

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
An Unexpected Use for Plastic Santas

I received a call last week from a woman who had been raised Catholic, but has since stopped practicing her faith. Although she once had a strong faith, she now finds herself wondering if there is even a God and, if there is a God, whether He truly revealed Himself in the Catholic Church. This Advent, there is no more important question we can ask: the Christmas story - *is it really true? Did God become man? How can I know?*

There are shallow tokens of Christian faith everywhere in this season: plastic Santas and reindeer, elves in red caps, and colored lights. Their obvious fantasy gives a carnival air to the festivities that may distract from this key question. But there is something important about these playful suggestions of faith that should not go unnoticed. They witness to one of the strongest proofs of the Christian religion: the fulfillment of prophecy.

Throughout the New Testament and in the writings of the Church Fathers, the teachers of our faith constantly pointed to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy as proof that God had really revealed Himself in Jesus. What were those prophecies, and how do they relate to our celebration of Advent?

The Hebrew Scriptures promised over and over that in the last days the God of Israel would be acknowledged throughout the gentile (non-Jewish) nations, and that this would come about through the reign of a Divine King. His Kingdom would bring an outpouring of God's Spirit. Men and women would be offered the grace to live righteously, to know and love God, and to receive the forgiveness of sins through His death and sacrifice.

Consider a few passages:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains . . . and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:2-3)

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6-7)

In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious. (Isaiah 11:10)

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isaiah 42:1)

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Ask yourself, "Is it true that the God of Israel has come to be acknowledged throughout the earth, even by gentiles?" Of course it is. There is no part of the earth that is not covered by a Catholic diocese, where the God of Israel is not acknowledged. Even the silly plastic Santas on every lawn are a lighthearted witness to this fact. Thousands of miles from Judea, and thousands of years from Isaiah, we find the words of this Hebrew prophet fulfilled again and again.

How did this take place? How did Israel's God come to be acknowledged throughout the earth? Again, this is no mystery. It came about through the ministry of the apostles, sent by Jesus of Nazareth, and by their successors in the Catholic Church. The apostles claimed to have seen Him die, and then rise again from the dead. Preaching that message, and entrusting it to others, they spread belief in Israel's God throughout the earth.

Finally, did the ministry of this Church bring about true righteousness and the forgiveness of sins? Of course it did. Who can deny the powerful witness of the saints throughout history? Their heroic charity, sacrifice, and hope? And everywhere throughout the world, they have received their strength from the Church and her sacraments, and their courage and hope from the words of absolution and the forgiveness of sins.

The Second Vatican Council embraced this messianic vision of the Catholic Church. The Council fathers called her a "messianic people," and found in her "a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race." (*Lumen Gentium*, 9)

This Advent, when you drive about and see tokens of Christian faith everywhere, remind yourself that the miraculous spread of Christian faith throughout the world is, itself, the fulfillment of prophecy and, thus, a sure sign of its divine origin. Consider, as well, that the faith is ONE only in the Catholic Church. 1500 years ago, St. Augustine of Hippo reflected on this aspect of the faith - that there is but one church in which the faith is both One and Catholic - that is, spread through every corner of the world. This led him to declare, "*Securus iudicat orbis terrarum!*" "The Verdict of the Whole World is Conclusive."