

# The Gift of Tongues

## INTRODUCTION

I would like to start by telling you a little about myself, and the reason is not to make myself look good, but to give glory to God. In the words of St Paul, if I boast, I boast in the Lord – because absolutely none of this would be possible without the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit.

As well as being on the Core Team here at Alton Day of Renewal, I have led the charismatic prayer group in the parish of St Joan of Arc Farnham for 25 years (or actually the Holy Spirit leads it when I give him a chance, and I try and coordinate.) With the prayer group I have run Life in the Spirit seminars many times, the Alpha course many times, numerous Café courses and other courses over the years; two parish missions; various prayer services and over the last year or so monthly healing services. I have also served on the Parish pastoral team including two terms as chairman; I'm an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion; I help with music ministry both here at ADoRE and in my own Parish; and my wife Jenny and I serve on the prayer ministry team at the Catholic Miracle Rally and the Southampton Celebrate Conference.

As I say, none of this would be possible in my own strength, and I give all the glory to God, who touched me in a very powerful way about 34 years ago when I invited Jesus to be Lord of my life.

I have learned – and I'm still learning – to trust God. And I'm trusting Him to speak through my inadequate words this afternoon. It's no false modesty to say I really wish it could be John Vaughan-Neil giving this talk and not me. I've known John for about 25 years ever since the first Life in the Spirit Seminars in Farnham in about 1991/2 because we used his seminar Sons and Daughters of the Living God and he was very helpful in guiding me in how to run the course. He then came and gave all the brilliant talks on the Holy Spirit away day. I recorded them all on cassette tape and listened to them over and over. So, although you are not getting John today, I'm sort of a disciple of his!

And I freely own up to having based much of this talk on John's book "*A Practical Guide to the Gift of Tongues*" available from [www.goodnewsbooks.net](http://www.goodnewsbooks.net) which I strongly recommend you obtain, to flesh out this talk and to answer many of the questions that we don't have time to cover today. The information about the history of the gift in the Church is adapted from *Sounds of Wonder: 20 Centuries of Praying in Tongues and Lively Worship in the Catholic Tradition* by Deacon Eddie Ensley available new from [Franciscan University of Steubenville](http://Franciscan University of Steubenville). (or used from Amazon etc.)

## GIFT OF TONGUES

Here is a short selection of misprints found in church bulletins, caused I suspect by those annoying predictive text spellcheckers which seem to know better than you do what you are trying to say!

- Please sign up on the information sheep
- We offer you a worm welcome
- Church welcomers must stay at the door to eat latecomers.

Words can be very helpful – even powerful - when you get them right, but unhelpful or confusing when you get them wrong. But also words can be quite limiting; if you are faced for example with trying to describe something really extraordinary or unusual, then unless you are gifted poet or writer, you can soon run out of adequate words. And even more so if you are trying to praise God or pray in accordance with His will.

How wonderful it would be if we could always find the right words to say when praying to God, who - like the perfect predictive text device – always knows better than we do what we are trying to say! And of course that's exactly what the gift of tongues (or praying in the Spirit) is essentially about.

## The Gift of Tongues

St Paul tells us in Romans 8 “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but *the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans*. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.” (Prayer )

**So the gift of tongues is the Holy Spirit praying through us in accordance with God’s will.**

Tongues is probably the gift which baffles people the most. Healing, prophecy, wisdom, even miracles we can quite readily see the need for. But, as someone said to me recently "I just can't get my head around the gift of tongues." and I think that is the heart of the problem - we try to understand it from a worldly perspective with our rational minds rather than from a spiritual perspective. But like most of the truths of our faith, that approach will only take us so far...

Think about the incarnation, the virgin birth, the resurrection, the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, eternal life.... it's not particularly easy to get our heads around them without faith and without the help of the Holy Spirit. It's the same with tongues: we can learn *about* the gift and there then comes a point where we have to just trust that God does actually know what He is about. We need to say: "ok Lord, your ways are not my ways, but if you are offering me a gift which you think is going to help, who am I to refuse?

So I'm going to start by telling you some basics about the gift, then we're going to hear some testimonies about people's experiences, then we will pray for the gift to be released or strengthened, if you want. The Holy Spirit never forces anything.

By the way, I realise there are probably four different groups of people here:

- Those who are using the gift regularly,
- Those who use it occasionally or did in the past but not now,
- Those who are intrigued but have not yet used the gift,
- And those who are not at all keen or clear what it's all about.

Let me reassure you, I have been in each one of those categories at different times! But I'm so glad I persevered from being baffled and suspicious, to being curious, to yielding to the gift, although not on a regular basis, finally to relying on it and finding it a real help in developing other spiritual gifts.

Let's look at the basic facts.

### 1. Scripture

The gift of tongues is something Jesus spoke about:

**Mark 16** <sup>15</sup> *He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation....* <sup>17</sup> *And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues;*

Paul tells us in Romans 8 “*the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.*

And in Ephesians 6:18: “*pray in the Spirit (i.e. in tongues) on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.*”

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As St Paul says in 1 Cor 14:2 *"one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God"*. The Spirit speaks through us – sharing our heart with God's heart.

One description of the gift of tongues is 'it's your soul speaking directly to God'.

So praying in words that you don't understand is a way of saying: "God I trust that you're better at praying than I am, so I'd rather use your words than mine. Please pray through me."

## 2. Church teaching

The Church accepts the reality of this gift. In the Catechism it says: **CCC 2003** *...There are furthermore special graces, also called charisms ...meaning "favour," "gratuitous gift," "benefit."*<sup>53</sup> *Whatever their character - sometimes it is extraordinary, such as the gift of miracles or of tongues - charisms are oriented toward sanctifying grace and are intended for the common good of the Church.*

Pope Francis is very welcoming of this gift. At a renewal conference in Rome last September he knelt while 50,000 charismatics prayed in tongues for him.

## 3. History of tongues in the church

The Scripture passage we are probably most familiar with is the Apostles on the day of Pentecost experiencing the miracle of speaking in languages unknown to them, which those listening could understand. That is the gift of speaking and interpreting tongues, (which is different from praying in tongues where, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are speaking directly to God in a language only He understands.) Speaking in tongues can happen at a prayer meeting for example - if a prophecy is given in tongues at a prayer meeting, everyone should pray and ask for the gift of interpretation, so that God's message to the group can be shared.

The gift of praying in tongues can be used for private prayer or together with others who are also praying in this way. During times of praise, for example, a group may sing together in tongues, which is a beautiful way to glorify God and often results in a communal sense of joy and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It's important to realise that this is not some wacky new age 20<sup>th</sup> century innovation. The gift of praying in tongues, particularly in the form of praising and singing in tongues was very commonplace in the Church right up until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There has been a long history of "jubilation," in the Church - namely, of wordless praying and singing aloud.

This form of worship was described by Church Fathers from at least the fourth century as a kind of spontaneous overflowing joy that cannot be expressed in words. **St. Augustine** mentions jubilation when commenting on the Psalms:

*"What is jubilation? Joy that cannot be expressed in words. Yet the voice expresses what is conceived in the heart and cannot be explained in words. This is jubilation.*

*"To manifest his joy, a man does not use words that can be pronounced or understood, but bursts forth into sounds of exaltation without words.*

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It was also referred to in the writings of St Gregory the Great and St John Chrysostom. Jubilation played a very real role in group worship and prayer; for hundreds of years it was a standard part of the Mass. The jubilation came after the singing of the alleluia, just before the Gospel during Mass... the people moved into exuberant wordless singing on vowel sounds. This jubilation could last for up to five minutes... It was almost certainly the origin of what became written down as Gregorian plain chant.

Continuing through the Middle Ages and until approximately the sixteenth century, this way of expressing worship was manifest among many noted saints and mystics and is referred to by writers on mystical prayer such as St. John of the Cross, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and many others. For example St Teresa of Avila who wrote the following in her autobiography: *Many words are spoken during this state, in praise of God, but, unless the Lord himself puts order to them, they have no orderly form. The understanding, at any rate, counts for nothing here; the soul would like to shout praises aloud... [The soul] utters a thousand holy follies, striving ever to please him who thus possesses it.*

There are several accounts mentioning thousands of people at a time harmon-izing in improvised singing and praying under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

This jubilation was frequently seen to be a distinct breaking through into a deeper level of worship and spiritual reality to sing and pray in the realm of the Spirit. The atmosphere was one of expectation of the miraculous, especially in terms of extraordinary healings.

St Thomas Aquinas, probably the greatest Catholic theologian wrote:

*"Jubilation is an unspeakable joy, which one cannot keep silent; yet neither can it be expressed (in words). The reason that (this joy) cannot be expressed in words is that it is beyond comprehension. . . . Such is the goodness of God that it cannot be expressed (in words)."* What Aquinas is saying is that part of our knowledge of God is beyond conception, beyond conceptual language. Many of the good things of God are too wonderful to be expressed in words. Yet they are so wonderful that we cannot keep silent. We express this joy with sound that has no words. Or with words whose meaning only God knows. That's what the gift of praying and singing in tongues is.

Of St Francis of Assisi it was written: *"Intoxicated by love and compassion for Christ, Blessed Francis sometimes used to act like this. For the sweetest of spiritual melodies would often well up within him and found expression in French melodies, and the murmurs of God's voice, heard by him alone, would joyfully pour forth in French-like jubilations."*

Why did it disappear? the splitting of the Church during the Reformation, and the increasing emphasis on Church structures from the Council of Trent, were all contributing factors to the decline of the mystical tradition in general, and other practices such as jubilation.

### Tongues today

Thankfully the gift of tongues is now reappearing in the Church quite extensively, though we are still a long way off St Paul's prayer "I wish you all had the gift of tongues".

I think it is worth emphasising at this point that the gift of tongues is available to everyone – you don't have to be super spiritual or holy. And I need to clarify any misconception you have about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There can be an erroneous line of thinking that some people receive one gift and some another and that we somehow receive the Holy Spirit in "bits".

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In fact, we do not “have” any gifts at all – we have the Holy Spirit himself, in all his giftedness -with all his gifts. This does not mean all the gifts will be manifested in me, but it’s up to the Holy Spirit to decide which gifts to use in which person and at which time. Those of you who have been involved in the *Called and Gifted* programme may have had a specific gift or gifts identified that the Holy Spirit is tending to use in you, which is fine, but that does not mean he cannot use other gifts as the occasion demands.

It would be a complete misunderstanding to think “I have the gift of teaching therefore I can’t pray for healing” or “I have a gift of music ministry therefore I cant have a gift of prophecy or wisdom or whatever”. We should not in any case be focusing on the gifts but on the Holy Spirit and on the need, and praying and trusting the Holy Spirit to give whatever gifts are needed to achieve God’s purpose. And the gift of tongues is available to everyone.

### What is the purpose?

1. **Praise and thanksgiving;** joy and exultation. Proclaiming the greatness of God and what He has done.
2. **Building us up:** in our relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. While we are praying in tongues for our own needs, the Holy Spirit is praying in us to develop our spiritual lives, and he knows far better than us what our needs are.
3. **Prayer of petition and intercession:** how often do we find ourselves lost for words when praying either for ourselves or for others? Particularly in the areas of healing or direction for our lives. We want to pray in accordance with God’s will, but what is His will? We may not know, but the Holy Spirit does, and He can pray perfectly. Even if we are in the midst of a personal crisis, the HS will hold us up and restore our peace.
4. **Weapon against temptation:** with the gift of tongues we are specially armed for spiritual warfare. It is a powerful weapon to help us ward off temptation, doubt, despair and all the arrows that the evil one throws at us every day.
5. **Opens our hearts to God’s word:** Before reading and meditating on the Bible, pray in tongues and the HS will open up the meaning of God’s word for us today.
6. **Sharpens our awareness of the Holy Spirit:** Jesus promised us one who would be like himself, a personal helper. As we pray in tongues we become more aware that the HS – God Himself - really is present in our personal lives, and we are immersed in the love and power of the Trinity.
7. **A key to other gifts:** as mentioned earlier, we don’t receive the HS in “bits” – we receive Him in total, with all his gifts. As we get into the habit of praying in tongues, we become more sensitive to the prompting of the HS in us, and allow Him to manifest His other gifts in us, according to His will. The gift of tongues bypasses all those selfish and negative and restrictive thoughts that we can so easily allow to pull us back from deeper commitment to God’s will. Because we allow Gods spirit to pray within us, He is able to develop those other gifts in us. (Healing , prophecy, words of knowledge etc)

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8. **Power to evangelise:** all these benefits of praying in tongues might sound like they are to do with helping us and empowering us, and indeed they are, but if we think this building up and empowering is purely for our own enjoyment, we have missed the point. We worship God who is love, and His gifts are all about love, which is of course self-giving rather than self-serving. As St Paul famously says in 1 Corinthians 12, *If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels, but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing.* The gift of tongues, like all gifts, is one of the ways the Spirit inspires and empowers us to evangelise – to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ and not just keep it for ourselves. The Church exists in order to evangelise, so the reason we belong to the Church is to evangelise.

### Testimony

My experience. I was drawn quite reluctantly into most aspects of charismatic renewal. Like many Catholics, After a very traditional church upbringing I got to my early 30s and felt my faith was very minimal, that there must be more. My brother had an experience of renewal of his faith and lent me books and tapes with testimonies of powerful prayer, healing and personal relationship with God. On the one hand I wanted this, but in those days there were very few Catholic books or testimonies and I wasn't sure it was really Catholic so I sat on the fence a long time.

But then I went to a talk where the speaker quoted those words of Jesus: “He who is not for me is against me”. I thought – I certainly don’t want to be against him, so I better make some sort of commitment prayer. I can’t remember exactly what I said but I asked Jesus to be at the centre of my life and help me. And everything gradually began to change from that moment.

Even after I made that personal commitment I was very dubious about tongues or raising my hands. I'm basically not a demonstrative type of person and felt I was drawing attention to myself. It took me quite a time to turn my attention away from me and what I want and focus on what God wants. Surrender is the key, whether it's loud and demonstrative praise or tongues or giving prophecies or praying for healing... it's all setting aside our will so that His will may be done.

I did eventually surrender my will and decided to make whatever sounds I felt God was giving me. It started off with just one syllable, but I persevered and it grew into more and more words. Everyone is different, and some people are fluent straight away. I encourage you to just start and ask the Lord to make the gift more abundant and fruitful. This applies also if you do already have a limited few words of tongues: use the gift as you already have it, but ask the Lord to increase it.

Some of the members of our prayer group have committed to praying in tongues in their private prayer time for 10 or 15 minutes each day, and they say this is really yielding fruit in opening them to words of knowledge from God. I don’t personally manage that much on a regular basis, but I certainly pray in tongues a lot at different times in the day, usually quietly under my breath, and I find that it’s giving me a lot more insight into Scripture and releasing me in prophecy and healing.

# **The Gift of Tongues**

## **How do we release the gift?**

Ask with expectation. Receive humbly. Cardinal Suenens described his own experience of getting the gift "its like entering a church through a low door. If you can bend low enough like a humble little child, you will gain access to so much more."

And you have to actually start making sounds that are not words that you know. That's where the humility comes in, because your mind will be telling you you're sounding foolish or making noises like a baby or like a child. But persevere - remind yourself what Jesus said about the need to become like little children and that you are indeed Gods little child and He loves you and wants you to respond.

Please be reassured that the gift of tongues is not experienced as something that 'takes you over'. You may be afraid that you will suddenly start speaking in tongues in the supermarket, but it's not like that. You are always in control of when you use the gift. You are only surrendering your understanding of the words you are using.

It's best to start with a personal re-commitment to Jesus, perhaps using the following prayer, then wait in silence till you feel prompted to respond to God's love, and use your normal voice mechanism (tongue and vocal chords) to make whatever sounds or words come into your mind (though not any language you already know) :

## **Prayer for release of the Holy Spirit**

Lord Jesus, I confess that I am a sinner.  
I reject satan and choose to turn away from sin.  
I believe that you died to pay the price for my sins.  
I welcome you into my heart in a whole new way.  
Come into my life and take control.  
I accept you as my personal Lord and Saviour.  
Release in me the power of the Holy Spirit.  
Be my teacher, my comforter, my strength, my wisdom.  
Thank you for promising that you will never leave me.  
I love you Jesus, my Lord and my God.  
Amen

*This talk was given by Alastair Emblem at Alton Day of Renewal 20<sup>th</sup> May 2017*

*More information about the Day and Catholic Charismatic Renewal at [www.altonrenewal.com](http://www.altonrenewal.com)*