

A Reflection of Father Austin

By

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Father Austin came to our community in 1971, over 50 years ago now. The community we are talking about is 'inner-city' Liverpool 8, the home of the oldest black community in Europe. A community demonised by the media, police and institutions in the City and beyond. A community oppressed by poverty, economic crisis, systemic racism and community politics. The type of politics Father Austin was deeply passionate about.

But it was Father Austin's destiny that he, representing his faith, came to our community at a time when the faith of many was being tested in ways no one could imagine.

There is an old Civil Rights saying that we abide by in our community "Nothing about us, without us, is for us". Father Austin came to our community with no agenda or plan. He had a passion for humanity, people and their survival and totally immersed himself into our community. He just believed it was crucial to be in the actual physical conditions of inner-city life to understand what it was like. You cannot help people if you do not know them. He became one of our community members and truly embraced us.... ..as I said Nothing about us, without us, is for us!

Conversation is the best way to get to know people and I have heard many a tale about Father Austin and his conversations, mostly over a cup of tea, but there were a few that went late into the night over a whisky or two, and I believe, included many a discussion about Everton FC.

10 years after moving into Liverpool 8 our community went through events that were to hit international headlines. Turbulent times known by the media as the 1981 Toxteth Riots where the systematic racism and oppression of the Liverpool 8 community came to a head and resulted in what we call uprisings. He became one of our trusted friends, activists and advocates.

He lived and suffered with us and he was deeply hurt, as were we, when on a few occasions individuals in our community who did not know him or his special relationship with the community members and activists he worked with questioned his motives. On one occasion he was labelled the 'most dangerous person in the room as a white liberal' and therefore should not be party to the discussions and action in relation to our black community. I can tell you as will many community members who vehemently defended him, he was not. He questioned himself a lot because of this but he worked through it and kept going. He had earned his right to be there in our community and this was why he was invited to all the instrumental meetings and events to support the community. We have many detractors and disrupters in communities and Father Austin was not one of them.

We are all activists... of God, of faith, of life, of social justice, of equality, of humanity. True blessings are far and few between and we must embrace them when we receive them, and Father Austin truly embraced and was embraced by us. His awareness of who he was, and his integrity still made him conscious he was a guest in the community and also led him to question whether he should have been housed by Steve Biko Housing as an elder, saying they were for people in the community.

His legacy is the Father Austin Fund, one of the reasons for choosing Father Austin was to keep his name alive and his name continues to attract funds for the voluntary sector to this day. He was instrumental in developing the voluntary sector in L8 and there are memories of him sitting in the Charles Wootton basement negotiating with churches after the 1981 uprisings for funding for the Liverpool 8 Law Centre.

It was Father Austin who first suggested that we as Liverpool Blacks should be empowered to protect ourselves and our community in all matters relating to criminal justice, police violence and brutality and have the confidence and resources to be able to effectively represent ourselves in all matters legal. It was the strength of his investment in the idea that convinced us that such an improbable dream could be achieved. I say improbable, because the institutions would never allow the Black

community to have such responsibility and power. He fully committed himself and his reputation and standing as a respected priest, to the enormously difficult challenge of securing vital funding, a building and all the resources required to support the founding of a centre and its team of skilled staff, as well as the approval of the authorities concerned. Such was his energy and powers of influence, it's no exaggeration to say that if he hadn't been so deeply involved with our proposal the UK's first Black established, Black staffed law centre would more than likely not have been established here in Liverpool. He used his power and position with its influence to help us.

It was us in the black community and our heritage that he learned from, and he was guided by. He was our friend and in the 80's many young black kids were suspicious of what we considered back then to be the interference of white outsiders. They had been the bearers of so many of our original troubles we were rightly suspicious. However, Father Austin was able to not only become one of our most trusted, respected and well-loved members of our community devoted to championing equality, kindness and justice, he was also able to share common interests and understanding of us as young people. There are few who can do that.

As he reflected on lessons from modern life in his latter years, in particular the inner-city life he spent in Liverpool & he concluded that the ruins of the past came from an absence of reflection.....

- Terraced houses turned into slums
- Dock cranes lying idle
- People prematurely aged
- Youngsters without hope
- No thought to the future when slave ships left the City leaving street names to now tell the horrors of slavery and racism embedded in its very fabric

He asked the question: How many in (the powerful) Catholic Church, reflected in order to prepare for another era?

Today this question is still relevant and I ask you to take this question away with you.... .. How can we, when we make decisions and plans in the here and now, reflect on what legacy this will leave for the future generation?