

2020 - Issue One

Many Tongues, One Spirit: How Language is Natively Catholic

ERIK VAN VERSEDAAL

“And they were amazed and wondered, saying, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?’” (Acts 2:7-8).

The miracle that accompanies the sending of the promised Spirit of truth (Jn 16:13) signifies and inaugurates the Church’s universal mission to co-accomplish the Father’s purpose of joining all things together in the Son (Eph 1:10). On hearing the inspired disciples, those assembled in Jerusalem to observe Pentecost, among them Parthians and Egyptians and Romans, can each confess, “we hear them telling *in our own tongues* the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). Remarkably, the descended Counselor neither infuses the hearers with facility in St. Peter’s rustic Aramaic, the Lord’s own mother-tongue, nor unites all the crowd in a new vernacular hitherto unspoken by man. Instead, he pleases to safeguard all the diverse languages of the earth when he comes to build these pilgrims up “like living stones” into his own temple on the foundation which is Christ (1 Pt 2:5; 1 Cor 3:11, 16). But when in remembering this event we cast an eye back to Scripture’s other monumental building, the Tower Nimrod laid in his monstrous project to bridge the ever-greater abyss between God and man, we might ask why the Holy Spirit would employ, rather than bypass or abolish, a mark of division in the human family as his elected means of establishing our new unity with God and with one another. Is linguistic variety not a remnant of the judgment that cast down, confused, and scattered that presumptuous people who sought to make a name for themselves, to divinize themselves, with their all-assimilating skyscraper in the land of Shinar? Shouldn’t salvation undo that punishment, that primordial diaspora, which to this day alienates one nation from its neighbor? Or might it be that this punishment was a saving grace *for the very reason* that the plurality of languages is rooted in nature, and is thus available for being sanctified and everlastingly preserved?

The goodness of linguistic difference seems at first too obvious to warrant vindication. We are inclined to affirm it without hesitation, perhaps because it is a fact of life, or because we are accustomed by regnant opinion to praise any distinguishing trait as an assertion of self-willed dignity: sheer difference as indifferent to any end. Perhaps, more thoughtfully, we recognize that each language bears within itself the memory and character of the people born into its cadences and grammar and idioms, and so cannot be uprooted without harm to that people’s way of being. But why wouldn’t participating in the same culture and so invoking the same lexicon not be the needful guarantee of universal fraternity? What interest could the Church have in protecting and promoting the tongues of the nations?

In a stimulating and weighty essay, “Babylonian Transcendence: The One Logos and the Many

Languages,” the late Catholic philosopher Ferdinand Ulrich plumbed this theme with a meditation both Biblical in outlook and ontological in method.[1] These present remarks, far from a sufficient account of Ulrich’s text, merely take their bearings from the insights he offers there. Those who had the privilege to converse with Professor Ulrich in person attest that he himself had a wondrous gift both for finding himself at home in languages other than his own and for making space to welcome strangers into his native German. He demonstrated by his living example how the boundaries between languages can at once be perfectly opened and perfectly upheld with a hospitality animated by charity.

The Polyphony of All Flesh

To begin, let us take for granted the guileless standpoint that any given noun refers and really attains to the nature it names. Any single language’s vocabulary thus reflects the kinds of things that are or could be, their characteristic properties and works, and the tiers of interdependent relationships among them. Each language is copious because the world itself is plentiful. But why such a quantity of beings at all? According to Aquinas, the universe could not be an epiphany of divine goodness were only a single created essence, however noble, brought into existence.[2] No finite nature, nor even any number of natures, could capture the measure of God’s perfection. Yet only an abundantly-varied and mutually-coordinated multiplicity of essences befits the inexhaustible fecundity of being, that primordial gift which God freely delivers for the sake of freeing each thing to be itself together with all others. We recognize how God’s triune causality is thoroughly generous already in the unity-in-diversity of creation, to which the unity-in-diversity of each language responds and corresponds.

We can only hold that human language is faithful to that which it names if the mind is originally disposed toward receiving things as they are. Were it not the case that the speaker’s mind genuinely has access to the radical depth of that which he knows—i.e., its form—language would be nothing more than a superficial contrivance for forcefully systematizing anarchic experience. Yet the first reason why persons can grasp any nature is that the intellect always belongs in intimate contact with, or is pervasively illuminated by the radiance of, that same gift of being by which each and every essence is actualized. No nature is sheerly opaque even to human reason, and, since saying a thing truly follows upon knowing it, no nature is finally resistant to being named. This “connatural” communion between mind and being means there is an inclination in things to be gathered up in the human word that is met by man’s own unbounded desire to know and to give voice to what he knows. Notice how affirming the mind’s universal power to conceive what is, far from a hubristic posture, relieves the suspicion that naming is but a fictive act of violence. For if it falls to man to utter that which he perceives, he can only do so by first obediently and gratefully consenting to the thing’s own veritable self-revelation. Only such humility before reality, moreover, lets me trust that you behold and understand the same things I do, that the words we exchange mean for both of us what they mean for each of us.

If man can name whatever exists by virtue of knowing it as it is, and if each being has but one nature, why would he ever pronounce more than a single word to signify a given thing? Form is not the sole principle of diversity in creation. Each corporeal substance also presents itself by means of its matter, through the distinctive harmony of its complex, changing surface. On Ulrich’s view, the many-faceted body of created things is neither a brute fact nor an absurd happenstance, but the extreme seal of the gratuity with which God releases being into its generative fullness. Each thing’s *kenosis* into the moving, growing differentiation of its members is no fragmenting fall, but the rightful course along which it lovingly perfects its own God-beloved goodness, and so represents in action the creative bestowal upon which it continually depends. What has this to do with language? While the concept *is* the very form of the thing as apprehended by the intellect, the human person, as embodied spirit, comes to understand essences only on the basis of his sensory experience of concrete wholes in their

self-becoming. When he gives voice to his understanding with his tongue and breath, his idea, which Aquinas after Augustine referred to as the “inner word” or “the word of the heart,” undergoes what we could call an incarnation.[3] This audible enunciation of the known form reflects the manifold material exteriority of the named thing in a different mode. Man not only intimately bears the form of a material thing in spirit, but embraces it as a whole, and with the whole of himself, by vocalizing its name in the flesh. There is an analogy between an individual corporeal substance that rightly manifests its nature in its unique body and the unique pattern of syllables through which an individual spoken word expresses its meaning. Each spoken, written, or remembered human word can only indicate a universal hylomorphically—that is, from within the proper limits of the language in which it has its place. Such boundaries are no hindrance to expression, then, but instead make expression, and even understanding, possible in the first place. Indeed, a word that sought to represent a body’s numerous determinate aspects exhaustively would be too idiosyncratic to signify anything (witness the thunderclap that opens James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*). Yet something of matter’s exuberant diversity is echoed when a given substance is articulated in numerous concrete languages.

True to Mystery

Even as the word’s communication transcends the transmission of physical stimuli, its sound or script is deeper than an indifferent cipher for an idea that could be relayed by any other vehicle. If any human word is appropriately circumscribed, why does *this* particular ordering of vowels and syllables denote the thing it does? Consider how a word’s very sound can evoke the meaning it signifies—perhaps all words are onomatopoeic at root. The assignation of *this* word to *this* thing is more than arbitrary. At its best, it is aesthetically apt: the formulated sound could always be otherwise, but is just right as is—it rings true. This versatile convenience of the spoken word’s “body” again recalls the gratuity of being that saturates and is refracted throughout the overflowing variety of the material realm. Naming is always foremost a poetic act insofar as man’s response to real things calls for a kind of creative finesse in finding the right phonic pattern to suit the substance it means to express.

The fittingness of linguistic diversity is bound up, then, with the positive elasticity of matter and with matter’s docile correspondence to form. But why does each language have its own word even for spiritual realities that stand above matter’s fluidity? When Dante meets Adam in *Paradiso*, our first father explains to the pilgrim how and why man’s appellations for God shifted and transformed down the ages:

That man has language is the work of Nature,

But that his language should be thus or so,

She leaves to you to choose it as you wish.

Before I went to banishment below

I was the name on earth for the high Good

That now has clothed me in the robe of joy;

And then they called it *El*—right that they should,

For mortal use is like a branch’s leaves:

Where one may fall, another springs to bud.[4]

Adam hands down to his descendant how linguistic development is akin to organic metamorphosis. Each body of language belongs to a time-bound culture, and both reflects and mediates that culture's own manner of abiding in the world. A given people's speech grows out of and is colored by the place in which they dwell and by the kind of life this locale calls forth from them. This makes sense of the common experience that one thinks and even perceives differently when inhabiting a foreign language. Even the name by which a people understands and addresses the divine is affected by their incarnation in a unique setting and by their habits of being there. Yet human language shows its materiality not only in being unique in every case, but also in transforming as one generation passes into the next. We find recorded in the etymological connections across language-trees something of the genealogy of that cultural differentiation that comes along with being naturally embodied, but also the radical unity that abides this branching. Every human language is carried forward as a tradition, and all these unfolding traditions look back together to a common, generous "nativity."

Adam's discourse on the various titles man has used to invoke God since Eden calls to mind the "divine names" theme prevalent in classical and medieval thought. Associated above all with its most magisterial representative, Dionysius the Areopagite, this teaching holds that we say God in many ways because he absolutely transcends our power to conceptualize and hence to verbalize him. Our analogous naming of God magnifies him, therefore, by confessing him as the infinitely-excellent cause of all perfections we know in the finite order. Might this endless outpouring of names by which each people gives thanks to the Creator shed further light on why difference among human languages is fitting? Explaining a sense of mystery as super-abounding truth, Josef Pieper writes: "St. Thomas does not hold the thesis that neither God nor things are knowable. On the contrary, they are so utterly knowable that we can never come to the end of our endeavors to know them. It is precisely their knowability that is inexhaustible." [5]

Each created thing bearing its own one nature can be spoken in many tongues not only because the principle of matter positively produces such variety, but, most basically, because there is an ontological richness to each thing that by forever exceeding our utterance, forever elicits it anew. If, as Ulrich is always fond of recalling, being is "the likeness of divine love" (Aquinas), this super-comprehensible fullness that belongs to each thing's singular act of existence is the stamp of the Creator who sends being and remains causally present in his gift. The languages in concert interpretatively unfold each creature's God-bestowed, God-like inexhaustibility.

Logos is Common (Heraclitus)

Man vocalizes his understanding in speech because his intellect generously depends on his senses, but, still more obviously, he does so to share this understanding with his neighbor. Beyond humanly bringing the world to light, speech is at the service of uniting you and me in a common grasp and embrace of reality, and indeed in our mutual *recognition* that we grasp and embrace reality together. Human knowing has its natural locus in dialogue. Because we are embodied, we generate, and so are sheltered in a family, race, and species of which there are many members. We are constituted socially, rightly desire to dwell in community, and seek to impart our understanding to one another in speech and to enter more deeply into things through the mediation of one other's words. Human language thus reveals the communal character of personal intelligence and how it is oriented to the reciprocal presence of friends in the flesh. Learning one's mother-tongue at home is itself an initiation into knowing reality through dialogue, fitting because all knowledge, above all of God, is a mode of conversation, and thereby of mutual indwelling. Yet if meaningful speech is what allows me to be interiorly present to you and you to me, why, again, should I want you to have a native language other than my own?

Sharing a single language is undoubtedly the primary natural mode of social relation. However, each human language is universally hospitable to any human speaker. Man is so constituted that he can be admitted into any other concrete language, so that speaking a second language grants a heightened experience of the native intimacy each person shares with every other. The joy of living out this ontological intimacy as a person consists precisely in learning to see and, yes, to speak like the unique stranger whom I discover to be my neighbor, my kin. “In loving conversation each hears the other in his very own language, and each so speaks in his own proper language that he has entered into that of the other and is heard in the other’s language.”[6] Participation in the foreigner’s experience and understanding through sharing his language—a possibility rooted in being’s generous availability to every mind—presents an especially vivid image of the fellowship of each with all that is the Father’s coming kingdom of charity.

The Babel-ian temptation is to render the face-to-face hospitality involved in bringing a guest into one’s own language superfluous through neutralizing the need for patient listening in order to inhabit another’s speech, and through suppressing dependence on the interlocutor’s receptivity in order to be heard. Whether this nullification of linguistic (dialogical) difference takes the form of instructional programs, economic policies, or technological interference, the temptation haunts us still—often enough under the banner of difference. Rightly glimpsing that no people is made to be alone, the latter-day Nimrod nevertheless refuses to accept that each culture is porous to living exchange with every other only through remaining itself. Fearing that works alone suffice for salvation, he seeks to solve the problem of human division lovelessly, devising a formally-unifying framework that actually entrenches each of its subjects all the more inescapably in the despair of ever reaching his neighbor. So doing, he effectively rejects our incarnate existence, wearing thereby the sign of the anti-Christ (*cf.* 1 Jn 4:3). On Pentecost, meanwhile, the Roman heard the Galilean’s Aramaic *as* Latin. “The languages no longer exclude one another, but each opens *into itself* for the other by virtue of the Spirit of truth and love that breathes within it. In the Pneuma of the *one* Word each language has room *in itself* (not beside itself) for the other languages.”[7] As the Spirit was shed abroad in their hearts, speaker and hearer were united through the Logos in an exchange of enkindled charity, and yet, marvelous to say, each one’s tongue remained inviolately unconsumed.

Erik van Versendaal received his PhD from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute (Washington, D.C.) and is a Philosophy Tutor at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts.

[1] “Die Babylonische Transzendenz: Der Eine Logos und die Vielen Sprachen” in Ferdinand Ulrich, *Logo-Tokos: Der Mensch und das Wort* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 2003), 351–505.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, 72.

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q.34, a.1.

[4] Dante Alighieri, *Paradise*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Random House, Inc., 2005), 285 (Canto XXVI.130–138). In his note on the passage, found on p. 473 of the volume, Esolen comments: “To wish to speak a never-changing language is to wish not to be an embodied being but a god.”

[5] Josef Pieper, *Guide to St. Thomas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 160.

[6] Ferdinand Ulrich, *Logo-Tokos*, 371-372. Faithful translation, countenancing and delighting in every term or turn of phrase that resists translation, is thus more truly a “labor of love” than is typically acknowledged.

[7] *Ibid.*, 488.

