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## The Fierce Urgency of the Slow: How Pope Francis is Calling Us to Save the Planet

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**The Fierce Urgency of the Slow:  
How Pope Francis is Calling Us to Save the Planet**

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*Addressing the urgent issues facing humanity today, in his recent encyclical on social friendship, Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis reminds us that it is “all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence” (no. 33). In this and in his previous encyclical on care for creation, Laudato Si’, Francis makes clear that we do not have a moment to waste. None of his diagnosis should “be read as a cool and detached description of today’s problems” (no. 56).*

*Before an onslaught of urgency backfires in paralysis, however, we might notice a heartening paradox: Read carefully, Francis’s message to us is that we move quickly to slow down! Yes, “rethink” immediately. Yes, act now, and “boldly.” But then, once we have promptly changed direction, Francis insists that we take all the time we need. After all, what we most urgently need is to do the hard work of truly human encounter on the way to authentically human solutions. We might call this “the fierce urgency of the slow.”*

*Keywords:* Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, Laudato Si, care for environment, culture of encounter

**Introduction**

Few need reminding that humanity faces a confluence of urgent issues. Immediate headlines bring us a pandemic, polarization, and populist politics vying for the interests of some, not the common good. Driving all of those are decade-long headlines: time running out to stop the worst of climate change, pressures around immigration, and worsening economic and social inequality. Behind these, the stories of a century and counting: warfare, racist colonialism, consumer capitalism, and relentless globalization imperiling vulnerable cultures on every continent.

Addressing all of these in his recent encyclical on social friendship, Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis has his own reminder: The pandemic especially has made it “all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence” (no. 33). In this and in his previous encyclical on care for creation, Laudato si’, Francis makes clear that we do not have a moment to waste. None of his diagnosis should “be read as a cool and detached description of today’s problems” (no. 56). To heal the open wounds in our relationships with one another and with the planet requires peacemakers who will “work boldly and creatively to initiate processes of healing and renewed encounter” (no. 225).

Before an onslaught of urgency backfires in paralysis, however, we might notice a heartening paradox: Read carefully, Francis’s message to us is that we move quickly to slow down! Yes, “rethink” immediately. Yes, act now, and “boldly.” But then, once we have promptly changed direction, Francis insists that we take all the time we need. After all, what we most urgently need

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is to do the hard work of truly human encounter on the way to authentically human solutions. We might call this “the fierce urgency of the slow.”

**“Fierce urgency”—now but not hasty**

To accentuate the fierce urgency of the *slow* is not to detract in any way from “the fierce urgency of the *now*”—that poignant phrase which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. first pressed into our consciousness and lexicon. Appearing in two of his most historic speeches (“I Have a Dream” and “Beyond Vietnam”), “fierce urgency” succinctly captured the pointed message of his earlier “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and his book, *Why We Can’t Wait*: “For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’” Where white moderates had urged the Civil Rights Movement to “take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism,” King’s antidote was his “fierce urgency of the now.”

Refusing to wait any longer does not mean starting to hurry frantically or haphazardly, however, much less discarding one’s deepest human commitments in a misguided trust that noble ends will somehow justify inhumane means. Reflecting this was Dr. King’s commitment to the active nonviolence of Jesus as developed by Gandhi. Active nonviolence requires a refusal to cut corners, after all—eschewing violent short cuts in the struggle for a just and humane future wherein the dignity of every human being is respected. If that is what we must resolve decisively and without waiting, then it is altogether compatible with the fierce urgency of the now for us to trust—as the wisdom of an African-American proverb puts it— that “God may not come when you want him but he’s right on time.”

The fiercely urgent “now” is our need for *metanoia*—a decisive and repentant change in direction. Once set, though, that new direction is one we are to live out for a lifetime, however stalwartly, patiently, and yes slowly the journey may sometimes proceed.

Pope Francis’s unobtrusive word choices consistently hint at this expectation. (I will be highlighting them in my quotations here.) Where economic growth is failing to build a just economy, he describes it as “*feverish*” or “*frenetic*” “*scramble*” in pursuit of short-term growth at the expense of the environment and the poor alike (no. 35, no. 40, no. 229). “*Quick*” results are often a temptation (§33). One of the reasons that digital communication may fail to build true social friendship is that “*careful* listening” is being replaced by a “*frenzy* of texting,” which puts at risk “the basic structure of sage human communication” (no. 49). Persons and cultures alike lose their integrity when they abandon their traditions in exchange in a “a *craze* to mimic others or to foment violence” amid the pressures of “cultural colonization;” thus they allow others to steal their “very soul,” their “moral consistency” and their “intellectual, economic and political independence” (no. 14). Francis regularly characterizes the modern world as “*frantic*” or “*frenetic*” (no. 48, no. 63). But war and the death penalty require extended attention as preeminent examples of our attempt to find hasty answers amid “*dramatic* circumstances” that tempt us toward “false solutions.” These will “ultimately do no more than introduce new elements of destruction in the fabric of national and global society,” after all (no. 255).

**“Time is greater than space”**

Though Francis’s word choices are telling precisely because he may not be conscious of the pattern, he has sometimes been quite explicit. In his early encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* or “The

Joy of the Gospel,” he laid out four principles to guide peacemaking, work for the common good, and evangelization itself. Topping the list: “Time is greater than space” (nos. 222-225). Even amid our limitations, he insisted, God’s gift of time opens up our reality to the horizon of God’s fullness—to God’s promised fulfillment of the future communion for which we have been created. In the difficult meantime in which we long for a better world, the principle that “time is greater than space” helps sustain us, even as it frees us from our need to grasp at *things* in a desperate desire for control: “This principle enables us to work **slowly but surely**, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give a priority to time” (no. 223).

The fierce urgency of the slow appeared even—or especially—as Francis addressed the pressing dangers of climate change in his 2015 encyclical on the care of creation, *Laudato Si’*. Yes, the failure of technological manipulation alone to bring human progress “shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution.” Yet only two sentences later he explained how to rebalance our relationship with science and technology as we do so: “Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, **but we do need to slow down** and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.” (no. 114). When turning in *Laudato Si’* to assess specific policy proposals Francis likewise warned against quick, easy solutions that defy the slowness of nature’s own processes (no. 133, no. 171). After all, if there is any one name for the damage that humanity is doing to itself and the planet, for Francis that word was “**rapidification**”—an “acceleration of changes” that outstrips the change that is surely necessary for all complex systems to stay healthy with a speed that too sharply contrasts with the “**slow** pace of biological evolution” (no. 18).

Now in *Fratelli Tutti*, therefore, Francis often describes the struggle for just social change itself as necessarily slow, arduous, and requiring patience (no. 16, no. 161, no. 190, no. 232). His point is not complacency towards the marginalized and their urgent needs, much less that they should silence their demands as they wait. Rather, his point is to encourage us in the struggle, lest we rush past those who are slower and more vulnerable (no. 98, no. 108, no. 110), lest we fail to develop solidarity and to listen, really listen (no. 190). After all, to be human--fully human, together, in relationship--takes time and work.

### **Slowing down for social friendship**

Only as we recognize the fierce urgency of the slow will we be able to appropriate and live out Pope Francis’s overarching call to human encounter, fraternity, and social friendship in *Fratelli Tutti*.

Solidarity requires us so slow down. This is the fresh lesson that Francis draws from Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan. What distinguishes the Samaritan from the many who “**hurry** off as if they did not notice” the man assaulted and left on the wayside was not just that he gave money, but that he “also gave him something that in our **frenetic** world we cling to tightly: **he gave him his time.**” (§63).

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Dialogue and true human encounter take time. They should not be confused with “the *feverish* exchange of opinions on social networks, frequently based on media information that is not always reliable” (no. 200). Rather, when we “seek the truth in dialogue” it may happen either “in relaxed conversation or in passionate debate” but dialogue always “calls for *perseverance*.” Indeed it often “entails moments of *silence* and suffering” as we “*patiently* embrace the broader experience” of others (no. 50).

Peacemaking based on social friendship is thus a kind “craftsmanship.” For “social peace demands hard work” not mere “cleverness,” as it cultivates “the fruit of a culture of encounter.” Admittedly, “integrating differences” requires a “difficult and *slow* process, yet it is the guarantee of a genuine and lasting peace.” (no. 217).

Perhaps future theologians, historians, and Catholic social activists will find in the fierce urgency of the slow a hermeneutical key for interpreting Pope Francis’s thought. But more important is the guidance it offers to everyone from prominent politicians to those engaged in unheralded grassroots neighborliness.

If they recognize their vocation to “political charity,” “government leaders should be the first to make the sacrifices that foster encounter and to seek convergence on at least some issues. They should be *ready to listen* to other points of view and to make room for everyone,” as they exercise “sacrifice and *patience*” (no. 190).

But ordinary believers and people of good will may take heart in Francis’s commendation of what they are already doing: “I have only to think of what our world would be like without the *patient* dialogue of the many generous persons who keep families and communities together. Unlike disagreement and conflict, *persistent* and courageous dialogue does not make headlines, but quietly helps the world to live much better than we imagine.” (no. 198)

The fact that a better world may be hard to imagine at a moment of planetary crisis does not make the fierce urgency of the slow any less urgent, nor turn it into a luxury we cannot afford. For if Francis is right that “time is greater than space,” then to act hastily in ways that short-cut either human dignity or the integrity of the environment will only reap delay.

*Gerald W. Schlabach’s most recent book is A Pilgrim People: Becoming a Catholic Peace Church (Liturgical Press, 2019).*

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