



## What did you say?

As preachers and leaders of worship, we priests are expected to be experts in communication. When I arrived in Venezuela in 1994, armed with a year of high school Spanish, thirteen weeks at language school in Bolivia, and some travel experience, I was anything but an expert. Adults tended to be very patient, respectfully doing their best to understand me and speak very distinctly. To endear themselves to the gringo padre, some young people would mimic my Anglo accent with sufficient overemphasis and then smile at me like a puppy wanting a pat on the head for being so cute. There was definitely a disconnect between the smile I gave in return and the irritation I actually felt. Little kids just looked puzzled. As I was talking with her mom, one little girl around three years of age tugged at mom's skirt, looked up at her with big sad eyes and, pointing at me, said in a sad surprised voice, "Tan grande y no sabe hablar"...so big and he doesn't know how to talk."

It is said that dreaming in another language is a sign of fluency. I had five years of Latin in the seminary but never dreamt in Latin, nor do I recall dreaming in Spanish as of yet. Rather than dreaming, I consider *thinking* in another language as the major milestone. It took me over a year to get past using my "English filter": hearing something in Spanish, translating it in my head, figuring my response, and translating that into spoken Spanish with detours whenever I came to a roadblock where I didn't know a word. At clergy gatherings, I had a sort of leapfrog thing going. I would hear a sentence. By the time I figured out what had been said, the speaker had moved on. Then I would pick up another sentence. As my vocabulary increased by sheer repetition, the day finally came when I could get by without my English filter...at least most of the time.

Then there is the matter of accents. At the language institute in Bolivia there were students from almost every English-speaking country. Most difficult for us gringos to understand was a fellow from Northern Ireland. So strong was his brogue that, although he was just partway through the beginners' course, we would ask him to speak in Spanish instead. Bolivia was a good place to learn Spanish. Most folks there spoke rather distinctly. Traveling about, I found Spanish in Peru to be quite similar, but when I crossed the border into Chile I was greeted with a faster-paced sing-song Spanish that dropped a lot of consonants along the way. It was good preparation for Venezuelan Spanish. Particularly notable here is the Spanish from the region of Maracaibo, known colloquially as Maracucho. Trying to understand what a fellow from Maracaibo was saying one day, I turned to ask a Venezuelan friend next to me. "Don't worry, padre," he replied. "I can't understand him either."



After an interlude of 20 years in Minnesota during which I got used to Mexican Spanish, I returned to Venezuela a bit over a year ago, but I am having difficulty understanding many of the folks here. Too embarrassed to keep asking people to repeat themselves more slowly, I tend to nod my head a lot and hope they aren't aware that I haven't the foggiest idea what they are saying. Maybe I can catch on before they expect me to respond. When everyone else is laughing at something, well, I just smile along. Fortunately, most people are capable

of speaking slowly and distinctly for my benefit, but I can go from full comprehension to zero if they forget the gringo in the room and switch from Spanish to Venezuelan with their friends.

It is said that necessity is the mother of invention. It is also the mother of linguistic fluency. From time to time someone at my parish in Northfield would ask, "When are the Hispanics going to learn English?" Most of them lived in trailer courts or apartment complexes where most of their neighbors, as well as people with whom they worked, were Spanish-speaking. They received radio and television in Spanish. They were in daily telephone contact with folks back home. The necessity for speaking English was not there. They would, however, love to develop more fluency. That's where you come in. Invite them into your world, your groups, your homes, as Hispanics in Minnesota and Venezuela have done for me. Be patient in your conversations. Speak slowly and distinctly. By doing so you can help them cross the language barrier. Put yourself in their shoes, striving to understand their lives and the challenges they face. With that understanding, you can create a bond that goes beyond language and culture and, in the process, maybe learn a bit of Spanish yourself.

### Points to ponder

Have you traveled to a foreign country where they speak a different language? How did you get by? Do such experiences help you have be more understanding and patient with immigrants learning to speak English?

*The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at [ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org](mailto:ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org) or 651-368-7324.*