

Praying in tongues

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

I first heard the Lord's Prayer in Mexico, during a family trip when I was 11 years old. I strayed from the Oaxaca market square, where my parents were bargaining over black pottery, and slipped into an old stone church, cool and dark. There were clusters of women in lace mantillas, and one or two solitary old men. Some were silent. Some whispered, some chanted in unison with the priest, "Padre nuestro que estás en los cielos: Santificado sea tu nombre." I never forgot the sound of these words, and their sensory associations lingered as I found myself repeating them in my heart.

Later, on the plush carpet of our living room, 12 stories above the East River in Manhattan, I learned my first catechism, taking the Agnus Dei not from a missal, but from my parents' phonograph record of Bach's *B Minor Mass*, and the Kyrie and Credo from the Congolese *Missa Luba*. It was several years before I encountered any of these words in spoken English prose.

Perhaps this is why I like to pray in foreign languages. What a curious sensation, what a mix of familiarity and strangeness when we hear a well-known prayer transposed to another tongue! Stranger still when we recite the prayer, and find ourselves discerning its meaning under the appearance of unknown words. I don't speak a word of Swedish, but when I sound out "Fader vår, som är himmelen: Helgat varde ditt namn," it is as if a veil were suddenly lifted, the curse of Babel partially revoked. In the Maltese "Missierna li inti fis-Smewwiet, Jitqaddes Ismek," I hear the Jewish Aramaic Kaddish prayer magnifying the divine name, and the Arabic root *q-d-s* evoking the holiness of desert and oasis. In the French "Notre Père qui est aux cieux: Que ton nom soit sanctifié," I hear the sweet voices of convent schoolgirls. In the Greek, "Pater hemon, ho en tois ouranois," the astronomical heavens come into view; and in the Latin, "Pater noster qui es in coelis: Sanctificetur nomen tuum," the celestial hierarchy arrays itself in splendid ranks.

The Tower of Babel, like the Fall itself, may be viewed as a *felix culpa* (happy fault) for giving us such rich diversity of expression, but for one thing: it is an implication

of the biblical story, amplified in rabbinic legend, that the builders who conspired to storm heaven were stricken by agnosia as well as confusion of tongues. Their faces changed and they could no longer recognize one another. Diversity is a good thing only when we can discern in one another a kindred face, a common humanity.

Not just agnosia but amnesia was the fruit of Babel, for legend has it that whoever passed by the tower instantly lost all memory. Nationalism began at Babel too: according to rabbinic and patristic accounts, when God and his 70 angels descended to earth to render judgment, each angel was assigned to a nation to teach it a separate language, with only Israel receiving the sacred language—Hebrew—that God used in creation.

When we pray in the tongues of the nations, our language is at once angelic and corrupt: angelic because there is no such thing as a private language, corrupt because there is no such thing as a universal one. When we pray in an unfamiliar tongue, we experience the scandal of the divisions in Christ's body but also the grace of Christ's commission to his disciples to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. We long to hear with perfect understanding and speak with one voice the words our Savior gave us, but this is a gift that comes only with tongues of fire.

In the *Heliand*, a ninth-century Old Saxon alliterative verse retelling of the gospel, Christ teaches his disciples the secret runes that God spoke in the beginning when he called the world into being. These runes are the Lord's Prayer, creation's antiphonal response to the primal "Let it be." We have lost our ear for runes, but may we hear in a child's patter something of the primeval Pater? Listening to our four-year-old explain so earnestly why dragons have wings instead of wheels, I get an inkling of unfallen speech. A child's speech is both mythic and literal, logical and magical. Andy wanted to know about the strong man who went to the moon. What strong man, we asked. The one with the arm so strong he could reach the moon. After some discussion we realized he was speaking about Neil Armstrong.

Is there a protolanguage, an innate language? This is the stuff of legend on the one hand, neurolinguistics on the other. From a linguistic perspective, any protolanguage would be merely embryonic. But if there is an original language of revelation, it would have to be more complex and rich than human languages; it would have to be the mother of all languages, the archetype compared to which the English of Shakespeare, the Latin of Cicero, the Spanish of Cervantes, the Sanskrit of Patanjali are no more than a pale shadow, a borrowed fire.

Today, by contrast, we view language as something socially constructed, built up from a set of rudimentary signs and open to reconstruction in the interest of reform. Even our prayers are rewritten to remove offense, reflecting the socially engineered language of the college admissions brochure, the bureaucratic memo or the therapeutic intervention. When we pray, however, it does us no good to feel in control; prayer is a gift rather than a project. "Lord, teach us to pray," is our prayer before we pray, and it disposes us to pray in the words our Savior gave us, words of sacred tradition.

Saying the Lord's Prayer in other languages, I rediscover its freshness and revelatory power, and overcome the amnesia and agnosia, the deadness that is the work of Babel within me. Praying in foreign languages makes old things new, recalls the dignity and mystery of the act of prayer, and conquers the embarrassment and inhibitions that make me falter when I would say Father, Lord have mercy, glory and praise. Who would have guessed that in Babel one could find such hints of Pentecost?