

Pentecost 2021

Here at St. Cronan, American English is our common language. In today's liturgy, we have a long-standing custom of having parts of the first reading proclaimed in other languages that some members of the congregation know: American Sign Language, Czech, French, German, Italian, Spanish. Once in a while, the Gloria may have a refrain in Latin, or we may even have a Greek Kyrie in the penitential rite. And of course, many years ago, the whole liturgy was in Latin, while the congregation paged through Missals that might have been translations but, to be honest, were often pious time-fillers.

How does language matter? Have you ever wondered what it would be like to suddenly understand something said or preached in a language unfamiliar to you? Would that not be startling?

A very long time ago, a couple of years after college, I embarked on a Eurail journey through Italy, Switzerland and France. I had been saving my money for the adventure, but then felt embarrassed that I had the means to do it. I was part of the NY Catholic Worker in those days, and somehow Dorothy Day heard about my self-inflicted scruples. When she saw me, she said, "Don't be an idiot. If you can go to Europe, go!" But she made me promise to bring something by Dostoevsky and to read it along the way; for me, that was *The Brothers Karamazov*.

It was a journey I've never forgotten: wandering Rome for a week or so, my first visit to Assisi, up to Florence, several stops in Switzerland including the Abbey of Einsiedeln, arriving at 1 or 2 in the morning at the train's last stop, the station in Lyon. As was the custom for people in their 20s on a Eurail trip, I was used to sleeping in the train, but this time I was left on a platform with nothing leaving the station until dawn. So I slumped on my backpack and made the best of it.

Somewhere around 5 or 6 in the morning, I heard the announcement on the loudspeakers for the next train to Paris. I got up, organized myself, and headed to the indicated platform. It was in that not-quite-awake state that I suddenly realized that the announcement had been entirely in French, and I understood every word without even thinking. Yes, of course I had studied French in school, but I never expected to awaken in a francophone environment and actually comprehend. No, it wasn't a miracle either. It still took me a while to actually manage speaking and understanding in real life, but that moment was still astonishing.

All those Jews gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast didn't know each others' languages, and one can imagine the comic and frustrating moments there must have been just trying to buy daily food. But suddenly the loudspeakers told them where to get the next train for Paris, and they understood without even thinking – and without having studied it in high school or college – and their lives were never the same.

Bill Barrett