

Photographer Creates 21st Century Portrait of Jesus

✖ Fashion photographer Michael Belk has done shoots for Calvin Klein, Nautica and , with his images appearing in *Vogue*, *GQ* and *Vanity Fair*. But the longtime Christian says his best work by far is a new collection of photos that feature Jesus at the center.

Belk's *Journey With the Messiah* collection, which officially launches on Friday, seeks to retell the story of Jesus to a 21st^t-century audience. Shot in Matera, Italy, the location for *The Passion of the Christ*, the images draw from biblical stories such as the Last Supper, Jesus and the woman at the well and the Sermon on the Mount to address modern-day issues such as addiction, poverty and materialism.

"I look at these images, and these are divine," Belk said. "These came from God. I had nothing to do with this. I was just a guy with a camera."

Belk said he plans to release the collection on the anniversary of 9/11 to help an anxious nation find the source of true peace. He said like the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the recent economic crisis has left many people searching for answers.

"In our society, we are so self-reliant," he said. "I think many people at that time realized there was something bigger than them that they needed to turn to."

But Belk said he also felt prompted to use his talents to glorify God.

"I just felt like I had been given this opportunity to know Jesus in a personal way ... and it made me want to say to people: 'There is nothing to fear here. What you're afraid of

is religion. You're afraid of some of this crazy stuff you sometimes see on television. You're afraid of people marching in front of an abortion clinic with vulgar signs. You're afraid of people who kill other people in the name of God, and that is not who Jesus is.'"

The project, which cost \$600,000 and took more than a year and a half to complete, includes such images as "The Second Mile," which is drawn from the Beatitudes and depicts Jesus walking beside a man in a Nazi uniform, carrying his gear.

Belk said the photo is meant to illustrate Jesus' command in Matthew 5 to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us and forgive others as Christ forgave us.

"Quandry," which shows Jesus standing behind a group in a Ferrari, is drawn from the story of the rich young ruler.

Other images are more controversial, such as "Embrace," which depicts Jesus standing with representatives from a variety of faiths. "I believe every knee is going to bow before Jesus Christ before they get into eternity; how God has planned that for people is beyond me," he said. "I don't know. For people I think can understand the message of Christ, I'm going to tell them the story."

(See images from the *Journey With the Messiah* collection.)

Belk is selling prints of the collection and hopes to make it a traveling exhibit. He and his wife also launched the With All That I Gave You Foundation, a nonprofit organization that will use proceeds from the collection to help meet the needs of people worldwide.

During the photo shoot in Italy, Belk said he brought along a director's chair with God's name on it. "The reason was that I knew I had been given the ability to create pictures, but I couldn't make them divine where they'd have the power to touch lives," Belk said.

Now that his “best work” so far is complete, Belk says he’s putting it in God’s hands to do with as He pleases. “I just truly believe that God wouldn’t go to this trouble if He didn’t want to use it to touch lives,” he said.