

Pope Francis *Pro Mundum*:

An Interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia* through *Brideshead Revisited*

Introduction

After months of tense anticipation and the work of two meetings of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis finally released his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* last Friday. His Exhortation “On Love and the Family” had me think about a particular family that I have known for a number of years now.

I have known this family since we first became acquainted during my days in college and I have often thought of them and referred back to them in the years since. This family is the Marchmain Family, the fictional aristocratic British family depicted by Evelyn Waugh in his 1944 novel *Brideshead Revisited*.

Before anyone accuses me of insanity for considering myself acquainted with a fictional family, those who have any familiarity with Waugh’s story will realize how understandable this is. The Marchmain Family is relatable, they are a “family for all seasons” in the sense that they are like all other families. The Marchmains transcend time and culture. They are a family of saints and sinners and their triumphs and tragedies are the triumphs and tragedies of so many other families. There are countless lessons that we can learn from their successes and mistakes.

Even now when I think of my own family, when I think of my friends, when I think of life in my parish, I wonder how various characters from *Brideshead Revisited* would act in various situations. If I’m describing a person to a friend who is a *Brideshead* initiate, I can always relate them to at least one of the novel’s characters : “She talks like Lady Marchmain” or “He drinks like Sebastian” or (dare I say it) “He reminds me of Anthony Blanche.” Even in my ministry as a priest, I have experienced brief shining moments when *Brideshead* is more than a novel : in a meeting with an engaged couple, when the tabernacle is empty on Good Friday, and of course when the Last Rites are administered at the bedside of someone who is surrounded by their family.

I hope that all of these reflections serve to show how captivating the characters in this one novel are. Like the novel’s protagonist, Charles Ryder, who is swept up in the drama of the Marchmain family, I too am enthralled by them and think back to them often. The Marchmains are in many ways a living family. Or at least I had always thought that they were. The pontificate of Pope Francis and now the release of *Amoris Laetitia* have increasingly worried me that in our current age, the Marchmains no longer have anything worthwhile to teach us.

Paradise Lost and Regained

Brideshead Revisited consists of the memories of Charles Ryder who, during the Second World War, is an officer in the British army. The primary focus of his memories is his engagement with the Marchmain family between the two World Wars. Charles is introduced to the family and their stately home through Sebastian Flyte, a fellow-student at Oxford University. Sebastian is the younger son of Lord and Lady Marchmain. In many ways, the Marchmain family is an anomaly to Charles and to the entire British establishment. They are an aristocratic Catholic family in a thoroughly Protestant

kingdom. The peculiarity of their practices (visits to the Blessed Sacrament in their chapel, frequent discussions of religion) is one of the reasons that Charles, an agnostic, is initially dazzled by them.

However, behind the veneer of a beautiful, pietistic home, are many of the same obstacles faced by all other families. While Lady Marchmain was from a Catholic family, Lord Marchmain converted so that they could be married. "You have brought back my family to the faith of their ancestors," he said to his wife in the early days of their relationship.[1] Lord and Lady Marchmain eventually raise four children in the faith, two boys and two girls. However, after a number of years in an unhappy marriage, Lord Marchmain leaves his wife and children, eventually settling in Venice to live with his Italian mistress Cara. While Lord Marchmain still sees his children when they choose to visit him in Venice, he is essentially banished from British society while Lady Marchmain remains at Brideshead, attempting to instill a Catholic faith and piety in the hearts of her children.

While Lord and Lady Marchmain's eldest son (Bridey) and youngest daughter (Cordelia) appear to have inherited the piety of their mother, their two middle children (Sebastian and Julia) are the greatest cause of sorrow to Lady Marchmain. While the novel is discrete in describing Sebastian's disordered affections, it is obvious that these affections have been directed toward Charles and numerous other male characters throughout the novel. These affections are mirrored by his almost childlike persona. Unable to come to terms with these disordered affections, he increasingly turns to bouts of heavy drinking. Eventually, like his father before, he abandons Lady Marchmain and Brideshead for North Africa.

Sebastian's drinking eventually takes a toll on his health. He is taken in by a Catholic monastery in Tunisia and serves there as something of an under-porter. The last we hear from Sebastian, he is said to have become very religious, still struggling with his alcoholism, but able to find comfort and solace in his Catholicism. "I've seen others like him, and I believe they are very near and dear to God," says Cordelia.[2] She even foresees her brother's eventual death in the care of the monks of the monastery: "Then one morning, after one of his drinking bouts, he'll be picked up at the gate dying, and show by a mere flicker of the eyelid that he is conscious when they give him the last sacraments. It's not such a bad way of getting through one's life." [3]

Julia manages to match Sebastian's dissolute lifestyle through her own acts of intransigence. She eventually plans to marry Rex Mottram, a Protestant Canadian, who has managed to gain a seat in the House of Commons. It is this relationship with Rex that marks Julia's descent into chronic sin. Julia learns that Rex may be carrying on an affair with a mistress. She thinks that if they become engaged, this can put an end to the affair. When it doesn't, she then begins to reason that if she is going to keep Rex from being unfaithful, she will have to offer sexual gratification to her fiancé before they are married. Julia justifies this in her own mind and presents the proposition to a priest: "Surely, Father, it can't be wrong to commit a small sin myself in order to keep him from a much worse one?" [4] The Jesuit responds in the negative and suggests that she make her confession. It is this moment, when Julia does not receive what she wants, that she turns against the faith: "'No, thank you,' she said, as though refusing the offer of something in a shop. 'I don't think I want to today,' and walked angrily home. From that moment she shut her mind against her religion." [5]

During their engagement, Rex agrees to receive instruction so that he can convert to Catholicism.

However, matters are exasperated when it is revealed that Rex was previously married and divorced in Canada. Rex does not understand how this can be an impediment to a prospective marriage to Julia and he sees no difference between his divorce and the granting of an annulment. When it is obvious that nothing can be done with only a few weeks before the wedding, Julia and Rex agree to marry in a Protestant ceremony, separating themselves from Catholic society and the Marchmain family. Julia's intransigence reaches its peak as she voices a modern refusal to recognize objective sin : "I don't believe these priests know everything. I don't believe in hell for things like that. I don't know that I believe in it for anything." [6]

All of this is recounted by Charles, who will not see Julia again for ten years. By this time Lady Marchmain has died ; and when Charles and Julia are reunited, it is obvious that both of them are unhappy in their respective marriages. An affair begins between the two of them and it eventually becomes a public matter to the extent that both of them begin to consider divorce so that they can marry each other. When it is revealed that Julia's older brother Bridey has managed to find a woman to be engaged to, Julia suggests inviting her to Brideshead. However, Bridey says that he cannot invite his fiancée Beryl because of her strict Catholic faith and the offense that Julia's irregular situation could cause : "You must understand that Beryl is a woman of strict Catholic principles," he says, "I couldn't possibly bring her here. It is a matter of indifference whether you choose to live in sin with Rex or Charles or both – I have always avoided inquiry into the details of your *ménage* – but in no case would Beryl consent to be your guest." [7] Such a severe revelation causes Julia to leave the room in tears. "There was nothing she should object to," Bridey says of Julia, "I was merely stating a fact well known to her." [8]

The drama of the moment is heightened when it is announced that Lord Marchmain will be returning to England with Cara so that he can spend his years of declining health at Brideshead. When it becomes apparent that Lord Marchmain is approaching death, the family calls on Father Mackay, the local priest, to visit Brideshead. Lord Marchmain announces to Father Mackay that he hasn't been a practising Catholic in twenty-five years and Father Mackay politely leaves. As Lord Marchmain's condition worsens, the priest returns again. There is a debate in the family as to whether Father Mackay should attempt to administer the Last Rites or if Lord Marchmain's years as a "scoffer" should be honoured. "Christ came to call, not the righteous," Father Mackay explains, "but sinners to repentance." [9]

By this time, Lord Marchmain's condition has deteriorated to such an extent that he is barely conscious. Father Mackay ministers to him, praying with him and encouraging him to ask God's forgiveness for his sins. He suggests that, if he is able to, Lord Marchmain should make some sign to show that he is sorry for his sins. Father Mackay then anoints Lord Marchmain. At this moment, Charles, the self-professed agnostic, says that he felt a longing for Lord Marchmain to make a sign of sorrow for his sins. Then, Lord Marchmain, even in his weakened condition, is able to raise his right hand, and after twenty-five years of lapsed faith, makes the Sign of the Cross as a sign of his contrition.

Charles recognizes the magnitude of such a seemingly small sign : "Then I knew that the sign I had asked for was not a little thing, not a passing nod of recognition, and a phrase came back to me from my childhood of the veil of the temple being rent from top to bottom." [10] This is the moment that

changes Charles' life. After such a grace-filled moment of repentance and redemption, both Charles and Julia realize that they cannot marry each other. Charles asks her what she will do. "Just go on – alone" Julia explains, "You know the whole of me. You know I'm not one for a life of mourning. I've always been bad. Probably I shall be bad again, punished again. But the worse I am, the more I need God. I can't shut myself out from his mercy. That is what it would mean ; starting a life with you, without him." [11] Julia realizes that God's mercy can be extended even to her, but God requires a sign of contrition : "[I]t may be a private bargain between me and God, that if I give up this one thing I want so much, however bad I am, he won't quite despair of me in the end." [12] Charles is able to accept this because he too has changed. He has witnessed the working of God's mercy and now knows that it is something that he too can receive.

The novel concludes with Charles serving in the army during the Second World War. He finds himself quartered at Brideshead and prays a visit to the chapel. While in the chapel, he offers a prayer. It is then that we know that Charles has turned away from his agnostic beliefs. He hasn't only returned to the Anglicanism of his childhood, but he has been converted to Catholicism, saying "a prayer, an ancient, newly-learned form of words." [13] It is in this faith that he has found comfort ; and while he and Julia cannot have a relationship with each other, he has found peace because now he is able to have a relationship with God. "You're looking unusually cheerful today," says one of the officers to Charles after his visit to the chapel. [14] It is this that God gives us if we are willing to give ourselves to Him : unusual cheerfulness, a cheerfulness and joy that overcomes all moments of anxiety, pain, and frustration.

Brideshead Revisited vs. Amoris Laetitia

The reason *Amoris Laetitia* has led me to think of the Marchmain family is because of a frightening revelation. Are the moral and religious questions addressed in *Brideshead Revisited* relevant in the world of *Amoris Laetitia* ? In many ways the document does much to undermine objective truth and absolute values. Julia attempts to do the same thing when she rationalizes an unchaste relationship with her fiancée to keep him from having an affair. "I'm rescuing a fallen man for a chance," Julia reasoned, "I'm saving Rex from mortal sin." [15] Thus, Julia's thoughts seem to mirror the pope's : "a small step in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties." [16] Such reasoning smacks of gradualism just as Julia thought that she could "commit a small sin" in order to save Rex "from a much worse one."

If they were alive today, would Julia and Charles have had to part ways ? *Amoris Laetitia* offers alternatives : "Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end." [17] Couldn't Julia and Charles have spoken with Father MacKay in the internal forum for the sake of contributing to the "formation of a correct judgment" ? [18]

Even the idea of living as brother and sister seems to be impossible in this modern age. While Julia explains to Charles that she plans to "[j]ust go on – alone" this is not a sad revelation because she is finally able to receive God's mercy and to return to a right relationship with Him. However *Amoris Laetitia* makes it seem that "going on alone" or abstaining from sexual intercourse is impossible in

2016. Pope Francis explains that “many people, knowing and accepting the possibility of living ‘as brothers and sisters’ which the Church offers them, point out that if certain expressions of intimacy are lacking, ‘it often happens that faithfulness is endangered and the good of the children suffers.’”[19] In the age of *Brideshead*, one didn’t die if they abstained from sexual intimacy. Apparently, in this sex-obsessed age, it is impossible for one to live without it.

A Twitch Upon the Thread

If *Brideshead Revisited* reminds us of anything, it reminds us that salvation isn’t cheap. Salvation requires a response. It requires some sort of a sign that one desires it and is willing to do whatever it takes to purchase this pearl of great price.[20] Even a small sign (such as Lord Marchmain’s Sign of the Cross) can carry with it an immeasurable amount of weight. Even a small sign can be as powerful as the “veil of the temple being rent from top to bottom.” That is because such a sign indicates a person’s willingness to recognize their errors and to do whatever is necessary to return to a right relationship with God.

The world of *Amoris Laetitia* sees everyone as being fine just the way they are. The development and growth that the Marchmain family experienced throughout the course of *Brideshead Revisited* was seemingly unnecessary. Apparently the Marchmain family should have continued to enable Sebastian; Julia didn’t have to worry about “living in sin” with Rex ; Lord Marchmain had nothing to apologize for ; Julia and Charles could have followed a path of discernment with their local pastor ; and Charles should never have had to convert to Catholicism.

Perhaps I am being a little too harsh though. There is at least one character that Pope Francis would say needed to change : Lady Marchmain. The poor matriarch of her family led her future husband to convert to Catholicism. In a similar way, she attempted to lead her children along a faithful path only to see her hopes dashed constantly. But even in her sorrow and grief she never gave up hope and she never stopped praying each day for those closest to her. She knew that the faith which she handed on to her children offered the most immediate possibility for salvation. By the novel’s end she is vindicated with the return of Julia and Sebastian to the Catholic faith. She is even vindicated with Charles’ conversion since it was she who had pressed the need for his conversion years earlier : “‘We must make a Catholic of Charles,’ Lady Marchmain said, and we had many little talks together during my visits when she delicately steered the subject into a holy quarter.”[21] Unfortunately, the pope would probably consider Lady Marchmain to be a narrow, rigid monster who is concerned only about the letter of the law. Perhaps he would even mimic the condemnation that Sebastian’s friend, Anthony Blanche, levels against her in the novel: “She sucks their blood.”[22]

Ultimately, the main characters of *Brideshead Revisited* find their way on the path to redemption. No doubt it is a path of many twists and turns. It is a path that demands a response, a decided yes or no. It is not a path to be discerned. Our Lord will come to us at a moment that we may not expect. Will we take His yoke upon our shoulders and learn from Him[23] or will we depart from him sorrowfully like the rich young man?[24] Each of the characters in *Brideshead Revisited* is presented with a moment for conversion. It is in that moment that they recognize the working of God’s grace. Cordelia, the youngest of the Marchmain children, knows that her siblings cannot be lost forever. “I caught him,” she quotes G.K. Chesterton, “with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread.”[25]

Cordelia knows that those of faith will always be open to the working of God in their lives. God has them on His thread and one day, even in an instant, He can call them back to Himself. But they must be willing to participate in this supernatural “twitch upon the thread.” Unfortunately, the essence of *Amoris Laetitia* and Pope Francis’ theology is a Nietzschean attempt to naturalize God and to pull His thread toward us, forcing Him to submit to and approbate the wiles and intransigence of human sin. The way of God in *Brideshead Revisited* brings us unusual cheerfulness which can never be extinguished. The way of man in *Amoris Laetitia* further entrenches us in the miry modern clay of misery, emptiness, and unfulfilment. *Quo vadis?*

- [1] Waugh, Evelyn. 2012. *Brideshead Revisited*. New York: Black Bay, 254.
- [2] *Ibid.*, 354.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 355.
- [4] *Ibid.*, 216.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 217.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 226.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 327.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 328.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 388.
- [10] *Ibid.*, 390.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 392.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 393.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 402.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 402.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 215.
- [16] *Evangelii Gaudium*, 44.
- [17] *Amoris Laetitia*, 305.
- [18] *AL*, 300.
- [19] *AL* Footnote, 329.
- [20] *Matthew* 13:46.
- [21] Waugh, 142.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 60.
- [23] *Matthew* 11:29.
- [24] *Mark* 10:22.
- [25] Waugh, 254.