

Pray for, support and invite people to consider the Lord's call

Homily by Bishop John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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“The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest” (Luke 10:2). For the past 14 years, before I was appointed as bishop here in Fargo, I served as rector of the college seminary in the Diocese of Lincoln. And while I was involved with the formation of seminarians, these words of Jesus had a very special importance to me.

It was clear to me that many of the seminarians I worked with were indeed called by the Lord to the priesthood and sent out by him in response to our many prayers. It was also clear that they were needed. Any priest will tell you, and all agree, that we need these men to hear God's call, to come and learn from the master, and then to go out into the world, to proclaim the news of God's kingdom, and to bring in a great harvest of souls so that all might enjoy the peace of that kingdom.

Of course, now as a bishop, these words seem even more important to me. Soon I will have the responsibility of sending out laborers into the field, priests who are willing to be sent, willing to be servants, pastors, evangelists and spiritual guides for God's people. There is much work to do and, as Jesus says, the laborers are few. So it is all the more urgent that we obey his command and ask the master of the harvest to invite and send out laborers.

Prayer must be our first response. A praying people will be heard by the Lord, and he will respond to our prayers by giving us the shepherds we need. A prayer for priestly and religious vocations should be part of the daily prayer of all Catholics. But we must also support and encourage those who have answered that call. They are, as our Lord says, “like sheep among wolves” (Luke 10:3). Their task is not easy, it may even be dangerous, and they need our help in the midst of the challenges of the apostolate. Finally, we must invite others to consider this joyful call. A word of encouragement may be just what a young man needs to consider the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Or it might be just the nudge that a young woman needs to enter a religious community. Despite its challenges, it truly is a joyful call, and a joyful participation in our Lord's work. Those who say “yes” to that call are greatly blessed by the master who calls them.

But the work of the Kingdom is not limited to priests, or deacons, or consecrated religious sisters and brothers. It is the work of all Christians. Each of us has a part to play in this mission in our own state in life. When his disciples were ready, Jesus sent out 72, and they were not all apostles. They were not all bishops, priests or deacons. They were, in fact, followers of Jesus from all walks of life who made themselves available to him and willingly accepted his urgent appeal. He knew that his time on this earth would be short, so he needed to reach as many people as possible. Then, as now, he enlisted the cooperation of others to share the news that God's kingdom is near and has arrived. He knew that others, his followers, would have to carry on his work after his ascension into heaven. He saw how much work remained to be done, and he

realized that too few people would be willing to take up the work. When he said that the harvest was great, Jesus was thinking not only of the people of Palestine in his own time, but of people of all places and times, including this place and this time. The need is great, even urgent, and today he is asking all of us to be his co-workers.

Like the 72, Jesus asks each one of us to proclaim in word and deed the presence of his kingdom, the love, mercy, and power of Christ among us. The Second Vatican Council teaches us that by virtue of our baptism and confirmation, the laity, all of you, are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself. Your baptism brought you into God's family, and your confirmation was a sign of your commission to take up serious responsibilities in the Church, to carry out the work of Christ on this earth.

The Council tells us that every member of the Church is called to holiness. The very testimony of your Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, have the power to draw others to belief in God. No one can deny the power of good example; we notice it all the time. So just the way you live, your authentic Catholic life, can do more good than many sermons and many books. Mahatma Gandhi said, "There would be far more Christians if you Christians were a bit more like your Christ." Our example, our witness, is essential.

But good example, no matter how powerful, is not enough. The Council continues to teach us that a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words, as well, words addressed to those who do not yet believe, with the hope of leading them to faith, or to those who do believe but need to be strengthened in their faith. We are sometimes shy about speaking of faith, or unsure of ourselves and reluctant to speak too openly of our relationship with Christ and our love for his Church. But there are many around us who know nothing of Jesus and his great love, who will never have occasion to pick up a Bible, much less a Catechism. We may be the only Bibles they ever read. Our words may be crucial. We may be the very instruments God has chosen and sent to bring our brothers and sisters into his fold.

During this Year of Faith, our Holy Father Pope Benedict specifically asked all Catholics to study more deeply the faith that we have received as a gift. We must all take advantage of the resources given to us to know our faith more thoroughly, so that we might be able, as Peter says, to give an answer for the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15). Open up the Catechism, or any of the many summaries that are available, and accept the challenge to have an adult understanding of faith, so that you can take your place with the 72 that Jesus sent out long ago.

There are many who have questions about our Catholic faith, and if we won't answer their questions, who will? You may have more opportunities to reach out to a neighbor, or a co-worker, or a family member than a priest would. Where a priest or a religious might be prevented from touching the hearts and minds of others, you might be able to engage them and enter into a dialogue of faith with them. We never know where and to whom the providence of God will lead us.

As a baptized and confirmed Catholic, give serious thought to what you can do to spread and solidify the religion of Jesus Christ. And pray that you may respond to the strength of the Holy Spirit given to you in your confirmation. We are like sheep among wolves, and that can be a

terrifying image to consider. There are many who would wish to silence us or even do us harm because of our faith, and by all appearances we are merely defenseless sheep. But one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we have all received is fortitude, the courage and strength that God gives all his servants. Do not doubt the grace of the Lord. He never sends us out to do a job without giving us the grace to complete it. The message Jesus gives us is a message of peace, a message of hope in God. It is a message of freedom, the freedom of the children of God, and we have nothing to fear.

The only thing lacking is, once again, sufficient laborers for the harvest. There are many who wait, perhaps unwittingly, for our witness. There are many who will never know our Lord unless we introduce them to him. Jesus says to all of us, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few." Will we respond to his plea for help?