



DIALOGUE INTERRELIGIEUX MONASTIQUE
MONASTIC INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Vol XVI No 2 July - December 2026



Gratefulness: The Birth Centenary of Brother David Steindl-Rast OSB

On July 12, 2026, Brother David Steindl-Rast (universally called Brother David) completed his birth centenary and attained the biblical age—an age which many religions also call the fullness of life. This moment had long been anticipated, and preparations were made to celebrate it in his presence. Since he is now living in Austria, the two monasteries involved in these celebrations were his own Europa-Kloster Gut Aich near the famous Lake Wolfgangsee in the Salzburg region, and the historic abbey Stift Kremsmünster in Upper Austria.

Brother David is internationally known as one of the leading spiritual masters of our time, who has touched and transformed

the lives of thousands of seekers, Christian or otherwise, while remaining a simple monk and practicing his teachings in daily life—a life of thankfulness. He is one of the leading and most inspiring figures in interreligious dialogue and has been involved since 1965, especially in dialogue with Buddhism. He practices Zen and, as a participant in many interreligious meetings and conferences, especially in the United States, he is close to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who sees in him a continuation of Thomas Merton. Their relationship is marked by joy, friendship, and a shared sense of humor. Brother David was also closely associated with Thich Nhat Hanh, joining him in peace movements and in protest against the Vietnam War.

Brother David's importance as an outstanding figure embodying peace at all levels is uncontested. He is perhaps best known for his inspirational movement, which has expanded into a global network centered on "Gratefulness" or "Grateful Living." His TED Talk on gratefulness has been viewed by more than nine million people. The question of the secret of his appeal has often been raised. To my mind, it lies in the combination of his monastic simplicity with the depth of his experience and a universal spirituality that can touch not only Christians but anyone, regardless of religious affiliation—or none. Brother David is convinced that everyone is a mystic or at least has the potential to become one; this dimension simply needs to be cultivated.

In preparation for his birthday on 12 July, the Abbey of Kremsmünster organized a colloquium on the theme "The Mystery of Life," with lectures, panel discussions, and dialogues with and about Brother

David. This was complemented by prayer and liturgical celebrations in the abbey church, including Vespers and High Mass for the feast of Saint Benedict, presided over by the Archbishop of Vienna, Josef Grünwidl, together with Abbot Bernhard Eckerstorfer of Kremsmünster and Prior Brother Thomas Hessler of Gut Aich.

Brother David's love for the poet R. M. Rilke was honored one evening with a musical rendering of Rilke's poetry. The motto, chosen by Brother David, expressed the growth of life:

Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen,
die sich über die Dinge ziehn.
Ich werde den letzten vielleicht nicht vollbringen,
aber versuchen will ich ihn.

Ich kreise um Gott, um den uralten Turm,
und ich kreise jahrtausendelang;
und ich weiß noch nicht: bin ich ein Falke, ein Sturm,
oder ein großer Gesang.

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across all things.
I may not complete the last one,
but I will try.

I circle around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for millennia;
and I still do not know: am I a falcon, a storm,
or a great song.

The most extraordinary "mystery of life" was the continuous presence of Brother David at all the events and his active participation; one could hardly believe that he was one hundred years old. With full attentiveness and an expression of love for his followers and admirers, the atmosphere in the hall, with about 450 participants, was joyful and grateful—grateful that he is still among us and maintains a personal relationship with each person. To complete the interreligious dimension, a high Tibetan lama, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, and his disciple came to wish him long life. They embraced as a sign of spiritual friendship between Christian and Buddhist monks.

Equally striking was Brother David's energy in giving interviews throughout the event, each time with full attention and fresh insight. One touching example may suffice. When asked what moved him at the completion of a century, he replied: "I am still asking myself in what way I have to mature further." And he added, "Maturity does not have to do with the number of calendar years; it has to come from elsewhere."

We then moved to St. Gilgen and Kloster Gut Aich to celebrate his actual birthday on July 12. The atmosphere shifted from the solemnity of Kremsmünster to the intimacy of his monastic community, with more personal and interactive programs. His international reach was evident in the fact that the talks, discussions, and celebrations were translated into three languages: German, English, and Spanish. Friends from Argentina, Latin America, and the United States contributed to the vibrancy of the occasion.

Since his birthday coincided with the 125th anniversary of the local fire brigade, the celebration took on the character of a village festival, with a procession, brass band, and an open-air Mass in which Brother David participated silently. The speeches focused on the saving of lives; I felt that a complementary theme was Brother David's gift of making lives meaningful. Another event was a visit to an exhibition at the House of Mozart titled DAVID 100, which highlighted his life, his followers, and the beginnings of the Catholic Church's engagement in interreligious dialogue through pioneering figures such as Raimon Panikkar and Swami Abhishiktananda. The exhibition gave special attention to Brother David's relationship with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The central birthday celebration, bringing together all his friends and admirers, took place at 6:00 p.m. in the monastery cloister, bathed in evening light. It was a truly universal celebration in which everyone felt at home. Brother David sat at the entrance, warmly welcoming each person with a handshake, a smile, or a hug. There were moments of silence, followed by songs. A symbolic offering to the four elements—earth, water, fire, and air—connected all present with the primal forces of the cosmos. The cloister was filled to capacity, yet the atmosphere remained joyful and marked by a deep sense of belonging to a community of thankfulness.

Brother David's wish for the following day (13 July) was to take as many of his friends as possible on a boat trip on the Wolfgangsee. The weather was splendid, and we spent four hours on the lake in his presence. He made an effort to meet everyone, offering a smile, a touch, or a hug. His memory for people is remarkable. There was music, a dervish dance by Paramjyoti, flowers offered to him, and a birthday cake shared by all.

After four days of celebration, one might have expected that Brother David would need rest. Yet he participated in the evening Mass of the community. After Mass, he approached me and my friend and asked us to go to the newly planted linden tree behind the herbal garden and water it. The tree had been given to him as a birthday gift. I was deeply moved that, after such a long day, he invited me to share this simple task. I could not have anticipated what followed.

The conclusion of all these celebrations became a very personal and intimate act, profoundly connected with nature. Brother David himself came on foot while we were watering the tree. In that moment, I sensed the depth and intimacy of his relationship with the tree, with the elements, and with those of us present. This act of blessing was not only the offering of water, but also of our good wishes and prayers for the tree's future, expressing our interconnectedness. More than words, this symbolic gesture spoke of his attentiveness to every particle of the cosmos. It recalled Raimon Panikkar's term "cosmotheandric," the profound interrelationship of cosmos, divine, and human. After this spontaneous ritual, as I had the privilege of accompanying him from the meadow to the road, he said to me with great care: "Don't step on the flowers!"



Author: **Bettina Sharada Bäumer** Ph.D., Dr theol. hc, was born in Austria in 1940 and moved to Varanasi, India, in 1967 after completing her doctorate. She is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Vienna (adjunct), Director of two research institutes in Varanasi, and Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla. From 1988-2007 she was President of the Abhishiktananda Society. Her particular fields of research and publication are Indian philosophy, especially Kashmir Shivaism, Indian aesthetics, religious traditions and temple art of Orissa, and inter-religious dialogue, especially Hindu-Christian dialogue. Visit her [website](#).