

# A Welcoming Home Away from Home

DWC honors **three Dubuque sister communities** for their generous support of Vietnamese students

It may come as a surprise that nearly a third of the students at Divine Word College live off campus. Perhaps even more unexpected is that most of those off-campus students aren't living in apartment buildings or rental houses. Instead, approximately 30 Vietnamese religious sisters enrolled at DWC reside with one of three religious sister communities in the nearby city of Dubuque.

These communities do more than provide housing — they create an enriching environment where the students

live in community with fellow sisters, receive academic support, and experience companionship on their faith journeys.

This spring, Divine Word College recognized the commitment of these three Dubuque-based communities by presenting them with the Donaghey Award for Outstanding Service. The honored congregations were: the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM), the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (PBVM), and the Sisters of St. Francis (OSF).

These partnerships have fostered meaningful collaboration among Catholic organizations in the area, benefiting both the students and the host communities. Divine Word College President Fr. Tom Ascheman, SVD, expressed deep appreciation for the local sisters, reflecting on the profound impact they've had on the college community.

"The purpose of Divine Word College is to prepare missionaries for today and tomorrow," he said. "Our companion sister congregations are fully committed to the same purpose. The college is enormously grateful for and indebted to them for both their generous deeds and their prayers."



Fr. Tom Ascheman, SVD

Sister Carmen Hernandez, president of the Sisters of the Presentation in Dubuque, reflected on the gift of



## The Donaghey Award

The Donaghey Award is named in honor of Rev. John Donaghey, SVD, who dedicated much of his life to Divine Word, as an instructor dean of students, vice president of academic affairs, president, and longtime member of the Board of Trustees. Established in 1999, the award recognizes individuals and groups who have demonstrated a lasting commitment to the mission of Divine Word College.

Sr. Van Nguyen, MQP chats with guests during the Donaghey Award reception.





**Back row L to R:**  
DWC President Fr. Tom Ascherman,  
SVD and Associate Director for  
Development Fr. Thang Hoang, SVD

**Front row L to R:**  
Congregational leaders Sr.  
LaDonna Manternach, BVM, Sr.  
Kathy Knipper, OSF, Sr. Carmen  
Hernandez, PBVM

community and the mutual blessings shared through this partnership.

“To us, this isn’t simply an act of service, it is an extension of the hospitality that is woven into the fabric of our identity as Presentation Sisters,” she said. “Having our Vietnamese sisters live with us has been an extraordinary blessing.”

Sr. Carmen said the DWC students bring vibrancy, resilience, and rich culture into the lives of the Presentation Sisters.

“In accepting this award, we want to express our heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to Divine Word College for its inspiring missionary commitment, nurturing vibrant new leaders for the church. To our Vietnamese sisters, we offer our profound thanks for the gift of their presence,” she said. “You have widened our world and strengthened our sense of shared purpose. May this award reflect not only what we have been given, but also the immense blessings of which we have received.”

Living with the sisters also gives students daily opportunities to interact with native English speakers who help explain American customs and culture. Sr. Nhung Hong Thi Tran, LHC, who lives with the Sisters of St. Francis, said she and her classmates are each paired with a companion Franciscan Sister who accompanies them throughout their time in the United States. Step by step and word by word, these women help the students grow in language, understanding, and confidence.



*Sr. Nhung Hong Thi  
Tran, LHC-TD*

Sr. Nhung shared a lighthearted memory that illustrates both the challenges and joys of learning a new language. One day, a Franciscan Sister taught her the word “deer,” showing her a photo of the animal standing in the prairie. Sr. Nhung carefully repeated the word: “deer, deer.” A few days later, she walked into a room where another sister greeted her warmly with, “Hello, my dear.” Thinking she had heard “deer” again, Sr. Nhung ran to the window in search of the animal — but saw nothing outside. Moments like these, she said, have brought both laughter and learning to her experience in the United States.

“With such encouragement, how could we possibly give up? Beyond our companions, all Franciscan Sisters have become our teachers,” Sr. Nhung said at the Donaghey Award presentation. “We Vietnamese sisters extend our deepest appreciation to you for your gracious hospitality, for opening your hearts and your home to us. Your embrace of our cultural traditions exemplifies the universal language of love and understanding that bridges all communities. Through your generosity, we have the opportunity to study at Divine Word College, to grow intellectually, spiritually and personally. Thank you for everything you have done and continue to do for us.”