

“Freeing God from unimaginative orthodoxies”

an account of the vision and reality of Austin’s Ministry in Liverpool from the inside, as told by companion on the journey, Fr. Nicholas Postlethwaite, CP.

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 at the start of the ministry in the Toxteth area of Liverpool. His reflections on what he encountered over the years of sharing the Inner City Ministry with Austin offer a rich insight into Austin’s passion and humanity, as well as his theology, beginning with the insights a conversation late in Austin’s life shed on the Passionists’ ministry.

“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.

Open-ended conversations allow open-ended journeys

Conversation had always been the heart of our friendship. It is one such conversation that 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.”

Loosening the bonds we bind God and each other with.

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

“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.

**Open ended
invitations on
the journey.**

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 point out 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: 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 14 monastic corridors, beside chapel altars and even on floors under monks’ refectory tables.

**return to
Passionist
roots**

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 and a place of special significance for Passionists since the eighteenth century when 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 - or the Passionists as the popular Catholic name given to all members – the Order to which I applied to join as a teenager and which subsequently has shaped and supported me since. 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. 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?

**Mystical
vision for the
inner city**

The conversation and the minibus trip 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.

**Contemplation
and action** It can never be an exclusive "internal" journey of contemplation – or a life of continual "external" 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 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.

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

**theological reflections,
not a theological manual**

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.**

the riches and dangers of institutions

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. 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. I hope that perhaps our story and discoveries made along the way may resonate with your experiences: 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.

are there basic human questions which all our quests risk neglecting today?

Passionist Inner City Mission: genesis and backdrop

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!

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

Fragmentation

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?”

stirrings of the Spirit

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 Spirit 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 to step out – and, thank God, he also got permission to ask me to travel with him.

Passionist Inner City Mission comes to life.

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 the 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.

**a Church with
a view**

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 Carrol 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.

New venture, old doubts 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 doorbell 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 – are **discovering, not delivering, God** 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. 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.

**decades later -
boarded up, not
shut in**

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 nonbelievers, 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.”

**but was anything
actually achieved?**

While the history of Passionist Inner City Mission is evidently a personal narrative, as well it also has an institutional identity. For institutions to maintain their ‘health and vigour’ they have to become self-questioning in examining their effectiveness and value within their wider contexts. From its beginning Passionist Inner City Mission has valued and positively promoted scrutiny – both within internal analyses as well as externally when questioned from outside. We particularly have always valued questions originating in dialogue with our fellow Passionists. I well recall many years ago, one such particular perceptive “scrutiny” – shared with a good friend from another Passionist Province: “Tell me Nicholas, can St Joseph’s Province Inner City Mission demonstrate something it is actually achieving? What in practice is it doing?” I recognised that though his query included a note of scepticism, nonetheless it was a positively legitimate question. Struggling to find an adequate response, I felt that my previous terms of reference seemed totally inadequate and in much need of clarification. Institutionally, how best measure and validate “Passionist mission” – whether with or without the added pre-fix of “Inner City”?

My friend’s question has continued to resonate with me down the years: it has prompted a number of various – if somewhat late - responses. Presently I find two quotations helpful in attempting again to articulate an honest response: I choose them as highlighting key principles of thinking and practice in Passionist City Mission:

conversation

“A satisfying CONVERSATION is one which makes one say what one has never said before. For talk should be an experience, a shared one, the participants bonded in joy of an enterprise, surpassing themselves because there is so much in each of them to be called forth – accumulated experience, accumulated knowledge, and (just as important) hopes, fantasies, dreams, as yet unformulated speculations. We can emerge from such with new perspectives on our own selves, on our fellows, on life itself. And actions, or activity, can follow.”

(Theodore Zeldin),

and

community

“...leadership happens only as and when the priest has learned what it is to inhabit a place and to speak from that place into the COMMUNITY’S life – the believing COMMUNITY but also the wider human COMMUNITY.....”

(Rowan Williams)

Zeldin highlights the potential of authentic open conversation – perhaps something that is often sadly lacking in many areas of life – perhaps even in Religious Life conversations? Rowan William points to the link between community and the ministry of a priest: a link necessary, he suggests, to exercise ministry “authentically”. Do these two perspectives perhaps help provide better terms of reference for my response to a friend’s question about measuring Passionist Inner City Mission outcomes? Of course, I am also tempted simply to resort to Father Austin’s frequent expression:

“Liverpool Inner City Mission did not offer me a new form of ministry. Rather I am brought to a new beginning in my understanding of the radical Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth.”

Mersey Vespers p.143

Arriving in Liverpool both PERSONAL and the INSTITUTIONAL dimensions of “mission” seemed to be combining within the contexts of the welcome we were receiving from

Liverpool 8's richly diverse community. Our conversations were shaped by a neighbourhood and history as the UK's oldest Black community built on the shoulders of generations – each struggling to protect those inalienable human rights from impoverishing forces wherever they sought to violate them. We were discovering together a new sense of personal and institutional 'Mission' – forged from shared CONVERSATIONS together – and with this community welcoming us as friends. I shall always be eternally grateful for the Liverpool 8 community drawing Austin and me into an Inner-City Mission journey which had continued uninterruptedly – walking later with other fellow Passionists also - first in London - subsequently Newcastle – in Wigan – and today with Province leadership in Birmingham's Austin Smith House.

During these almost fifty years, the backdrop to this Inner-City experience has been a church impacted by two forces –sometimes seemingly contradictory. On one hand a church 'enthused' by the Second Vatican Council. On the other, increasingly stark evidence of church (and Passionist) decline – with debilitating effects on ecclesial institutions and structures. Considering these conflicting forces, I hear an insistent echo of my friend still pressing his question from many years ago: "Nicholas, institutionally can you practically point to outcomes that illustrate what Inner City Mission is achieving?" A first response is: we have not given up! We continue keeping our story fresh as we journey through complex situations alongside people living "at the edges". Paul of the Cross encouraged his companions to keep this as a priority. Inner City Mission considers we are fortunate in being able to number so many friends at the "edges". Friends who unfailingly renew our depleted energy: friends seemingly always able to re-awaken our enthusiasm: friends who revitalise themselves – and us – in determination and stamina in confronting decline whether in secular or sacred institutions - no matter how tired such structures often seem. We dare to claim that in perhaps small ways, Passionist Inner City Mission continues to be a positive force for change wherever we are invited to share conversations and actions –secular and sacred.

**a church on
the edge**

We hope it is not presumptuous to look back on our story and recognise consistency since 1971. Some key moments stand out along the way. In 1999 St Joseph's Province embraced a systematic two year discernment process towards focusing Passionist Mission for the 21st Century. A main outcome was the decision to hand over power for all existing pastoral Province commitments into capable other hands to lead them forward. This radical option was made in order to free future resources for exploring new missionary paths which would prioritise pastoral engagement at the "edges". Twenty years on, this has been partially achieved. Much has been wonderfully accomplished although, admittedly much remains uncompleted. In making this a Passionist priority, is it unreasonable to suggest at least in part that our confidence stemmed from Inner City Mission values becoming more integral within St Joseph's Province policies?

Returning to my friend's persistent questioning: today he would undoubtedly push the issue further: "Has Inner City Mission experience had a tangible effect institutionally in the context of the wider Passionist Congregation?" Yes! Inner City Mission was integral in helping set-up and develop the inter-Province initiative which over a number of years operated as "Group 72". Group 72 was vibrant focus for ongoing regular exchanges between Passionists from various European Provinces. Insights and planned initiatives were shared encouraging fresh ways for inter-Province partnership in discovering Passionist mission inserted and rooted in cultural and social spaces at the "edges" – places where frequently there was little other visible "church" presence.

**trusting the
original
intuition**

In 2002 Father General challenged the Congregation to engage an urgent discernment process towards radical restructuring of life and ministry. St Joseph's Province and Inner-City Mission supported this call unequivocally with enthusiasm. We saw it as a wonderful opportunity to share more widely

something of our accumulated Inner-City Mission experience garnered since 1971. We saw it as opening potential for co-operation with fellow Passionists world-wide. We interpreted Father General's invitation as a call to world-wide institutional "conversion" that might bring a new sense of focus and mission priority. Whether such hope has yet to be positively realised is an open question. Perhaps, as I experienced with my friend's challenge, it is necessary to clarify terms of reference to make real progress. **A vision risks being beset by a danger of subsequent loss of focus that can dilute the original intuition.** How do we guard against reducing a call to radical RESTRUCTURING and prevent it reverting to becoming merely institutional RE-ORGANISING. This is a danger for every human movement for change – even within our church and Passionist Congregation.

In conclusion, I want to re-echo my friend's query not about the past but towards the future. If he and I were to meet to share a beer together today he might press me like this: "Nicholas, will Inner City Mission as an institution – or even St Joseph's Province as we know it – continue into the future? Or are you facing terminal decline?" I hope I might answer with a little more confidence today than I did then! Inner City Mission is essentially about CONVERSATION – at both personal and institutional levels. It is about CONVERSATIONS where "power" aspires to be shared equally by all who participate in it. Though this is a truly daunting ambition – and one in which it is so easy to fail – nonetheless it reminds us that the Gospel can never be for the faint-hearted! Specifically – is there a Passionist future in the UK? The answer will be measured on our seriousness in regard to both personal and institutional commitments and security. Are we truly open to discovering Gospel at the "edges"? Are we prepared to explore creating new models of how leadership, power and authority – sacred and secular – are shared in communities willing to experience life at the "edges"? If religious life structures – as with other church structures such as parishes – choose radical options in preference to maintaining precious securities, then, with God's help, new life will surely grow.

Another well - known Austin aphorism:

"We must learn to combine two human roles: the role of undertaker and the role of midwife! Reverently lay to rest institutions no longer functioning while imaginatively and creatively nurture new life where we see it springing up!"

I rejoice in the privilege of having lived most of my Passionist life in the context of the Inner-City Mission in St Joseph's Province. My prayer is for the continuance of both Province and this Mission as we seek new models of partnership among the "enthusiasms" generated by the Gospel of Jesus. I hope to glimpse the future possibilities and be part of a "midwife" process bringing fresh forms of Province life to birth – in whatever new forms this may take.

living legacy In February Nelson Mandela's daughter and granddaughter were invited to spend some days in Liverpool. They were invited in honour of the memory of their father/grandfather as a mark of the esteem for a man who on his release from prison had been granted freedom of the City of Liverpool. The local community asked its distinguished visitors to inaugurate a new monument in Mandela's honour. The organising group planned that this inauguration should culminate in the formal opening in Princes Park of the new monument. The local community responded and arrived in great numbers for the event – young and old – religious and non-religious – Black activists – trade unions, MPs, City Council – and even a representative of the Queen! Gathered against the backdrop of press and media, school children voiced on behalf of the City a charter of dignity and rights in the spirit of Nelson Mandela. Those organising wanted the ceremony to end with a blessing –an inclusive blessing that would embrace this large and wonderful multifarious gathering. It was an honour they turned to Passionist Inner City Mission to create and deliver this "blessing".

Perhaps this incident may go some small way to reassure my good friend with his ever-helpful questions: yes, now and again there are “institutional outcomes” from Passionist Inner City Mission. “...leadership happens only as and when the priest has learned what it is to inhabit a place and to speak from that place into the community’s life –... Nicholas CP