Wego, "Spiritualitas Sosial, Mungkinkah?", 101.
[20] Prasetyantha, *Ekaristi,* 139.

between himself and God. Therefore, it is crucial for Acolytes to comprehend the life story of Saint Tarcisius to understand his exemplary spirituality.

However, based on interview results, researchers concluded that acolytes have not fully applied the spirituality of Saint Tarcisius in their ministry duties. Although respondents expressed their love for the Blessed Sacrament and demonstrated respect by participating actively in the celebration, they often engaged in casual conversations during duty, lacked focus, and did not pay sufficient attention to the Eucharistic celebration system. Some participants initially joined the acolyte ministry based on a personal desire to serve God.

The concept of serving wholeheartedly, as mentioned by Gabriel,[21] indicates that tasks become easy and enjoyable when done with full commitment. However, researchers observed resistance from acolytes regarding certain tasks. Many respondents were hesitant to volunteer for less visible tasks, such as Sunday morning mass and daily mass, which correlates with issues of humility, indicating a reluctance to participate in tasks that go unnoticed.

Moreover, the wholehearted attitude in duty remains less visible in the actions of acolytes. Data revealed that almost all participants frequently made mistakes during duty, such as errors in ringing gongs and bells, lack of rhythm while walking, standing, and bowing. These mistakes often resulted from nervousness, lack of confidence, and a lack of focus during duty. Additionally, distractions such as chatting with friends, an inability to resist drowsiness, and falling asleep during duty were observed.

Regarding selflessness in service, respondents generally acknowledged sincerity in performing tasks without expecting rewards, with the primary focus on the Lord Jesus Christ rather than worldly concerns, as the centre of the acolyte ministry.[22] However, the provision of gifts appeared to enhance enthusiasm for duty.

Concerning responsibility, respondents often lacked a sense of responsibility for assigned tasks, frequently requesting substitutes from the acolyte administrator. Regarding humility in duty, participants did not fully prioritize Christ, as indicated in the Gospel of John 3:30, which emphasizes a decrease in self-importance. The interview results revealed that respondents preferred involvement in ministry duties during major Church holidays when a larger congregation was present.

[21] Gabriel, Buku Pintar Misdinar, 91.
[22] Martasudjita, *Panduan Misdinar,* 18.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The study's limitations include the inability to interview all members of the Parish of Saint Francis Xavier Kidul Loji, as not all acolytes are actively involved in acolyte activities. With only 20 respondents, the findings represent a fraction of the total acolyte population.

CONCLUSION

The acolyte ministry should extend beyond fulfilling responsibilities to become a living prayer. While St. Francis Xavier Parish offers opportunities for parishioners, especially teenagers, to engage in Church activities through acolyte membership, there is a need for a deeper understanding of Saint Tarcisius's spirituality.

Observations, document studies, and interviews revealed that most acolytes in St. Francis Xavier Parish lacked profound knowledge of Saint Tarcisius's spirituality. Their service duties were limited to routine tasks learned during acolyte training. To enhance their devotion and duty performance, acolytes need to familiarize themselves with Saint Tarcisius's life story and embody his spirituality.

Hence, the researcher proposes a few recommendations. Firstly, St. Francis Xavier Parish could arrange recollection activities for the acolytes. This initiative aims to enhance the spirit of the acolytes, encouraging them to embody the essence of Saint Tarcisius in performing their duties with dedication, energy, and responsibility. Additionally, it is anticipated that acolyte coordinator will offer comprehensive support to aid the acolytes in their responsibilities.

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