

# Passionist Inner City Mission: Part 1



*The Passionists began moving to Britain's inner cities in 1971 to be alongside those suffering there from injustice and deprivation and to join them in the struggle for life and justice. They did this believing that this was the most effective way in which to witness to the realities of crucifixion as well as resurrection in our country today.*

*Nicholas Postlethwaite CP joined Austin Smith CP in ministering in the Toxteth area of Liverpool and shares the first instalment of his reflections on what he encountered in his initial years there.*

## “Once upon a time...”

This is to tell the story of a journey - begun some fifty years ago and continuing still today.

I choose two events - each very different though connected, as a starting point for all that will follow. The one took place on 25th September 2008 - the other occurred some thirty years earlier in May 1978.

The first event is simply the summary of a conversation:

Father Austin Smith and I had arrived in Liverpool 8 in 1971. By the year 2008 Austin was beginning to need additional personal and supportive care. This was wonderfully provided for him within the Granby Care Home where he spent his last years - just a few hundred yards from where we had first begun our Liverpool journey together. This Care Home, which incidentally Austin himself had helped plan and design, provided Austin's later years with a living personal context where friends from the local Toxteth community he had come to love - and which loved him in its turn, were able to continue sharing conversations with him.

Visiting during his final years before his death in 2011, I enjoyed some of the best of my many “Austin conversations” - sometimes alongside other friends, sometimes with just our two selves. Conversation had always been the heart of our friendship. It is one such conversation that provides this first event to introduce our story: it stands out particularly for its focus on what our journey is about. Immediately leaving him that day, I wrote down the key points Austin had shared to

ensure I would not forget. I will try to share it now.

Austin possessed many outstanding qualities as will testify all who knew him. One quality was his appreciation of philosophy and his imaginative poetic ability to link abstract theoretical principles to concrete realities here and now. On that September day, sitting in the lounge of Granby Care Home, surveying life going on all around him, I asked Austin: “What would you name as the key challenges we have faced since coming in 1971 to live in Liverpool 8?

Austin did not hesitate: “*To free God from the trammels of unimaginative orthodoxies!*”

And then “*To release human mystery so it can enjoy its rightful limitless historical and cultural heritages.*”

I pressed further: “What do you believe this required from us?” Again came this immediate succinct responses:

“*To deconstruct all restrictive linguistics in order to promote authentic human conversation. To “re-found” religious institutions so they liberate imagination and promote solidarity and human freedom on shared Calvary journeys. To integrate art and new poetic beginnings - whether with members of a religious order or with elders sharing life together in our Granby Care Home.*”

Evidently on a roll I risked pushing Austin further: “In our Granby home, what do you think has been the energy that has sustained us to keep probing forward together? Again, Austin did not hesitate:

“*Our shared meals have been an essential element in it - meals where conversations were allowed to run free and so seldom ended in dead ends! Our initial decision to step into a new reality beyond the realms of theory to meet human mystery in all the multi-faceted realities of this Granby neighbourhood. We learnt perseverance and gained stamina by patiently always allowing the human to speak - before too neatly trying to corral it within structural organisation. We were ready to risk “letting-go” of hallowed certainties if it might lead to learning new ways of listening, speaking and loving.*”

The New Testament speaks of the coming time when “... young men shall see visions and old men dream dreams...” (Acts 2.17) Approaching the end of his life, I remember my conversation with Austin as echoing this prophetic insight linking our original vision to the reality of bringing us both to Toxteth - a vision that continued sustaining us now many years later. Stripped back to bare essentials, this summary conversation could perhaps be described as an Austin “Nunc Dimittis”, summarising his deepest convictions about life and his own commitment to it.

## A second event is about another shared journey:

In May 1978 nine excited teenagers accompanied by three of us who were rather nervous adults, boarded a mini-bus outside Paddington Comprehensive - our Liverpool inner-city school. The twelve seater was completely full, because we had not anticipated in our enthusiasms the subsequent

problems that can occur through too close proximity throughout long journeys. We set out with high hopes on a long anticipated three week journey taking us through France and Italy and on to our eventual destination of Rome.

Along the way we begged accommodation from religious communities who were prepared to risk welcoming this band of somewhat unusual pilgrims. We were allowed to lay sleeping-bags in monastic corridors, beside chapel altars and even on floors under monks' refectory tables.

One highlight of this journey was an invitation to stay in our Passionist monastery perched high up on Monte Argentario - an Italian mountain peninsula north of Rome. Almost an island, reaching out into the Mediterranean it provides wonderful sea views on all sides. Today it has become a popular holiday resort- perhaps as a result of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor discovering it as a hideaway from media attention while they were filming in Rome!

More important than celebrity notoriety, historically Monte Argentario is a place of special significance for Passionists – and not least for me. Since my teenage years it has represented a sacred place – the symbol associated with another man of vision who lived there some three hundred years ago.

In the eighteenth century, Paul Danei recognised the beauty of this isolated peninsula. From his earliest years Paul believed God was calling him to a life of prayer and contemplation. To Catholics he is known today as St Paul of the Cross - Founder of the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ - the Order to which I applied to join as a teenager and which subsequently has shaped and supported me since becoming a member of the community of the Passion – or the Passionists as the popular Catholic name given to all members, not least to those of us in St Joseph's

Province in England.

Paul shared his vision and began to attract companions to share commitment to searching for a deepening union with God - and specifically for union with a God revealed pre-eminently in the mystery of the death of Jesus on Calvary. High on this idyllic Italian peninsula Paul and his first companions built their Passionist home. It was towards this now well-established monastery and retreat centre on Monte Argentario, that an over-heating mini-bus with twelve over-heating Liverpool passengers began to wind its way up the road to St Joseph's Retreat.

## Memories of Toxteth: An Introduction

I deliberately choose this moment, recalled from nearly forty years ago as a second event to introduce the story that follows. Austin's answers to my questions in the Granby Care Home were situated in terms of the personal journey he and I travelled together. But he would be the first to remind that it was not a journey travelled in isolation. Along the way, we found ourselves accompanied by and accompanying many friends and fellow pilgrims. Many of these for me were the young people of Liverpool 8 with whom I worked for many years, including the nine travelling with me in our minibus in Italy in May 1978.

Recalling that time brings to mind another key question - perhaps it is a somewhat paradoxical question. Is an eighteenth century saint's mystical vision relevant to twentieth century young people from inner-city Liverpool? Can there be some sort of "connect" between such apparently diverse contexts?

These are two contrasting events are foundational markers for me as I begin this story of our Passionist Inner City Mission. They contrast with each other in various ways.

The one summarises the maturing reflections of someone approaching his end of life and specifically about the decades of Austin's life dedicated to becoming part of one relatively small Liverpool neighbourhood known as Toxteth. Austin continued to the end dreaming dreams about the essential in searching the wonder of human mystery.

The other highlights that we do not journey alone. We are all part of an ongoing pilgrimage. It can never be an exclusive "internal" journey of contemplation – or a life of continual "externa" activity. The distinction sometimes used in religious contexts of ministry between contemplation and action, is in my view, a very artificial and dangerous one.

For me the conversation with Austin and the journey with my friends from Toxteth each speak in their different ways to the essential mystery and wonder of our authentic human searching.

This is the story of a continuing search to stay in the presence of the mystery of divine buried in the heart of the human and of the reflections and actions that result from rooting this search in the heart of human praxis - especially in those places where human experience is stripped to its bare essential.

My hope is that in peeling back some of the reasons that brought Austin and me to Liverpool and the experiences we shared over many years there, may help to put flesh on the bones of these two opening stories to demonstrate hopefully

## Time Revisited

You've confused our tidiness of time,  
Redefining the simple and sublime,  
Redeeming earth's space and being,  
Gracing deeply our life's becoming,  
Sharing secrets of some eternity,  
Telling tales about our mystery,  
Mapping a journey to a distant shore  
Fighting sleep behind a stable door,  
Eyes half open on a night star  
Blinking brightly from so far,  
Way, way up in a cloudless sky,  
So we dance, sing, laugh and cry  
Away our time of joy and sorrow,  
Living today for life's tomorrow,  
In every now a not-yet is unfolding  
Your babyness the eternal revealing.  
Tiny swaddling of time and timelessness  
Fast falling asleep in human powerlessness.

Fr Austin Smith CP, Christmas 2000



why we both have always considered that the best decision either of us ever made, was to come to live in the Toxteth neighbourhood of Liverpool.

I am focusing on a specific experience shared between my friend Austin and myself over many years in inner-city Liverpool. Readers will formulate their own reactions and questions in ways that are more appropriate for their specific life experiences. It would be foolish to suggest our particular Liverpool experience could or should be replicated by others. But it could also be deemed foolish to pretend that there are not underpinning principles and values that dovetail into the mystery of the human in all its panoramic possibilities. We tell our stories in order to dig ever deeper to the realities – often unable to be expressed – that sustain them in the depths of silence.

My purpose in writing this book is not to claim our Liverpool experiences have either ethical or universal lessons applicable for others. It is simply a personal story, detailing the search of two friends opting to travel together to help sustain each other in continuing to probe shared questions in the light of a faith that motivated both our lives. It would be arrogant in the extreme to imply this experience has any general or instructional value for others. But encouraged by many friends to tell our story, perhaps it is not unrealistic to hope that some of the challenges we met and the rewards that flowed from facing those challenges, may encourage others travelling similar paths - or perhaps considering whether or not to do so. But not only is this not a morality tale, neither does it pretend to be a firm formula for political or community development programmes. It does however illustrate the many positive outcomes that come when we work together for change from the margins.

Further, though this journey originates and remains within a faith context, I do not present it in any way as a new theological manual able to be read and translated into other situations and contexts. But it is an account of a continuing theological - and philosophical - reflection conducted within the realities of a rich inner city community that generously ensured that Austin and I never risked escaping into unreal ivory towers that can so often be used as protection against stepping out into the wonder - and messiness - of the world that all men and women of good will share together. It is a continuing journey and conversation which opens onto - not a new ministry or pastoral project - but rather explosively reveals new understanding of the call of the Gospel to recognise the presence of the divine shared at the heart of human mystery.

While always remaining focused on our personal experiences, neither Austin nor I hopefully ever forgot how much we owed to the legacy of the institutions that educated and enriched our lives from our earliest years. While never forgetting our role in and need for the institutional identities that had made us, neither did we hesitate to analyse and challenge the interpretation of those institutions which risk inhibiting the merging of human mystery in the transcendent mystery of God. As will be seen as our story unfolds, this sometimes can cause tensions and misunderstandings. But life without tension is surely hardly life at all? Institution is a necessary part of human socialisation and order: but institutions, whether sacred or secular, are there to serve not to dominate

or oppress those who are part of them.

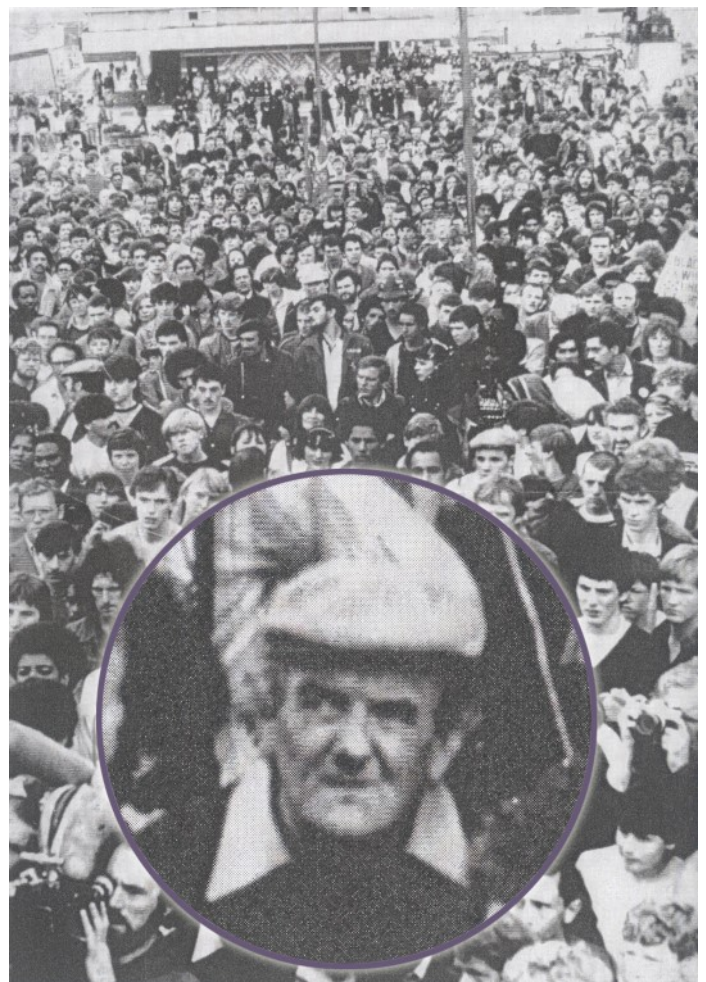
Geographically this story is focused within a very small space - a few streets in inner-city Liverpool. But we often felt this narrow focus was a gateway or entrance into much wider panoramas. Because it has been a long-lasting journey it has enabled us many times to listen in new ways for the “knock at the door” that the Gospel’s speak about and where it is important to stay awake so that opportunities are not missed to open and welcome whoever stands outside.

If you decide to read on, I hope that perhaps our story and discoveries made along the way may resonate with your experiences: are there basic human questions which all our quests risk neglecting today. If what follows helps uncover or throw fresh light on some such questions - questions which sustained many conversations Austin and I shared down the years - then telling our story will have been worth doing.

We two English Passionist priests were gifted with opportunity to explore within the context of a wonderful Liverpool community, and to rediscover our faith integrated within the mystery of a grace filled humanity.

In the next issue of ‘Passio’ I will highlight some of the historical details which led Austin and I to opt to come to live in Liverpool - both on a personal level as well as within a radically shifting national and international background affecting both secular and religious understandings.

The story is divided into sections to reflect some of the key discoveries made along the way on what we call our Passionist Inner City Mission journey.



*Austin Smith CP at the Liverpool Protests*