

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Soul-Friendship

There was a clerical student of Fearná, a foster-child of Brigid, who used to bring her presents. He used to eat with her in the refectory. Once when they were together, said Brigid, 'Good young student, have you a soul-friend (anamchara)?' 'I have indeed', said the student. 'Let us perform his requiem', said Brigid. 'Why?' said the student. 'Just when you had half finished your meal I saw he had died'. 'How did you know?' said the student. 'Not hard to answer that', said Brigid. 'I saw you half way through your meal without a head, for your soul-friend was dead. And now, eat no more till you find a soul-friend, for a person without a soul-friend is a body without a head' (Is colainn gan cheann duine gan anamchara).¹

THERE WE have a vivid illustration of a proverb that had become a commonplace in ancient Ireland. Soul-friend is rendered literally in Latin, *amicus animae*, or simply, *pater spiritualis*, *confessor* or *pater confessionis*, and indeed it often means just 'confessor', but it frequently means also 'spiritual director'. We know from the pagan literature (passed on by Christians) that wisdom was always highly esteemed and that a king, above all, should have his counsellors. There is a great amount of what we could call 'wisdom literature', which has to do with that aspect of life. It may be of interest here to quote from sayings attributed to Flann Fína mac Ossu, by which name Aldfrid son of King Oswy of Northumberland was known in Ireland:

A teacher deserves honour; wisdom should be revered; the beginning of wisdom is mildness; wisdom is a good gift, which makes a king of a poor man and a wise one of the foolish—good its beginning, better its end.²

The seventh century hiberno-latin text, *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, attributed to, among others, St Cyprian, and very popular in Europe, re-echoes the wisdom of the past: 'The justice of the king consists . . . in having elders, wise men and sober, as counsellors'.³

It is very important to realize that by the sixth century the Irish Church was mainly a monastic Church, the monks being actively engaged in pastoral work as well as leading a monastic life. It was but natural, then, that religious literature should have a monastic flavour. So too, doubtless, the practice of soul-friendship was monastic in origin. It is interesting to note that the Rule of St Columbanus seems to be unique among the

ancient monastic rules in having a chapter entitled 'On discretion'. The chapter is summed up in the final words: 'For while we must always restrain ourselves from either side, according to the saying, keep yourselves from the right and from the left, we must ever proceed straight forward by discretion, that is, by the light of God, while very often we say and sing the victorious psalmist's verse, My God, enlighten my darkness, since in Thee I am rescued from temptation. For temptation is the life of man on earth'.⁴

In the next chapter of the same Rule, 'On mortification', we have what we might call an apologia for the practice of soul-friendship, for it is that which is implied here although not specifically named:

The chief part of the monk's rule is mortification, since indeed they are enjoined in scripture, 'do nothing without counsel'. Thus if nothing is to be done without counsel, everything must be asked for by counsel. Thus we are enjoined through Moses also: 'Ask thy father and he will show thee, thy elders and they will tell thee'. But though this training seem hard to the hard-hearted, namely that a man should always hang upon the lips of another, yet by those who are fixed in the fear of God it will be found pleasant and safe, if it is kept wholly and not in part, since nothing is pleasanter than safety of conscience and nothing safer than exoneration of the soul, which none can provide for himself by his own efforts, since it properly belongs to the judgments of others.⁵

Others than priests could be soul-friends. St Columbanus himself was ordered by an ancient anchoress to abandon the world. It was asked:

When is a person competent to answer for the souls of others? When he is competent to answer for his own soul first. When is he capable of correcting others? When in the first place he can correct himself. A person who converts his own soul to life everlasting, how many souls could he convert? The people of the whole world provided they were tractable he could convert them to life everlasting so that they would belong to the kingdom of heaven.⁶

The qualities of the soul-friend are frequently stressed. He should be 'learned in the rules of conduct laid down in scripture and the rules of the saints'⁷ [although we are not told exactly what the rules of the saints are]. We may note the gloss on 1 Corinthians 12, 29 *Numquid omnes doctores?* (Are all teachers?)—'The soul-friends . . .'⁸ So we read that they instructed the young: 'Those children were baptized . . . and at the end

of a month they were confirmed; and at the end of seven years they were taken to soul-friends, and with them they read their psalms and hymns and all the order of the Church'.⁹ In the Rule of Mochuda there is comprehensive advice for the monk and the soul-friend: 'Not to accept alms unless they (penitents) obey you'.¹⁰ St Mael Ruain adds something to that: 'Laymen fancy that in order to get to heaven it is enough for them to give something to their soul-friends, and that their soul-friends will thenceforth be at their command. It is better then not to accept anything, save from one who is holy, or from one who accepts spiritual friendship'.¹¹ Mochuda warns lest 'their love be great about you, like a fire around your body',¹² a temptation of all times, lest what began as a soul-friendship should end as a body-friendship. We are reminded of the Curé of Ars or Padre Pio, perhaps, when we read: 'With fasting, with prayer you will pay their price. If you do not, you will pay for the crimes of many'.¹³ 'Instruction of the ignorant, to yield to your direction that they may not fall into guilt through following you. Let there be no lasting love in your heart, only the love of God. Since pure is the Body to which you go, be pure who approaches it'.¹⁴

We have similar counsels for the monk and soul-friend in the Rule of St Ailbhe: 'Heavy is the burden he takes. Let his conscience be diligent, be keen, without proud lying, without vanity. Fewness of words . . . Let him be steady without a particle of weakness. Let him be an anvil for every profitable thing'.¹⁵ The metaphor of the anvil was a favourite one, signifying perseverance, which was regarded as the highest of virtues, perseverance in prayer and service of God. We are reminded of what may well have been the source of the metaphor, the words of St Ignatius of Antioch to St Polycarp, urging him not to be frightened by false teachers: *Sta firmus ut incus qui percutitur*¹⁶ (Stand firm as the anvil when it is struck):

Let him perform the desire of every person; let him answer the sins of every soul [an expression of being all things to all people, I suppose]. Let him be gentle, firm and zealous, a serpent in deftness, a dove in filial affection [a favoured metaphor]. The confession of everyone he should closely conceal. Let him bewail with everyone his sins; if it be a scandal he shall hide it; the poor man, the needy man, as far as lies in his power, he shall not refuse them. Without reviling, without reproach, without rough reproof. Lest Satan carry him off his track, let him act lowly against loftiness—that is what the devil hates, that one should be gentle towards a rough person. With affection, without any harshness, without strife, without lust, humble, patient, with mildness, gentle be his countenance.¹⁷

Constant is the reference in the Rules to the monk's own need for holiness before he can guide others. What are called 'Rules' are not so in the legal sense. They are rather counsels of perfection, with occasional precisions. So, when it comes to considering the function or requirements of the soul-friend, it is right to regard him in the full context of the Rule. Thus the Rule of St Ailbhe urges the monk to be:

constant at prayer; let him not forget his canonical hours; his mind let him bow down without insolence or contentions. Their father is noble God, their mother is holy Church. Let it not be mouth-humility; let each have compassion on his brother. Let it not be too strict, let it not be lax. Let it not be a rule without knowledge, so that each may be able to bear his yoke, that he may not leave his enclosure.

Abruptly a word of advice may come for the soul-friend: 'A person who does not endure reproof and who admits not his blame, the soul-friend should warn him off to some other place'.¹⁸

When we realize that frequent confession was praised and practised—in one life of a saint we read, 'As the floor is swept every day so is the soul cleansed every day by confession'¹⁹—we are not surprised to find soul-friendships, in the broad sense of hearing confessions and in the narrower sense of direction of souls, as an integral part of the spiritual and pastoral literature.

There is constant counsel for the penitent; primarily, in the Rules, for the monk. Thus we have in a Rule from about the eighth century:

Light, wonderful and mild is the yoke of the Lord. To go to a devout sage is good, to direct one's path. A devout sage to guide you, it is good to avoid punishment. Although you consider yourself very strong, be not your own guide.²⁰

Wisdom in the soul-friend is often stressed. It is taken for granted that he will be one of the seniors. Seldom had the young the necessary wisdom—just through lack of experience [even in the modern language the word *críonnacht* means both old age and wisdom]. 'It is better for you to avoid those whom you think could slay you, a fool, pious but ignorant, a sage impenitent and shameless'.²¹ The choice of 'a humble, learned soul-friend'²² is recommended, 'the selling of darkness for light'.²³ 'Study', the monk is told, 'with a well-spoken old man (*senóir*)'.²⁴ To the soul-friend himself it is said: 'You do well to correct. You do not do well to reprove. The mind rebels against reproof. It is humble at being corrected. Wisdom without learning is better than learning without wisdom'.²⁵ It is the duty of the soul-friend to 'correct all impiety, without harshness,

without shame; correction of all the proud [we are told, perhaps unexpectedly?] with humility, through laughter'.²⁶

The penitent was to persevere in his repentance, yet steadily: 'The path of repentance if anyone should take, let him advance a step a day and not practise the ways of a charioteer. Make not a fire of bracken, it is quickly extinguished. Be not a sedge against the stream so that your piety will last'.²⁷

For one who was serious in his desire for soul-friendship it was not considered a good sign to move from one soul-friend to another. Mael Ruain had no great desire to receive Mael Díthruibh, although an anchorite and a learned man, as his disciple or penitent. He said to him:

'Did you ask permission of those you left before coming here?'

'Yes,' 'Even artisans, smiths, carpenters etc., none of them likes a man of his household to go to anyone else'. 'What you say has been looked to', said Mael Díthruibh, 'I obtained authorization and permission'. Then he rendered his obedience to Mael Ruain. Now, till that time he had been under the spiritual direction [soul-friendship] of Echtguide.²⁸

Mael Ruain added some advice that shows how seriously soul-friendship should be taken, and perhaps shows his esteem for Mael Díthruibh who was already well-advanced in holiness: 'When you place yourself under the judgment or control of another, seek out the fire that you think will burn you the fiercest [that is, him who will spare you least].'²⁹

Another soul-friend, Eláir, ended by sending all his penitents away:

because he saw that their penance was not zealously performed, and also that they concealed their sins when making confession. After that he finally refused to receive anyone at all to spiritual direction [soul-friendship]. However, he would sometimes allow holy persons to consult him.³⁰

It was for the penitent, then, to seek out a good, learned and holy soul-friend. An impious teacher was regarded as one of the three enemies of the soul, the other two in scriptural terms being the world and the devil.³¹ In a seventh century commentary on the Letter of St James we have the following remarks on chapter five, verse twenty:

To what is the teacher (*doctor*) like when he converts a soul? He is like the sentry on the tower looking out and indicating the stratagems of the enemy. Then, not only does he save his own soul, but also those of the citizens. So a double good accrues to the teachers and their hearers who obey them and fight against the enemy.³²

It is easy to see how those words would certainly be applied to the soul-friend as teacher.

Three women-saints in particular were noted for their guidance of souls, Brigid, Íde and Samhthann. It is related of Brigid that a feast was made for St Brendan, herself and her household and that

they were thirty days consuming that feast together. And each of them confessed to the other. Brendan said first that since he became religious he had never gone over seven furrows without his mind on God.

‘It is well’, said Brigid, ‘I thank God’. Brigid said however (that since she had fixed) her mind on God, she had never taken it from him at all. At which Brendan marvelled ‘It is right, then,’ said Brendan, ‘that you should surpass us in every respect’.³³

Perhaps we have here an example of that mutuality we come across occasionally, a mutual soul-friendship. Mael Díthruibh when he sought Mael Ruain as his soul-friend has such a mutual sharing in mind when he spoke of his desire to have his fill of discourse with Mael Ruain. St Íde was known as the foster-mother of the saints of Ireland, and St Brendan, already mentioned, was said to have been her chief fosterling. An example of her wisdom is shown in the answer she gave one day to St Brendan. He had asked her what were the three works most pleasing and the three most displeasing to God. Íde replied:

True faith in God with a pure heart; a simple life with piety; generosity with charity—those three things please God well. A mouth that hates men; holding on to evil dispositions in the heart; faith in riches—those three things displease God greatly.

And we are told that ‘St Brendan and all who were there and heard those sentiments praised God for his handmaid’.³⁴ In many places in that same life we are told that the saint consulted St Íde before undertaking particular tasks.

St Samhthann who flourished in the eighth century, a couple of hundred years after Brigid and Íde, seems to have had a great reputation for her wise advice, and was connected with the general movement of reform in the eighth century, as was in particular St Mael Ruain. Her sayings merited recording:

A certain monk once questioned St Samhthann about the way of praying; whether one should pray lying down, sitting or standing. To whom she replied: ‘In every position’, said she, ‘should one pray’. Again, a certain teacher named Daircellach came to the

virgin and said to her: 'I propose to give up study and give myself to prayer'. To whom (said) she 'What then can steady your mind and prevent it from wandering', she said, 'if you neglect spiritual study?' Then the teacher said 'I wish to go abroad on pilgrimage'. She replied, 'If God cannot be found on this side of the sea, by all means let us go overseas. But since God is near to all those who call on him, we have no need to cross the sea. One can reach the kingdom of Heaven from every land.'³⁵

Another incident is told of her:

There was a certain itinerant pedlar in Munster in the time of Samhthann, who used to carry greetings from her to the 'sons of life' [i.e. religious] in that country. Once she called him to her and bound him not to add to nor take away a single word that anyone should say to whom he was sent. Then she said to him: 'Say to Mael Ruain for me', said she [—or to Fer Dá Chrích, and the latter is more likely, since Mael Ruain was more venerable than Samhthann], 'that he is my favourite among the clerics of the South, and another thing you will say to him: ask, does he accept women for confession and will he accept my soul-friendship?' The pedlar took this message. But when he told him that he was Samhthann's favourite, he rose at once and raised both hands as in a cross-vigil and gave thanks to God. When the pedlar asked him next whether women took counsel of him and whether he would accept Samhthann's soul-friendship, he blushed down to his breast, and made three genuflections, and fell silent for a long time. Then he said: 'Tell her', said he, 'that I will seek counsel from her'. Then the pedlar told all those sayings to Samhthann, and she said: 'I think', said she, 'something will come of that youth'. Then she draws her brooch out of her mantle and drives it into her cheek till it stuck in the bone, and then there came out two filaments of milk: yet not a single drop of blood came out. At that sight the pedlar began to weep and wail. Then she took the wound between two fingers and set to squeezing it for a long time, and not a drop was wrung from it. Then at last by reason of the long squeezing out came a little tiny drop. It was a little drop of water, and there was a little yellow on the surface, enough to change its colour. Then she put this little driblet on her nail, and she said: 'So long', said she, 'as there is this much juice in his body, let him bestow no friendship nor confidence upon womankind'.^{36 37}

Nowhere is it clearer that soul-friendship was a serious matter than in

the prescriptions for married people who placed themselves under a soul-friend:

From prime on Monday to matins on Wednesday, for these two days and nights they are given exemption and licence both for meals and conjugal intercourse. After that time abstinence is imposed on them both from flesh and intercourse, from matins on Wednesday to matins on Thursday. They are given exemption again from matins on Thursday to matins on Friday. They must keep themselves again from intercourse from matins on Friday till matins on Monday, that is, they are to live separately for three days and three nights. Abstinence from meals is imposed on them on Friday and the following night, and on Saturday and Saturday night. They are given exemption, for meals only, on Sunday and Sunday night.³⁸

The great principle in the guidance of souls was that borrowed from medicine and popularized by John Cassian, and after him, we might say, above all by the Irish in their Penitentials which exercised such an influence on the sacrament of penance in Europe: *Contraria contrariis sanantur* (contraries are healed by their contraries). In a way I suppose that is to show the negative side of soul-friendship, yet the need is nearly always there to remedy various spiritual ills. So we read:

Let the power of the physician become greater in the degree in which the fever of the sick man increases. Hence those who take care to heal the wounds of others are to observe carefully what are the age and sex of the sinner, what instruction he has received, what his strength, by what trouble he has been driven to sin, with what kind of passion he is assailed, how long he remained in sinful delight, with what sorrow and labour he is afflicted, and how much he is detached from worldly things. *For God despiseth not the contrite and humbled heart.* Wise men, in regulating penance, are to look carefully also to this: not to punish with the rod a crime worthy of the sword and to smite with the sword a sin worthy of the rod; and according to Gregory, great care is to be taken by pastors lest they carelessly bind what ought not to be bound and loose what ought not to be loosed.³⁹

The principle itself is thus expressed in the Penitential of Finnian, the earliest of the penitentials, dating from the sixth century:

By contraries, as we said, let us make haste to cure contraries and to cleanse away these faults from our hearts and introduce

heavenly virtues in their place: patience must arise for wrathfulness; kindness, or the love of God and of one's neighbour, for envy; for detraction, restraint of heart and tongue; for dejection, spiritual joy; for greed, liberality. For Scripture saith: *The anger of man worketh not the justice of God*, and envy is judged as leprosy by the law, detraction as anathema, as is said in the scriptures: *He that detracteth his neighbour shall be cast out of the land of the living*; Gloom certainly devours or consumes the soul; *covetousness is the root of all evil*, as saith the Apostle.⁴⁰

It is easy to see how the principle fits in with the virtue of discretion, as expounded, for instance, by Columbanus, and indeed for him they are intertwined. In our own day it could well be profitable to take up the principle seriously and perhaps lay aside the polysyllables. The principle, after all, is timeless in matters of the body or the soul, no matter how it may be disguised or hidden under jargon. Certainly, whatever fault we may find with the old Irish or other ancient Christians, we can rarely fault them for lack of clarity.

We noted earlier that the soul-friend was expected to be 'learned in the rules of conduct laid down in scripture and in the Rules of the saints'. On reflection I think these must be the monastic Rules to which we have referred repeatedly. As I said, they are not Rules in the legal sense (although Columbanus has also a communal Rule which is penitential in character), but rather 'rules of conduct', prefaced by the great Rule of love of God and the neighbour. That last phrase occurs very very often in all the religious literature, whether in the Latin *dilectio Dei et proximi* or in the Irish (and incidentally is common in the traditional prayers that have come down to our own day). I have no doubt (considering also the fact that every ordained monk, at least, was also expected to be a soul-friend) that these Rules, as I have already hinted, had the soul-friend in mind. It is a subject which would deserve deeper study, but a few further excerpts will show how the constant growth of the soul seems to be always in view. From the sixth or early seventh century text, *Aggúir Chrábaid* or Alphabet of Piety, cognate to the Rules, we note the following: 'Three things expel a vacillating spirit and make for a steadfast mind: vigil and prayer and labour.'⁴¹ There are four things that obscure the truth: sexual love and fear, partiality and necessity. So long as a person is unjust, he cannot proclaim the truth in its propriety'.⁴² 'Moderation and wisdom and true holiness, together it is that a man attains them. When does a man attain them? When his truth is faultless? When his heart is in its proper condition, then truth is therein as if he had not been born of man'.⁴³ The first part of the answer to the question, 'What should be learned by a person?' is 'Perseverance in holiness'.⁴⁴ One of the Rules already quoted says: 'Through fear is the love of the King who heals

every misery. It is from love of him that his will and his commandments are cared for'.⁴⁵ And again: 'Fear controls repentance, love determines piety'.⁴⁶ 'This is the virtue that causes long consolation, that in all your desires you exercise patience'.⁴⁷

There was variety of discipline in the old Irish monasteries, even within the same monastery. 'Different is the condition of everyone, different the nature of the place . . .'.⁴⁸ Fostering that spirit and springing from it was surely the practice of soul-friendship.

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NOTES

¹ *Féilire Oengusso (The Calendar of Oengus)*, February 1.

² *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts III*, pp 10-20.

³ Migne, *Patrologia Latina IV*, 947-90.

⁴ Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, pp 135-39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 139-41.

⁶ 'Apgitir Chrábaid' no 18 in *Celtica VIII* (1968) ed. Vernam Hull.

⁷ *The Rule of Tallaght*, ed. Edward Gwynn, *Rule of the Céili Dé*, 37.

⁸ *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus*, ed. Stokes, Strachan, Vol 1, p 574.

⁹ *Life of Colmán son of Luachán*, ed. Kuno Meyer, no 8.

¹⁰ *Irish Ecclesiastical Record XXVII* (1910), p 505.

¹¹ *Ut sup.*, 7, p 61. It is interesting to note that Thomas Merton wrote in 1960 in *Spiritual direction and meditation* that only if the layman 'has special work to do for the Church or is in a situation with peculiar problems' ought he to have a spiritual director (quotation in 'Soul Friend: guidance on our sacred journeys' by Edward C. Sellner in *Spiritual Life*, Summer 1982, p 75).

¹² *Ut sup.*, 10, p 505. ¹³ *Ibid.* ¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ériu III* (1907), p 97. ¹⁶ Quoted in Roman breviary, *heb. xvii per annum, fervi, lectio altera*.

¹⁷ *Ut sup.*, 15. ¹⁸ *Ut sup.*, pp 99, 103, 105.

¹⁹ *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Plummer, *Molua xxx*. ²⁰ *Ériu I* (1904), p 197.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 198. ²² *Ériu II* (1905), p 64. ²³ *Ibid.*, p 65.

²⁴ *Ibid.* ²⁵ *Ut sup.*, 6, no 36.

²⁶ 'Anmchairdes Mancháin Léith' (The Soul-friendship of M.L.) *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie VII* (1910), p 311.

²⁷ *Ut sup.*, 20, pp 200, 194. ²⁸ *The Monastery of Tallaght*, ed. Gwynn, Purton, no 24.

²⁹ *Ut sup.*, 7, no 77. ³⁰ *Ut sup.*, 28, no 23. ³¹ *Ut sup.*, 6, no 20.

³² *Scriptores Hiberniae Minores I*, ed. R. E. McNally S.J., p 22, 763-7.

³³ *Ut sup.*, vol 2, p 324. ³⁴ *Ut sup.*, *Ite xxii*. ³⁵ *Ibid.*, *Samthann xx*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

³⁷ Kathleen Hughes in *The Church in early Irish society*, p 177, footnote 6, remarks that the *Life of Samthann* 'shows a more enlightened attitude. The story expresses the views of Mael Ruain rather than the views of Samthann'.

³⁸ *Ut sup.*, 28, no 50. ³⁹ *The Irish Penitentials*, ed. Bieler, p 199.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p 85. ⁴¹ *Ut sup.*, 6, no 20. ⁴² *Ibid.*, no 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, no 16. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, no 9. ⁴⁵ *Ut sup.*, 20, p 195.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p 196.

⁴⁸ *Ut sup.*, 10, p 511.