

Caritas

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THE MOST IMPORTANT MESSAGE

& the Greatest Gift

The world's most important message will not be carried this season by The New York Times, CNN, Facebook or Twitter, and its greatest gift will not be available on Overstock.com or on EBay.

The message of the birth of Jesus Christ and its meaning will instead be transmitted person to person, heart to heart, just as it initially was shared thousands of years ago. And no shopping place can offer anything to match what God already has given to all of us: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Everything changed on that day in Bethlehem when Christ was born, but sometimes we lose sight of the promise, and the responsibility, entrusted to us by God's goodness. In the words of Jesus, we are to love one another as He has loved us.

There are people who need our help to make their way in our troubled world. They are the poor, the vulnerable, the sick, the mentally ill, the neglected and the downhearted. They are all ages, all races, all faiths, and all ethnicities from every part of our planet, which itself is ailing.

Hearts are always open this time of year to the touching stories of families in crisis, victims of fires, floods and other disasters, and the elderly who are alone and lonely. Those situations still will exist in the months after the Christmas trees and the holiday decorations come down.

The mission of Providence, since the founding of the Sisters of Providence by Blessed Emilie Gamelin in 1843, is to reveal God's providence to all of these through our compassionate service. In every season, it is our motivation, our goal and our challenge; one that we share with the many, many friends of Providence.

Let us pause now to recall the world's most important message of God's love and share it with others, not just through our words, but through our deeds. Listen to that message despite the discordant voices and distrustful words filling every medium all around us. Turn them down, tune them out, turn the page and change the channel. The only messages that matter are those of hope, peace and love. Anything else is just noise.

“With the angel on that first Christmas night, we praise God saying: Glory to God in the highest and on earth PEACE to all.” We join our sisters and brothers of all faith traditions as we pray for peace throughout our world, in our country, in our communities and in our families.

With grateful hearts, we pray for peace,
hope and love for you and

a blessed Christmas to us all.

Kerri Dufault, SP

Maureen Newman, SP

Judith Desmarais, S.P.

Jennifer Hall

Karen Lauby

Joann Showalter, SP



Rev. Dr. David Duncombe is congratulated by (back row from left) Provincial Councilor Jo Ann Showalter, Provincial Superior Karin Dufault and Provincial Councilor Maureen Newman; and (front row from left) Sister Rita Ferschweiler and Provincial Councilor Judith Desmarais.

Rev. Dr. David Duncombe of White Salmon receives

2010 Mother Joseph Award

Rev. Dr. David Duncombe, of White Salmon, Wash., is this year's recipient of the Mother Joseph Award. Age 82, he is currently an active member on 22 boards and advisory groups for nonprofit organizations serving the poor and vulnerable and has been a founding member of most of them.

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His is a life writ large, as evidenced by his nominators' recitation of his commitments, activities and values from a lifetime of ministry: serving in a mountain infantry division in the Korean War, protecting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala.; his faculty position at Yale School of Divinity, and later at the University of California at San Francisco; his close personal friendship with internationally renowned priest and author Henri Nouwen; his innovative experiments in Clinical Pastoral Education with homeless men and women in Golden Gate Park; and his profound history as an activist demonstrating, praying and fasting for international debt relief, and against government sponsored terrorism (experiences for which he has been incarcerated countless times).

David has made many headlines from a series of extended fasts in Washington, D.C., each 40 to 50 days long. They were, he said, a public witness aimed at changing the hearts and minds of lawmakers and others on Capitol Hill over the crippling debt that burdens some of the most impoverished countries in the world. David began his most recent fast at age 79, weighing 145 pounds. For more than six weeks he consumed no food and only a gallon of water a day. Afterward, his remarks revealed "a deep sense of solidarity with those who suffer and whose plight is forgotten in the corridors of power."

David received the Mother Joseph Award at a reception on November 18 at Bethel Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, in White Salmon. He was joined by his nominators, Ty W. Erickson, CEO, and Mark Thomas, mission/spiritual director of the Providence Gorge Service Area, and other supporters from the Gorge community.

"David is an accomplished intellectual, holding multiple advanced and doctoral degrees and Ivy League faculty appointments. His contributions to local ministries and programs are most frequently at the governance level. However, David recently described his quiet, daily work as

the handyman for the local transitional housing and emergency homeless shelter (which, like Mother Joseph, he literally helped build with his own hands) as his most satisfying ministry. For over 16 years, he has been fixing pipes, patching roofs and unclogging toilets while gently showing hospitality and compassion to the residents at the shelter."

Some defining moments

What are the milestones in life that shape a David Duncombe? His life's defining moments are clear, including a last-minute change of assignment that kept him out of a battlefield in Korea, an opportunity to demonstrate an innovative weapon of war that thankfully never materialized, and a peaceful demonstration turned tragic that made his path clear. But first, there were the German children, following the American G.I. through the streets of Frankfurt, clamoring for chocolate.

David, just 19 at the time and a self-described "chocoholic," was carrying a bag of the much sought after ration. As a group of children followed him, begging for chocolate, he became anxious. "Suddenly, something in me snapped," he recalled. "I knew I couldn't go on living that way, focused on myself. The chocolate symbolized that."

That was a "religious experience" in the eyes of a young man who had not grown up in a religious family. David was born in 1928 in New York City, the middle child of a lawyer and career Army officer and an artist who

became a children's book author. When David was 3, the family moved to tiny Katonah, NY, bought a 1760 farmhouse with neither water nor electricity, and turned it into a productive farm during World War II. "It was literally a wakeup call for me since I had to wake up every day at 4 a.m. to milk the cows and slop the pigs," David recalled. The farmhouse was sold when David's father died. His mother was very active in Katonah until her death at the age of 94.

Accepted at Yale before he went into the service, David instead opted for Dartmouth when he returned 18 months later from Germany. However, he had signed up for the reserves and two years later was recalled to the service during the Korean War. Next came another defining moment of David's life. He and a couple of others from his infantry unit were held back for kitchen duty in November, just days before the unit shipped out to Korea. Within two weeks of their arrival in Korea, ninety

Editor's Note: The Mother Joseph Award is given annually to a person who exemplifies the values and courage of Mother Joseph, the first provincial superior of the Sisters of Providence in the West. The Leadership Team presents the award on behalf of all of the Sisters of Providence in the province, which includes Alaska, Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Montana and El Salvador.

percent of those soldiers were dead. “I wake up in the morning and think, if it hadn’t been for that order to wash dishes, I might not have come back,” David said.

Next, David was sent to the Austrian alps to help stop the Russians from coming West. There, where the scenery was the most beautiful in the world and the skiing was excellent, soldiers were required to lug 60 millimeter mortars up the mountainside. David successfully designed a lighter, even more effective weapon and was asked about taking it to the proving grounds in Maryland to be tested after his discharge. He never was called to do that, his father surmised, because the Army had no desire to change contracts even though David’s invention was one-third of the cost. Looking back, that was another defining moment. “I was disappointed at the time, but I’m thankful I didn’t use the thing,” he said. “I realize now that I would have killed people.”

David returned to college at Dartmouth, where he majored in political science. Along the way someone suggested that he read the Bible, especially the Gospels. “I discovered that a lot of my values were the same as those in the New Testament, and especially the values of Jesus. It was kind of a conversion experience. I was thankful then that I never became a military officer – I refused a commission – and I wanted to return to college to enter politics or at least government.”

He found himself studying at the feet of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr at the Union Theological Seminary (UTS) in New York. David sought to study with Dr. Niebuhr as a leading political scientist. “I knew that he was a theologian, but I didn’t go for any religious reasons.” After graduation, though not ordained or even baptized, David became a Bible teacher and chaplain at Taft School in Watertown, Conn., for five years. He discovered that Christianity had deep meaning for him and determined to become ordained in 1958, the same year he married his wife Sally, an Episcopal priest’s daughter who died five years ago. The couple had three children, Jane, of Mount Hood, Ore., Betsy, a social worker in Maine, and Stephen, a professor of media studies at New York University.

In 1960, David went to Yale to complete his theological training and stayed for the next 22 years, first as a student earning a Ph.D. in the psychology of religion and chaplaincy, then as the first chaplain for its medical schools. David taught at the Yale Divinity School, where he became friends and colleagues with internationally renowned priest and author Henri Nouwen.

It was there that social justice issues began to call to David. He used his military background and knowledge to create a nonviolent security operation for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) that was used during the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala.

In 1983 he moved to the University of California at San Francisco, becoming chaplain for the Newman Center, and he taught a Clinical Pastoral Education program at St. John of God in Haight-Asbury where he trained CPE students to be counselors to medical, dental and pharmacy students.

Time for perhaps the most defining moment of David’s life was approaching. He agreed to demonstrate at the Concord, Calif., naval weapons station to block a train carrying munitions eventually headed for Nicaragua and El Salvador. A 40-day fast also was involved. “I don’t know which frightened me more, the fast or blocking the train,” David said. “A two- or three-day Lenten fast was all I could handle.” On September 1, 1987, David stood with others on the tracks, waiting for the train to stop as planned so the demonstrators could be arrested. But the train did not stop, running over veteran Brian Willson, who lost both legs and suffered skull fractures and multiple other injuries.

“That got me involved in a six-year demonstration, the longest 24/7 demonstration in American history,” David explained. For the first four years, demonstrators blocked every train and he was arrested more than 100 times. “I learned to fast while in jail,” he added, which made it reasonable for him to go to Washington, D.C., in later years to do long fasts. “I also learned how important prayer was to a successful outcome. They go together.” He took along a two-foot crucifix given to him by a sister to use as a center of meditation, giving him not just stamina but also strength for walking six to seven miles a day up and down the corridors of Congress.

Here I am; send me.

“I never sought any of this out,” David said. “People around me asked me to go, to the South, to stand on the railroad tracks in Concord, to come to Washington, D.C., to do a fast. The people who asked me to participate were people I trusted. That’s why I did those things.”

Just a few of David’s involvements include: a founding member of the Providence Community Caregivers; an advisory board member of the grassroots Emergency Voucher Program; provider of informal, voluntary supervision for a group of local chaplains in hospital, hospice, fire/EMS and parish settings; a board member of the Washington Gorge Action Programs; and chair of the Emergency Food and Shelter board for Klickitat County, Wash. He also is an active member of Bethel United Church of Christ in White Salmon, Wash., and also of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Hood River, Ore.

Sharing the values of Mother Joseph

There are many parallels between David’s values, service and involvement with those of Mother Joseph, his nominators stressed. There is great humility, evidenced by his involvement wherever needed, without expectation of thanks or recognition; simplicity reflected in his personal life and in the fact that he “simply shows up” to participate and take a lead when needed; and charity, indicated by his personal giving to more than 60 charities

despite his own fixed income. Indeed, his nominators wrote, “Yet David is troubled that he cannot give more.”

“David reveals the love of a compassionate, provident God with every breath,” the nominating letter said. “He is a living prayer, an unassuming hero, a treasure hidden in plain sight and a real kick in the pants.”

David explained that he is no stranger to Mother Joseph. He has been to Providence Hood River functions that highlight her life and her works, seen her pictures, and has been impressed with the hospital’s core values. Still, he was stunned when he came in for what he thought was a routine meeting instead was told he would receive the 2010 Mother Joseph Award. “I couldn’t believe it. I was overwhelmed and still am,” he said. “I am not a Roman Catholic, but I learned that did not matter; the award is for sharing Mother Joseph’s spiritual values,” he explained.

An extravagance of God’s grace

He has spent a great deal of time since then thinking about it, he added. Not so much whether he deserves the honor, but about what it means to be selected. “It is almost like being selected by Christ,” he continued. “Not deserving it, but having to acknowledge you have been blessed in this way by no merit of your own. I haven’t found words to express it. I’m not sure that there are words for this.”

“I am really deeply honored and amazed. I have had awards before, but nothing like this.”

David revealed a related incident that came to mind. One of his spiritual directors, the French Jesuit Pierre Wolf, asked David to co-celebrate Mass at a summer retreat. “I thought that was kind of strange since I am not Catholic, but Pierre’s response was, ‘I am, and I am asking you to do it.’ When it came time for communion, there were wafers left over and he passed them to me and said, ‘Eat them.’ I was stunned and started crying,” David recalled.

The next day, David asked Pierre what was going on there. “Pierre’s response was, ‘You’ve always been calculated in matters of grace. The wafers symbolize an extravagance of God’s grace. You only needed one, but you were given all the others.’”

“That’s what got to me about this Mother Joseph Award; this extravagance of God’s grace.” ●

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