

I can only think of one or two people over the years who were “converted” and began OCIA because of an intellectual agreement with Church teaching. You should picture quotation marks around the word “converted” because no one is, or at least no one ever should be, “converted” to the Catholic Church. The only conversion that takes place is to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. People come because they think, or at least hope, they’ll find a more vivid experience of Christ’s presence here than they did wherever they came from.

That’s not to say that we, the Church, don’t have teachings, and laws, and all the rest — we do, and they’re important in their own way. But they aren’t themselves the way. Christ is the Way. In fact, for decades after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, His followers were simply called “the Way”. Today we try to teach what the Church teaches, but it’s important to remember that Jesus Himself, the Apostles, and the first disciples all managed to spread the Good News of the Gospel to the ends of the then-known world without most of the stuff we think is so important two millennia later. They weren’t dogmatists. They didn’t have a catechism, and they didn’t have a Code of Canon Law. They didn’t have a hierarchy as we understand it today. What they *did* have was the simple yet powerful fact that they were *practitioners*. They taught the things Jesus taught, sure. But most of all, they *practiced* the things that Jesus taught, they *practiced* the Gospel, and it was the *practice* of the Gospel that attracted others. Through the practice of the Apostles and first disciples, others sensed the presence of Christ. That’s why they joined “the Way” initially and that’s why they stayed.

And all of that was just as Isaiah had prophesied. The prophet Isaiah lived some eight hundred years before Christ. His work is the most oft-quoted of the Hebrew Scriptures in the New Testament. It’s quoted directly ninety times and there’re another four hundred allusions to it.¹ He had much to say about the eventual coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom He’d bring. That’s why we’ll be hearing much from Isaiah during Advent.

Our First Reading today gives us a nice overview of what Isaiah had to say. Listen to what the prophet says will characterize the Messiah: the Messiah will exude a “spirit of

¹ Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre, *The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 1999), p. 41

wisdom and understanding, a spirit of knowledge.” He won’t judge others by their appearance, nor will He be swayed by gossip or slander. He’ll insist that people be treated fairly, and He’ll speak out in judgement against those who mistreat or oppress others. He’ll be just and faithful. He’ll be a peacemaker. And in Him, others will see and hear, touch and experience “knowledge of the Lord” God Himself.² And then Isaiah says something that’s directly pertinent to the Church today — by which I mean the entirety of the Christian faith, not simply the Catholic Church. This will be, Isaiah says, “a signal for the nations [that] the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious.”³

Well, *of course* they will — and did. Who doesn’t want some of that? Who doesn’t want to be in the presence of wisdom and understanding? Who doesn’t want to be treated fairly? Who doesn’t want an experience of peace? That’s the best evangelization there ever has been or ever will be — the *practice* of the presence of Christ. Offer that, and people will come. Neglect it, and no substitute will be an effective alternative — because there *is* no alternative.

When the Church — the entire Christian community, including the Catholic Church — becomes about itself, she’ll find her pews emptying and her influence on the surrounding culture diminishing. Pope Francis made this point at the very outset of his papacy. Here’s what he had to say about this:

*The evils that, in the passing of time, afflict the [Church and its] institutions have a root in self-referentiality, in a sort of theological narcissism. In Revelation, Jesus says that he is standing at the threshold and calling. Evidently the text refers to the fact that he stands outside the door and knocks to enter ... But at times I think that Jesus may be knocking from the inside, that we may let him out.*⁴

“Letting Jesus out” isn’t a bad practice at Advent or any other time of year. That’s what the Apostles and first disciples understood and we sometimes forget. After all, Jesus can’t come to others if we try to keep Him in the box of our own ecclesial obsessions. The Messiah

² Is 11:1-9 (NAB)

³ Is 11:10 (NAB)

⁴ Quoted in Jim Manney, “Letting Jesus Out,” IgnatianSpirituality.com, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/letting-jesus-out/>

is more, much more, than a series of propositions about Him or a list of rules concerning how He should be approached. He's a *person*, and our job as disciples is to invite others to see Him, to hear Him, to touch Him, and in doing so to enjoy the healing and peace that He brings.