

Neerology

David Belongea
1931 - 2015



David was born on December 17, 1931 in Kaukauna Wisconsin. He was the ninth of fifteen children of Isaac Belongea, a former engineer for the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad Company, and Ella Auguste Maldewin, a homemaker. Three days after his birth, on December 20, David was baptized at St. Mary of the Annunciation Church and was given the name Carl George after his uncle and godfather.

At the tender age of four, David began his primary education in Kaukauna's St. Mary Grade School, staffed then by the Franciscan Sisters of Charity from Manitowoc. The simplicity in which the sisters lived made such an impression on David that he attributed that as the beginnings of his Franciscan vocation. At St. Mary's Grade School, David learned to serve at Mass and developed a love for the Eucharist. At their class graduation dinner, one of David's teachers wrote a class prophecy, stating that David would one day become a priest—a prophecy that would later be fulfilled.

David continued his studies at Kaukauna High School. There he became involved in music. He was a member of the chorus and was later a member of the male octet. He then became an accompanist on the piano for all the choruses at school, as well as for the band and vocal soloists. David's skills as an accompanist caught the ears of many. At a state tournament in Madison, where David's soloist won first place, one of the judges wrote, "Your accompaniment added very much to the presentation." In his high school yearbook, the following was written about him: "Part of the success of the chorus was due to his brilliant accompaniment."

David's heavy involvement in music during those years led him to consider pursuing a career in music with dreams of becoming an orchestra conductor. He took the entrance exam at the Lawrence Conservatory of Music in Appleton, and was accepted. However, David also felt that he was being called to the priesthood. This was a conflict for him. After spending time in prayer and reflection, David decided to pursue the priesthood. With the encouragement of his pastor, David applied to the Capuchins in Mount Calvary. He was accepted and was made part of a special class along with other candidates who have already obtained secondary education.

David's decision to join the Capuchins was met with resistance by his father. Isaac used to pass by what was then the St. Anthony House of Theology in Marathon on his way to work and he would often see the Capuchins working. He was repulsed by their austere and rugged appearance. So, when he learned that his son was joining the Capuchins, he was not the least bit pleased. David nevertheless went ahead with his decision. He left for Huntington, Indiana in

the summer of 1951, to enter the novitiate. On August 30 he was invested with the Capuchin habit and was given the religious name "David." The beauty of the ceremony and the friendliness of the friars so moved Isaac that he reconsidered. He fell in love with the Capuchins and finally became at peace with his son's decision.

David made his first profession on September 1, 1952. He began studies in philosophy and in the ensuing years, became involved once again in music. He was first an organist, then later the director of the Oriental choir. He was also the sub-director of music for the friars' Mass. At that time, some of the friars celebrated Mass in Greek (Cuthbert Gumbinger) and in Slavonic (Hermes Kreilkamp). In the summer of 1954, when Solanus Casey celebrated his golden priestly anniversary, David was the organist for the occasion.

On September 1, 1955, David made his perpetual vows. Eight months later, in May 1956, David transferred to Marathon for studies in theology. In Marathon, David again became involved in music and choir. He played the organ for community services and helped organize programs in the friary for special occasions. On some evenings, he and other friars would travel to Wausau to perform mini concerts for patients at the hospital.

On September 10, 1959, in his fourth year of theology, David was ordained a priest at St. Mary Church in Marathon. His fifth and final year was spent in Milwaukee at St. Francis and at St. Elizabeth Parishes doing pastoral work under the guidance of Gerard Hesse and Caspar Stollenwerk, respectively. At the end of that year, David received his assignment. He was initially asked to transfer to Lawrence Seminary in Mount Calvary to teach music. David, however, did not feel disposed to return to the seminary after having spent years there. He was told that there was only one other option for him. Without skipping a beat, and without knowing what it was, David accepted. The assignment, he soon learned, was to go to Nicaragua.

David became part of the province's mission in Central America in 1961. David was first assigned in Puerto Cabezas to work with Florian Ruskamp at the Parroquia de San Pedro. There, David immersed himself in parish work. Two years later, he was transferred to Bluefields, where he taught Latin and religion at St. Pius X Seminary, and music at the primary and secondary school run by the Christian Brothers. He also became the musician and liturgist for the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Rosary.

In 1965, David was asked to become the secretary to the bishop of Bluefields. He moved from the seminary to the chancery. Besides pastoral work in the cathedral parish, David also became involved in ecumenical work with other churches in Bluefields. Together with the pastors from other groups, they formed the Bluefields Ecumenical Council of Christian Churches. They met for meetings, retreats, and other interfaith celebrations. Taking part in this ecumenical group had helped David to come to know other faith leaders — not as rivals seeking to make converts — but as brothers in ministry.

David collaborated with the pastor of the Moravian Church in Bluefields to form an ecumenical choir, with members from the Catholic, Moravian, Baptist and Anglican churches, of which David became the director and organist. Under David's direction, the ecumenical choir learned to sing the fiendishly difficult oratorio, *Messiah*, and performed it in concerts around Bluefields. This endeavor caught the attention of the director of Managua's Orquesta Nacional de Nicaragua. Soon, they were invited to perform Handel's timeless piece with the orchestra at the national theater. The concert was a resounding success. The choir then followed it with an encore performance at the Catedral de León in Nicaragua. On their return to Bluefields, the choir made yet another performance of the same piece, this time at the Bluefield's cathedral to a packed audience. David was very proud of their accomplishment. He believed that music is a universal language that has the power to bring people of various churches together.

Being a missionary gave David a whole new outlook in life. He learned a new language and grew in appreciation of the beauty and the richness of another culture. He became a more independent thinker and brought his gifts at the service of his ministry. The prevailing thought at that time was that missionaries are the ones who teach people about God, but the expulsion of missionaries from China and the convening of the Second Vatican Council at that time, paved the way for a shift from that kind of mentality. David had learned that his role as a missionary was primarily to accompany the people as one sent forth from one church to another. He learned that he had to become the voice for the voiceless and the power for the powerless. This will soon prove to be dangerous for him and his missionary confreres.

In 1986, David returned to Puerto Cabezas to take on the assignment of being the pastor of the parish of San Pedro. The civil war between the revolutionary government (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) and the militia (Contras) was still raging in those days. Missionaries from North America were viewed with suspicion since the United States, under the Raegan administration, was supporting the Contras. Compelled by the need to clear the air regarding their position, David went to visit the Sandanista comandante to deliver this message: The missionaries are there not to fight but to take care of the spiritual needs of the people, including the soldiers.

Soldiers soon came to the parish for rosary and counseling. Twice David was requested to act as an intermediary between the government and a group of Contras. David became a member of a group of ministers regarded as guarantors — those who would ensure that the government would fulfill their promises to the other party. This was kind a work that David had never imagined he would ever be involved with, but it was work consistent with his vocation. After all, as a Christian and a Franciscan, he was called to be a peacemaker.

In 1991 David began to experience some health issues. After thirty years in the mission, David left Nicaragua to return to the United States. When André Weller was asked by the province to go to Panamá, David took his place as pastor at the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary — a largely Hispanic parish in Chicago, Illinois. He remained there for five years serving alongside two other Capuchin friars. When the province relinquished the parish in June 1996, David was

transferred to Appleton, Wisconsin, where he became the pastor at St. Joseph Parish until June 2000.

That same year, David moved to St. Fidelis Community in Appleton, where he served as local minister from 2002 until 2005—a position he never wanted, but accepted in obedience. In his retirement years David continued to serve his community through music. He would accompany them on the piano at morning and evening prayer, and at Mass. He would teach the friars new songs and would plan their community's celebrations, such as the Transitus and the Easter Triduum. On weekends, he would offer Mass help outs. In his spare time he maintained the friary's library and listened to his vast collection of classical music. After supper, he enjoyed playing Contract Rummy with his confreres and having a nice, warm cup of tea to cap off the evening.

In Autumn of 2015 David was admitted to Appleton Medical Center. He was diagnosed with pneumonia. His illness took a toll on his health and eventually affected his artificial valve. He was transferred to Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, for a mitral valve replacement. On the morning of his surgery, David suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage. The extent of the bleeding rendered David neurologically demised. In accordance with his wishes, David was taken off life support. He passed away peacefully on the night of October 16, 2015. He is buried at St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery in Appleton.

Like a great Wagnerian opera, David's life is filled with wonderful leitmotifs. His were music, religious life, priesthood, the mission—all of which, when put together, form a grand synthesis—a *gesamtkunstwerk*—of a life. The great Italian tenor, Luciano Pavarotti once said, "A life lived in music is a life beautifully lived." In Handel's *Messiah*, in one soprano aria, there is a passage from Isaiah: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that preach the Gospel of peace." David's life is beautiful, indeed, because of music and because he used that God-given gift as a powerful medium to preach the Good News of Christ's peace to all, regardless of their language, culture, beliefs, or politics. He truly was a disciple of Christ and a follower of Francis.

*Concédele Señor el descanso eterno,
y brilla para él la luz perpetua.
Que descanse en paz.
Amen.*

~Zoilo Garibay