

Experiencing Jesus: An Interview With Frank Desiderio

“Christians have to be able to present images and messages throughout the media that are supportive of what they believe so they have a place in the culture,” said Frank Desiderio. “If you’re not in the media, you don’t have a perceived place in the culture.”

The project was a hard sell. Father Kieser shopped it to the major networks, each of which passed, saying it was “too religious.” He offered it elsewhere, but still didn’t find any takers.

Then, Father Kieser died in 2000, leaving Paulist Productions without its president and the project without its instigator.

Enter Frank Desiderio, who had been director of story development for Paulist Productions. He became president of the company and executive producer of the documentary.

Finally, with a bite from the Hallmark Channel, production on “The Jesus Experience” moved forward.

The project was massive. It took two years actually to produce, with the filmmakers amassing over 2,000 individual images of Christ, not to mention gathering archival film footage, shooting re-enactments and interviewing roughly 50 experts.

“We had two people working full time for six to eight months on clearances” for copyrighted materials, Desiderio told EthicsDaily.com on the phone from his office in Pacific Palisades, Calif.

Desiderio also sought “personalities” to narrate the eight segments covering Jesus’ impact on various parts of the world. He enlisted several actors, including

Mike Farrell, Blair Underwood, Jane Seymour and Patricia Heaton, the co-star of "Everybody Loves Raymond."

"She was raised Catholic," Desiderio said of Emmy Award winner Heaton. "Her husband is Presbyterian. She's a very dedicated Christian woman. She graciously agreed to do the North America hour."

So it was that Desiderio brought "The Jesus Experience" to the [Hallmark Channel](#) (currently airing in segments on Sundays at 12 noon ET) and to [VHS](#) and [DVD](#).

After earning a bachelor's in English in 1976, Desiderio worked in children's book publishing for a while. Then he went to seminary and became interested in the Paulists because they effectively use electronic media to preach the Gospel.

He started doing radio production and eventually complemented his master's in theology with a master's in communications management from the University of Southern California.

Desiderio, who turns 50 next month, said he had several hopes for "The Jesus Experience," which is dedicated to Father Kieser.

"I not only made it for Christians, but I was also really reaching out to non-Christians and the skeptic," he said. "This is definitely something a non-Christian could get something out of. But Christians will like it too."

"The other thing I wanted to do for Christians was open up their heritage to them" in a way that is "entertaining, enriching and inspiring," he said. "I want it to present Christian heroes that the average Christian could aspire to be like."

In fact, Desiderio said the company decided early on to make the project "character-driven." That is, it would present heroes and personalities from the Christian faith and show "people who converted to Christianity and changed their culture," he said.

That idea was also the standard for what to cut, for when the subject is

Christianity, even an eight-part series means much of the history won't be told.

"It was really hard in Asia, where we had to just eliminate whole countries," Desiderio said of the editing process. "We couldn't do a lot with places like Indonesia. We didn't do anything with Australia or the Philippines."

Inevitably, some people—many people—got left out. For example, Desiderio said he especially regretted having to cut the story of two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, from the hour on Jesus and the Slavs. "We could have easily done 10 or 15 minutes on them," he said.

Now that war with Iraq has begun, Desiderio thinks the documentary has special relevance, mainly because it shows how Jesus has meant different things to different people.

"It shows how throughout history the warriors and pacifists have rallied behind Jesus," he said. "I think you're seeing the same thing today. George Bush is very much acting out of his evangelical Christianity to go to war. And the Vatican also, out of its own sense of Christian morality, is opposing war."

Desiderio said producing the documentary doesn't squash being affected by it.

"I think that the big surprises for me and the things that I enjoyed the most were digging into the Asian and African hours." Desiderio said he was already familiar with Jesus in North America, Western Europe and even among the Slavs. But he particularly enjoyed seeing Jesus in Africa and Asia "and how different the cultures are."

Desiderio believes that not only will others find this story engaging, as he did, but also that they need to see a Christian presence in the media.

"The role of media is expanding in both a positive and a negative way," he said. "In the past, the media was entertainment, a diversion from daily life. Now the media is omnipresent. You can't get away from it."

“Some of those messages are benign,” he continued. “But some of those messages and images we get are counter to a Christian message.”

“Christians have to be able to present images and messages throughout the media that are supportive of what they believe so they have a place in the culture,” he said. “If you’re not in the media, you don’t have a perceived place in the culture.”

Christians, Desiderio said, must carve a place in the culture, and they must change that culture. They can do so, partially, by what they watch and don’t watch on television.

“There’s a chance of changing the culture of television,” he said. He suggested that viewers, if they’re fed up with reality television, should tell the networks as much. They should say they don’t want to watch certain shows, but they are interested in other kinds—like “The Jesus Experience.”

ABC is meeting this week to determine an airdate for “Judas,” a made-for-TV movie for which Desiderio was executive producer. Desiderio is also working on several other projects, including a feature-length Easter story for kids and another made-for-TV movie for Hallmark.

These projects, and others from Desiderio and Paulist Productions, extend God’s message into the ever-expanding mediascape. And Desiderio hopes Christians will respond.

“When we put something on that’s worthwhile and Christians can get behind,” he said, “they’ve got to get behind it.”

Cliff Vaughn is associate director for EthicsDaily.com.

Click [here](#) to read our review of “The Jesus Experience.”

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Click [here](#) to visit the Hallmark Channel.