

## Linguistic Diversity

This last Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> February, was International Mother Language Day. This day has been observed by the United Nations each year since February 2000. Its purpose is to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism. That of course ties in very well with one of the principles of the Community of the Cross of Nails: namely, learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity.

What distinguishes human beings from other creatures is the ability to communicate using language, to formulate and express ideas in words. There are about six and a half thousand languages spoken in the world today, though around two thousand of those have fewer than one thousand speakers. As you might expect the most widely spoken language is Mandarin Chinese. Interestingly English comes only third, after Spanish.

Globalization and networks such as the internet only strengthen the position of the major languages of the world like English. At the same time many less widespread languages are under threat. And that is a serious concern. For although language is primarily a means of communication it is also a part of one's cultural identity, I was very aware of that when some years ago I worked for four years in a Welsh-speaking part of Wales.

In our own country the Welsh, Gaelic and Irish languages were long discriminated against and officially discouraged. Indeed even today one of the major sources of current disagreement between the main political parties in Northern Ireland is the status of the Irish language.

The ability to communicate well and clearly is essential to all aspects of human life. However, communication is also an important tool in the Church's task of mission and evangelism. The classic text in the New Testament is surely the account of the Pentecost experience in the Acts of the Apostles which we heard just now (Acts 2.1-11). Although the international languages at the time were Greek and Latin, we are reminded how very many other languages were spoken amongst the visitors to Jerusalem. To be able to hear the Good News in one's own language was both edifying and exciting. Today the Bible is available in most of the languages of the world.

Communication and identity are key factors that have to be taken into account in the work of peace and reconciliation. On the one hand there is a need for true dialogue. In practical terms that often requires the skills of translators and interpreters to ensure that the correct message is conveyed with all its subtle nuances. On the other hand the cultural heritage and identity of each side has to be understood and respected. Only then can progress be made. For all involved in that work we give thanks.

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