

On the verge of comprehension

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue



On Pentecost, Roman firefighters stand on top of the Pantheon and pour red rose petals through the oculus, the opening in the center of the dome. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Province of Saint Joseph](#).

I'll be leaving Rome soon. I walk around the city, trying to memorize it: the angels on the Sant'Angelo bridge, purposeful and grave; the arms of the colonnade cradling St. Peter's Square; the redbud trees lifting their branches like offerings. I hope to go home changed, but I don't yet know what that change will be.

Before I leave, the church will celebrate one more great feast: Pentecost, that festival of communication and understanding. Licked by tongues of flame and filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus' disciples found themselves suddenly able to speak in many different languages and be understood by native speakers, "devout Jews from every nation under heaven." What seems at first like a reversal of Babel becomes something even better: God's reaffirmation of the variety of languages in which human beings speak of the things that matter most. On Pentecost, rather than scattering in confusion, people of many tongues gather close and listen together.

It feels right to mark the end of my time here with the feast of Pentecost. The story that Acts tells is the stuff of my dreams, in which suddenly I can speak Italian fluently and understand all the Italian spoken to me. When such things happen in waking life, they feel like miracles. I remember receiving a letter from my sister, years ago, soon after arriving in Bogotá, Colombia, for a year of study. "My host mom and sister are talking in the kitchen," she wrote, her pen flying across the page, "*and I can understand what they are saying!*"

My experiences with comprehension are more sporadic. Sometimes I can understand every word in a sentence and still not know what the sentence means. I feel like Edgar Allen Poe's narrator in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," trying to follow the logic of his brilliant friend, Dupin: "I seemed to be upon the verge of comprehension, without power to comprehend—as men, at times, find themselves on the brink of remembrance, without being able, in the end, to remember."

"Upon the verge of comprehension" seems to me a good description of where we stand between Easter and Pentecost. Who can claim to be wholly fluent in this season's mysteries and impossibilities, to comprehend fully its appearances and disappearances? Even those who heard the disciples preaching in their own mother tongue still had to ask: "What does this mean?"

Comprehending "God's deeds of power"—the freeing of Jesus from death, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—requires more than finding the equivalent expression in our own language. Comprehension does not arrive, once and for all, once we have looked up all the words. We glimpse the meaning of Easter intermittently in the life we share with others. Those who heard the disciples preach on Pentecost comprehended the message in their own language. But that was only the beginning. It was in the life they lived together that their answers to "What does this mean?" began to take shape. And it was the life they lived together that inspired others to try to answer that question as well.

This Pentecost, people from many nations will fill the Pantheon in Rome, and I hope to be among them. We will celebrate the mass together—some of us understanding the liturgy word for word, some of us understanding only the gestures and forms, and some of us encountering a Christian celebration for the first time.

At the end of the service, Roman firefighters on top of the Pantheon's dome will pour red rose petals through the oculus, the large opening in the center of the dome which allows light to move through the building as the earth turns. The oculus has never been covered. It has stood open like the threshold between heaven and earth no matter which gods were being worshiped beneath it. Looking up through it at the unadorned sky, we might be standing in any moment in time, next to all who ever stood beneath it and lifted their faces.

In the Pantheon on Sunday, some of us will hear the gospel proclaimed in our own language; some of us will hear it in a language we do not understand. But when the

rose petals begin to fall, they will make us one for a moment like the Parthians, Judeans, Romans, Arabs, and others who heard the gospel in their own tongues. We may not know each other's languages, but when the rain of rose petals begins, we will have our faces turned in the same direction.

"What does this mean?" that first Pentecost congregation asked, and they kept trying to find out—in breaking bread together and praying for each other, in studying together and enjoying each other's company, in the sharing of their possessions and caring for those in need out of that abundance. On the verge of comprehension, we are called not to perfect understanding, but to the imperfect life of community. On the threshold of what we understand and what we do not, there is room for our comprehension to be shaped by solidarity, room for us to keep our faces turned toward love.