

PRAYING IN TONGUES

Msgr. Vincent M. Walsh

“All were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to express themselves in foreign tongues and make bold proclamation as the Spirit prompted them. “(Acts 2:4)

INTRODUCTION

When people hear of the Pentecostal Movement, nothing so quickly comes to their minds as “praying in tongues”.

In a real sense, “praying in tongues” has become either an attractive sign or a very difficult obstacle to Charismatic Renewal. For those attending a Charismatic prayer meeting for the first time, the most strikingly new experience is that of hearing the community pray or sing in tongues.

The gift often arouses many fears and touches deep feelings within them. Often, a newcomer can think to himself, “I won’t get that gift” or “I don’t see the value of that gift” or “I just aim at love for that is the highest of the gifts.” These feelings often reflect fears, anxieties or worry about this wonderful manifestation of God’s power.

Others already in the movement, even if already praying in tongues, do not always understand the power involved in this gift and, above all, find difficulty in explaining the gift to others.

A very important distinction is often overlooked between the power to pray in tongues, which seems to be enjoyed by almost everyone, and the charismatic ministry of “speaking in tongues,” which is used only by some mature members of the community.

Hopefully, this section will mean that prayer tongues will no longer be an obstacle to many sincere people who are attracted to Charismatic Renewal. May it help newcomers to understand this gift. Also, may those who already praise God in this way use this gift with deeper power in their life and be better able to explain this manifestation of the Spirit to others. PRAYING IN TONGUES

PRAYING IN TONGUES

A) Understanding the Gift

1. WHAT IS “PRAYING IN TONGUES”?

Praying in tongues is a gift whereby the person prays to God in a language which he does not know, by simply “yielding” to the action of the Spirit.

When “praying in tongues,” the person does not use his rational powers of memory or intellect which are usually employed in speaking or praying. He does use the other faculties associated with speech – the lips, the tongue and the larynx.

2. WHAT DOES “PRAYING IN TONGUES” SOUND LIKE?

Praying in tongues, when first yielded to, usually sounds like five or six words repeated in various ways. This praying in tongues begins and continues as long as the person wills. As time goes on, the prayer tongues usually lengthen or change and, on occasion, a different language is used.

3. WHAT CONTROL DOES THE PERSON HAVE OVER THE GIFT OF “PRAYING IN TONGUES”?

“Praying in tongues” is totally under the person’s control. The person decides when he wishes to pray in tongues and when he wishes to stop. The person, however, has no control over what words will be spoken since, as St. Paul says, “If I pray in a tongue my spirit is at prayer but my mind contributes nothing”

(1 Cor.14:14). The mind has no control over the words used in this prayer.

4. DOES THE GIFT OF PRAYER TONGUES COME AND GO OR IS IT PERMANENT?

The gift is a permanent one, i.e., whenever a person has yielded to the gift, the power to pray in tongues remains with him. After this first yielding, the person then prays in tongues whenever he wishes.

Sometimes, when a person has only recently begun to pray in tongues, fear, self-consciousness, doubts or some other obstacle begins to interfere with the use of this gift. The person even begins to think he has lost his gift. Usually these obstacles are removed by praying with others.

5. WHEN DOES A PERSON BEGIN TO PRAY IN TONGUES?

It can happen anytime. Sometimes a person prays in tongues even before attending a charismatic prayer community. Frequently, a person begins to pray in tongues during the course of instruction provided by the prayer community. Usually, the person begins to pray in tongues when he is prayed with by the community for the Baptism of the Spirit.

This gift usually is the first bestowed by the Holy Spirit and is the doorway to the other gifts.

6. WHY IS PRAYER TONGUES DIFFERENT FROM THE GIFT OF TONGUES AND OTHER CHARISMATIC MINISTRIES?

It is different for the following reasons:

- a) It is meant primarily for the individual's life of prayer.
- b) It can be considered part of the Church's initiation rites.
- c) It seems to be quasi-universal, so that, in general, it can be said that all should be encouraged to yield to prayer tongues.
- d) It usually appears very early in a person's life in the Spirit.

The charismatic ministries, in contrast:

- a) Are meant for the good of others.
- b) Require another infilling of the Spirit beyond that associated with the initiation rites of the Church.
- c) As St. Paul states, are spread throughout the Mystical Body, with different ministries given to each.
- d) Usually begin to emerge when there is some maturity in the life of the Spirit.

In fact, praying in tongues is deliberately treated in this separate section, distinct from the nine charismatic ministries, to specifically set it apart doctrinally from those ministries, with which it is usually grouped and confused.

B) Scriptural Basis for the Gift

7. MOST PEOPLE THINK THAT THE “GIFT OF TONGUES” AT PENTECOST WAS USED BY THE APOSTLES TO TEACH. IS PRAYING IN TONGUES DIFFERENT FROM WHAT THE APOSTLES DID AT PENTECOST?

On the contrary, praying in tongues is what the Apostles really did on the first Pentecost.

Most people do not realize that two distinct manifestations of the Holy Spirit occurred on Pentecost, the first was the gift of prayer tongues and the second was really a “miracle of hearing.”

- a) Acts 2:4 reads: “All were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to express themselves in foreign tongues and make bold proclamation as the Spirit prompted them.” At this point, the gift of tongues was not used to teach, but to praise God, since no one was present to hear.
- b) The second manifestation at Pentecost occurred when the large crowd gathered. “They were much confused because each one heard these men speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:6). This could either have been a “miracle of hearing” or, perhaps, the disciples were speaking in tongues that the bystanders happened to know.

This second manifestation, namely, people hearing the Apostles speaking in their own language, does not occur anywhere else in scripture. However, praying in tongues, that is, Christians praising God in unknown languages, is repeated throughout the New Testament.

8. DID CHRIST EVER SPEAK ABOUT “PRAYING IN TONGUES”?

In Mark 16:17-28, Christ makes the following allusions to tongues: “Signs like these will accompany those who have professed their faith: they will use my name to expel demons, they will speak entirely new languages, they will be able to drink deadly poison without harm, and the sick upon whom they lay their hands will recover.”

Scripture scholars seem to believe that these words reflected the experience of the post- Pentecostal Church rather than a personal teaching of Jesus. The passage, though, is still considered inspired.

9. WHAT OTHERS SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES ARE THERE TO PRAYING IN TONGUES?

The following are the outstanding ones:

- a) The Gentiles pray in tongues (Acts 10:46). "Whom they heard speaking in tongues and glorifying God."
- b) At Ephesus (Acts 19:6): "As Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came down on them and they began to speak in tongues and to utter prophecies."
- c) Some references are made to prayer tongues in 1 Corinthians (14:28), in the instruction on tongues and interpretation: "But if there is no one to interpret, there should be silence in the assembly, each one speaking only to himself and to God."

There are other Scriptural passages which probably refer to praying in tongues, but they are not as explicit as the above.

C) The Gift of Prayer Tongues and Reason

10. DOES NOT THIS PRAYING IN TONGUES OFFEND REASON, SINCE A PERSON SHOULD KNOW WHAT HE IS SAYING?

It is true that this praying in tongues does not have any rational purpose, in the sense of being used to communicate ideas to other minds. It is a prayer and is based on the faith that the religious powers described in the New Testament are still available in our day.

The gift does not offend reason although, like all of God's mysterious actions, it does ask reason to submit itself to a mystery it cannot adequately grasp.

It should also be noted that speech is a very unique faculty – whereby sense organs common to the animal (tongues, lips, etc.) are used for rational activity, i.e., the communication of ideas. It seems fitting that God should 'touch' this unique faculty where mind and matter converge and bestow a powerful sign of His presence.

11. WHEN A PERSON PRAYS IN TONGUES, IS HE ACTUALLY SPEAKING A LANGUAGE?

Concerning this question, the following can be said:

- a) Prayer tongues are not gibberish as some believe, that is, noises unrelated to a language. When someone hears another or himself praying in tongues for the first

time, he usually asks what language it was or says that it sounded like such and such a language. The acoustic experience is the same as hearing a foreign language.

- b) Prayer tongues have all the qualities usually associated with a language – accents, patterns, cadence, etc.
- c) The person praying in tongues has a subjective experience of speaking a language.
- d) It is not necessary for prayer tongues to be actually a language. It is enough for it to be a new way of praying to God, bestowed by the Spirit of God, and to be identified with the praying in tongues as described in Scripture.

Our claim, therefore, is that modern-day “praying in tongues” is the same religious activity described in acts 2:3, 10:46; 19:6; and in 1 Cor. 14.

12. HAS THERE EVER BEEN A TRANSLATION OF THE PRAYING IN TONGUES SO THAT PEOPLE KNEW WHAT WAS BEING SAID?

The following are experiences that have happened within our Philadelphia area:

- a) A Jewish nurse translated the Yiddish prayer of an Irish school teacher.
- b) A Mother Provincial from Ireland, visiting Philadelphia, was skeptical of the Charismatic Movement until she heard an Italian boy praying in Gaelic.
- c) A Greek-rite priest told an Irish layman that his prayer tongue was Greek and was the canon of the Greek-rite Mass.
- d) Two different people in the prayer community prayed in Latin and have had the prayer translated by a priest.
- e) An Italian woman praised God in Polish, translated by a leader in the community.

Practically all prayer communities have had similar experiences. Isolated experiences do not prove, one way or the other, that tongues is “language.” The phenomenon often is that the normal prayer in tongues changed to a known language at that moment for the sake of someone’s faith.

13. DOES THE PERSON UNDERSTAND WHAT HE IS SAYING WHEN “PRAYING IN TONGUES”?

Usually not, unless as mentioned above, someone who knows the language has translated it. Scripture does not give any indication that the disciples “knew” what they were saying. They seemed to have had a general sense that they were praising God. In fact, the later scripture explanation of the gift in Paul’s letters indicates that the person did not know what he was saying. “A man who speaks in a tongue is talking not to men but to God. No one understands him, because he utters mysteries in the Spirit.” (1 Cor. 14:2).

D) The Purpose of Praying in Tongues

14. HOW DOES PRAYING IN TONGUES BENEFIT THE INDIVIDUAL?

Even with years of experience, all of the effects of this gift have not been uncovered. However, the following could be listed:

- a) It helps the individual to fulfill Christ’s command to pray always.
- b) It is an aid to recollection and leads to more fervent mental prayer.
- c) It is the doorway to charismatic ministries – the use of prayer tongues somehow sensitizes the person to yield to other charismatic activity of the Holy Spirit.
- d) It is a personal, concrete sign of God’s action within.
- e) It is a powerful weapon against Satan.
- f) It is an effective means of intercessory prayer, especially when the person does not know exactly for what to pray.

15. IS PRAYING IN TONGUES IMPORTANT FOR THE CHARISMATIC RENEWAL MOVEMENT?

Although praying in tongues is by no means the center of the movement (Christ is), nor is it the most important gift of the Spirit (a prayerful awareness of Christ’s presence is that), still it would be hard to conceive of the dynamism of the movement without prayer tongues. The following would be the roles the gift plays in the movement:

- a) It is a striking “manifestation” of God’s action and leads many people to look into the movement.
- b) It is an integral part of a charismatic prayer meeting.

- c) It helps people to place more faith in the concept of “Baptism of the Holy Spirit,” since prayer tongues is a concrete, external manifestation of God’s action within.

E) Universality of Prayer Tongues

16. DOES EVERYONE IN THE MOVEMENT PRAY IN TONGUES?

Not everyone involved in Charismatic Renewal prays in tongues, although certainly a very high percentage do. Many prayer communities with solid teaching and a favorable attitude toward prayer tongues do have all their members praying in tongues. From experience, it seems that almost everyone can easily be helped to pray in tongues.

Sometimes Pentecostal prayer groups are accused of “overstressing” prayer tongues, but really, through experience, it has been found that the gift is not exceptional but normal and quasi-universal.

17. ARE THERE NOT SOME COMMUNITIES IN WHICH MANY OF THE PEOPLE DO NOT PRAY IN TONGUES?

If this occurs, it is probably due to any of the following reasons:

- a) The community misinterprets St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians and believes that only some are supposed to have “the ability to speak in strange tongues.” Here the community is confusing praying in tongues with the gift of tongues.
- b) The community does not stress the gift nor does it urge its members “to step out in faith.”
- c) The community does not know how to help its members to “yield to tongues.”

F) Yielding to Tongues

18. WHAT IS MEANT BY “HELPING TO YIELD TO TONGUES”?

A practice exists among charismatic groups, especially those which stress the importance of praying in tongues, to help the person who has just been prayed with for the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, to yield to prayer tongues. This is accomplished by having someone who already prays IN tongues pray aloud, with the other person attempting “to imitate” him. What happens is this: By coming out with the first few strange syllables, the person yields to the gift of prayer tongues and discovers himself

praising God in an entirely different language than that of the person who helped him yield to this gift.

19. IF A PERSON HAS NOT “YIELDED TO TONGUES” AT THE TIME OF THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, WHAT SHOULD HE DO?

Usually within each prayer community there is a particular person or a number of people who have the ministry of helping others to “yield to tongues.” They are people in whom these others have great faith, with whom they are relaxed, and who themselves are open to the gifts.

The person who has not yielded to prayer tongues should ask one of these to help him. This ministry is usually accomplished by a prayer over the individual, asking God to remove any psychological barriers that are blocking prayer tongues and to grant a new infilling of the Holy Spirit.

The person performing this ministry then begins to pray in tongues. The person attempting to yield to tongues is told to leave English aside, to leave behind any rational activity of the intellect and memory – and to open his mouth like a little child “imitating” the prayer tongues of the other person.

20. IS NOT THIS A “MECHANICAL” OR “GIMMICK” APPROACH TO A MYSTERIOUS POWER?

Quite the contrary. It is a childlike step whereby the person confounds the wisdom of the world by leaving his natural powers of intellect and memory behind, and steps out in faith.

21. COULD YOU EXPLAIN WHY THIS PROCEDURE IS USED?

God bestows the gift of tongues in many ways, and many do receive this gift without being helped to yield. However, many people do have psychological barriers or just plainly do not know how to yield to this gift.

In bestowing this gift, God does not force a person’s mouth open. The normal procedure is for the person to take the first steps in faith by moving his lips and allowing God to fill it with prayer tongues. This is most easily done in the presence of others who are praying in tongues.

22. CAN A PERSON EVER “LOSE THE GIFT”?

It sometimes happens that a person who has “yielded to tongues” will come up the next day and say that he has “lost the gift.” It is much like the little child who rides a bike and later says he “forgot how to do it.”

If this happens, the person should be helped again to yield. He should also be encouraged to pray frequently in tongues so that he gains confidence in using the gift.

G) Reasons for Renewal of This Gift

23. WHY HAS IT NOT BEEN UNTIL RECENTLY (1900 WITH ORIGINAL PENTECOSTALS AND SINCE 1967 WITH CATHOLIC PENTECOSTALS) THAT THE PRAYING IN TONGUES HAS BECOME APPARENT AND WIDESPREAD?

The widespread renewal of praying in tongues is due mainly to two factors.

First, more people, especially among the educated, have accepted “praying in tongues” as a real spiritual power. Formerly it was thought of as “gibberish” or the result of emotionalism. It was sometimes even seen as a result of demonic activity. Now, however, it is accepted among educated people and can no longer be pushed aside. Obviously, before this gift could become widespread, the skepticism and disbelief had to be dispelled.

Secondly, the experience gained by charismatic communities in helping people to yield to this gift has been instrumental in bringing about its abundant presence. For most people, praying in tongues is one of the effects of participation in a Charismatic community. Without the teaching, practical and theoretical, which is available in the prayer communities, this gift could never have been so widespread.

25. DID NOT SOME WRITERS THINK OF PRAYING IN TONGUE AS “ECSTATIC UTTERANCE”?

Many are still under that impression. In the past, theologians clearly admitted that the charismatic gift of prayer tongues was present in the Early Church. However, they associated it with the mystical experiences of the saints, whereby under a transitory divine “touch”, the person would find himself uttering unknown words to try to express his delight in the experience. All of these writers, however, were denied the actual experience of prayer tongues.

Now that praying in tongues is widespread, it is obvious that the theological explanation was wrong and that praying in tongues is not the transitory expression of an ecstatic experience but a permanent power meant to be given abundantly to many.

H) Difference between Prayer Tongues and the Gift of Tongues

26. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “PRAYER TONGUES” AND THE “GIFT OF TONGUES”?

Praying in tongues is a permanent ability given to a person as an outward manifestation of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, whereby the person, at any time, can pray to God in a language which he does not know and which is not the result of his intellectual powers.

The gift of tongues is a passing manifestation of the Holy Spirit whereby an individual is prompted to “give a message in tongues,” i.e., speak aloud, by himself, usually at a prayer meeting. As mentioned, this manifestation should be followed by the charismatic gift of interpretation. The gift of tongues followed by interpretation is very close to prophecy.

27. IS THIS DISTINCTION FREQUENTLY OVERLOOKED?

Yes, and this causes some problems, especially in trying to explain the Pentecostal Movement to others and to newcomers. Most people seem to be aware of St. Paul’s admonition, “If any are going to talk in tongues let it be at most two or three, each in turn, with another to interpret what they are saying”. (1 Cor. 14:27).

They are also aware of Paul’s words in 1 Cor. 12:10, “One receives the gift of tongues”, and do not realize that the ministry of tongues which is given only to some is different than praying in tongues which seems to be offered to all.

28. DURING THE COURSE OF A CATHOLIC CHARISMATIC PRAYER MEETING, ARE THERE NOT TIMES WHEN EVERYONE DOES START PRAYING IN STRANGE TONGUES TOGETHER?

Yes, and this is not against St. Paul’s admonition that the gift of tongues should be used in turn, because praying in tongues and giving a message in tongues are two distinct charismatic manifestations. What really occurs is not many giving a message in tongues at once but the “collective use of prayer tongues”, that is, the community begins to praise God out loud, with those who pray in tongues using that gift to praise God. Anyone who have heard and/or participated in this form of praying or singing usually experiences a deep sense of peace and the presence of Christ.

29. WHAT IS “SINGING IN PRAYER TONGUES”?

As the community begins to praise God aloud in prayer tongues, it begins to sense that it would be even more beautiful to sing God's praises. One by one the members go from "praying in tongues" to "singing in tongues." At this point, the Hoy Spirit leads the group into harmony and the individual finds himself being led to sing with the others on a given note. (Any musician could probably chart the singing on a scale.) Another impressive phenomenon about both praying and singing in tongues is that the entire community is led to stop almost simultaneously.

30. WHAT IS MEANT BY SAYING THAT "PRAYER TONGUES" IS A SIGN OF CHRIST'S SPIRIT?

It is so designated because the gift of "prayer tongues" did not appear until Pentecost Day. There were many manifestations of God's power and activity in the Old Testament. There were healings, miracles, people raised from the dead, etc. These same manifestations were also evident in Christ's life.

However, the phenomena of people "praying in tongues" is first recorded at Pentecost, and was a clear sign of the gift of the Spirit promised by Christ.

31. WAS NOT "PRAYING IN TONGUES" IMPORTANT IN THE CONVERSION OF THE GENTILES?

This role of "being a sign of Christ's Spirit" was extremely important in the conversion of the Gentiles. Only with great reluctance did Peter go to Cornelius in the first place and only after the vision recorded in Acts, Chapter 10. During his sermon to Cornelius's family, the Holy Spirit descended on them and they began to pray in tongues.

"The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were surprised that the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, whom they could hear speaking in tongues and glorifying God" (Acts 10:45-46).

This praying in tongues was seen as proof that they had received the same Spirit of Christ as the disciples on Pentecost. Peter than went far beyond the original intention of his visit and accepted these Gentiles for sacramental baptism.

"Peter put the question at that point, 'What can stop these people who have received the Holy Spirit, even as we have, from being baptized with water?' So he gave orders that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. After this was done, they asked him to stay with them for a few days" (Acts 10:47-48).