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Article published Sunday, May 6, 2007
'I'M JUST A TRAVELING PREACHER'

Evangelist from Toledo on barefoot path for 16 years

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**By DAVID YONKE
BLADE RELIGION
EDITOR**

When Carl James Joseph left Toledo in 1991, he left on foot — barefoot, in fact — wearing a robe and carrying only a Bible, a rosary, and a toothbrush.

The long-haired, soft-spoken evangelist — who calls himself “What’s Your Name?” but is usually referred to as “The Jesus Guy” — has since walked his way through 47 states and 13 foreign countries.


“I’m just a traveling preacher,” Mr. Joseph told The Blade in a recent interview.

In 2000, the Bowsher High School graduate was quietly making his way across western Pennsylvania when the world’s media suddenly discovered this countercultural evangelist who seemed to have stepped out of the pages of the Bible.

Mr. Joseph soon found himself featured in Time magazine and on Good Morning America, 20/20, British television, the Washington Post, and a three-part series in The Blade.



Carl James Joseph, carrying his only possessions, makes his way to the Saint Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Ala.
(SPECIAL TO THE BLADE/BOB FARLEY)

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"It got very intense. It was a pretty major story all over the country and internationally as well," he said. "I somewhat ran away from it."

He headed south, he said, where the media were not so intrusive and people seemed more accepting of his unorthodox appearance and his Gospel message.

"The South is a whole different world," he said.



Carl James Joseph talks with Jan Harris, at the car, outside First United Methodist Church in Cullman. Mr. Joseph finds acceptance in the South, he says. (SPECIAL TO THE BLADE/BOB FARLEY)

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faith, not going with shoes, gets people's attention."

He does not have a job or money, relying entirely on the graciousness of others.

He has never been married. "I have never felt that call for family and so forth," he explained. "I believe it's a way that God has prepared me for this life."

But walking many thousands of miles — he cannot estimate the number — has taken a toll on his body, and Mr. Joseph underwent arthroscopic surgery on both knees last year.

"It's extremely diminished my ability to walk," he said. "Over the winter, I couldn't walk at all. I could hardly stand. Now I have been able to go a few miles at the most. I have to do things in a stable manner instead of going from area to area, constantly on foot."

The knee surgery, like dental work he had done last week, was donated, he said.

'They know it's pure'

People, whether it's someone he knows or a courageous stranger, give him food and shelter, although he will not accept cash. Many nights when no one offered him a place to sleep, he slept in churches, parks, woods, and on the beach.

"For the most part, what I've been doing since leaving the Pennsylvania area was literally living the way Jesus talked about: The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," Mr. Joseph said. "I think that living without money, I've seen God's hand in this because I can go into an area and talk to people and they know it's not about money. People feel secure. They know it's pure."

He said he began walking because he felt he should not contribute to pollution or to the petroleum and automobile industries.

Mr. Joseph, now 46, still wears a robe, never wears shoes or sandals, wears his long brown hair parted in the middle, has a beard because it's easier than shaving every day, and carries only a Bible, rosary, and toothbrush.

"What happens with the rosary and even with the Bible, I'll give it away any chance I can if it'll be used," he said.

In the winter, he wears a warmer robe but still goes barefoot.

"A lot of people ask me about the shoes," he said. "I found that taking even that extra step of

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"I take advantage of [cars] now, for good reason, but back then I said that unless I'm sure it's God's will, I'll walk."

He has never owned a cell phone and regrets agreeing to carry one briefly at the request of a television news producer in Philadelphia who wanted to be able to contact him at a moment's notice.

"So I agreed to carry someone's cell phone around, and I went downtown and met this homeless person, who was overjoyed at meeting me because he saw me on TV," Mr. Joseph said. "He used his spare change to buy me a water at McDonald's and then the cell phone went off and his whole demeanor changed. I think it hurt my credibility."

He laughed when asked about e-mail. "I may have sent one e-mail in my life. I certainly never received one."

Settling in the South

Mr. Joseph has settled for a while in Cullman, Ala., a town of 14,000 in north-central Alabama, midway between Birmingham and Huntsville. The town is 10 miles northwest of Hanceville, home of Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), the Catholic television network broadcast in 144 countries and 140 million households and the location of the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

The stationary life has its blessings, Mr. Joseph said.

"I was able to, in a sense, get a fresh start," he said. "That's one reason I go by James Joseph now instead of What's Your Name? It's different here. I noticed the deep segregation that's a problem here, especially in religion. So I was able to come into areas and help bring together blacks and whites."

Roots in this region

Mr. Joseph was born in Detroit and grew up in Toledo, attending Gesu Elementary School. He was 12 years old when he and his older brother, Vincent, were invited to join the Catholic Church. The brothers accepted, were baptized, and made their first communion a week later.

James attended St. John's Jesuit High School for 3½ years before transferring to Bowsheer as a senior, graduating in 1978.

A year later, he was confirmed at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church in Temperance.

Moved by 'the Holy Spirit'

He never attended seminary but has devoted much of his life to reading the Bible and the writings of major religious figures. He said it would be inaccurate to describe him as "self-taught."

"I like to emphasize that it's the Holy Spirit," he said. "Jesus said the Holy Spirit will teach you all things. The Apostles were, for example, taught directly by Jesus, but it really wasn't until the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost that they were able to share and to write.

"Yes, I've done an awful lot of reading on my own — the Bible, church fathers, some of the Scripture scholars of the last 2,000 years. But I would say it's especially through the gift of God, through prayer, that I've been able to share," Mr. Joseph said. "And also, like Jesus, it's through experience. It's one thing to learn by reading; it's another to learn by experience."

Mr. Joseph said he preaches a Christian message, not specifically Catholicism.

"I've always been open to whatever God may want. I never really set out with

the intention of living this particular lifestyle," he said. "But once I recognized it was what God was calling me to do, I went along with it."

His father, Louis Joseph, 71, lives in a condemned rental house in West Toledo and is hoping to move near his son soon. He wants to join forces with a man who owns property near EWTN's shrine, on which he plans to build cabins for pilgrims to rent at low cost.

Louis Joseph, who is separated from his wife, Bette, said he regrets that he was not an "active Catholic" when James was young.

"I did try to instill basic Catholic values — honesty, integrity, and morality. But I didn't have much emphasis on it like I do now," he said. "He made me more that way. He does that to everybody he comes in contact with. He's quite an unusual person."

'A very holy man'

Marie Arsenault, 65, a French-Canadian living in Cullman, met James Joseph shortly after moving to Alabama three years ago. She and her husband have occasionally provided the evangelist with a room, and he has been staying with the Arsenaults since December.

"He's very normal, very easy to get along with," Mrs. Arsenault said. "Very intelligent. Very soft-spoken. The Spirit just leads him. He's definitely a very holy man. To me, it was like Jesus coming to visit you."

A monsignor in Pennsylvania called Mr. Joseph "a modern-day St. Francis of Assisi," and some people have reported miraculous healings after coming into contact with the itinerant preacher.

Mr. Joseph said he tries to avoid such labels as "healer" or "prophet."

"I think that's one of the reasons I used that particular moniker of 'What's Your Name?' We have a way of putting people in categories by way of position. And I was very conscious of that. In one sense, I would identify with an apostle, as one living an apostolic life for 16 years. ... I do identify more with the term of 'evangelist,'" he said.

'The Jesus Guy'

Sean Tracey, of Portsmouth, N.H., is in the process of finishing a documentary film about Mr. Joseph titled *The Jesus Guy*, which he plans to debut at several festivals this summer.

"I think a lot of people are fascinated by who he is, what he is doing, and his commitment to this. There's a lot of interest just in the way he's leading his life," Mr. Tracey said.

He has edited more than 70 hours of film into the 65-minute documentary and decided to call it *The Jesus Guy* because that's how "people on the street" usually refer to Mr. Joseph.

A bumpy road

The barefoot evangelist has faced a number of obstacles in his 16 years of traveling.

He said he was kicked out of Mexico in 1999 when government officials became concerned over the large crowds that were following him.

In Texas, he said, a group of youths once threatened to crucify him. He was arrested in Greenfield in southwest Ohio on a disorderly conduct charge when he refused to stop preaching to a crowd. The charge was later dismissed.

In Pennsylvania, a man accused Mr. Joseph of blasphemy and then tried to stab him.

A few months ago, Mr. Joseph said he was insulted by a minister at an African-American church in Alabama.

"I was invited up to the front and the next thing you know, the pastor was talking about a 'white devil' and then talking about how it's common sense to wear shoes. I knew he was talking about me personally. I just had to shake the dust off my feet and move on," he said.

"It can be very difficult for me, emotionally. But rejection is something I shouldn't be surprised about," Mr. Joseph said. "In Jesus' life, it wasn't his success in preaching or his miracles that brought about salvation; it was his suffering and death on the cross."

'That simple lifestyle'

Lately, he said, he's been going into public schools on literacy days, reading from the Gospels and answering students' questions.

"I was invited as a guest reader and my choice of books was the Bible. All day long, they brought people in who asked questions. I was not proselytizing, but answering questions," he said.

He said he has never tried to start a religious community, preferring to carry out his evangelism on his own.

"I have a sense that God is calling me to something unique. Maybe there are people who want to follow a similar lifestyle. But I don't know about formalizing it as a religious order or something like that. I think one reason I've avoided that is to avoid the idea of a cult or something like that."

He hopes to continue his journey in the same manner for as long as possible.

"The core of my being is wanting to follow Jesus in a more literal way," Mr. Joseph said. "It may change, by not being as mobile, for example, but I have a deep conviction about living that simple lifestyle."

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