

Some years ago I spent a week in Poland with a friend of mine from Detroit who grew up in a Polish-speaking household. We traveled there to visit his extended family and to sightsee. He agreed to translate, but I thought it would be fun to learn a little Polish for the trip. Fun. I discovered that Polish grammar is very complex. I learned enough to know that if as a country they asked me to simplify their language, I could do it for them. (Too many endings.) On a train between Krakow and Cz,stochowa I sat with my grammar book next to a nun who had befriended us. I read in Polish the sentence, "Butter is cheap, but eggs are expensive." She corrected my pronunciation. I tried it again, "Butter is cheap, but eggs are expensive." Then an old man across the aisle lowered his newspaper and said, "No, butter is expensive and eggs are expensive." (Poles have a dark humor.)

Foreign languages are notoriously hard on us Americans. We have a worldwide reputation for not speaking in tongues. As children we learn English by hearing it, but in most households, we don't hear other languages, so we have to study them out of books. One method of teaching music to children, called Suzuki, is based on hearing rather than reading. The theory is that since music is a language, if you imitate what you hear you can pick it up better.

Pentecost Sunday recalls a great miracle of the early church; we call it the day the apostles spoke in tongues. But the Bible doesn't really say they spoke in tongues; it says people heard the speech in their own languages. It was hearing in tongues more than speaking in tongues. If people opened their ears, the Christian message spoke to their hearts no matter where they were from or how they were living.

Learning Jesus is like learning a language; if we listen in tongues we can learn a lot better. In the first Pentecost the Spirit spoke to every nation of the world; in Pentecost today the Spirit speaks to every experience we have. If we listen in tongues, Christ can direct everything we do. As a parish community, we listen to God at our weekly worship, but also in the meetings of our councils and organizations. When we meet as members of the parish, we listen in tongues--each person tries not to convince others about his or her opinion, but to search out with others what is God's opinion for our community. That's our consensus decision-making. If we open our ears, we will hear and speak the foreign language of the Word of God.