

**Homily for the Diocesan White Mass
Feast of Saint Luke**

October 18, 2022

**Saint Francis of Assisi Church at the Evermode Institute
Springfield, Illinois**

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Reverend Father(s), Deacons, consecrated religious, members of the healthcare profession, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good for us to be here at this Church of Saint Francis as we gather to celebrate the annual White Mass for the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. Per tradition, we gather on the feast of the Evangelist, Saint Luke, who was himself a physician according to early Church tradition. As we celebrate his feast, we again ask his intercession for God's blessings on all healthcare professionals.

"Cure the sick... The kingdom of God is at hand for you."

Jesus' commissioning of the 72 disciples in Saint Luke's Gospel includes the command, "Cure the sick." Notice that Jesus does not say only, "Pray for the sick," or "Visit the sick," or even "Care for the sick," although these are all important works of mercy. Jesus says simply, "Cure the sick." Since Jesus does not command the impossible, this command implies that

God will equip and empower us to continue Jesus' ministry of healing, whether by natural or supernatural means.

It is also noteworthy that there is no indication that Christ's command to cure the sick was unique to these 72 disciples. He includes curing the sick as an integral part of the proclamation, "The kingdom of God is at hand for you." Someone might ask, "But why the emphasis on healing physical sickness? Is Jesus not concerned with saving souls rather than bodies? After all, the mortality rate is 100%. Is not focusing on the body a distraction from the soul?" In response to this hypothetical objection, we have to remember that, "In the biblical understanding, the human person is an inseparable unity of body and soul. Christ came not just to 'save souls,' but to save human beings — to raise us up, body and soul, to the fullness of divine life in communion with God and all the redeemed forever. The body therefore has inestimable significance in God's plan."¹

What then is the relationship between physical health and healing on the one hand, and spiritual health and healing on the other? Physical healing is an expression of God's love, but also a sign of the deeper and enduring healing of the soul. Thus, we could say that healing is both an end in itself and a means to a greater end.

Whether physical or psychological, healing is an end itself insofar as it simply expresses God's love for His children. In His love and compassion, God does not need a reason to love beyond love itself. Healing is a demonstration of the love proclaimed. It is a tangible experience of the message, "The kingdom of God is at hand for you." When we as Christ's disciples continue his work of healing, we are following his model of evangelization, which includes not only proclamation but demonstration. As God's beloved sons and daughters, we proclaim that His kingdom is at hand, and then we demonstrate that by our lives.

Healing the sick is also a means to a greater end, which is to elicit faith in the God who heals not only the physical wounds of our bodies but the spiritual wounds of our souls, namely, sin. All physical healing is a temporary reality, a sign given in this life that points to the spiritual healing whose effects endure into eternity. If physical healing were only an end in itself, then it would ultimately be ineffective since this life cannot be sustained indefinitely. But since healing is an expression of love, it opens the heart of the suffering person to God, the Ultimate Healer.

It is this understanding of healing, together with the holistic view of the human person as a union of body and soul, that have motivated

Christians to live out Christ's command to cure the sick from the earliest days of the Church.

We see this relationship between physical and spiritual healing everywhere in the ministry of Jesus. He never separates the human person, as if a person's affliction could ever be purely physical or purely spiritual. Both dimensions are always present, because again, body and soul are always united. One clear illustration of Christ's holistic approach can be seen in the case of the paralytic whose friends lowered him through the roof in order to present him to Jesus. Responding to the bystanders who were indignant about his claim to forgive sins, Jesus says: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth" – he said to the paralytic, "I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home" (Mk 2:9-11).

Here we see that Christ's authority to heal the deeper and more serious wound of sin is demonstrated by his authority to heal physical disease. The fact that Christ initially forgave the paralytic's sin without healing him physically shows the primacy of spiritual health over physical health.

All of you who work in healthcare in any capacity, I urge you take Christ as your model as you follow his command to cure the sick. See your work not only as an occupation but as your Christian ministry, which it truly is. Remember that your *demonstration* of the kingdom of God through loving service should be linked always to the *proclamation* of that kingdom.

I wish to conclude with a brief reflection on the concept of health. Thankfully, there is still widespread agreement on what constitutes physical health, and through education and technology, healthcare workers throughout the world are able to address physical health problems more effectively than ever. However, when we look to the areas of psychological, spiritual, and moral health, we see that these concepts are breaking down more and more in our society and in many other parts of the world. We seem to have maintained the awareness that the physical health of a person is objective, that is, something that can be known and evaluated by others. This is of course what allows helpful intervention to occur and reestablish health. However, in the psychological, spiritual, and moral realms, we see more and more healthcare providers hesitating and even refusing to acknowledge any objective standards for health. The eventual result is the inability to treat disease and disorder, and in some cases, the tendency to make things worse.

We are constantly bombarded with euphemisms and slogans whose ambiguity and incoherence are so great that they almost acknowledge the truth they seek to deny. Abortion, which directly kills the human person created through reproduction, is called “Reproductive care.” The mutilation of healthy bodies, even those of minors who are otherwise treated as incapable of consent, is called “gender affirming care.” By contrast, any sincere effort to affirm a person’s real sex and to help him or her recognize this in a healthy and integrated way is denounced as harmful manipulation or “conversion therapy.” The need for people to distort language in this way betrays the distorted and detestable nature of what they are promoting.

But what is at the root of this confusion and breakdown in these areas of healthcare? I think that at least one cause is a distorted notion of empathy that is replacing genuine love. Following the example of Christ, the Church teaches that to love is “to will the good of another.” Empathy is an important human capacity that enables us to better understand the experience of others, especially when they are suffering in some way. In the context of healthcare, this greater understanding can inform how care is provided, ensuring that the patient’s unique experience and circumstances are taken into consideration. However, attention to patient’s personal needs and

desires should never override or contradict our concern for his objective good. Love and truth are never opposed, and care for the sick must always be informed by both. Our loving desire to meet suffering people where they are must always be accompanied by a desire to raise them up to true health and flourishing. We cannot address sickness if we refuse to acknowledge it. It is not condescending to see a sick person as sick, whether his sickness is primarily physical, psychological, or spiritual. As our Lord himself said, this recognition of the wounded human condition is the first step towards healing: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5:31-32).

All of us have various kinds of wounds, and all of us are called by Christ to heal the sick in various ways. The more we in humility recognize our own need for God’s healing and experience it, the more we will be moved in gratitude to genuine love for others. For the health of countless suffering persons and of our society as a whole, we urgently need those entrusted with the care of others to stand firm in their commitment to non-malevolence and beneficence based on their knowledge of the human good as known by reason and faith. As we approach Christ’s gift in this Eucharist,

let us ask for steadfast courage in this commitment, both for ourselves and for others.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Mary Healy, *Healing: Bringing the Gift of God's Mercy to the World*, Our Sunday Visitor, Kindle Edition, p. 26.