

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

**October 18, 2023**

**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 of Assisi as we gather to celebrate the annual White Mass for the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois on this feast day of Saint Luke the Evangelist, who was himself a physician according to early Church tradition. In this Holy Mass on his feast day, we again ask his intercession for God's blessings on all healthcare professionals.

We have just listened to St. Luke's account of Jesus commissioning the seventy-two disciples. This powerful scene contains many themes that we could consider. This evening, however, I want to reflect on just two questions that I think this passage raises, questions that are also especially relevant to the vocation of our healthcare professionals. First, what exactly is the harvest about which Jesus speaks? Second, who are the laborers for this harvest?

*What is the harvest?*

Jesus sends these disciples as laborers for what he calls the “abundant harvest.” In Luke’s gospel, it is not immediately clear what this harvest is. If we read Matthew’s account of this same scene, we see the immediate context for Jesus’ words about the harvest. There we read:

Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness. At the sight of the crowds, His heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest” (Mt 9:35–38).

In the eyes of Jesus, the crowds of lost and broken people were not an inconvenience to Him and His disciples, or a hindrance to the “real work” of their ministry. They were instead “the harvest,” the goal – they were the very reason that Jesus came. This is true for all of us: whatever our suffering, affliction, or weakness might be, Jesus looks upon us with compassion and He sees us as ripe for the kingdom of God.

In the world of healthcare, numerous people come day after day to clinics, hospitals, and offices seeking care. In their need, and at times, desperation, they are not unlike the crowds who so often flocked to Jesus. Of course, these people have problems, some of them serious problems. And, thanks be to God, healthcare professionals like you are trained and equipped to address these problems. A perennial challenge is to treat the patient's problem without treating the patient *as* the problem!

Perhaps there is an analogy here to the wound of sin. There is an old adage, "Love the sinner and hate the sin." The idea behind this is that we should never reduce people to the sins they commit, because even though sin harms them, they have a dignity and worth that their sins do not erase. Just as we ask God for the grace to see people's goodness and lovability beyond their sins and vices, so too we should ask God for the grace to see sick, injured, and disabled people in the way that He sees them. While their health problems do require much attention and work from many people, *they themselves* are not problems. They are rather the harvest of God's kingdom, the privileged recipients of His merciful love.

Now let us briefly consider: what does it mean to be laborer in this harvest? Many people see the seventy-two disciples sent by Jesus as ministers, perhaps even ordained ministers. In fact, Jesus' words, "Ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" are often used in promotional materials for priestly vocations. Of course, priests, deacons, and religious are certainly laborers working in God's harvest! But there is no reason to think that these seventy-two disciples were ordained ministers. They were committed disciples of Jesus whom He sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God by simply visiting people in their homes and praying for them.

Luke began this story with an important detail. He tells us that Jesus sent these disciples "ahead of him in pairs to every town and place He intended to visit" (Lk 10:1). The implication is that these disciples are not themselves the "harvesters." Their role is only to prepare the way for Jesus, since he himself is going to visit the people in those towns. In a sense, this is what each of us can do as a laborer. At times, we may have the privilege of sharing the Gospel with someone who has never heard it before. More often, God will use us as instruments of His healing, consolation, and encouragement for those who already have the gift of faith.

But in either case, we know that Jesus is the Savior and the person they ultimately need. The Holy Spirit must bring about the growth of their faith.

St. Paul speaks of this in his First Letter to the Corinthians. He writes:

What is Apollos, after all, and what is Paul? Ministers through whom you became believers, just as the Lord assigned each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth  
(1 Cor 3:5-7).

To be clear, preparing the way of the Lord is no small matter. As laborers for God's harvest, we are true instruments of His mercy. St. Paul writes elsewhere that "the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). When people experience God's love mediated through our words and actions, their hearts are opened to experience His love directly. When we experience genuine love, it provokes us to ask, "What is the source of this person's love and compassion? Why do they see people differently?" This is especially the case when we are in a broken and vulnerable state. Knowing this, when people come to us in need, pain, and suffering, we can help them believe in love –

or continue to believe in love. Then they will be more open to welcome Love Himself when He comes to them in their hearts, in His Word, and in the Sacraments. If we are true laborers, we will not be working only for the passing joys of this life, but for fruit that remains." It is our firm hope rooted in faith that one day we will see how everything we did contributed to God's great harvest of salvation, when God will say to us, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. [...] Come, share your master's joy" (Mt 25:21).

May God give us this grace. Amen.