

## Feast of All Souls

November 2

David A. Cregan, O.S.A.  
Villanova University  
Villanova, Pennsylvania

One of my favorite stories from St. Augustine is the tale of the migration of deer from the lowlands where they have grazed during the cold and snowy winter months, to the highlands where fresh foliage blooms with the onset of spring. On this journey the deer are often faced with the difficult and challenging task of crossing a river surging with the excess water created by the melting ice and snow from the mountaintops and hillsides. The deer have a strategy for crossing these treacherous obstacles, for it is absolutely necessary for their growth and prosperity to make it from one side to the other: The strongest in the herd move to the edge of the river and plunge themselves in against the surge of the oncoming waves, for they are the best able to swim in such dangerous conditions. Having bravely jumped into the water the strong deer wait for the weaker ones to follow, allowing them to place their heads on the hinds of the finest swimmers for support and buoyancy. In so doing, the herd creates a chain link that allows for all to cross safely, ensuring the future life and prosperity of the entire group.

Augustine told this story to emphasize how the Christian community is, in fact, connected to one another. Our faith is corporate and our salvation is never simply individual. This collective spiritual identity is deeply imbedded in the practices of our faith through the devotions expressed through the ages to the communion of Saints. It is our hope and our faith that we are in fact directly connected to those like-minded individuals who have been tested in this world and have been redeemed in the next. As Catholics we rely on those brothers and sister in faith who have gone before us to intercede for us to our Lord and to inspire us to persevere as they have done. This deeply held belief is what the Church has celebrated on November 1st through the feast of All Saints, and today we extend that belief in our connectedness with heaven as we celebrate the feast of All Souls.

We express these hopes in the link between heaven and earth in our funeral liturgies when we pray that through death life has not ended but changed. This is not merely an idea for those of us who have lost loved ones, for we still foster the love that we shared in life with those who now aspire to share the life of heaven through our daily prayers and remembrances. That which is spiritual about us remains connected to those who now live in the Spirit. We now speak to them in the language of heaven, the language of God: prayer. It is through faith that we remain connected and we count on the souls of those who taught us the strength of a life lived by faith to guide us from one side of life to the other. We truly hope that when our time comes to go to God that those who we were connected to will return for us and lead us into the place of everlasting life, of everlasting peace.

Is this just a attractive way of making us feel better about the finitude of life, to abate the fear that one day we will all die? How can we substantiate this hope in reality? In John's Gospel, chapter 6 verses 37-40 – one of the options for today's readings – we rely on the words of Jesus himself who states, 'Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should

raise it up on the last day.’

We belong to God and Jesus connects us. In our baptism we have been claimed for Christ; we are children of God. We know these connections to be real as they guide us through the ordinary struggles and joys of life. We see the unconditional nature of the bonds in authentic community living, in marriage, in family life and through friends.

The Eucharist is our best connection with Christ as the Real Presence in our daily lives. It is also that reality which connects us with those who have gone before us, those we remember today. We need them, and they need us. As we turn to them in memory and prayer and ask for their guidance, their intercessions, let us also remember that we must pray for them that they may live life eternal in the presence of God, singing His praises with the angels and the saints.