12.

Symbols That Speak

MARY AQUIN O'NEILL, RSM

Ecumenical dialogue is frequently thought of as an exclusively intellectual exercise. That is, the work is understood to involve clarification of terms, explanation of meaning, history of development, exchange of ideas, and so on. This is certainly an important, if not the major, part of the undertaking. But in every conversation among human beings, something else is going on. Participants in a conversation communicate attitudes about certain dimensions of their faith and, frequently, stir up responses in their conversation partners by operating assumptions, by ways of putting questions, and by the use of images that speak to a level of human experience that is deeper than thought. This level is commonly referred to as the level of feeling, and, though current intellectual fashions often advise that it be disregarded, becoming conscious of feeling in ecumenical dialogue can contribute greatly to increased mutual appreciation. It can also point us to areas of separation that do not come to light in other ways.

THE SCIENTIFIC USE OF LANGUAGE

The differences between these two aspects of ecumenical exchanges, the intellectual and the emotional, can be illustrated by attention to the use of language that characterizes each of them. Scholars typically use language in what can be called a scientific way. That is, the words used are intended to convey one and only one meaning, usually contained in the definition offered of the

term. By the scientific use of language, scholars aim at controlling and directing the flow of ideas much as a surgeon controls and directs the flow of instruments during an operation. Imprecision in terms leads to confusion; for this reason, it is to be avoided. In a conversation with others who use the same vocabulary (terms such as, for example, "salvation," "grace," and "mission") an important part of the work is to draw out the intended meaning in order to be sure that both parties to the dialogue are using it in the same way. In the same way a surgeon must make sure that the names of instruments are the same if she is operating in another English-speaking country. This labor, using language in a scientific way, is indispensable to developing mutual understanding. It demands of the hearer a kind of obedience, in which the hearer puts aside familiar meanings in order to struggle with what is meant by the other person. This is a basic asceticism of ecumenical conversation.

THE POETIC USE OF LANGUAGE

Important as the scientific use of language is, however, it is not the way we usually use language. We have only to listen to sports announcers, politicians, and taxi-cab drivers to know that, when it comes to articulating experience with feeling, people ordinarily rely on the poetic use of language, including the language of symbolic action. What is meant by the poetic use of language? The poetic use of language is the use that aims, not at univocal or one-dimensional meaning, but at ambiguity or many-dimensional meaning. It is a use that teases the mind into activity, that presents to the mind something of a puzzle to be solved, at least when the imagery is fresh and little used.

Jesus was very good at this way of employing language. Try to imagine what went through the minds and hearts of the disciples when Jesus took up the bread of Passover, so long associated with the story of the deliverance of the Jews from bondage in Egypt, and said, "This is my body." When the action was new and startling, the meanings must have been many and, perhaps, emotionally confusing. Scripture gives no indication that Jesus explained what he meant, either—at least not at that time. The

symbols spoke, even as they speak still, breaking the control of univocal meaning to open up new worlds for those who heard these awesome words.

The poetic use of language, then, is the province of the artist and, when effective, leads to discovery: discovery of meaning, discovery of connections, and, very often, discovery of how we feel about things. When participants in ecumenical dialogue turn to an encounter with artistic renderings of the gospel message or to the poetry of worship in song and prayer, we sometimes discover that, despite the unity achieved on the level of technical terminology, the affections are far from each other on key dimensions of the Christian faith. But the opposite can also be true. Participants to conversations can discover that, beneath the differences reflected in the scientific approach, there is an undreamed-of unity.

NEW IMAGES OF ECUMENICAL CONVERSATION

The Roman Catholic/Southern Baptist Scholars' Dialogue experimented in several ways with this attempt to reach the level of affection through imagination. In addition to our intentional experimentation, circumstances often brought insight. Much was learned from opening ourselves to poetic symbols, only some of which can be put into words. Let me give six examples.

One of the first symbols that comes to this author's mind was the baptismal font in the vestibule of Sacred Heart Abbey in Belmont, North Carolina. It is an authentic slave block and on it are carved the words: "Upon this rock, men once were sold into slavery. Now upon this rock, through the waters of baptism, men become free children of God." Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics alike were arrested by the power of the this symbol and by the many levels of meaning that flow from it like the waters of baptism itself.

On another occasion, deep in the hills of Texas, we were invited to visit a hermitage on the grounds of Laity Lodge, a retreat center selected by the Southern Baptists for a session of the dialogue. There in the hermitage we found a cross and a chalice, a kneeler and an open Bible in a structure of such rustic

simplicity that one was brought back to basics in every way. How many seeming contradictions are held in tension in these silent symbols?

Perhaps the most difficult and most revealing planned encounter with symbols came with the visit of the participants to the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. In this enormous church, dedicated to Mary the Mother of Jesus, one meets at every turn images of her whom Roman Catholics call "The Blessed Mother." In stained glass and in stone, in mosaics and in murals, in simple depictions and in highly symbolic representations, images of the "woman" are everywhere and, for some, are overpowering. Those planning the weekend were prepared for a strong reaction from the Southern Baptist participants; but the subsequent discussion revealed that strong feelings one way or the other did not divide neatly along denominational lines. Some Roman Catholics expressed discomfort with the Shrine and, I think it fair to say, with the kind of devotion it embodies—especially when faced with questions from Southern Baptists about how it can be said that Roman Catholics do not worship Mary. On the other hand, one Southern Baptist had noticed the motto, "through Mary to Jesus," and raised equally thoughtful points about the witness of the gospel concerning Mary. Is it possible, he asked, that loyalty and love of Jesus do in some way lead one to Mary? At least one feminist pointed to the Shrine as a celebration of the feminine face of the divine, asking if some of the discomfort expressed might be rooted in attitudes toward women as much as in dogmatic traditions. None of these questions could be adequately addressed, but they were surfaced because this group dared move away from the strictly conceptual dialogue and enter into the world where art works on the deep structures of the human heart.

If the symbols at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception revealed deep differences, another set of symbols brought about an experience of unity despite division. Having faced the impossibility of having a Eucharistic liturgy at which both Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics could receive communion—an impossibility due both to official Roman Catholic policy for dialogue situations and to awareness of different meanings among

us relative to such a worship—the Roman Catholic participants undertook what was named a "Eucharistic fast." That is, we decided to enter into joint worship that was inclusive to all even if it meant foregoing, during the time of our conversations, celebration of the Eucharist. At the first worship thereafter, all those praying together were invited to spread out on the plate and pour into the cup what was in their hearts regarding our inability to share the Lord's Supper and to do this in a spiritual act of consecration; then the empty plate and the empty cup were lifted up to God in silence and in solidarity. One might suspect that in such a symbolic action new meaning was discovered in the ancient words, "This is my body."

The unity achieved in and through symbolic action was realized in another way when the Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic scholars met at a trappist monastery. An ancient rule of the monks forbids women from entering what is called an "enclosure," and, since the central part of the monastery's chapel was thus enclosed, the women of the dialogue were required to go to the balcony and thus be separated from the rest of the group for worship. The pain of separation this time cut, not between the Southern Baptists and the Roman Catholics, but between the women and the men of the dialogue. So acutely was it experienced at the moment of the Catholic liturgy known as the kiss of peace, that one of the Southern Baptist scholars turned around and blew a kiss to the balcony! At the next meeting one of the Roman Catholic priests in the group objected to such treatment of the women and proposed that, if the women were to be relegated to the balcony, the whole dialogue should go sit there. At the next opportunity for worship, everybody did just that. The monks were so taken back that they sent a representative to ask about the strange behavior of their guests. When the superior of the monks learned the reason for the prayerful protest, he called a meeting of the monks, discussed the situation, and afterwards issued an invitation to all the members of the dialogue to join the monks for prayer not just in the central part of the chapel but in the choir stalls where the monks sit for prayer. Again, symbols spoke and were heard in a mysterious way, and a new experience of unity was granted.

Nothing, however, so symbolizes the mystery at work in this scholars' dialogue as the deaths of our two colleagues, Jerry Dollard and John Steely. Deeply desiring to honor them with memorials, the group was moved to face questions about belief in the resurrection at a level far from the conceptual, and to wrestle with the ways of praying in death that distinguish the two traditions. As things unfolded, the memorial for Roman Catholic Jerry Dollard was held at a Southern Baptist seminary and the one for Southern Baptist John Steely, at a Roman Catholic conference center. In this way God's providence furnished a lasting symbol of the exchanges between the traditions these two men represent, gifts that have now entered into eternity. Reflecting on all that this particular group of ecumenical conversation partners have experienced, we know that it is up to us now to make this symbol speak, drawing out the revelation that has been seen and heard and touched in our own time.

13.

Grass Roots Conversations: How to Have Them in Our Churches

C. BROWNLOW HASTINGS AND THADDEUS DANIEL HORGAN, SA

Baptists and Catholics are not strangers to one another. Some know the other based on stereotypes passed on within their own traditions for generations. Others know one another because they have actually met. For more than a decade encounters have been sponsored in many places by local Baptist and Catholic congregations. So frequent have these become that the Department of Interfaith Witness of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention issued the following eight guidelines in January, 1986, for encounter events.

1. The purpose of encounter events is to provide an occasion in which Baptists come into personal contact with persons of another faith for mutual understanding and witness.

2. The target audience is confident Baptists who can share their faith articulately, who are willing to meet with similar persons in another faith tradition. These specific target groups can be defined as pastors with their counterpart clergy, laypersons, couples, congregations, and mixed groups.

3. The leadership depends on the format and agenda. Speakers should be persons who understand their own tradition and who can interpret it adequately.

4. The planning must be mutual. A co-sponsor from the other faith must be enlisted, and the program must then be designed cooperatively.

5. The schedule and length may be a one-session evening event, or a weekend retreat, or a series of dialogue sessions over

a number of weeks. The schedule followed will vary with the length and the aim of the encounter event.

6. Various formats for the agenda may be followed; what is important is that the formats allow for an interchange of experiences, both of a personal and a corporate nature. Subjects of importance to both groups should be discussed, as well as subjects which are of interest to one group more than the other.

7. There are two basic forms in which the dialogue may take place. The two-church dialogue occurs when Baptists attend Saturday evening Mass at a Catholic Church, remain for a fellowship at which a Baptist speaks on "What Baptists Believe," and then answer questions from Catholics. Then Catholics attend the Baptist Sunday evening worship service, remain for a fellowship in which a Catholic speaks on "What Catholics Believe," and answer questions from Baptists. The follow-up committee then plans for other joint contacts.

8. A weekend interfaith retreat is the other dialogue form. In this form couples from each tradition meet for a weekend in a retreat setting. Personal and religious histories are shared, as well as mutual concerns.

The anticipated results of the weekend are are follows: genuine witness is shared, stereotypes are broken down, the understanding of one's own faith is strengthened as well as greater understanding of another faith, and doors of opportunity for further contacts are opened.

Catholics on their part also have guidelines for inter-church encounters. Often these are issued by a diocese, but guidelines from the larger Roman Catholic Church are also available. These are strikingly similar to the guidelines provided to Baptists by the Home Mission Board.

What exactly is an encounter event? One word suffices as the answer: hospitality. For Christians this is a principle of life based on God's hospitality to us and on the wonderful examples of hospitality set by Jesus. Hospitality is paying attention to and valuing others while allowing them to be different.

Four general goals are achieved in encounter events. They are:

1. To inform each other as to who we are and what we believe

today. This helps us to remove misunderstandings, false images, old stereotypes, and outdated beliefs and practices.

2. To learn how to cross ancient barriers with a positive witness to one's faith. "Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you. But do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15b–16:2, TEV).

3. To develop the ability to read the Bible and pray together, and even to worship when others lead the way.

4. To bring the resources of our faith to bear upon the common concerns of personal, family, and social life today.

MODELS FOR CONVERSATIONS

Encounter events happen at several levels. They may involve only clergy, or they may include entire congregations, or selected clergy and lay people. They may be organized locally, or on a wider scale; the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention has been formally sponsoring encounter events since 1971. This book is the product of a dialogue of Catholic and Baptist Scholars who met together regularly for ten years. Whatever the level at which an encounter event is organized, it is a conversation which involves listening at least half the time, and its success may be measured by how free each group felt in responding to the others and how generous was the spirit of communication.

Get-acquainted services—A Baptist pastor and his congregation can extend an invitation to a neighboring Catholic pastor and his parish to come for a Baptist Open House, Catholic Friends' night, or Good Neighbor Day, to be held on a Sunday evening. The invitation should make it clear that this is a typical Sunday evening-style worship service. If possible, Baptists should schedule a baptismal service but not the Lord's Supper. Plan the music so that all may sing well-known songs. The Catholic pastor may be invited to respond to the Baptist pastor's welcome, to read the Scriptures, and to lead in prayer. After the service, a time of fellowship is important. This may also include time for putting questions to a panel, made up of the pastors and of representative

laity from each church. During the service and the panel discussion, keep explanations of beliefs and practices to the minimum necessary for understanding the occasion. Emphasis should be on evangelical witness to Christ and the gospel.

Success will depend largely on how involved the congregation is in inviting their Catholic friends and making them feel welcome. Be ready to respond to a return invitation from the Catholic church for a Saturday evening Mass or perhaps a folk Mass on Sunday afternoon.

The initiative could equally be taken by the Catholic congregation. If the invitation is to attend Mass the usual form for Catholic Sunday worship, Catholics should indicate that Baptists are welcome to take part in prayers, responses, and hymn singing, but not in communion. Baptists should not request or expect to receive communion. If the invitation is to another type of service, then Catholics, with their bishop's prior permission, may invite Baptists to read the Scriptures and even to preach.

Hospitality may involve helping guests with transportation. It is certainly needed when guests arrive at the door of the church. They should be recognized as guests, introduced to members of the host community, shown to their places, and aided in other appropriate ways, such as answering any questions they may have and making sure that they can see and hear what is going on. Guests often worry that they will do or say something that is inappropriate. Hospitality therefore includes attempts to alleviate such anxieties. It may be helpful then to provide information regarding the structure of the service. At a more practical level, it would be useful to help guests know when the community will change posture or participate in movement. Explaining why this is done is equally important. (For example, explain why Catholics stand when a text from the Gospels is read.)

A Baptist/Catholic town meeting—This kind of meeting may be sponsored by a Baptist association, pastors' conference, or two or more Baptist churches. On the Catholic side the initiative may come from the ecumenical commission of the diocese, a deanery of churches, or even from an individual pastor. The purpose is primarily to acquaint each group with current beliefs and practices of the other without trying to resolve issues or to set

up programs. It could be scheduled for a week night or a Sunday afternoon. A typical program might follow this schedule:

Registration and Get-Acquainted Time	30 minutes
Opening Song and Prayer	5 minutes
Welcome by the Host Pastor Response by an Appropriate Leader	5 minutes
Where Are We From? and Why Are We Here? by the Program Leader	10 minutes
Message: The Things that Make Baptists Distinctive, by a Baptist Pastor	15 minutes
Testimony: My Experience in Worship, by a Baptist Lay Member	5 minutes
Message: The Things that Make Catholics Distinctive, by a Catholic Pastor	15 minutes
Testimony: My Experience in Worship, by a Catholic Lay Member	5 minutes
Break	5 minutes
Open Discussion	20 minutes
Close: The Lord's Prayer and a Benediction	

An inter-church conversation—This is a good way to follow up a town meeting or a get-acquainted meeting. This plan is especially recommended for a regular Baptist/Catholic clergy conference. Since it involves only one main presentation, fairness would indicate announcement of at least one other conference. For the clergy, the plan is simple:

Time for informal sharing and get-acquainted	15 minutes
Meditation and prayer	5 minutes
Presentation of a discussion topic	20 minutes
Open Discussion	45 minutes

Topics which make for useful discussion are interfaith marriage, the meaning of worship, how to involve the laity in church life, how to study and prepare sermons, strategies for social action, the ways authority works, pastoral counseling, new styles of ministry, helping the laity understand the Bible, and training lay people to share their faith with the unchurched. If the conversation is held in the mornings, the group might adjourn to eat lunch together or arrange for lunch at the host church.

If both clergy and laity are invited, then the discussion topic might be presented by one person from each communion. The time would be divided and the approach made more popular than scholarly. If the group is large, it might be advisable to adjourn for discussion to small groups of no more than ten or twelve persons. Group leaders should be chosen for their skills in keeping the discussion moving and for drawing each member of the group into the discussion as much as possible.

Another variation of an inter-church conversation is to have a joint committee plan the whole meeting around six or eight workshops. As the people register, they will either choose or be assigned in rotation to one of the workshops, each with a different issue of current concern to Baptists and Catholics. After a brief opening period, all of the time is spent in the assigned workshop. There ought to be two resource people for each workshop, one from each communion, to present, in about ten minutes, each one's approach to the subject. The rest of the time is spent in discussion. There will usually not be enough time for a closing general session at which reports would be made. However, a reporter in each group can provide the planning committee with a summary and evaluation for future guidance.

MODELS FOR RETREATS

Weekend or even day-long retreats in some quiet facility offer the best opportunity for individuals to get to know one another in deeper relationships. Retreats may be for clergy, for lay couples, or for clergy and laity together. They should be planned around spiritual and practical concerns with as much freedom as possible for the group to develop its own agenda. At laity retreats, if there

are pastors or other ministers present, let them serve as enablers and resource people only. Laity should be recruited from mature, experienced Christians and not from those who have an axe to grind or a cause to promote. The following agenda has been found useful.

Friday evening:	
Supper	6:00 p.m.
Introduction of topics for discussion	7:00 p.m.
Listing of topics for discussion	7:30 p.m.
Discussion by small groups	8:00 p.m.
Break	9:15 p.m.
Evening devotions	9:45 p.m.
Free time	10:00 p.m.
Saturday morning:	
Breakfast	7:30 a.m.
Individual silent vigils	8:15 a.m.
Explanation of Catholic worship	8:45 a.m.
Group discussion (continued)	9:30 a.m.
Explanation of Baptist worship	11:15 a.m.
Lunch	12:00 noon
Open forum	1:30 p.m.
Closing meditation	3:00 p.m.

This retreat program can be varied by having two assigned topics to be presented in ten to fifteen minutes each on a subject such as "What (Baptist/Catholic) Beliefs are most Important to Me." Another variation is to allow each group the first evening to choose a short book of the New Testament for devotional study for three sessions (Friday night, Saturday morning, and Saturday afternoon). Note that the program itself does not single

out issues between Baptists and Catholics; these are allowed to arise naturally out of the discussion of the study. A discussion leader may be assigned or chosen by the group, but not to do formal teaching.

Clergy Retreats—These can often be scheduled at some retreat center, monastery, or assembly grounds for two days during the week rather than on the weekend. The planning committee may want to include such features as: four Bible study periods, led by two teachers either together or alternately; joint worship; prayer time for individual vigils and for small groups; well-prepared presentations, but not formal papers, on subjects such as church music, spiritual growth for ministers, developing human relations and ministries; and opportunities for free time and recreation.

Out of such retreats can come lasting friendships and mutual planning on moral and social projects in the community. A regular Bible study and prayer time may be scheduled by the whole group or by part of the group of retreatants.

Special retreats—For couples, marriage encounter retreats sponsored by Catholics yet open to others have proved very valuable. Protestants also have developed marriage enrichment retreats of various kinds. The family life conferences which many Baptist churches hold, could be opened to Catholic neighbors. Further information on the many kinds of opportunities available for any of these can be had by inquiring of your local leaders.

MODELS FOR BIBLE AND PRAYER FELLOWSHIPS

These often grow out of either a dialogue conference or a lay retreat. An easy way to begin is for two neighboring pastors each to select five or six couples to have an exploratory meeting in a home on a week night. The group may plan to study a book of the Bible one night a week for a definite period of weeks. They may choose a study guide, such as *Interfaith Prayer and Bible Study,* published by the Department of Interfaith Witness and specifically written for Baptist and Catholic couples who want to learn to read the Bible and pray together. Alternatively, the group may choose a classic of devotional literature from each communion as

the basis for their reading discussion. Examples of classics are *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis and *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers.

Suggestions for setting up and conducting Bible and prayer fellowships are found in *Interfaith Prayer and Bible Study* and in pamphlets produced by the Church Extension Department of the Home Mission Board.

OCCASIONAL EVENTS

These are events usually planned by a local congregation, to which fiends in other churches are invited.

1. Most Christians, including Catholics, observe in one way or another the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the third week of January. This is an excellent time for Christians to reach out prayerfully and in practical ways toward others. A get-acquainted service is recommended.

2. January Bible Study, a custom associated with Baptists, is a good time for them to invite Catholics for an inter-church conversation based on the biblical text to be studied.

3. The feast and fast days of our traditions are also opportunities for spiritual retreats or other events. During the four weeks of Advent which precede Christmas and during the forty days of Lent which precede Easter, Catholics are especially interested in moral and spiritual means of strengthening their Christian lives. These are good times for worship-centered gatherings.

4. Music and drama events in Baptist churches. Youth are very interested in the musicals which are becoming widely popular. Special showings of Billy Graham films, of television specials, and of other media features offer opportunities for gatherings.

5. Invitations may be extended by one congregation (Catholic or Baptist) to the other to send observers to conferences and workshops sponsored by a congregation or diocese.

SUGGESTED GROUND RULES FOR GROUP MEETINGS

Robert McAfee Brown and Gustave Weigel in *An American Dialogue* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1961) developed

guidelines for interreligious dialogue. These have been adapted by J. R. Estes in a pamphlet entitled "Baptist/Catholic Relations." They are as follows:

1. The purpose of each meeting in which Baptists and Catholics share should be clearly stated in advance.
2. Respect must be shown for the feelings and beliefs of the other.
3. Each leader of a Baptist/Catholic dialogue should be well-informed about his/her faith.
4. Each participant must desire to have a fuller and clearer understanding of the faith of the other. This means that each must be willing to let go of caricatures of the other and be open to a clearer understanding of the other's faith.
5. Participants must be prepared to deal frankly with their own faith, with its weaknesses as well as its strengths, and must avoid being overly defensive or polemical.
6. Each participant must be prepared to agree and to disagree in all candor. The possibility of disagreement must not destroy the relationship, but be a natural expression of the desire for unity.
7. Each participant must honestly face the issues which divide Christians even if they are an indictment of one's own group.
8. Each participant must avoid judging the other's spiritual condition or acceptability to God. Only God judges who is saved and who is not.
9. Each participant must believe that the other is sincere in faith and genuine in the desire for unity in Christ.
10. Each participant must be motivated by love for the other.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SPEAKERS AND PROGRAM LEADERS

1. Emphasize the distinctive elements of each Church's beliefs. It is not necessary to use the other's religion as a foil to your own. Be a bridge-builder, not a demolitions expert.
2. Inform yourself of contemporary beliefs and practices of your own church. What you remember from college and seminary may need to be updated.

3. When in doubt, quote!

4. You may disagree in doctrine, but *never* question another's motives for particular devotion (for example, in worship or prayer life).

5. Relate your comments to the audience at hand and to the kinds of things they can do something about. For example, local Catholic pastors and laity can do nothing about changing Canon Law on marriage and divorce. They can, however, decide to cooperate in a joint forum on the family.

6. Demonstrate confidence in the combination of the Word, the Spirit, and the people, by leaving the meeting open. There should be no hidden agenda and no manipulation of people to a preconceived end. Do not try to dictate conclusions or resolutions that do not honestly and wholeheartedly come from the group.

All of the above is proposed so that Catholics and Baptists more and more might deepen their appreciation for each other. This is a way for them to witness to the reconciling Lordship of Jesus Christ. "It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).