

Foreign languages are some of the hardest subjects for American students. People like the idea of speaking in tongues, but it's just a lot of hard work. I can remember sitting in a French classroom one day, where the teacher spoke only in French, and we had to figure out what was going on. It was very frustrating. And even when I thought things were getting clearer, I kept getting more confused. One day the teacher asked what you call the stuff you suck up with a vacuum cleaner. She wanted the word for "dust", which is *poussière*, but I answered out loud with the word *poulets*, which means "chickens."

Somehow on the first Pentecost the disciples got it right. These people who did not know foreign languages, stepped into the streets of Jerusalem, and people from all over the world understood what they were saying. Most of us lack that gift of the Holy Spirit. A lot of times we can't get people to understand us even when we speak English.

At the time there was already a day on the Jewish calendar called Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks. It started as a springtime festival, when the first crops to be harvested and the first lambs to be born were offered to God. Later it changed to a remembrance of the day God appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai and gave him the law, including the Ten Commandments.

So when Acts of the Apostles says that the disciples had gathered at the time for Pentecost, it means first of all this Jewish celebration. And just as God had appeared to Moses on a mountain in the midst of noise and fire, so now the Holy Spirit was appearing to the disciples in an upper room in the midst of noise and tongues as of fire. The first Pentecost was a second Sinai; the first worked out the old covenant with God's chosen people, and the second worked out the new covenant with God's chosen people. When we celebrate Pentecost, we celebrate God handing us the new law, the law of the Spirit.

The disciples were utterly transformed by this new law. They had been huddled together in an upper room out of fear, but now they were driven out into the world with excitement. They believed in God's mighty deeds, and they had to tell people about them. They believed the miracle that Jesus had risen from the dead, and they bore witness to it by the miracle of speaking in tongues.

The miracle of Pentecost showed that if you are filled with the Holy Spirit, people will understand that no matter what language they speak. Many people are confused about how to do what pleases God. They don't know how to be kind to someone at work. They don't know how to act responsibly when they fall in love. They don't know how to handle anger. But once in a while the Holy Spirit speaks through us in a tongue they can understand. If we put into action the faith that burns like a fire within, we

will speak the right words and do the right things, because the Holy Spirit dwells within us.