

Passionist Inner City Mission: Part 2



Austin Smith CP and Nicholas Postlethwaite CP on Crosby Beach

Nicholas Postlethwaite CP and Austin Smith CP moved to Toxteth, Liverpool, in 1971 as part of a wider Passionist movement to Britain's inner cities. Their mission was to be alongside those suffering there from injustice and deprivation and to join them in the struggle for life and justice.

In the previous Passio edition I spoke about a conversation with Father Austin towards the end of his life. In response to me asking why our Inner City Mission was important to him he answered with this personal “credo”: “It is about trying to free God from the trammels of unimaginative orthodoxies!” It has to do with the release of human mystery so it enjoys its rightful limitless historical and cultural heritages.” This was a vision he had matured over more than forty years.

In this second article I am recalling early days – what brought this journey to birth and to continue still today? I describe three events taking place in one specific location, though forty seven years and eleven months separate them – a front door key – a visit of friends– and a ladder up which to climb to a first floor window!

Passionist Inner City Mission – its initial genesis and backdrop

Historians highlight countless advances initiated during the span of the twentieth Century. But observers would be unbelievably naïve not to note also the countless tragedies marking 20th century calendars. Immediately following the First World War, gloomily but presciently, W B Yeats observed that “Things fall apart” and “the centre cannot hold.” Yeats would die months before the start of a Second World War. Had he lived to see its end in two catastrophic atomic explosions and the continuing procession of “local” wars that plagued the century's remaining years, Yeats surely would conclude more emphatically than ever that yes indeed, “the centre” is not

holding?

Political fragmentation was not just the preserve of secular institutions: tensions and divisions were mirrored in religious institutions too. Visiting Dachau one must walk through middle-class Munich streets and neighbourhoods to arrive at the concentration camp gates. The dark shadow of shame hangs over churches colluding with 1930's fascism – though in contrast to courageous examples of small communities such as those of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other friends witnessing to Gospel resistance even at the cost of their lives.

In Britain a sense of comfortable complacency seemed to develop in those post War decades – so the prime minister could claim “we have never had it so good.” If true for some, it was certainly not the experience of all whose lives were fragmented and alienated in society. It was these men and women on whose behalf Austin protested: “Release human mystery to enjoy its rightful limitless historical and cultural heritages.” Safety announcements are sometimes heard on trains warning travellers alighting “to mind the gap”. Was this a prophetic warning to secular and sacred institutions that the division between those who had it so good was widening for those who did not “enjoy their rightful limitless historical cultural heritages?”

Towards the end of the '50s something wonderful happened in the Catholic Church. An aged Pope invited the Church to re-engage in a world-wide conversation - the Second Vatican Council. A Pentecost fire was reawakening the Church to its 20th Century reality. Classically summed up in words from “Gaudium et Spes”: “..the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their

hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.

Austin's gravestone uses three words to describe him – the third word is 'POET'. Austin used poetry to express wonder and mystery – especially the human mystery with - 'its rightful limitless historical and cultural heritages'. With the eye of a philosopher Austin was aware better than most of the crises to which Yeats referred. But with the eye of a poet he could also glimpse vibrant light beckoning beyond and outside darkened church doors - thrown open by the Council call to engage in authentic conversations. He felt the urge to lift poetry off the printed page and bring it to life in practical action.

With patience – and no little genius and determination – he successfully persuaded hesitant Province leadership to give him leave to step beyond his ecclesiastical comfort zone and set him free to walk alongside sisters and brothers outside church confines – particularly along those roads restricting "rightful limitless and cultural heritages". In 1971 he was given permission and the blessing of his Province community's to step out – and, thank God, he also got permission to ask me to travel with him.

I acknowledge inadequacy in sketching such vast issues underpinning the birth of Passionist Inner City Mission. I hope a fuller outline will be written out of future research and analysis. But inadequate as it is, I pass now from background to a first story:

The First Day

On 11th October 1971 Austin and I climbed stairs from the front door of 7 Ducie Street Liverpool 8, key in hand to a first floor Flat 3. The door opened onto tiny space – accommodation designed for a single person. There was a distinctive feel and smell that lingers still in memory. Consisting of a bathroom, a small bedroom and a slightly larger living space open to a miniscule kitchen. We faced a first dilemma: the space was adequate for one - but we were two! Though friends, we needed some separation to maintain good relationships in such a constriction – at very least separate bed spaces! Austin, generous from the beginning insisted I make the bedroom my own. This resulted in his bed being part of living room furniture: it also required him to surrender bedtime privacy until me – or visitors – left him free to convert living room back to bedroom! Such may seem trivial; but as someone accustomed to personal space and privacy, this decision was an early indication of Austin's generosity of spirit characteristic of how he would live the next forty years of life till his death in a local Care Home just a few hundred yards from where we were that first day in Ducie Street.

Looking back I have to smile when I contrast the grand image of a Church throwing wide its doors and window in Vatican Council documents - and the dramatically reduced spaces Austin and I now faced in our new home. But we were embarking on a wonderful Gospel experience that would open ever wider panoramas for us from this Passionist Inner City Mission first starting point.

From the upstairs window we had a very different "view" from that to which we were accustomed. Ducie Street in the Granby neighbourhood is referred to by its postal number - Liverpool 8. The media in 1981 would subsequently resurrect its old name - Toxteth - when national attention was attracted by street disturbances but those events were some ten years further down the road.

I cannot remember precisely what we said to each other looking through the window at this seminal moment. A fanciful image comes to mind: coming from Warrington, I think of that well-known author from my home town with stories for children about a girl named Alice. Lewis Carroll introduces Alice talking to her cat!

"Now if you'll only attend, Kitty, and not talk so much, I'll tell you all my ideas about Looking-glass House. First, there's the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way..... the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way; I know that, because I've held up one of our books to the glass, and then they hold up one in the other room."

Strangely Austin and I - albeit confusedly – felt we were experiencing something analogous to an "Alice moment". We too saw things familiar, yet different, stepping away from familiar into new landscapes. Superficially of course, everything was completely normal. We were standing at an ordinary window - looking out to ordinary houses – where perfectly ordinary people were passing by in the street below. From my perspective nearly fifty years later, I am unsure whether I realised at that point how radical was the step we were taking. But realising it or not, undoubtedly we had entered a drama that would affect us for the rest of our lives. Letting-go of many previous securities underpinning religious and priestly life up to that moment we would begin to face paradoxes – rich paradoxes - implicit in the wonder of the "ordinary". It would touch deepest hopes and require us to discover new ways to live our faith. It would produce shifts in visions and dreams. It would teach us to question in deeper ways the meaning and significance of faith – of religious life – of priesthood as slowly we would learn to re-internalise these gifts stripped of many exterior trappings and symbols that previously seemed to make them secure. We would be led to new signposts and milestones pointing towards unexpected places with new answers to old questions. But that day in October was but our first small step on a new life-long journey. A new beginning – yes! But were we clear about its many implications? No – not clear then! But there was definitely a sense of a guiding hand drawing us forward in new ways – and a new life waiting to be lived.

Not only were we uncertain about the path less travelled –so also were many of those who were close to us and who were equally concerned about the steps we were taking. It was vital to us that this new beginning enjoyed the active support of our religious community - St Joseph's Passionist Province. And it is the ambivalences the Inner City Mission would sometimes raise in the minds of friends and fellow religious that reminds me of a second story from the day we moved into Ducie Street.

Celebrating a first Mass

We were listening for the door-bell marking the arrival of five friends invited to share with us this first day of the rest of our lives. Unsurprisingly the first guests were not from among our new neighbours – we did not yet know them. Rather they were Passionists from different parts of our Province joining us in a Eucharistic celebration. We were fortunate in our open and creative Province leadership – ready to encourage explorations of new forms of Passionist life and ministry. It would be inaccurate, however, to claim there was total 100% support within the Province. There were from the beginning – and some would remain - doubts and questions about the appropriateness of this new venture and criticisms from some traditional perspectives. But despite ambivalences, Austin and I needed the reassurance of a supportive Province – we did not want to be accused that we were “doing our own thing”. That said it often proved necessary to try to dispel misinterpretations about the principles and purpose of the Inner City Mission. I suspect there was a little hint some ambivalence that can be detected in that initial Eucharist in Ducie Street on our very first day.

When our five friends arrived, Flat 3’s limited space seemed totally over-crowded! There was something gently comic in seven priests - unused to ritual outside a church setting, negotiating space to vest for Mass and find a “perch” around the small coffee table serving as altar. Three squashed together on Austin’s bed as we began our first Inner City Mission Eucharist.

Despite cramped conditions I remember this beautiful, intimate and moving celebration. Austin had chosen readings and prayers appropriate to the circumstances. We also had opportunity to share personal thoughts about this new beginning. Contributions focused on prayers for the venture as well as for Austin and me undertaking it. One friend voiced his “bidding prayer” by thanking God “for bringing us to this new Passionist venture. We pray for Austin and Nicholas so they can bring you (God) to everyone in this neighbourhood who do not know you.”

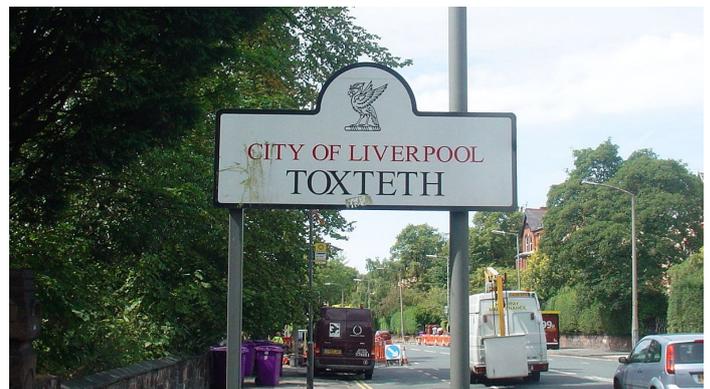
I remember his prayer and clearly understand the sincerity it expresses. But, then as now, I felt it contained a theological paradox. Does it imply it is we – priests, Passionists, ministers –tasked to bring God to others? I felt then – and believe now –that God is already and always wonderfully present in every human community and circumstance. Is not the true challenge for the minister humbly to seek to learn to recognise the wonder of God at the heart of each human person?

I am sure if my friend (sadly no longer alive) were to read my critique of his spontaneous prayer he would deny caricaturing priestly ministry in this way. But perhaps in that first Mass I think I sensed something of the challenge Austin and I would face. We would need to begin learning as he later expressed so well that we must “try to free God from the trammels of unimaginative orthodoxies!” It has to do with the release of human mystery so it enjoys its rightful limitless historical and cultural heritages.” – including the heritage of each person a temple of God’s Spirit. Implicitly or explicitly, I think I was sensing my need to purify theological principles and pre-suppositions – attitudes perhaps that were alien – and learn to go deeper into the mystery at the heart of the human – which we were invited into that first day together in Ducie Street.

Austin and I though unsure about our future, certainly were convinced from the start that God was certainly not “on hold” - waiting for us to take him to Liverpool 8! God did not need Passionist introductions to his people of this neighbourhood! Though totally new to this neighbourhood and yet to learn to appreciate the love and friendship so generously given us in the years ahead, we did know God was already there before us! We sensed if anyone needed to learn to recognise God anew, it would first have to be Austin and myself entering into the story of the wonderful community that is Liverpool 8 and at whose door that day we were preparing to ask for admission. We felt called to a total re-appraisal of what it means to search for God after stepping away from many securities of our previous Passionist and priestly experience and to seek God in a “new land”. Our first Mass was raising questions for us as individuals but also in regard to self-understanding as members of a Religious Congregation mandated to take this new step. Mandated it must be said, not always without some reserve and suspicion by some. Are such suspicions traceable to some of the theological paradoxes present even in our “spontaneous prayers” voiced in a Mission Mass that first morning?

Our story would continue unfolding beyond the first day through many subsequent decades with other theological and pastoral questions challenging personal and priestly pre-suppositions. But those are stories that must await future episodes in this long running saga. Many challenges require returning to again and again. The mission is not static! It is a continuing flowing river of experience and grace. It is a sharing that continues as really today in 2018 as when it first began in Ducie Street all those years ago.

A third story about Liverpool



Passionist Inner City Mission

My first two stories each took place within, 7 Ducie Street in October 1971. The third happens outside the same front door – now sadly nailed up to protect the property left derelict. It was on Saturday 1st September 2018.

Liverpool 8 community took Austin to its heart. After he died in 2011 and to honour his memory a Fund was established to provide financial help to local groups associated with him: called the Austin Smith Memorial Fund. He would have been 90 this year and to mark his birthday a celebration was planned in a marquee erected outside 7 Ducie Street. Notices were distributed inviting

everyone to come to share memories, conversation, photographs, laughter and food in Austin's memory. A local artist joined in spending the day creating a piece of art to act as "visual minutes" to commemorate the event. Large photographs of Austin had been displayed throughout area fastened to walls and lamp posts. One friend found a ladder and climbed to the first floor window of 7 Ducie Street symbolically attaching a large photograph of Austin looking down from the self-same window we had both gazed through all those years ago in 1971.

Young and old, Muslim and Christian, believers and non-believers, black and white, friends from near and far came to make this celebration what one visitor spontaneously remarked to be "all that human community should be about – people together celebrating through all their differences without let or hindrance and no artificial barriers keeping them apart". Was he perhaps simply echoing in his own way something Austin articulated in Granby Care Home shortly before he died: "Let's free God from the trammels of unimaginative orthodoxies!" and "Release human mystery so it can enjoy its rightful limitless historical and cultural heritages.?" I believe and hope so.

Perhaps these three simple stories, spanning many years, give some indication of the beginning – and continuing of this Passionist mission. In limited space it is not possible to include so many other "ups and downs", "lessons learned only to need re-learning again", that make up the fascinating narrative of a continuing radical Passionist journey. Perhaps at a future date other stories can be shared taken from this kaleidoscopic journey which St Joseph's Province began in 1971 – and which continues today and which with God's help, will continue growing and developing in years to come.

As state and church worry about whether "the centre" is holding – or are things "falling apart" – perhaps there are hints and pointers in the Passionist Inner City Mission which may encourage others to step outside safety zones and rediscover the wonder and beauty at the heart of human mystery. I began this article with an Austin quotation: I conclude it with another from his book *Mersey Vespers*, page 148:

"Liverpool had this impact on me. It did not offer a new form of ministry. Rather I was offered a new beginning to understand the radical Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth."

“In the Shelter of Each Other the People Live”



Delegates at the NJPN Conference

Kris Pears is a member of the Community of the Passion. In July he attended the Annual Conference of the National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) in Swanwick, Derbyshire.

This was the 40th Annual Conference. Even though I've been involved in J&P for 49 years it is something that I only became aware of 4 years ago, so for me it was just my 4th conference. There are a number who have been to most (and probably one or two who have been to all) of them, so I feel quite inexperienced. Nonetheless for each year that I have attended there has been a reasonable number with a star on their name badges to indicate that this is their first time, it is good to be able to share my limited experience with first timers, even if it is just pointing out where the tea/coffee machines are (and what time they are switched on & off at).

We started with dinner on Friday evening (all food for conference follows the LOAF principle – Locally sourced, Organic produced, Animal friendly & Fairly traded) so meat is only available at one meal.

This year's theme was "In the shelter of Each Other the people live". There were 4 speakers:

- Rev Al Barrett – Rector of Hodge Hill Church, a CofE-URC ecumenical partnership in east Birmingham (less than 20 miles from where I live & I'd never heard of it).
- David McLoughlin a teacher from Newman University, someone who has offered radical views on the bible in relation to everyday life.
- Sarah Teather, Director of Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) UK, an MP for 12 years in her previous life.
- John Grogan – current MP – Labour in Keighley & Ilkley, elected in 2017.

An interesting mix of speakers and this year we had a different chair for each of the speakers. Rather than losing continuity, it added a dimension to it.

The link below will take you to the home page of Liverpool NJPN, where Stephen (one of their members) has posted 8 videos, showing the 4 talks by our excellent main speakers from the weekend. Each is split into two parts [the second usually being the Q&A after the talk] this keeps each video below the one hour mark.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQzJkymJ3su5HJKc7dbiKyQ>

On Friday evening Al challenged us to listen – his topic was "Can anybody hear me – Christian discipleship in Brexit Britain, in the shadow of Grenfell Tower".

He talked about the Web of Poverty, the numbing of conscience and used the term *benumbment* – a refusal to listen OR be listened to.