

*Resplendent and unfading is wisdom, and she is readily perceived by those who love her.  
Wisdom 6:12 ff.*

The great fire of the past month led me into contact with many friends and relatives whom I hadn't heard from in years. One was a younger friend who was a seminary student of mine back in the early 60's. He left the seminary before ordination and often told me I had a big effect on him. He ended up in college teaching and administration (even president of one I think) in subsequent years. So out of the smoke surrounding us his e-mail came through and we re-established a contact as close as ever.

Among the changes he has undergone is his conversion to views of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (300's BC); he seems to have given up on the Church. I didn't discuss the change but wondered whether any influence I had on him so long ago had lasted (I certainly wasn't teaching Epicureanism at the time!). He likes that philosopher's opposition to religion, gods, superstition. It's an early form of rationalism or science, i.e. if it doesn't add up logically, or if we may say doesn't add up to what's in the test tube, if it's not verifiably factual – avoid it. Pleasure resides in sticking to facts, not opinions or fantasies. Later on I thought: *How disciplined a life one must lead to stick only to data that's verifiable*; no wandering thoughts, images, distractions; rigorously measuring everything before letting it share your mind. No sloppy thinking such as one might call the Apostles' Creed.

Which led me to recall a passage I read in Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*. It's about an aristocratic Catholic family in Britain prior to WWII. Its patriarch Lord Marchmain has returned to his estate to die. His Italian mistress Cara shares the scene with his family: his son and daughters Julia and Cordelia (so young and lively). Also present is Julia's lover Charles Ryder, an agnostic (or you could classify *him* as an Epicurean, strictly rational, materialist).

They are discussing whether it would be prudent to call for a priest – despite Lord Marchmain's long detachment from his legitimate wife and from the Church. During their discussion Charles Ryder breaks in proposing that they leave the poor man alone, let him die peacefully, no hocus pocus. But no, they start trying to explain to Charles – in logical terms he might understand – why it's important that the father receive the last rites. And they get all tangled up: *"I think my nurse told me . . . You've got it all wrong, Cara . . . Well, I remember when Alphonse de Grenet died . . . Madame Grenet thought . . . Well, she was wrong. . . I never heard that before."* Until Charles asked impatiently, "I wish someone would explain to me quite what the significance of these sacraments is." They are stopped in mid comment. Even they can't explain in rational terms why there are sacraments. Finally Cara, the Italian mistress, in the ensuing silence says (sighing?): "All I know is that I shall take very good care to have a priest." And young Cordelia says, "Bless you; I believe that's the best answer."

Cara's gut, Cara's heart has spoken and wins delightful Cordelia's spontaneous confirmation. Wisdom has spoken out of a logic Charles Ryder could not presently fathom but would begin to ponder when he later beheld the comatose Lord Marchmain

himself at his anointing slowly raise his hand to his forehead, breast and shoulders in response to a priest's request for a sign of faith.