



# From Dominic Barberi to Birmingham Inner City Mission 2014

*Austin Smith House in Sparkhill, Birmingham, is a community of prayer, hospitality and resistance which hosts destitute asylum seekers and refugees, run by Passionist priests Fr John Kearns cp and Fr Martin Newell cp. As part of the discernment and preparation for the opening of the House, Archbishop Bernard Longley asked the pair "What is the continuity between yourselves and Dominic Barberi?", the nineteenth century founder of the Passionists in England. This article is their response.*

Towards the end of his life, St Paul of the Cross was saying Mass and suddenly he stopped, his eyes filled with tears, and he remained motionless, weeping, for a few moments.

Afterwards, he explained that he had seen, in something like a vision, 'my children in England'. By this he meant he had seen the Passionists in England. That was not to happen until Fr Dominic Barberi and his three companions arrived in 1841, the following century.

On his arrival, Dominic began to adapt the Passionist vision of St Paul of the Cross to the context he found in England. Dominic was not 'different' to Paul when he was in Italy, but when he came to England, he was 'different', because the context was different. Dominic found rapid industrialisation, large scale movements of people and desperate living conditions. We, inspired by Dominic and Paul of the Cross, are trying to live out a contemporary understanding of the Passion in our context.

Passionists have at the heart of their spirituality a loving memory of the Crucified Christ, by which is meant meditation on the love and mercy of God. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, not just to be among us but to take the form of a slave and die a brutal death at the hands of the Roman Empire. It is this passionate love which is the glory of God, and it is this same love, revealed in the life and passion of Jesus, which gives us hope. Dominic was steeped in this tradition. The apostolic outlook of a Passionist is very much to see the Crucified God in His Crucified Ones – that is, to see the face of the suffering Christ wherever humanity suffers, and to respond in love and mercy.

This brings us to our own times and to the challenge of what has been called the 'new evangelisation', the project of preaching the Gospel afresh to the people of our very modern age. It is surely no accident that Dominic was beatified during the Second Vatican Council. One of the Council's themes was to prepare the Church for effective mission in the modern world, and Dominic provided us with a great model for such mission.

By living and working among people of so many faiths and none we seek to be faithful to the inspiration of Dominic and the Second Vatican Council. The Council expressed in the official teaching of the Church that all Christians and peoples of other faiths are children of God, and we reject nothing of what is good and true in them, wherever it is to be found (see *Nostra Aetate*). Dominic was indeed a man ahead of his time.

When Paul of the Cross thought of the 'Conversion of England' and the Passionist mission in England, he thought of everyone becoming Catholic. When Dominic came to England, along with Ignatius Spencer, he entered into dialogue and asked everyone to pray for 'unity in the truth'. Reading the signs of the times and

the sources of our charism, (see *Perfectae Caritatis*) Austin Smith led Passionists in England into the contemporary Inner Cities. He was following in the footsteps of Dominic. As an Anglican, John Henry Newman had said he would become a Catholic if he saw them walking among the poor of the slums of the great cities and going where others feared to go. When he met Dominic, his prayer was answered.

Inspired by the example of those who have gone before us, we are seeking now to follow in this tradition of mission in dialogue among the urban, (post)industrialised poor and crucified, among large scale movements of people. In doing so, we remember the words of Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, also quoted by Pope Benedict XVI in speaking about the New Evangelisation, ‘Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.’ This mission of the New Evangelisation we understand to be a co-operation with God in building His Kingdom, which begins on earth, to be fulfilled in the Beatific Vision. We pray for the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit, as we seek to respond to this challenge and call.

Today, Passionists live in communities in many different ways. One example is the community living in inner city Birmingham, to live as a community centred on prayerful contemplation, among people who have migrated from across the world, from Pakistan, India, Somalia and elsewhere. Seeking to respond to the challenge of Pope Francis to respond to the ‘globalisation of indifference’, we will offer a home to the crucified Christ in asylum seekers who have been rejected instead of being offered welcome, a place and hospitality in our country.

Dominic himself had first-hand experience of war and personal loss. His parents died when he was a child and when he was a young man Napoleon invaded Italy. We continue to remember that Christ is crucified in victims of war and violence today, by working for peace. We recognise the crucified and tortured Christ among those who have suffered the effects of loss and multiple deprivations that have so often led them to prison.

The theology of the Passion has developed since the times of Paul of the Cross and Dominic. Our understanding of the Passion leads us to believe that, humanly speaking, Jesus was crucified as a result of His challenging of the oppression as well as the violence of the Roman Empire and the Temple state, as well as Jewish rebels. This leads us to an understanding of the Cross as a witness to the non-violent love of God.

Of course we hope and pray that our tradition and charism will continue to live, challenge and inspire Catholics and others to live the Gospel of love of God and neighbour. As part of this we are working on the formation of a wider Passionist movement in England.

Dominic’s life shows how he is very contemporary. In a world that continues to see war and violence, where religion is fatally distorted by some, where many no longer know what ‘the Passion of Christ’ means, let alone honour it as they should, the values of Dominic’s life and the things that were important to him are as vital today as they were then. Our hope and prayer is that we will continue to deepen in living and witnessing faithfully to the Gospel of the Passion in our time and place.

*“If they [Catholics] want to convert England let them go barefooted into our manufacturing towns-let them preach to the people like St. Francis Xavier-let them be pelted and trampled on-and I will admit that they can do what we cannot...What a day it will be when God will make arise among their Communion saintly men such as Bernard and the Borromeo’s...The English will never be favourably inclined to a party of conspirators and instigators; only faith and sanctity are irresistible.”*

Bl John Henry Newman