



Navigating the rapids

Antonio Spadaro SJ

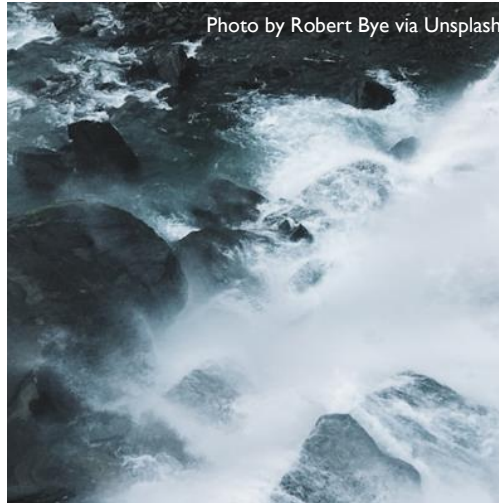
In an era of swirling changes, which often resemble the turbulent waters of the storm that Jesus calmed, we need a 'rapid theology', says Antonio Spadaro SJ.

The changes we are experiencing are not merely 'fast'; they are 'rapid'. The Church has historically paid little attention to the speed of phenomena. Instead, it has placed emphasis on their 'rapidity'. It was John Paul II who spoke of the 'rapid development of technologies', for example.

The adjective 'rapid' contains the root of the Latin verb 'to grasp' or 'to carry away'. A train is fast: it glides undisturbed along tracks, unaffected by external elements. High speed is its defining feature. 'The motorised age has imposed speed as a measurable value, with records marking the progress of machines and humans', notes Italo Calvino in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.

Rapidus, however, refers not to what runs but what enraptures, drags, sweeps. And it is also capable of involving attitudes, lifestyles, understandings of reality, of politics. The invention of electric light 'seized' the rhythm of our days; social networks and our relational capacity; artificial intelligence and our way of thinking.

Our rapid present demands that we navigate it. Jesus's invitation to the disciples comes to mind: 'Let us cross to the other side', which was the motto of one of Pope Francis' most delicate and challenging apostolic journeys, to the Central African Republic. Crossing to the other side 'requires a shift within the consciences,



attitudes, and intentions of people', the pope noted at the time.

Jesus, in the evening, stands before the crowd by the Sea of Galilee, a body of water prone to sudden windstorms. He speaks from a small boat swaying on the waves. At that moment, perhaps the least opportune, he invites them to cross. It is dark. This will

not be a moonlit crossing; chaos overtakes them in the form of tumultuous waters. Suddenly, 'a great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped'. Yet chaos does not disturb Jesus. He remains at the stern, asleep on a cushion. His sleep must have been deep, as he does not wake even to the sound of the slapping of waves and of water flooding the boat. Chaos does not disrupt his rest. The Lord is always in control, even when he is 'asleep'. And thus, he intervenes as a deliverer: 'the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm'. Jesus can then say to his disciples, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' (Mark 4:35-41).

This image aptly captures Jesus's call to cross to the other side, navigating threatening, rapid waters. A 'rapid' is the stretch of a river where its bed steepens abruptly, accelerating its flow with waves and turbulence. It is neither a calm current nor a waterfall. These are the waters we navigate in our passage.

In the waves, we see today's intensified cultural and social transformations, as well as our fears. The hallmark of the 'change of epoch' is that things no longer seem to be in place. What once explained the world, relationships, good and evil, now appears unusable. What seemed normal in family, Church, society and the world may never return to its prior state. Pope Francis has evoked the Spanish term *rapidación*, a phenomenon which 'traps our existence in the whirlwind of high-speed', causing a constant shift in 'reference points'. We cannot deceive ourselves into thinking this is a transitory phase, after which things will revert to how they always were. Nor can we adopt an ostrich-like attitude and pretend the world is unchanged. Courage is needed to overcome fears, cross the sea, and journey alongside humanity in our time.

Surfing these rapids, we find a significant shift in the relationship between Christians and culture in many places where the Church has lost its unique authority in cultural production, which was once rooted in and directed by a theological vision of life. Evangelising within today's complex, hybrid, dynamic and mutable cultures requires maturity — the understanding that we are no longer directors, but we still are actors, and sometimes protagonists but always together and alongside others. The future is no longer built in pursuit of 'cultural hegemonies'.

In this cultural reality of change, new actors emerge with new lifestyles, ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving and relating. The greatest challenge in this cultural context is empathetic dialogue, even seeking new languages to express faith. A lack of critical reflection and discernment can lead to either fundamentalist religious subjectivism or superficial syncretism. We are called to discern this restlessness within society and value it, for any system that seeks to 'pacify' humanity is pernicious. We must keep alive the ability to dream of 'new versions of the world' (Pope Francis). This is the essence of our journey through the rapids of our time. We

must push our engines to their limits to navigate the whirlpool of Scylla and the shoal of Charybdis.

We must not fall victim to fear amidst history's great changes. The changes we face are indeed significant but not unprecedented. Humanity has experienced abrupt changes in 'intelligence' before: consider the Enlightenment, which was later countered by Romanticism. Humanity produces these changes and must learn to manage them wisely.

Contemplating Christ alive in our time frees Christians from the temptation to recycle the gospel into either a restoration workshop or various utopian laboratories. We need the courage to leap into the future, trusting that the Lord is not merely a 'lighthouse' emitting light from afar but is present on our storm-tossed boat, saving us with the rest of his consolation. He is the Lord of the tides. Chaos does not disturb his rest or cause him to lose his mastery of the situation.

Theology, therefore, must think not only of the waves but also of the shores of arrival. It must immerse itself in the rapids, thinking on the move, without lamenting the lack of time to reason and plan. We need rapid theological thought, a 'rapid theology'.

No longer can we demand constant pauses to gaze at the stars for orientation; we must learn to understand their position on the move to chart our routes. We risk clinging to an overly 'ontological', theoretical, static vision of contemplation. We risk believing in Mercury (and his dexterity) as entirely separate from Saturn (and his solitary contemplation). This polytheism is useless.

We must also understand wind directions and anticipate potential storms. After all, this is the original meaning of 'cybernetics' (etymologically, the art of the pilot) — being contemplative in action, as proposed by the *devotio*

moderna in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and later by Ignatian spirituality. Jesuit Claude Larre beautifully observed in his (sadly forgotten) spiritual commentary on the ancient *Tao Te Ching* that Lao Tzu's contemplative approach views life as an art that marries context and the flow of reality. Ecclesial memory must merge with instinct to turn it into 'intuition': the ability to perceive, discern and assess situations quickly in their unfolding.

Today, especially through its increasingly radical synodality, the Church must dwell not only in safe harbours, where people can be led as they would be during earthquakes. It must also take up residence in places exposed to rapids, winds and even storms that stir the world. It is in these turbulent and windy places that the Spirit blows.

Antonio Spadaro SJ is the Undersecretary of the Vatican Dicastery for Culture and Education and the Secretary General of the Vatican Foundation 'All of Us'. He was previously the editor of the journal La Civiltà Cattolica and a board member of Georgetown University. He conducted the first [interview with Pope Francis](#).

This article is a translation of a text that appeared in Avvenire on 19 January 2025.