

Good morning, everybody. My name is Christian Hernandez. I am a senior studying neuroscience, entrepreneurship, and integrated marketing communications. Here's my reflection on the mission trip I took during winter break.

When driving out of Phoenix, I expected to see desolation and an empty landscape, the sort of desert you see on TV. However, what I saw was anything but that barren wasteland I had imagined. Instead, I saw that Arizona is full of life, which finds ways to persist. All around us, I was fascinated by this living landscape, but even more so by the absolute silence. Silence that completely envelopes you. Silence, which makes you feel like your mere presence in the desert is interrupting something sacred. Silence that made you question where your own two feet were planted. Although I knew I was physically in Arizona, I could even point out exactly where on a map, I never felt like I was truly there. Instead, I felt set apart in a sort of surreal place, somewhere outside of my everyday life.

Throughout the week, it was this same sacred presence that I encountered in the people we met. Individuals who carried a sense of stillness, grounded in themselves and their community, gladly welcomed us into their homes. As they spoke, sharing their stories with a bunch of strangers, I admired them. Some of them immediately felt like family, and Joe, a Tohono O'odham elder, reminded me of my grandpa. It was strange that someone who was, for all intents and purposes, a stranger felt so deeply familiar. Being with him pulled me out of my own head and made me intensely present, as if time slowed while I listened to him speak, drawn in by the dignity with which he carried himself. During our conversation, Joe began singling me out, asking me what I felt being there or when I had last spoken to my ancestors, and more often than not, I couldn't answer his questions because I didn't know exactly what I was feeling, but there was a lot of it.

Part of the turmoil I carried came from the division I witnessed that week. A 30ft steel fence that violated the landscape, a jarring and physical symbol of hate for the other. Standing on that road, which stretched as far as the horizon, I felt something break in me. I understood then that moment was something I would carry with me for the rest of my life. I understood why my parents seldom spoke about their own experiences coming to the United States as teenagers. They risked everything for a chance at a better life, chasing the American Dream.

I stand here before you in the midst of my own American Dream, a continuation of the dream my parents established. As a senior, I don't know exactly what comes next, but I do know the adage we heard so often in Arizona will ring true: the Sonoran Desert stays with you, and it stays with me in how I see the world around me now. In our presence, in our stillness, and in our silence, that is where God meets us. We are all connected, not just to each other but to the life that surrounds us. Respect for each other, even strangers, and for the world is a responsibility we are called to live as Catholics.

If there's one thing this trip taught me, it's that we are far more connected than we realize: to one another, to the land we walk on, and to the strangers whose stories we may never fully know. It showed me how powerful it can be to step into unfamiliar places with humility, presence, and a willingness to listen for where Christ is already at work. If you're curious or want to hear more, we'll be in the library after Mass. We'd love to share more about our experience and answer any questions.