

There I was over an hour by bus in the high desert outside of San Diego. I had just finished the month-long program on Water Survival, and here I was starting the field portion of Desert Survival.

The point of this exercise was to prepare us, a group of about twenty Sailors and Marines, for the worst-case-scenario – having to survive in the desert. And part of this class was learning what it was and wasn't that you could eat.

Cactus was edible – but by the time you took off all the spines, your fingers were raw. There was a twig-looking-thing that had little green and yellow buds. If you got enough of those, it tasted a bit like old broccoli. And then of course, there were the bugs. Don't eat anything with fuzz, or powdery coating, or stingers. The ants were the most plentiful. The black ants were sweet, the red and black ants were bitter, and the red ants ... well, not only did they bite back, but you'd better run if you saw them coming.

Some of my colleagues were so intimidated by the lack of food we had at our disposal, that they went so far as to cheat. The most common thing was to replace the sole of your boot with beef jerky. Personally, I'd just as soon eat bugs then try to eat beefjerky that had been seasoned up against my sweaty foot for a few days.

In the first reading, we hear about Israel during their time in the desert. They're complaining about not having enough food ... so God sends a miracle: bread in the morning, and quail in the evening. A miraculous, desert-survival all-you-can-eat buffet.

And in the Gospel, the crowds notice that Jesus has left, and so they set out to find him. This scene follows the feeding of thousands by Jesus. The crowds come looking for Him, not necessarily to hear his teaching, but to get a deal on food.

In the second reading, St. Paul admonishes his listeners to stop living how they used to live, but instead to live a new life in Christ. He calls on them to abandon the futility of the mind, and in Christ Jesus, to be renewed in the spirit of their minds. He goes so far as to tell them they need to become completely new persons created in God's righteousness and holiness of truth.

The message here is that we need to maintain a certain focus – away from the past, and away from the things of the world, and keep our focus on Jesus Christ.

Our new bishop, Joseph Cistone, addressed the way that we can keep ourselves focused on Jesus – and that way is the Eucharist.

In his homily at the installation Mass this past week, he spoke of how ...

*the Church draw(s) her life from the Eucharist; the Church – you and I – also draw our identity from the Eucharist. We come to know who Jesus is and who we are as his body through (the) Eucharist.*

Our very life comes to us through the Body and Blood of Christ, which we will soon

receive from this altar. And if we lose our focus on Jesus, then all of this can lose its significance for us and seem to be nothing more than futility.

If our focus falls away from Jesus, then it will fall onto something else – something less significant – and we begin to live our lives, not for God in Jesus Christ, but instead for our job, or stuff, or sports, or money, or politics.

And if that is who we were in the world, it is important that we take the to heart the admonition St. Paul gives us in today's reading to “no longer live ... in futility of (the) mind ... but be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.”

There is no method for doing this other than by placing our focus on Jesus. And there is no better way to place our focus on Jesus than through the Holy Eucharist.

The primary way we do this is by coming to Mass on Sunday ... but not as a passive observer, but rather by engaging the liturgy through music, responses, and prayer. And it's not just a question of what you are doing ... but rather a question of what are you willing to allow God to do to you ... for you ... and in you ... during the liturgy?

God desires to be an intimate part of every moment of our lives. The problem is that God is a gentleman about that – and isn't going to force Himself on us. Rather, we need to let Him do His thing with us ... that is let God do the “God thing” in us and in our life.

So, right now, let's accept that challenge thrown down by Saint Paul, and take advantage of the “all you can eat” buffet of grace provided through the gracious love of the Holy Trinity to which we have access as adopted daughters and sons of God the Father, redeemed in Jesus Christ His son, and let us receive in abundance the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Let us ask God to renew the spirit of our minds and give us the grace to put on a new self ... “in righteousness and holiness of truth.”