

# Dialogue, a Choice?

- *brother Daniel*

**S**AINT BENEDICT BEGINS HIS RULE FOR MONKS WITH THE GENTLE REQUEST TO “listen with the ear or your heart” (*RB Prologue 1*). Later on in the Rule, he speaks about a conversation about the things that matter (*RB 58, 17*). This is not about chatting, but a summons to meaningful dialogue. It is lived out in many ways among our brothers. A beautiful opportunity to practice this monastic skill came during our canonical visitation this year with Father Jerome Kodell, abbot-emeritus of Subiaco Abbey. Father Jerome has been a very good and caring friend of our community.

A Canonical Visitation is a privileged time of reflection, sharing, and deep listening as we explore questions born from our community’s lived experience. As we try to listen with the ear of our heart, we are also invited to speak from our heart. Of course there is risk involved. However, if we choose vulnerable honesty, mutual understanding and trust, it will lead to growth, transformation, and a deepening love.

An empathetic discipline of listening to the other on his or her own terms blossoms in a meeting of hearts, often beyond the words! We experience a kind of sacramental interaction where a mystery deeper than ourselves surprises us with new insights and shared awareness. Having crossed into the perspective of the other, we recognize our own outlook enlarged and enlivened. We meet on common ground. This evolving capacity is a sign of the Holy Spirit drawing us into deeper communion, and our conversation leads to conversion.

As I reflect on our powerful experience of community discussions during the canonical visitation with Father Jerome, I am painfully conscious of the polarization and mistrust that permeate our American society where we simply talk about each other or at each other. I ask myself, how can a culture used to Tweets and Instagram posts learn the craft of meaningful conversation? As we engage in this spiritual path of listening from the heart can we glimpse the bridges over the walls we build to shield our fear? The craftsmanship of real conversation is not about being smart, learned, or knowing the answers. Genuine involvement engages everyone! Nevertheless I wonder, will we have the courage and humility to enter into authentic dialogue together? ■



Father Jerome Kodell, abbot-emeritus  
of Subiaco Abbey, Arkansas.