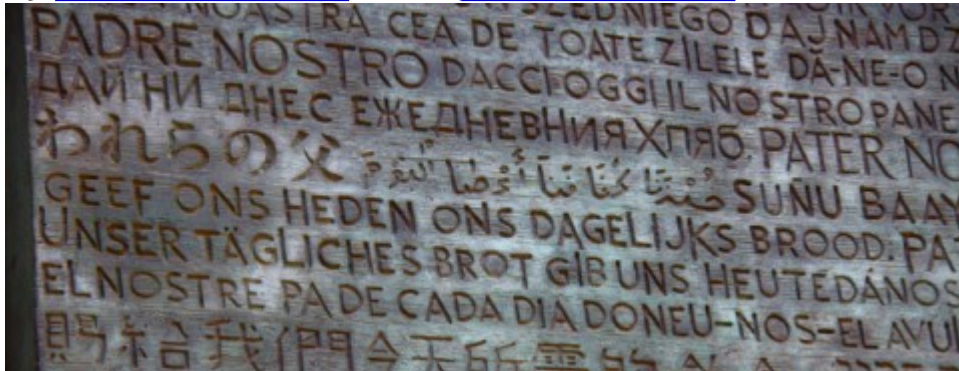


Fluent in God's work

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue



The Lord's Prayer in many languages on a church door in Barcelona, Spain. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Scott SM](#), photo adapted.

A few weeks after moving to Rome, my daughter returned from dinner with classmates and announced that sharing a meal with people from around the world and trying to communicate in each other's languages was life's greatest pleasure. "I want my life to be full of meals like these," she said.

I'm learning a lot from watching my daughter navigate in multiple languages this year. "Ah, the young," a shopkeeper told me as he witnessed how much more at ease my daughter is in Italian than I am. "Their brains are so fresh!"

I recently signed up for an Italian class to try to catch up with her, and it's clear that a fresh brain would be a definite advantage. But there are other qualities needed. Most necessary is a blend of humility and fearlessness, a willingness to risk embarrassment and failure over and over again. The star students of language classrooms are the ones most comfortable making mistakes and most eager to be corrected. They are also having the most fun. One of my classmates, a young priest from the Republic of the Congo who is learning his fifth language, advised me to listen to more Italian music and watch more Italian films. "You have to find pleasure in a language," he told me, "in order for the logic of the language to reveal itself."

Also important is the capacity to remain open and attentive even as meaning slips in and out of our grasp. Learning to understand what someone is saying in another language requires us to bring our minds continually back to the speaker and focus

our attention on something outside ourselves. It's a lot like learning to pray.

Then there's the willingness to let go of our accustomed ways of making meaning with words. My daughter suggested that I stop trying to translate every word into English in my mind. "You've got to let go of English," she told me. "You've got to learn to hear in Italian as well. It's not just English expressed another way. You've got to think differently."

In Rome, language learning feels like a Christian obligation. When Pope Francis opened the Jubilee Year of Mercy a few weeks ago, prayers were offered in Mandarin, Arabic, French, Swahili, and Malayalam. The first lesson was read in Spanish, the second in English, and the gospel in Italian. The Lord's Prayer and the creed were sung in Latin. It's hard to imagine anyone present understanding everything—at some point in the service everyone would have heard the sound of longing, prayer, and praise in an unfamiliar language. The music of those languages made me wonder what new thing I might learn about my own faith if I could understand.

The book of Genesis tells a story about a time when "the whole earth had one language and the same words." But when earth's monoglots began to build a tower to heaven, God divided their one language into many and scattered the people across the face of the earth. A homogenous group piling brick upon brick seems not to be what God had in mind for human beings.

The old desire to build structures that enshrine a single language, a single perspective, is as strong as ever. As unprecedented numbers of refugees flee the most extreme kinds of violence, Donald Trump proposes building a wall at the U.S.-Mexican border and looks back nostalgically at our nation's history of internment camps. As Mohamedou Ould Slahi reports in his *Guantánamo Diary*, prisoners held without charge at Guantánamo Bay have been told that speaking multiple languages is a suspicious gift, one of the "criteria of a top terrorist."

In fact, speaking multiple languages is the mark of a person of faith. On the day of Pentecost, with help from the Holy Spirit, Christ's disciples addressed "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt . . . Libya . . . [and] Rome," each in their own language. From the tower of Babel to Pentecost, the stories of our faith remind us both of God's love of languages in all their diversity and of our call, as God's people,

to learn to communicate across all kinds of boundaries.

Churches have often embraced language teaching as a form of welcome. My mother taught English to refugees from Haiti when I was a child, and my daughter teaches English to refugees from Afghanistan and Liberia. Both were invited into this work by churches for whom it was a ministry.

In these days, both teaching and learning a language can be an act of resistance to walls and prisons and the torture done in our name. What if more churches became known as places where languages were not only taught to those newly arrived in our communities but also learned by those of us who've been here for a while? What if we were more deliberate about lifting up the languages present in our congregations, our country, and our world? Perhaps we'd enter more fully into God's work of retraining the human imagination in openness and attention, humility, and fearlessness, moving us away from our towers and out into the world.