

Commissioned by Jesus

Fr. Robert Wagner

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Most of us are aware that Jesus sent His Twelve Apostles out to preach the Good News in the towns and villages of Galilee. We also know that the Apostles were the first priests of the church, those anointed by Christ to stand in His place, through whom He makes Himself sacramentally present to the world. In light of this understanding, it makes sense that these 12 men are sent out as priests to preach, heal, and cast out demons. This is the ministry of the priest. It is his vocation.

Jesus said, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest." We use this passage as a call for the church to pray for an increase of priests, men who are laborers in the world to bring Christ to His church. It is a noble and necessary practice that we ask the Lord to grant those men He calls to the priesthood the grace to answer with generosity, that we as a church may continue to bear the fruit of sanctification and good works through their ministry.

We should note, however, that in this Sunday's Gospel from Saint Luke, Jesus sent out more than the Twelve Apostles. Instead, He sent 72 of His disciples with the commission to tell the men and women of the towns and villages that "The kingdom of God is at hand for you!" This group of 72 included those who were not Apostles, and thus those who may not have had the same intimate relationship with Jesus that His Apostles enjoyed. While we may be tempted to think they were under equipped for such a mission - especially after the Lord tells them they can take practically nothing on their journey - we hear they were wildly successful. "Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name," they said upon their return, seemingly astounded that God would work through even them in such a powerful way.

Too often, we as a church are tempted to think the work of spreading the Gospel and preparing people to encounter Jesus is solely the duty of clergy and consecrated religious. Yes, ministry to the people of God is the vocation of the priest, but he cannot do it alone. The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay

People, promulgated during the Second Vatican Council, says, "Since the laity, in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven, with the ardor of the spirit of Christ" ("Apostolicam Actuositatem," 2).

On a practical level, the work of most priests is limited to the boundaries of their parishes. Also, their encounters are primarily with those who already practice the Catholic faith. In comparison, the men and women of their parishes regularly interact with people of many creeds and backgrounds through their work, their social circles, and their activities away from home. Therefore, in a parish, opportunities for evangelizing those who do not know about the Catholic faith are most often greater for most laity than for priests.

Of course, we may have concerns regarding how to evangelize, particularly in a culture that is often hostile to the faith. First, we must realize that hostility is not a new phenomenon. Jesus tells the 72, "I am sending you like lambs among wolves." Second, every encounter of evangelization does not have to involve us shouting, "The Kingdom of God is at hand!" More often, the best way to evangelize is to live a life of virtue, that is, to be a man or woman of mercy and justice in all things great and small. In this sense, evangelization means being a person of integrity, so that others may experience the beauty of what the Catholic faith looks like in action. Then, when the goodness of our lives inevitably attracts questions as to the source of our goodness, peace and joy, we can share the message of Jesus Christ and our salvation through His church.

Like the 72 disciples sent out in this Sunday's Gospel, each one of us within the church is called to spread the Gospel of the Lord and prepare others to meet Him. No matter what our vocation may be, let us go out into the "harvest field" of the world with confidence, trusting that the One who sends us forth strengthens us with His grace and His Spirit.

Fr. Wagner is Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde's secretary.