

Father Austin Smith, a Passionist priest, who lived and worked in Toxteth died on Thursday 24 March at the age of 82. For almost 40 years he lived and ministered within the Toxteth Community - but with influence that extended far beyond in both national and international circles. The respect and affection of the local community for Austin - especially the Black community - is outstanding. His positive contribution to the struggle to overcome racism in all its forms is well documented. Significantly in 1981 during the Toxteth riots, Austin played a positive and pivotal role in articulating the deeper issues that were at play.

GERALD AUSTIN SMITH (known by his Passionist name - Austin) was born on 31st July 1928 in Liverpool, the younger of two sons to Jim and Josie. He was educated by the Irish Christian Brothers for whom he has always maintained deep admiration and close contact. He completed secondary studies at the Passionist Junior Seminary, Blythe Hall, Ormskirk. From there he went to the Novitiate in Broadway Worcestershire.

After profession he completed studies for the priesthood in Passionist communities in St Helens, St David's and was ordained in St Joseph's, Highgate. From there he went to Rome for post-graduate studies in philosophy at the Pontifical Angelicum University.

Returning home he taught philosophy to students in the Passionist Community at Minsteracres, County Durham. During the 1960s he was appointed Superior of the Junior Seminary at Blythe Hall. Pursuing his interest in Philosophy and Church Social Teaching, Austin began to earn a national reputation as a preacher and lecturer and was closely involved with the YCW and YCS movements in the 1960s.

Encouraged by the fresh vitality post Vatican II, Austin began to articulate and propose new ways to reach out in gospel witness particularly in places stigmatised as marginal. With the blessing of his Congregation in October 1971 Austin established a new Passionist presence in Toxteth, which became known as the Passionist Inner City Mission.

Uninterruptedly Austin has lived and ministered since then within the Toxteth Community - but with influence that extended far beyond in both national and international circles. For many years Austin was Assistant Chaplain in Walton Prison, till ill-health forced retirement.

The respect and affection of the local community for Austin - especially the Black community - is outstanding. His positive contribution to the struggle to overcome racism in all its forms is well documented. Significantly in 1981 during what was called the Toxteth riots, Austin played a positive and pivotal role in articulating the deeper issues that were at play.

With an invitation from the local community, Austin was delighted to live for many happy years as he continued his work in the Steve Biko Housing Project.

He has written numerous articles, poetry and three books - the most recent of which "Mersey Vespers" was published recently by Kevin Mayhew in October 2010. In recognition of all Austin's academic and community achievements Liverpool University awarded him an Honorary Doctorate. Perhaps as much or even more important to him than this honour, in October 2010 the Black Community awarded him their Outstanding Achievement award.

As his health deteriorated, in 2008 Austin moved to Granby Care Home, Liverpool 8. Already known to Staff and Residents through his frequent visits, he was proud to have been part of the original team helping create a design to reflect the rich cultural diversity of the Granby neighbourhood. Over the two years Austin lived there, the sensitivity and care staff have provided, has been truly inspiring. Especially in recent months as he approached the end, Staff and District Nurses provided wonderful support. Austin died peacefully on Thursday morning 24 March 2011. Consistent to the end his Requiem Mass will be at St Anne's Overbury Street and afterwards we shall respect his wish to be buried in Toxteth Cemetery, Smithdown Road.

His body will be received into St Anne's church, Overbury Street, this Thursday, 31 March, at 6.30pm when Mass will be celebrated. His Funeral Mass will be celebrated there at 12.00 on Friday, 1 April.