

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In today's second reading, we hear that **"we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses"** (Hebrews 12:1). This comes directly after when the Letter speaks about the Old Testament saints – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets (see Hebrews 11). The writer speaks about how they acted in faith – a supreme act of trust in God. He uses this to encourage us – you and me – to

rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.
(Hebrews 12:1-2)

What a great analogy – running the race of our lives. When I was young, my parents used to take us cross-country skiing. I was never good at it, but, as I grew older, I enjoyed it. When I was about 12 years old, I was in a race. I started out well, but very quickly I lost my breath, and had to "slog" my way through the race. My older cousins (who were excellent skiers) were part of the race as well, but in an older division. They had to go through the route I was doing... but twice. Each time they passed, they shouted great encouragement to me. But I knew, that, being *way* behind everyone else, I had no chance of winning, and was not encouraged about even finishing.

As I came around the last turn of the course, I was shocked to find my family – including my cousins who had finished the race – waiting at the finish line, crying out my name, encouraging me to keep on. Suddenly, everyone in the crowd – most of whom I did not know – were calling out my name, saying I could do it, that I could finish strong. With that encouragement, I was able to muster a last bit of energy, and I truly raced past the finish line. (All told, I think I came in 23rd... I don't know if there were more than 23 people racing in my division.) That experience has stayed with me. The great encouragement of my family, and then the crowd, gave me the "umph" (to use a technical word) to give my all and to finish the race.

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks the same to us – that we need encouragement in the on-going race of our lives. To switch the metaphor a bit, our race is not a sprint, but a marathon. He says that there is a **"great cloud of witnesses"** (Hebrews 12:1)... and they are cheering us on, encouraging us, spurring us to keep on running the race. The Church speaks about this "cloud of witnesses" as the Communion of Saints – those who have run the race already and are watching us from Heaven. They want to encourage us and help us along our road of life.

St. Paul says that the Church is the Body of Christ (see Romans 12:5, I Corinthians 12:12, 27, Ephesians 3:6, 4:12, 14, Colossians 1:24). Since there is only one Christ, we, who are here on earth, are still connected through this one Body to those who have gone before us into Heaven. As such, we can have a relationship with them in Christ.

Who are the saints that you know, that spur you on? Often times, we have a saint we're named after (I do not since, as of yet, there are no Saint Volneys... but I'm working on that!). Our confirmation saints, or other saints to which we feel an affinity can be a great inspiration to us, their lives can give us hope, and they can pray for us from heaven.

I have a devotion to a number of saints – the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, St. Philomena, St. Maximilian Kolbe, St. Therese of Lisieux, St. Gemma Galgani, St. John Vianney, St. Pio, St. John Paul II, St. Faustina ... just to name a few. Each of these saints have somehow affected me, shaped my relationship with Jesus – by the example of their lives, or through my prayer to them over the years.

The thing to remember is that the saints are *real people* who do really care for us, and help us from Heaven. They are crying out as part of the great cloud of witnesses, encouraging us to live holiness, to keep going in the tough times, to seek intimacy with God. I encourage you to cultivate a relationship with the saints; they will help you in your hardest times, and rejoice with you in your joys.

I pray that the faith of the saints may inspire you and encourage you in your life of faith. May their successes... and their failures in trial help you to keep going, to finish the race well, and so run into the arms of our loving Lord and God.