

## Saturday Catechism: Handout: 10/1/11

Bro. David Steindl-Rast, OSB in *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer; An Approach to Life in Fullness*, Paulist Press, 1984, assists our prayerful advance. On p 48 he continues showing us how to pray always.

“This approach [remembering how prayerful children are] has yet another advantage. It allows us to speak about prayer without using religious jargon. If we said ‘prayer’, someone might think we mean an activity to be added to our daily tasks. Right away we’d be back in the confusion between prayer and prayers. But if we call it mindfulness or wholehearted living, it is easier to recognize prayer as an attitude that should characterize all our activities. The more we come alive and awake, the more everything we do becomes prayer. Eventually, even our prayers will become prayer. Some people find it easier to eat and drink prayerfully, mindfully, than to say their prayers prayerfully. Should this surprise anyone? Why assume that our prayer life starts with saying prayers? If prayerfulness is our highest degree of aliveness, the starting point might be whenever we spontaneously come alive. Does it seem easier to recite a Psalm with recollection than to eat or drink or walk or hug with that same wonderment and concentration? It may well be the other way around. For some of us, saying prayers wholeheartedly may be the crowning achievement after we have learned to make every other activity prayer. 48

“What matters is prayer, not prayers. But if this is so, if prayerfulness is all that counts, who needs prayers? The answer is simple: everyone. Prayers fill a need we all experience, the need to express our prayerfulness. We cannot be mindful without being grateful. As soon as we awake from taking everything for granted, there is at least a glimmer of surprise, and a beginning of gratitude. But gratitude needs to express itself. We know the awkward feeling we get from an anonymous gift. When I receive one, it is as if something were bottled up within me, and all morning I find myself expressing something like thanks to everyone I meet, just to satisfy my own need for doing so. But something else happens. As I express my gratitude, I become more deeply aware of it. And the greater my awareness, the greater my need to express it. What happens here is a spiraling ascent, a process of growth in ever expanding circles around a steady center, a movement leading ever more deeply into gratefulness.

“And so with prayers. As the expression of our prayerfulness, prayers make us more prayerful. And that greater prayerfulness needs to express itself again in prayers. We might not have much to begin with, but the spiral expands according to its own inner dynamics, as long as we stay with it.” 49

Bro. Brian’s comments: *Bro. David expresses the most important part of prayer so simply. We can add that prayer is loving the Love Who loved us into existence. Love deployed us, like a sail, to catch some of His Love, Which carries us along infinite seas to Him, our Home. That’s why prayer is our highest degree of aliveness. Loving gratitude lives in prayer. It is our most real moment. Prayer is much more than we can express. But Bro. David gets us into the heart. From there every detail unfolds. No wonder that prayer absorbs all our actions. We make every other activity prayer because God creates all activity. When we agree to that, we expand into ever deeper and deeper prayer. Saying words gets us started. Then we go beyond words. Do we still need words? Yes, because we expand ever deeper and deeper into gratefulness. We thank God for everything He created. Bro. David provides a wonderful image for our growth in prayer, so we move on to it.*

“One image in which this dynamic movement of growth seems perfectly crystallized is the chambered nautilus. I can never pass a shell display without looking for one of the fascinating seashells. The specimens I find most exciting are the ones cut in half to show the whole suite of empty chambers with their pearly inner wall. Somewhere in the South Pacific or the Indian Ocean, a mollusk built this marvelous shell around its body. And as this mysterious sea creature grew, it moved from chamber to chamber, scaling off the old one it had outgrown, as it moved to a new and bigger one. But soon this new one too grew too small, and forced its mason and inmate to build again, and move on.

“Year after year beheld the silent toil  
That spread his lustrous coil;  
Still, as the spiral grew,  
He left the past year’s dwelling for the new,

Stole with soft step its shining archway through,  
Built up its idle door,  
Stretch'd in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.' 50

“These lines are from a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes: ‘The Chambered Nautilus’. The poet thanks our small soft shellfish, that ‘child of the wandering sea’, for its message, still echoing through its chambers long after it left. A ‘heavenly message’ the poet calls it, because it has to do with growing toward our ultimate goal. He says of that message:

“While on mine ear it rings,  
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:  
Build  
Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,  
As the swift seasons roll!  
Leave thy low-vaunted past!  
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,  
Shut thee from heaven, with a dome more vast,  
Till thou at length art free,  
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea!”

“Once we realize how the interplay between prayerfulness and prayers builds the temple of our prayer life, we should be able to ask the right questions to see where we stand in this process, and how we need to proceed. Our prayers have a twofold relationship to our prayerfulness, as we have seen. Prayers both express and reinforce our prayerfulness. Hence we need to ask two basic questions: are my prayers a genuine expression of my prayerfulness? Do they make me more prayerful?”

“Since these two questions go to the heart of the matter, we can use them to check both prayers in community and prayers by ourselves. The context will be so different, however, that we shall here test these two areas one by one. Let us begin by looking into what are often called private prayers. 51

“‘Private prayers’ is a misleading phrase. First of all, true prayers are never private. If prayers are private, they are not truly prayer. Whatever is private excludes someone. A private club has an exclusive membership; if a road is private, all but the owners are deprived of its use. But genuine prayer comes from the heart, from that realm of my being where I am one with all. It is never a private affair. Genuine prayer is all-inclusive. A great teacher of prayer in the Jewish tradition expressed this well: ‘When I prepare myself to say my prayers, I unite myself with all who are closer to God than I am, so that, through them, I may reach God. I also unite myself with all who may be farther away from God than I am, so that, through me, they may reach God.’ Christian tradition calls this the communion of saints. When we pray, we pray in community. This is why some speak of ‘personal’ rather than ‘private’ prayers. But that won’t get us far. What is the alternative to personal prayer? Impersonal prayer? Let us hope that there is no such thing. Still, we do need to distinguish between praying together with others, and praying by ourselves. I will call these two areas prayers together, and prayers alone. 52

“It helps to get rid of the term ‘private’ when we speak of prayers. But retaining the term ‘prayers’, we are still running the risk of misunderstanding. Let us make it clear that we do not necessarily mean set prayers out of a prayer book. Once more, we must distinguish prayer from prayers. Prayer, as we have seen, should go on without interruption. Through prayerfulness, *every* activity can and should become prayer. What we call prayers, on the other hand, is *one* activity among others – time out, as it were, for nothing but prayer. What we put into that time slot may be set prayers, but it may equally well be prayers in a wider sense. Our time set aside for prayers will be well spent if whatever we do in it gives expression to our prayerfulness, and so makes us more prayerful.

“There is only one basic rule for prayers alone: make sure you are left alone. Once this is assured, it will be quite easy to find your own expression of whatever it is that fills your heart at that time. But being left alone in prayer is not as easy as one might think. Especially in religious communities, there are sometimes those whose religious observance consists largely in observing others. When and where and how you say prayers, for how long, and in what posture – every detail is apt to come under scrutiny. It may be a great blessing to be able to discuss all these points with a teacher of prayer who will guide us to find what is most helpful for us personally. But beyond that, we have a right and a duty to insist: Concerning my prayers alone, leave me alone.” 53

Bro. Brian’s comment: *How helpful this simple description is. If we follow what Bro. David says, we will advance in prayer. If we advance in prayer, we will be more real, and more really in Love. We want that.*