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## Paulist Priest's Ministry Brings Luke's Gospel to Life

By **RON LAJOIE**



Luke Live

Father James DiLuzio, C.S.P., brings the Gospel according to St. Luke to life during a recent performance. He says one of his goals for the production is to perform "Luke Live" at a secular venue.

The first time Father James DiLuzio, C.S.P., read Scripture in a theatrical setting he received rave reviews.

"Father Jack Collins, C.S.P., was doing an evangelical program called 'Give Us 60 Minutes, We'll Give You the Catholic World,' it was sort of based on the 1010 WINS radio show," he recalled with a laugh. Father DiLuzio, working at the time for the Metropolitan Opera a few blocks north of St. Paul the Apostle Church on Columbus Avenue, had only recently started going back to church after an absence of some 20 years. He decided he liked the Paulist preaching and had recently become a lector at the parish.

“It was a semi-theatrical presentation of the Catholic Church. A lot of young adults were involved in it,” he explained. “I was 31, and I got to proclaim Isaiah 55, ‘all you who are thirsty come to the waters...’ It was the first time in a long time I had memorized Scripture. I just kept going over it. It was the Holy Spirit, I guess. But I couldn’t get enough of it. At any rate, some of my actor friends and some people from the Met came to the production and they said, ‘Wow, even when you were acting you weren’t that good! That’s when I really thought this could be a vocation.’”

As a youngster Father DiLuzio had been drawn to the theater. With a master’s degree in drama from the University of Southern California he pursued a professional acting career through his 20s, got his SAG-AFTRA cards and went to auditions. Needed dental work propelled him to find something that provided a steadier income. He took a job at the Metropolitan Opera in the early 80s and moved quickly up corporate ladder to eventually become director of customer service.

Away from the church he was settling into a routine adult life, kind of drifting along, when family difficulties arose that got him thinking again about his dormant faith.

“I’d stopped going to church on a regular basis in high school,” he said. “I think it’s more common than not. And I said you know I have to get more involved in my Church. So I started coming here.”

What attracted him to the Paulists, he said, was the way they sought to present the Gospel to contemporary culture through the use of modern media. “Paulists do not condemn culture nor do they try to conform the Gospel to it,” he explained. “The Paulist mission is to integrate faith and culture.”

He entered the Paulist novitiate in 1987 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1993.

As a young priest he began to explore ways in which he could bring his acting background into his ministry. Then, while working as an associate pastor in Los Angeles, he saw Alec McGowan’s one-man performance of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. “I got the video and I said I would love to do that because my background was in English and education and I have a master’s in drama. I thought what a great way to integrate faith and preaching and acting!”

Then while engaged in campus ministry at the University of Minnesota he got to direct and act in a student production of “Into the Woods.” The acting bug was back.

“It just pulled so many things from my past together,” he recalled. He had been doing missions work, which he found exciting. As that work ended, he put together a proposal to perform the Gospel of St. Luke, his personal favorite of the four synoptic Gospels.

“I wanted to do missions and I wanted to do something different,” he explained. “I wanted to memorize the Gospel of Luke but I didn’t want to do it just as a theatre piece. I wanted to intersperse it with preaching and then I’m a singer so I wanted to do songs and meditations.”

The result is “Luke Live” a dramatic proclamation of the Gospel in 12 segments he has performed in missions at parishes and schools across the country since 2003. “Luke Live” is a unique performance pastiche in which Father DiLuzio brings the written word to life.

“Hearing the Gospel proclaimed from memory invites participants into an experience of the early Church when written copies of the Gospels were scarce and memorization was the way the stories of Jesus were preserved,” he said. “They became more personal, more engaging, more interactive in the telling and the hearing.

“One thing it’s brought to me is how much real life and fully human everybody is in the Bible. You don’t get that when you just hear it in formal proclamation. You just don’t get how human they are.”

Father DiLuzio said his use of contemporary music by artists such as Bruce Springsteen, “Into the Fire,” helps bridge the gap between faith and culture. He sometimes performs them with piano accompaniment and at other times a cappella.

“Luke Live” keeps Father DiLuzio on the road much of the year. “I’ve been on the road every week since the first week of February and I will be until Holy Week,” he told CNY during a stopover at St. Paul’s rectory, his luggage still packed, following his most recent road trip to Ohio. In between, he’s been working on a package of CDs on “Luke Live.”

How has bringing Luke to life for 10-plus years deepened his own faith?

“I feel I’ve come full circle,” he said. “I feel very strongly the spirit is moving me in these directions. And hopefully I’m freeing others to tend to that spirit. Together we are coming to know Jesus on a more personal level and learning more about ourselves. That is how we grow in faith.”