



DUC IN ALTUM

A JOURNEY THROUGH FAITH, HOPE AND CHARITY
Pastoral Letter – January 12th, 2024

ABSTRACT

On January 29th, 2011, I was consecrated to the episcopacy. On that date, I selected as part of my coat of arms the motto: Duc in Altum -- Latin for "put out into the deep," the words that Jesus said to Peter when he first encountered him, prompting him to go into deep water and lower his nets for a catch. Peter reluctantly agreed, and as a result, his fishing nets tore because of the great number of fish he caught. Thirteen years after offering myself as His servant to lead his flock, still these words are pounding in my heart-- the words He said to his first disciples—Duc in Altum!

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DUC IN ALTUM

Duc in Altum! Duc in Altum! These three Latin words mean, “Put out into the deep.” They have come to mean “Go deeper into your inner spiritual life,” or “Take the risk and plunge into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” or “Trust the Word of God as a guide for your daily life.”

He said, “*Duc in Altum! Let us go out into the deep!*” These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

These words, *Duc in Altum*, come from the gospel of Luke (Lk 5, 1-11). Early one morning, Simon (whose name had not yet been changed to Peter), James and John had been fishing all night without catching any fish. They were finished for the day, cleaning their nets and ready to go home. Jesus tells them, “*Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch.*” These fishermen knew the young rabbi from Nazareth—after all, he borrowed Simon’s boat—but they are not yet His disciples.

You can imagine these exhausted men, who have just finished a fruitless, night-long fishing trip, asking, “What? After a long, hard night without catching a single fish? Why is Jesus telling us to get back into our boats and back to work, under the hot sun of daylight, when we have already cleaned our nets?” They might be thinking the young teacher clearly knows nothing about fishing. After all, every fisherman knows that the best time to fish is at night and the best place is close to the shoreline, where the water is shallow and the plant life, which the fish feed on, is plentiful. So, Simon says, “Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing!”

Still, Simon listening to Jesus’ words and *Duc in Altum*, says, “but if you say so, I will lower the nets.” Perhaps he was influenced by the fact that Jesus had recently cured his mother-in-law at her nearby home in Capernaum (Lk 4:38-39). Suddenly, they caught a great number of fish. Shocked by this, Simon fell at the feet of Jesus saying, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” The concluding sentence reveals the whole point of this unusual story. “Do not be afraid, Simon, from now on you, James and John will be fishers of men, then you will be catching people!” The men left everything and followed Jesus!



Simon's actions tell us he was willing to listen to Jesus and try something that he was sure would fail. Jesus' speaking of "the deep" suggests to Simon that there may be possibilities beyond his knowledge of the Lake of Gennesaret, unexplored realities that he cannot fully understand.

Put out into the deep and find out. Because of his willingness to take a risk with Jesus, he experiences the unexplainable, the unbelievable, a catch of fish that is more than two boats can hold. Simon and his friends have hauled in so much food that is not only sufficient for them and their families, but also enough to feed other families whose fishermen husbands had caught nothing the night before. Simon cannot help but feel there must be a connection between Jesus and this amazing gift for him, James, John, their neighbors, and the entire community. But with this abundance comes a new risk and danger, the boats were overloaded and almost sinking. Simon, overwhelmed with awe in the presence of some otherworldly wonder, professes faith saying, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." This is not unlike the experience of Moses before the bush that burns yet is not consumed. A voice tells Moses, "Put off your shoes from on your feet for the ground whereon you stand is Holy." But Simon is not given the time he needs to contemplate his encounter with Holy Mystery in Jesus. He is told immediately, "*from now on you will be fishers of men!*" The life of Simon, who would become Peter, the Rock, is changed forever.

Some scholars argue that this amazing gospel story may not be literally true. It may be a kind of parable created by Luke to teach us a central Christian belief. Each one of us must be willing to hear Jesus saying to us, *Duc in Altum!* Put out into the deep waters of life. Place your trust in Me. Evidently, Jesus called men to catch them in order they would come to know the love of God in His Son, our Redeemer. The Holy Spirit continues in this mission today, using Word and Sacrament to call sinners out of the darkness and into His marvelous light.

We are called today to look at our lives and search for the crossroad where we feel frustrated, confused, even paralyzed. Like Simon and his friends, we may be exhausted. We may not know what to do. We feel uncertain about trusting that Jesus is with us. Perhaps we are plagued by doubts, our faith has been shaken by painful life experiences: We have lost our job during the pandemic! Our marriage is in crisis! Someone whom we love dearly is at the point of death! One of our children can no longer embrace the Christian faith! We know something about our personal lives that we are ashamed to tell anyone! We fear growing older, we are terrified at the thought of suffering and death! We are no longer sure we believe in the life of the world to come! Perhaps when we die, we cease to exist! Whatever the issue is that has caused us to pull our fishing boats out of the sea of life, go home and pull the covers over our heads or drink too much, this may be the very day when Jesus is calling out, "*Duc in Altum!*" Put out into the deep. Open your heart to Me. Take Me seriously! Return to Me in Prayer, in reading the scripture, in receiving Holy Communion worthily, in going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in forgiving those who trespass against us. Perhaps when we begin to live an "if you say so Lord" type of life, of trusting in Jesus Christ, we will feel like Simon in the presence of the Holiness of God, saying, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man, I am a sinful woman." But we can be confident that Christ will tell us, DO NOT BE AFRAID. From now on you will be fishers of men. If you stay close to Me, you will inevitably attract those around you to the community of My beloved disciples.



On the other hand, from the earliest centuries of the Church, Christians have been preoccupied with the symbolism of fish. There are stories about fish in the gospels. Jesus multiplying the loaves and fish as a sign of the Eucharist. There is the odd story of Jesus instructing someone to catch a fish and pull out the coin from the fish's mouth. There are fish in our Christian art. And we have an ancient tradition of no meat, but fish on Fridays. There is a reason for this. The ancient Greek word for fish is (ICHTHUS). During times of persecution, the fish symbol was used by Christians to identify themselves to each other as they escaped their persecutors. When two Christians met, one would draw the top of a fish in the sand. The other would complete the picture drawing the bottom below, creating the image of a fish, indicating both were Christians. Why is this? ICHTHUS, the Greek word for FISH is formed from the first letters of five Greek words:

Iēsous meaning JESUS, Christos meaning CHRIST, Theou meaning GOD's, Uios meaning SON, and Sōtēr meaning SAVIOR, meaning: Jesus Christ Son of God Savior. The words proclaim the Christian Message, announcing the triumph of God's love over human fear. We must put out into the deep waters of life.

As we ride our boats on the stormy sea of life, not sure of where we are going or how to get there, we may feel anxious to bring our boats to the shore, clean our nets, and return to the comforts of home. But just then, Jesus says, *Duc in Altum!* Put it out into the deep! Are we, like Simon Peter, willing to profess our faith, declaring if You "say so, Lord, I will do so."

Above all, Luke's Gospel is a call to everyone around the world, whatever our social or moral status, to abandon our futile methods of self-salvation and leave all to follow Christ, the great Friend of sinners (Luke 7:34; 9:57–62; 18:9–14). What is the book of Luke trying to teach us? In Luke, Jesus emerges primarily as a teacher, a teacher of ethical wisdom, someone who's confident and serene in that ethical teaching. Someone who is very much interested in inculcating the virtues of compassion and forgiveness among his followers. The focus of Luke's Gospel is the nature of the salvation that Jesus Christ provides. Because Jesus encounters a wide variety of people in Luke, this Gospel offers a glimpse into the different facets of salvation—its spiritual, physical, and social dimensions.

Let us go forward in hope relying on the help of Christ! The Son of God, who became incarnate two thousand years ago out of love for humanity, is at work even today: we need discerning eyes to see this and, above all, a generous heart to become the instruments of his work. Now, the Christ whom we have contemplated and loved bids us to set out once more on our journey: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). The missionary mandate accompanies us throughout this Third Millennium and urges us to share the enthusiasm of the very first Christians: we can count on the power of the same Spirit who was poured out at Pentecost and who impels us still today to start out anew, sustained by the hope "which does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5).

Nowadays our steps must quicken as we travel the highways of the world. Many are the paths on which each one of us and each of our Churches must travel, but there is no distance between those who are united in the same communion, the communion which is daily nourished at the table of the Eucharistic Bread and the Word of Life. We need to become communities of prayer.

Yes, dear brothers and sisters, our Christian communities must become *genuine "schools" of prayer*, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly "falls in love". Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan.¹⁸

Christians who have received the gift of a vocation to the specially consecrated life are of course called to prayer in a particular way: of its nature, their consecration makes them more open to the experience of contemplation, and it is important that they should cultivate it with special care. But it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects' faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but "Christians at risk". They would run the insidious risk of seeing their faith progressively undermined and would perhaps end up succumbing to the allure of "substitutes", accepting alternative religious proposals and even indulging in far-fetched superstitions.



Every Sunday, the Risen Christ asks us to meet him as it were once more in the Upper Room where, on the evening of "the first day of the week" (Jn 20:19) He appeared to his disciples to "breathe" on them his life-giving Spirit and launch them on the great adventure of proclaiming the Gospel.

The Risen Jesus accompanies us on our way and enables us to recognize Him, as the disciples of Emmaus did, "in the breaking of the bread" (Lk 24:35). May he find us watchful, ready to recognize his face and run to our brothers and sisters with the good news: "We have seen the Lord!" (Jn 20:25).

As this year begins and points us to a future of hope, may the praise and thanksgiving of the whole Church rise to the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. Duc in Altum! These words should ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8).

As the prophet Isaiah said "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts*" (Isaiah 6:5). Peter has seen the King. Yet, the King – Jesus Christ – does not wish to destroy us. Rather, *He wishes to share His sacred mission with us. Jesus invites everyone to become fishers of men.*

In the calling of the first disciples, Jesus reminds us of His overwhelming grace and of His call to action. Let us always remember that he has placed Peter as our leader. Let us always remember that a single drop of His grace could flood the whole world. And let us always remember that despite our sinfulness, He still calls us to assist in His sacred mission – the salvation of souls. Once again, thirteen years ago I accepted the call to lead his mission amongst the men commended to me. With humility, and a deep commitment to listen to His word, I once again commit to continue assisting in His sacred mission – the salvation of souls, hoping that every man and woman I reach out too will respond wholeheartedly to His calling.

In pledge of this, I impart to all of you my heartfelt Blessing on the 13th anniversary of my episcopal consecration to become His servant.

With Jesus and Mary,



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