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Return of the robe

BY BOBBY MASO
STAFF WRITER

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His first visit drew hordes of followers and attracted national attention.

The second coming, so far, has been quieter.

The mysterious figure known here as "What's Your Name?" has re-emerged in the Hazleton area, almost a decade after he first began walking its streets – often barefoot – proclaiming the word of God.

"What's Your Name?" was his response to those who would ask him his name, and it became his moniker. He's also been known as "The Jesus Guy" or just Carl James Joseph, his birth name.

But no matter what he's called, there's generally enough buzz to attract even the modestly curious to the nomadic evangelist with Jesus-like long hair and beard, and a simple white robe.

On Tuesday, sightings of Joseph were reported around Tamaqua. By Tuesday night, he was back in Hazleton, stopping on sidewalks to chat and attending Mass at St. Gabriel's Roman Catholic Church on South Wyoming Street.

Joseph has been spreading his religious message for 20 years – and he's been doing the same since Hazleton last saw him.

"After I left this area the last time, I went to Philadelphia. I went to South Jersey to minister. Then, after 9/11, I thought I would either go to New York City or Washington. God brought me to the capital," he said Friday in downtown Hazleton.

After leaving Washington, Joseph said he headed to Alabama, where the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) is based. He said last week's Pro-Life March in Washington, D.C., which opposes abortion, led him back to Pennsylvania.

"That's such an important issue at this time and I wanted to be a part of it because if the Freedom of Choice Act is passed, it will be one of the greatest evils," the Catholic/Christian evangelist said.

Joseph focuses on Christ but still likes to address specific needs, like that of the need to have special community events that bring everyone together.

"I hope we can focus on our needs and focus on a solution, especially spiritually, and have united prayer," he said. "And also on having a greater communication in particular within the Hispanic and non-Hispanic community."

Joseph said he's worked with members of the Hispanic community – he's fluent in Spanish – to foster greater communication with non-Hispanic community members.

When asked about the reception he gets in Hazleton, Joseph smiled and made no secret that he appreciates the kindness.

"There's always a great response when I am here," he said. "There was a tremendous response when I first arrived and it got the attention of the whole world. It's always nice to be here and as Jesus said, "a city on a



Carl Joseph, known throughout the area as "What's Your Name?" walks along South Wyoming Street on Friday.

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mountain is meant to share it's light.”

Not long after he first came to Hazleton in 2000, reporters with newspapers and television networks from around the world converged on Hazleton to tell his story. Later, a documentary called “The Jesus Guy” was produced; the traveling preacher believes it has helped change lives.

One whose life changed is Dr. Frank Polidora, who first noticed Joseph walking along Interstate 80 almost 10 years ago.

“The weather then was much the same as it is now,” Polidora said. “Later, I was looking for him and saw him in the chapel at (the former) St. Joe’s hospital. I took him around to see the patients and it was amazing how people accepted him.

“I mean, the one thing is, he’s not Christ,” Polidora continued. “But he’s like a living icon. And what do icons do? They make us think of saints. And with him, I often noticed that you’d see other people who either loved, hated or feared him, and it made me think of what it must have been like when Jesus walked the earth.”

Joseph echoed that sentiment, saying he doesn’t think he’s Jesus and that his clothing is not a costume. He merely feels he is sharing good news, just as God told his apostles to do – without shoes, without money, and with one robe.

As for how long he will remain in the area, Joseph said it will be the same as in any other place.

“As long as God wants,” he said. “I hope to do as much good as I can.”

On Tuesday, Joseph hopes to more clearly illustrate his intentions, as well as clear up any questions people may have, when he appears on “The Sam Lesante Show” at 7 p.m. on local Channel 13 SSPTV. He said he will talk, among other things, about the current state of church closings and public criticism of Diocese of Scranton Bishop Joseph Martino.

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