While most everyone would say that they want to go to heaven, as we all know over the course of our lives it's easy to at times get confused as to how to stay on the right road there. As proof of this we need look no further than the Bible, where time and time again people fall away into darkness, but God knows that we are also seeking light - and yet this is not forced upon us. He enables us to travel the road, making straight the paths with filling the valleys and laying low the mountains. But it's up to us to keep our eyes focused on Him, and make that effort to travel the road He has set before us.

These days, Jesse Romero, who is a Catholic author, radio host, speaker and evangelist, has dedicated his life to helping people to do that. But as with all of us, there was a time when he thought other roads would better lead him to God.

In his story about finding his "Catholic Answers," a reference to the web site he has often contributed to, he reflects about being raised in a solid, traditional, Catholic family. He went to Catholic schools, went to Mass every Sunday; his parents were the president and vice president of the Legion of Mary, and his dad had a conversion experience through a

Cursillo retreat, leaving the life of a functional alcoholic to become a sober man of God. His mom had a constant deep faith; Jesse remembers seeing her pray for him often as a kid when he was at the local bar the late morning hours.

In his formative years, he was he says clearly sheltered in a Catholic culture, and as a kid thought the whole world was Catholic. As a youngster at about the age of 12, he remembers being on a retreat, and remembering words from a song at the closing Mass “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me shall never die.” He was fascinated by them, and remembers saying to himself that he hopes they are true. It was a moment of grace, and those words of Jesus struck him like a lightning bolt.

In his teens, he became addicted to martial arts and the Chicago Civil rights movement, and began to drift. He had a crisis of faith and became a “pragmatic atheist” as he put it; a Catholic heart but a secular mind. Secularism grabbed hold of him, and instead of laying hold of Jesus, laid hold of other voices in society. He’d remember that song, but he became a “cafeteria Catholic” as he said, living in a comatose spiritual condition for many years; going to Mass, just to basically keep peace with his parents for

his faith had grown stale. His faith wasn't lively because he hardly knew it, and that meant his love for God was weaker than it should have been. He hadn't questioned the faith because he hadn't much thought about it.

He poured his heart into martial harts, and began to teach karate, work at a supermarket and go to junior college. He was he says a "total worldling," thinking about God only on occasion mostly at funerals or a wedding. God just wasn't factoring much into his life.

At 21, he joined the LA Sheriff's Department and married his wife Anita. He started going to Mass with his wife who was very devoted to her faith.

As a deputy sheriff at the age of 21, he said he became a bit arrogant and prideful and self-righteous. He became the embodiment of the deadly sins; while going through the Academy he was admired for his physical fitness and martial arts background. He hung out with the jocks and would haze the less physically fit, more bookish cadets; he remembers one he felt was a "softie" and as he put it being brainwashed with worldly philosophies like "might makes right" and "only the strong survive." You can imagine his surprise when that cadet who graduated with him gave him a wrapped gift

at graduation, and said “God bless you” and wished him well. He was shocked; the guy had every reason to hate him, but here he was saying “God bless you.” It was a moment of grace, and when he opened the gift it was a Catholic Living Bible. Jesse asked himself “what kind of person would do something like this after having been treated so badly?”

He meant to read it, but it sat on the coffee table for several years; Jesse saw himself as the seed scattered among thorns, hearing the word but the thorns of the world and culture chocking it out. His world became his career, his karate, and amateur boxing.

A fellow deputy he knew had a genuine love for people and peace. They developed a friendship, and his friend, Paul the deputy would ask him about his faith and he had no answers; Paul asked him if he accepted the Lord, where he would spend eternity, and he couldn’t answer. He realized he knew Jesus, but did not know him. He had tried to be perfect in all he had done, but not his faith. Paul was working on him with non-Catholic Christian books, and tapes, and invited him to make a personal commitment to Christ. Paul told him “Most people will miss heaven by about 12 inches,” saying the distance between the head and heart is 12

inches and saving faith needed to come from the heart. He realized his heart was not with God; Jesus was not seated on the throne of his interior castle. He got home and looked at a picture of the Sacred Heart, and felt the warm presence of Christ in a powerful way. He sang that song from his childhood at that retreat and laid on the floor prostrate before the image of Jesus.

This was the moment Christ became real to him; it was a mystical encounter that was a pivotal conversion point in his life. His faith was renewed, and he says what was revealed to him was the Babe from Bethlehem became the Christ on Calvary and the Lord of the empty tomb. The Bible became a love letter. He listened to the tapes and books and started going to non-Catholic Christian events because he was seeking the truth. He later learned Paul was a fallen-away Catholic who was now a non-denominational Christian. And Jesse was saturated with evangelical fundamentalism, even going to Paul's church. The battle though was when he heard some Christian preachers disparage the Catholic Church.

His wife knew his Catholic faith was hanging by a thread; she was happy he was seeking but worried. And this is when his parents and wife began to

make sure he was on the right road. When he shared the Christian truths about the Resurrection, the Virgin Birth, blood atonement and inerrancy of Scripture thinking they were revelations, his parents told him these are all part of the Catholic faith. When he said he thought the Catholic Church was teaching error, his wife challenged him. She said before you run off, why don't you study Catholicism from Catholic sources. If you can prove it's rong from Catholic sources I'll respect you if you want to leave. As a deputy, he saw her argument as quite valid; hearsay testimony is inadmissible in court, and all of his anti-Catholic biases were hearsay.

He thought it would be easy. But his parents spoke to him with love, knowing he was seeking and proud of his love of Jesus, and he ended up going to a big event with them at a sports arena. It was here that there was an event just like the Eucharistic Congress this past year in Indianapolis; a priest came in with the monstrance; thousands of people were on their knees while the Lord was there, and he felt this grace filled moment. In the weeks and months that followed he and his wife when to conferences, seminars, healing Masses and retreats, even a marriage encounter. When the "honeymoon" period as he put it of his conversion or reversion was waning, he met with his parish priest who sent him to Catholic Answers, at

the time a lay apostolate of Catholic apologists experts at answering Protestant Objections to Catholicism. It was a Catholic Boot Camp, and because of the time he put in, all his Protestant residue as he put it went away. He now had good Biblical Catholic answers, and as he now had as he put it “spiritual steroids” from that conference. He went home, and hugged his wife, and apologized to her for trying to take her out of the Catholic faith. They embraced and wept in one another’s arms, and he says on that day became a truly Catholic Christian couple.

From that day, he also tried to live out John Paul II’s words: “It is not enough to discover Christ, we must bring him to others.” He realized he had to be a witness; for an informed Catholic is a contagious Catholic. He did his in daily life, but focused on also doing it for his career, which he continues to do to this day.

What Jesse was at one point in his life is what so many of us are too; an exile; a seeker. The words “Oh Come, Oh Come Emmanuel and Ransom Captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God Appear,” speak to the heart not just of Advent but to all of us, as we are seekers. Baruch echoes this in our first reading; “Led away on foot by their

enemies they left you; but God will bring them back to you born aloft in glory as on royal thrones." He's saying that the people have lost their way and been taken away, but God is answering now - they will be now like princes and kings on royal thrones. God is building a highway to invite his exiles back home.

The challenge though for us is to get on the highway. Exile takes many forms. For Jesse, he gradually went into an exile of sorts when he drifted from his faith, and was kept there in part through listening to the wrong voices. For some there may be the exile of addiction to drinking, drugs, sins of the flesh; or it may be an indifference or a greed or an addiction to pride or being right all the time or selfishness. A good thing to do, especially in Advent, is to ask ourselves am I in exile with respect to something in my life? Perhaps like Jesse you may not be fully away from the the faith, but there could be just something or some things that are preventing you from living it out as you should. Now is the time to get on the right highway again. To come and welcome Jesus into our hearts and souls. Now is the time to work with the Lord, for God does not force us to love Him or one another; rather we are given free will and now is the time to choose to follow Him. So how do we do that?

The starting point is to again look at our lives and say what is off kilter, what needs to be fixed, what am I ignoring and what can I now begin to do right? Don't ignore it any more. If you fall in it again, go to confession, pray about it, but keep picking yourself back up and work with God to become truly free.

As we do that, we take the steps like Jesse did. One way is through prayer. Use what works. Perhaps it's reading a Bible, like the one he was leaving on his coffee table for several years and now is the time to dust it off. Or maybe it's a rosary you got on your First Communion or Confirmation that hasn't been used in a long time. Or maybe just silence or spending time with God. Whatever works best for you, do.

Second, continue to make Mass a priority. I realize I'm kind of "preaching to the choir" as they say for we are at Mass, but for all of us, like Jesse at one point in his life, we can be at Mass but not pray at Mass; we can go through the motions but not enter into it. This is not to say that you don't have moments where you are tired or your mind drifts; I can assure you this happens to us priests all the time. But it is to say we try to really enter into

this sacred time; to still our hearts and minds, and encounter the Lord in the Word and the Eucharist, so we have that spiritual food and power to get through the week ahead.

Third, we can grow in the faith like Jesse did. There is so much good spiritual information out there; today Catholic Answers isn't a retreat but a website, and there are many other good ones, with materials in both print and online; as I've mentioned formed.org is one our parish makes use of. Do some exploring and grow in the faith by learning it.

Fourth, ask yourself what do you want to change. Maybe you don't have any big time addiction, but maybe like Jesse you are battling a particular sin. Sit with an examination of conscience. Perhaps you've become too prideful and your ego prevents you from seeing that you need to be a better parent or spouse or more humble; maybe you need to be more open to others who want to help and less stubborn, trusting in the guidance of the Church and other prophets God sends into your life; maybe lust clouds how you look at the body and you ignore it forgetting that it can be cheating against a marriage vows; maybe envy takes over and you are wrapped up in thinking about what you don't have. Or wrath consumes you towards an

enemy. Well take concrete steps. Maybe pray for someone you have a grudge against; think of something nice to say to the person you are envious of; get rid of the materials or things that cause you to fall with lust; own up to your pride and show humility towards people you love and recognize you have work to do to make spiritual progress. This is part of how we journey not to Bethlehem but the heavenly Jerusalem.

And lastly, do what Jesse did and what John the Baptist do - articulate it. Spread the faith to others. Don't be afraid to talk to others about why you are Catholic; to explain to that relative or friend who is like Jesse's friend Paul, a lapsed Catholic who makes excuses about why they go to a non-denominational church or why they don't go to Mass at all and counter their arguments not with shouting but by knowing what happens at Mass, and why our Catholic faith through the magisterium and teachings of the saints does so much to help us be formed on our journey. We can't fear challenging people with love, and it requires patience, commitment but also perseverance.

Advent is a beautiful season of preparation, but we are preparing not just for Santa and celebrating with food and festivities and gifts in a few weeks,

but rather for the day when we will be the people forever no longer in darkness but in the light of heaven. The thing of it is to let the light in you have to open the shades first - so let us use this holy season to let Jesus in, so he can nock down the mountains and make the valleys straight that are the obstacles preventing us from getting to Him, for then we will be truly ready to meet the Lord when He comes.