

Having a soul friend ( anam cara)

We all enjoy the company of friends. Some may go back to early school days; others gathered on our journey through life, through work, pastimes, Church and from places where we have lived. Some friendships last a very long time, some friendships can be rekindled very quickly after years of being apart and others are quite fleeting. Our lives are enriched by friends; people we can trust and confide in or go to for advice and share experiences with.

I have loved reading about a very special friendship bond that was ingrained in the early Celtic church; that of the anam cara or soul friend relationship which was a very profound, all encompassing relationship.

Anam cara is the anglicized version of the Irish word anam chara . Anam meaning soul and cara meaning friend. A soul friend was a companion with whom you could share absolutely everything and anything in a lay and spiritual sense which made for very deep and meaningful relationships. They were in part mentoring relationships considered vital for spiritual growth and development and centred on God. These relationships went deeper however than simply mentoring, it was a sharing of your whole life laid bare.

I first came across the term anam cara when reading about Saint Cuthbert. One of his soul friends was Herbert, a hermit who lived on the middle of an island in the middle of the river Derwent. Herbert would leave the island once a year to visit Cuthbert and hear him teaching. Bede describes how they would have long discussions, encourage each other while “refreshing each other with draughts of heavenly waters” Then during one meeting Cuthbert told Herbert that this would be their last earthly meeting as “ the time of my departure and of laying aside my earthly tabernacle is at hand” The two men had such a close relationship that Herbert was totally dismayed and begged Cuthbert to plead with God that he himself may not be left alone for a moment on earth without his friend, his anam cara. And” that as we served him together on earth, may we journey together ... to behold his grace in heaven ”Herbert returned to his island and Cuthbert’s prophecy was later fulfilled when Herbert became ill and died whereupon their “spirits left their bodies on one and the same day”

Cuthbert had another anam cara relationship with the prior of Melrose, Boisil. He mentored Cuthbert and had a huge influence on him. Boisil had a vision about Cuthbert becoming a bishop which Cuthbert hated the idea of – and later on when Boisil lay dying of the plague, Cuthbert came to read the gospel of John with him .This had been the prior’s dying wish. Cuthbert was greatly loved as Boisil had been, preaching and spreading the Gospel walking about in local villages and living a simple Christian life.

These relationships were very common and considered vital for your spiritual and general wellbeing and development through life. Brigid of Kildare is reported to have told one young cleric that “ anyone without a soul friend is like a body without a head “

Hilda, the noblewoman who later became the abbess of Whitby had an anam cara relationship early in her life with Aidan. He inspired her so much that she followed Celtic traditions in worship. She had

wanted to become a nun with her sister in Gaul. Aidan begged her to not to go and she stayed, eventually founding the monastery for men and women at Whitby and becoming an influential force in healing the rift between the Roman and Celtic ways of worship.

Finnian acted as an *anam cara* to many future founders of other monasteries eg Columcille of Iona. Ita, the holy nun mentored and had deep relationships with many young men who led the Celtic church at some stages in their lives. She was also very close to Brendan who returned from his voyages many times to visit her. She said that time passed very slowly when he was absent .

There seemed to be a genuine deep affection and intimacy between these Celtic teachers. It was said that there existed between Patrick and Brigid “ so great a friendship of charity that they were of one heart and one mind”

There was great respect for each other in these relationships , despite any age differences. A feeling that the other person brought many blessings and gifts were often exchanged between them. Brigid gave a ring to Finnian for example.

These friendships could survive long periods apart - Brendan often returned to Ita for advice after his long travels. At times there were disagreements in *anam cara* relationships but they seem to have been short lived. The overriding characteristics seem to have been the sharing of common values, a friendship ultimately centred on God, a mutual respect and affection, an honesty and transparency with each other, encouragement and love for each other. At the same time this relationship recognised the need for periods of solitude and contemplation . These traits could be seen earlier with the Desert Fathers who enjoyed long periods alone but they also relished deep friendships and mutual encouragement. Abba Theodore said “ Let us each give his heart to the other, carrying the Cross of Christ” We know that the early Celtic church was very much influenced by the Desert Fathers and these ideas were expressed in many of the Celtic monastic rules.

I think we could do well to reflect on these type of relationships where people express a mutual love ,trust and respect for each other, where there is a real understanding of the other person and where people can encourage each other in the light of this knowledge and understanding while rooting the whole relationship in the embracing and loving arms of God.

Philippians chp 2 v 1-5

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard other as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something he exploited ....

Peace and love be with you all. Amen .