

## Wisdom

Recently I presented a talk on our parish Facebook on the meaning of our familiar terms sacrament and sacramental. It was intended to be both educational and inspirational – and went into the task at some length. Of course, I was assuming that many church laity – far removed from catechism days – needed help understanding what a sacrament was.

Later my grandmother came to mind, relative to such well-worn terms, and I was amused as to whether she or anyone coming out of her peasant Catholic culture would have needed any such education as to what a sacrament was or in what way our world is itself a sacrament. Illiterate immigrant that she was, any explanation on my part would have beclouded the wisdom she already possessed. My aunt referred to her as “dumb-smart” – suggesting that though my grandmother seemed “out of it” at times – she was quietly wise to everything that was going on.

Many years ago I acquired a sense of her “cultural” smarts when viewing an episode in Evelyn Waugh’s novel *Brideshead Revisited*. Late in the novel Lord Marchmain, a Catholic peer, has returned to his estate to die. Cara, his mistress,, has accompanied him. Cara and Marchmain’s heirs Brideshead, Julia and Cordelia have gathered to discuss when it would be prudent to call a priest to anoint the father. They’re concerned that Lord Marchmain, a strong willed apostate, might cause a scene. To Charles Ryder, Julia’s agnostic fiancé, their almost agonizing discussion seems pointless. He proposes they leave the poor man alone. But no, on they go, arguing just *when* would be the best opportunity, until Charles asks impatiently, *I wish someone would explain to me quite what the significance of these sacraments is.*

The family had never before been challenged to explain things like the Anointing of the Sick. They slip into conflicting opinions: *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.*

Charles is not impressed. *There was a pause in which Julia sighed and Brideshead drew breath as though to start further subdividing the propositions.* Then in the silence Cara said, *“All I know is that I shall take very good care to have a priest.”* “*Bless you,*” said Cordelia. *“I believe that’s the best answer.”* (It was their way of saying that death is somehow a sacramental event – not just a final breath.) Cara’s gut, Cara’s heart has spoken and wins delightful Cordelia’s confirmation. Wisdom has spoken out of a logic Charles Ryder could not

presently fathom but would eventually understand even as he would better understand himself.

St. Augustine says there were two trees in Paradise, the tree of knowledge (or science) and the tree of life (or wisdom). Some people in our day and age would eat only of the tree of knowledge. People of faith – and poets - feed also off the tree of life, whose roots draw nourishment from realms far more profound, primeval and true.