

Good morning. My name is Armando Jaquez and I am a Junior studying Mechanical Engineering at Northwestern. This December, I was one of eight students to go on our annual Arizona mission trip.

Arizona is mostly desert. On the first day of our trip, the Gospel reading fittingly showed Jesus saying, "What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?" Jesus's rhetorical question here is clearly trying to tell us that under ordinary conditions, there is no good reason to go into the desert. I learned for myself that the desert appears quite desolate, just like how Jesus describes. One afternoon, four of us took a run on a desert trail, and after all the noise from the road had faded all we heard was the ringing in our ears. The sacred mountains on the horizon stood in the distance and never seemed to get closer.

If there's nothing there, then why go into the desert? In this week's Gospel, we see Jesus being baptized in the Jordan, and we know that right after he's going to wander the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. The truth of the matter is that the desert is much more alive than most people give it credit for. Stripped of all the noise of your daily life, the desert forces you to face the spirituality of the world around you. You end up finding the good and the bad in everything.

It's easy to find darkness in the desert. You can see it taking the form of addiction. You see it in the deculturalization placed on the Native American people. The border wall is not a fence that separates one flat desert from another; We've destroyed terrain so that it can climb the hilltops of the desert. The wall is the fear we have of our neighbor because of how much we love our comfort.

By the second half of our trip, our group had been immersed in the darkness of the desert around us. It was then that we began meeting with the elders of the O'odham tribe. Each of the elders treated us with so much compassion, taking us in and sharing their stories and culture with us. The O'odham taught me that while we have been placed in a world with so many problems, it is not our responsibility to fix it, but to take a small part of this world and fill it with our love.

Just as the desert was transformative for Jesus, it was for me as well. In the harshness of the desert, the smallest of blessings stand out and make an enormous impact. Enormous Saguaro cacti thrive off the smallest amount of water. One elder spoke to us about how each part of God's creation speaks to him on his walks. There was a form of gratitude that I realized was missing from my life.

Altogether, being on this trip made me appreciative of the world around me, including my Sheil community. For the first time in my time at Northwestern, I got to know other people practicing their Catholic faith. I was welcomed to the group immediately, and I enjoyed socializing with them more than I expected for a church trip. As someone who normally only attends mass, I expected to feel much more like an outsider than I ended up feeling. Within a week, I felt that I could be vulnerable around people that had previously been strangers. Altogether, my trip to Arizona encouraged me to be more active in a community centered on faith, and I plan on

spending more time at Sheil this quarter. If you ever feel like an outsider at Sheil, I couldn't recommend a mission trip more. We'll all be in the Sheil Library after mass, and we invite everyone to talk with us about it.