

## SPIRITUAL FRIENDS – THE ANAMCHARA TRADITION

“A person without a spiritual friend (anamchara) is like a head without a body.”  
Attributed to St Brigid of Kildare

### **Self-assessment:**

I experience myself as a collection of impulses, desires, needs, loves, memories and hopes, a thinking and feeling and physical being, always becoming. I am a part of nature, not apart from it, and thus my environment affects me as much, if not more, than I affect it. I am neither an animal nor a machine only, but I am more than either one. I am spiritually centered even as I am materially grounded. I am perceptive enough to transform the data of my experience into a coherent reality, yet open enough to keep that vision of reality open-ended and available to new experience. While I experience myself as a totality, yet I know that I am constantly changing and evolving as I move toward an end that is led by the Spirit and is “hidden with Christ in God.”

**Preliminaries:** to be a spiritual friend requires

- A. a faith community that
  - Rejects the idea of a completed faith as intellectual assent
  - Assumes a relational or communal matrix for faith – we are not alone
  - Eschews the compartmentalization of religion from life issues; soul, spirit, and body belong together
  - Calls for intellectual depth.
- B. A view of faith that
  - Growth is possible: deepening, expansion, interconnectedness
  - Growth is possible through the freedom offered in Christ
  - Growth involves ongoing repentance/metanoia
  - Growth takes place in a communal context
- C. A basic understanding that this friendship is not authoritarian or even necessarily a form of “direction” but rather cultivates inner receptivity and pregnant, expectant silence in the Presence of God.

### **Understandings**

- A. Spiritual friendship is a special kind of friendship in which the focus is on plumbing the depths of the soul, which enables growth in faith. This growth involves a number of aspects, among which are:
  - Discerning your call to discipleship,
  - Understanding and claiming the gift of grace
  - Seeking God’s will for your life
  - Exploring your experience of God
- B. The characteristics of the relationship might include:
  - That it is freely entered into; there is no coercion to take it up;
  - That it involves a sort of covenant, an understanding of the bond that connects the partners;
  - That it can be ended with impunity and without judgments of “success” or “failure”

- That it involves mutual support and teaching one another;
- That it has to do with discipline, conversion, and the life of prayer and that these matters are open for discussion;
- That it has to do with all of life, not some sector called the soul.

C. The characteristics of a spiritual friend include:

- Compassion
- Respect
- Confidentiality
- Self-disclosure
- Prayerful and willing to share prayer
- Listening
- Maintaining the emphasis on the other person in the relationship
- Discernment of the movement of the Spirit in one's own heart to enable that movement in another
- Maturity – wisdom beyond knowing facts derived from honestly facing crises, suffering, and questions
- Ability to relate conversation to the liturgical life of the church
- Maintaining an inquisitive, authentic, "beginner's mind"

D. What a spiritual friend is not:

- A father confessor. The relationship operates on a different plane and there is no word of absolution.
- A counselor or therapist. This is not psychological counseling and presumes no knowledge of theory or therapy.
- A spiritual director. These are people found in monasteries or in special circumstances who really lead you forward; the spiritual friend walks alongside.
- Your best friend.
- Your spouse, because it is more helpful to get fresh insights from someone who knows you from a different angle altogether.
- Someone of the opposite sex, unless you really understand and discuss boundary and transference issues. That is to say, simply, you have to understand that there will be no sexual trespassing and you're not going to see someone in role as your mother or father.