

I'll Have My Pollo with Perro, Por Favor

I tell my friends in Latin America that my Spanish is peligroso—dangerous.

Here's why.

I took three semesters of Spanish in college and spent hours practicing conversation with a Nicaraguan immigrant a few years ago. But when I travel in Latin America these days, my mantra is: *Mi español es muy peligroso*. My Spanish is very dangerous.

On my first visit to Guatemala, for example, I discovered its most popular fast-food restaurant, Pollo Campero. It means “country chicken,” and (with apologies to KFC) it is the moistest, tastiest, most delectable fried chicken on the planet. You will smell it on flights from Guatemala to Miami because people like to take boxes of it to relatives.

**“Please
don't be intimidated by people who speak another language,
or judge them
because they are different. God may want to use you to build
a bridge.”**

But when I told my Guatemalan friends how much I loved the restaurant, they looked shocked. That's because instead of saying *Pollo* Campero I said *Pollo con Perro*. Very similar pronunciation, but the latter means "chicken with dog." Yuck! Or as my Hispanic friends say, "*¡Asqueroso!*"

It gets worse. Once when I was in Venezuela with a group of ministers, our hosts took one of the women speakers to a *churrasquería*, a restaurant that specializes in piling your plate with multiple pounds of grilled meats including lamb, beef, sausage, pork and chicken. When the lady came back to the hotel I wanted to say, in Spanish, "You had a lot of meat." What I told her, in front of seven horrified friends, was that she was fat.

¡Mi español es muy peligroso!

I've heard countless embarrassing stories of how Spanish has been misused in sermons by American speakers, and some I can't repeat here.

Once an evangelist visiting Peru exhorted an audience to lift their hands in worship. He should have said, "*¡Levante sus manos!*" Instead he exclaimed, "*¡Levante sus monos!*" which means, "Lift up your monkeys!" (I am sure the worship was especially joyful that morning.)

Another time a visiting speaker asked all the *adúlteros*, or adulterers, to come to the altar as he concluded his message. He became frustrated when no one moved, so he turned to the bewildered host pastor and asked why the people weren't responding. Finally, after one

man walked
sheepishly to the pulpit with his head bowed, the host pastor
explained that
the speaker meant to ask for all the *adultos*, or adults, to
move to the
front. Oops! (I hope the repentant man received prayer.)

Language is tricky, and it can create insurmountable
barriers between people. Yet I have found that even though I
make a lot of
goofy mistakes in Spanish, the Holy Spirit is eager to help me
communicate even
when culture stands in my way.

I have recently started mentoring a young man from
Guatemala through e-mail. I know this is not the ideal way to
disciple a young
Christian, especially when he speaks no English and I speak
“dangerous”
Spanish. Yet with the help of Google Translate and other
online translation
programs, I have been able to send him encouraging messages
and helpful advice.
And now his brother-in-law is asking for similar input from
me. Somehow the
love of God is able to transcend every wall.

My correspondence with my friend Luis is not perfect, I
will admit. Recently when he wrote to me and I ran his message
through the
translation program, he closed his letter by saying, “I love
you, potato.”
(What he actually said was, “I love you, papa.”) I knew what
he meant. Those
little errors are not going to stop me from pouring my life
into someone who
might one day change a nation.

This is really the essence of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was poured out on a world that had become a Babel of confusion, division and isolation. Yet through Pentecost's miraculous burst of supernatural languages, God made it clear that He would reach every tribe, tongue and nation with the gospel of Christ.

Eventually the apostle Peter dared to venture into an Italian house, even though he had been brought up by a kosher Jewish mother and taught to stay away from foreigners. I am sure Cornelius and his immigrant relatives preferred Latin over Hebrew. Yet the Spirit fell on them all (see Acts 10:44-45) when Peter brought the gospel. It wasn't long before Italian converts showed up in Rome, worshipping in a church in Caesar's household.

Wherever the Spirit moves, barriers are torn down. Please don't be intimidated by people who speak another language, or judge them because they are different. God may want to use you to build a bridge.

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