

## Universally Speaking

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Though we might not recall perfectly the story, I believe that most of are familiar with the story of the *Tower of Babel*, found in Genesis, chapter 11. As the story goes, the inhabitants of the valley of Shinar, set about to build a city in the heavens to demonstrate their “equality” with God. They wished to be independent of God. Supposedly the greatest asset they had was their common language. God only needed to mix up their languages to halt the construction of their great tower. Among the many theological points of the story, there is also the obvious explanation of the many various languages around the world. For thousands of years, language barriers have been great obstacles between nations. For centuries French served as the “international language” and today English has pretty much taken over that role. Still, there is no single common language, understood by all people. *Or, is there?*

If we were to contrast the stories of the Tower of Babel and the Pentecost, we can easily recognize the reversal of languages. Though the crowds were from all over the Mediterranean area, each speaking a different language, they all heard and understood the disciples as though they, the disciples, were speaking their particular language. What we see in the Babel story is the fragmentation of human society by diversity of language. In the Pentecost story, we see the re-unification of human society through the power of the Holy Spirit, becoming not a city separate of God, but the City of God. Humanity was once again invited to come together as a single people, sharing a common faith in the One God, His Son Jesus who died and rose from the dead that sins would be forgiven. After all the excitement was over and the Parthians, Medes and Elamites went home to Mesopotamia, Judea, etc. they still continued to speak in their native languages. But, they also had a common language of faith.

Even though the world has made great strides to come together under a common language, it is as quickly being pulled apart by a new (not really) language, the language of self-interest. It is not just the terrorists who want to change how the world looks at life, it’s also the Feminists, the Survivalists, the Capitalists, etc. It seems that each group wants to polarize the world to look at life only through their microscope. Thus, we may someday achieve a unified spoken language but we will still not be unified until we become united also in spirit.

It has been the struggle of the Church since its earliest existence to hold and maintain the fragile unity of faith. St. Paul spent a great deal of his letter writing time directing his messages to those who would, otherwise, tear to church apart with different ideologies, regulations and flat out denials. The early Fathers, St. Ignatius of Antioch being one, wrote eloquently on the need for the faithful to be in unity with the church and the bishops. It is still today, one of the greatest difficulties the Church faces, how do we account for diversity and still maintain unity? We all have differing abilities, needs and capabilities of understanding. We all, by virtue of human nature, filter everything through our experiences and “feelings”. These feelings and experiences are going to be as varied as there are people in the world. Where are we going to find common ground?

I would propose that we only need to open our eyes and hearts to understand an ever-present universal language – the face, the body. Look into the eyes of poor and see if you can’t understand the language of despair. Look at a young couple in love, or better yet, an elderly married couple in love, and see if you can’t understand love’s power to endure all things. Look into the face of a child and learn the language of trust. Look about at the joyful, the hurting, the lonely and the jubilant. See if you can’t understand what they are telling you. It is with open eyes, ears and hearts, that we meet Christ and live our faith. It is in responding to the smiles and tears, the fears and terrors that we are really united in faith, speaking the one common language of God.