

PRAYING AND SPEAKING IN TONGUES ©

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A newcomer to a prayer meeting is often intrigued to hear, from time to time, one person – or the whole group – beginning to pray or sing in tongues. His first impression is one of uneasiness prompted by this spontaneous verbal expression, in which syllables succeed one another, forming phrases that are unintelligible. It is important to understand ‘glossalalia’, neither minimizing nor exaggerating the importance of this mode of prayer. It is not a miracle; it is not pathological.

Not a Miracle

Charismatics of many denominations, but especially classical Pentecostals, consider glossalalia as the indisputable sign that one has received the ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit’. And they also hold that it is an infused gift enabling someone to pray in a real language which he himself does not understand. This we cannot accept. I have already shown how such a viewpoint is incompatible with Catholic theology. But we do not exclude the possibility that in certain rare cases it has happened, for we believe in miracles, and such a phenomenon would pertain to the order of “the miraculous”. Yet, I surmise that this would be truly exceptional, and we should avoid any kind of “sensationalism”. According to my understanding the phenomenon of “speaking in tongues” has nothing to do with the infusion of a mysterious language by heavenly decree. Its significance is totally different.

Not Pathological

At the other extreme, we find people, especially those who are to some degree familiar with psychiatry, shrugging their shoulders speaking of pathological conditions: emotionalism, mass hysteria, infantile regression, etc. This is not the view of solid scientific investigation, nor is it that of one of the most qualified men in this field, William J. Samarin, professor of anthropology and linguistics at the University of Toronto. Professor Samarin concludes a long, extended study, conducted in many countries, by declaring that this phenomenon contains nothing abnormal nor pathological, and he offers proofs.¹

If praying in tongues is, then, neither miraculous nor pathological, how are we to assess it?

What then is Glossalalia?

We should first recognize that we are dealing with something that is referred to in the Scriptures: there are, indeed, about thirty allusions to praying in tongues. In the New Testament, we have the witness of Acts (2,4-11; 10,46; 19,6), the letters of St. Paul (1 Cor. 12,30; 13,1; 14,2,39), and also the promise of Jesus in the Gospel of St. Mark (16,7). There are undoubtedly exegetical problems, but this should not blind us to the simple fact that the New Testament speaks of this phenomenon as real and relatively frequent. St. Paul says that this ‘gift’ is the least important in the hierarchy of gifts; he also says that he possesses it himself and wishes it for others, though he stresses that, in public worship, moderation must always be respected. We cannot say then, that there is no biblical evidence for the existence of this

¹ William J. SAMARIN, *Tongues of Men and Angels* (New York, 1972).

gift. It is also found in the living tradition of the Church, widely diffused at the beginning and then, to a more limited degree, in monasteries and in the lives of saints

I would like to contribute here some personal reflections, which claim to be neither definitive nor exhaustive.

We should note at the outset that, in virtue of baptism, every Christian has received the Holy Spirit and thus, potentially, all the gifts of the Spirit. The visible manifestation of a gift, its active exercise, reveals its presence but it does not create the gift. A fundamentalistic reading of the New Testament might induce one to treat these gifts of God as ‘objects’, something exterior to ourselves. The importance of speaking in tongues is not minimized if we situate it on a natural plane, which can assume a supernatural character through the intention which animates it. Further, we should remember that everything, in a sense, is a gift: ‘everything is grace’.

This form of non-discursive prayer – a preconceptual expression of spontaneous prayer – is within the reach of everybody and remains always under control. It is verbal expression independent of any specific linguistic structure. This manner of expression, known to other civilizations, is less a stranger to ourselves than is supposed. Think, in the Gregorian chant of jubilation inherent in the prolonged ‘A’ sound at the end of the Alleluia’s. Think too, of how a little child, before having learned to speak coherently, adopts spontaneously these varied sounds and unintelligible syllables to express his joy.

Someone has said that praying in tongues is in relation to discursive prayer, as is abstract art to figurative art; the comparison, I think, throws some light.

The gift of tongues has also been compared to the gift of tears. Anyone who feels strong emotion is able to cry; actors can shed tears whenever the scripts calls for them. This is natural. But there is also a gift of tears, recognized by a spiritual tradition, that goes far back in time. Moreover, in the Ritual, there is a prayer for this gift. It is a profound religious experience in which one gives expression to the inexpressible, when moved by a sense of compunction, adoration or gratitude before God. These tears, if we analyse them, are no different from others, but their religious significance goes far beyond the physical phenomenon. The analogy with tongues is appropriate.

RELIGIOUS VALUE OF PRAYING IN TONGUES

Why pray in Tongues?

Having tried to see in perspective this mode of religious expression, we should attempt some evaluation of its spiritual value. There are numerous testimonies – and I would join my own to them – which witness to the fact that this mode of prayer brings a freedom from spiritually inhibiting bonds, which block our relationship with God and with our fellowmen and makes us find a whole new sense of liberation.

If, at the outset, a person accepts this act of humility – the risk of appearing foolish and childish – he soon discovers the joy of praying in a way that transcends words and human reasoning, bringing great peace and an openness to spiritual communication with others.

Nor are other forms of prayer excluded. Moreover, it can be practiced alone or in a group. When, in a prayer meeting, it takes the form of an improvised chant in tongues, it can assume, in musical terms, a rare beauty as well as a religious depth by which no one who listens without prejudice can fail to be impressed.

If St. Paul treats this gift as the least of all – though he used it himself – might this not be because it is, in a sense, a way that leads to the other gifts, a small doorway as it were, which can only be entered by stooping: like the door into the Church of the Nativity at

Bethlehem? Humility and a childlike spirit characterize the Kingdom of God: “*If you do not become as little children...*” We know this saying of Jesus, and it has considerable relevance here. The gift of tongues, which has nothing to do with the intellect, makes a breach in the ‘reserve’ we assume as a system of defence. It helps us cross a threshold and, in doing so, attain a new freedom in our surrender to God. This surrender hands over body and soul to the action of the Holy Spirit. It is only a first step by which we learn how to yield to the other gifts, but nonetheless it is precious because it gives expression, in its own way, to the inner freedom of the children of God.

Karl Barth once defined glossalalia as an attempt to express the inexpressible, and St. Paul says that “*the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words*” (Rom. 8, 26). It is to this mysterious, inarticulate prayer of the Spirit that we unite ourselves, leaving to the Holy Spirit the role of glorifying God and giving thanks for a love ‘which is beyond all knowledge’ (Eph. 3,19). In psychological terms, we could say that it is the voice of the subconscious rising to God, finding a manner of praying which is analogous to other expressions of our subconscious in dreams, laughter, tears, painting or dance. This prayer within the depths of our being heals at a profound yet often perceptible level hidden psychological wounds that impede the full development of our interior life.

Let us admit it: we are terribly complicated when it comes to giving outward expression to our deep religious feelings before God or in front of others. Even priests and religious know at what cost they reveal themselves at any spiritual depth to those with whom they live, and how often community life is little more than a superficial juxtaposition of individual lives. We have been ossified by formalism and ritualism. Our liturgical gatherings have only begun to awaken to the meaning of communal liturgy after centuries of passivity. But though a thaw has set in, we have yet to experience the warmth and enthusiasm that should characterize our liturgical celebrations in community. Pope Paul VI has warned us against routine in prayer and the misuse of ready-made formulas.

At this very time, we are awakening to new dimensions of bodily expression and communication with one another. There is growing interest too in ways of life and prayer that derive from oriental philosophies, and in the practices of non-Europeans who are less rigid than ourselves. Our young people naturally gravitate in this direction.

We should not be surprised then to see this revival of a practice which is in no way foreign to our authentic religious tradition. When someone has once experienced this freedom in expressing deep-down spiritual feelings, he senses the need to share with others what he feels. It seems quite natural and helpful that we should be able to praise, adore, glorify and love God with all the means at our disposal – using all the strings of our harp. Among these means, the gift of tongues for those who have grasped its significance, is an integral factor.

Speaking in tongues thus conceived is spiritual enrichment; far from being an archaism, it is a factor of renewal on more than one level: that is why I do not hesitate to count it among the fruits of grace.

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