

# **Eulogy given at the funeral Mass for Br Austin Casson FSC at Clayton Court December 1<sup>st</sup> 2011.**



**Brother Austin (Ronald) Casson FSC**

**29.04.1924 - 22.11.2011**

On the morning following the death of Br Austin we prayed the Divine Office for the Dead as we do in each community for our deceased Brothers. There is a beautiful image in the Canticle from Isaiah that we recite at Morning Prayer:

*...like a weaver I have rolled up my life;  
he cuts me off from the loom...*

Austin's life was a beautifully woven fabric, with rich colours and intricate patterns. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, observed that life must be understood backwards and lived forwards. So, as we look backwards over Austin's life and try to appreciate how it unfolded as he responded to God's creative call for him to become the finished amazing technicolour dream-coat, woven over eighty-seven years before his divine weaver cut the last threads and gathered the precious fabric to Himself.

Each of us remembers perhaps a few threads in the life of Br Austin - some delightful colourful patterns of his rich and varied life. No doubt many of you treasure a beautiful icon purchased from Br Austin at surprisingly low cost. The value of that icon though is much more – its value is measured in the generosity of Austin and his skilful helpmates in producing so many icons to support the education and development of the untouchables in Tamil Nadu, India. The value of those icons is further enhanced by your own generosity in wishing to support that mission. That combined generosity can also be measured in monetary terms as a sum of more than £30,000 that enriched the lives of so many young people in Br James Kimpton's mission of *Reaching the Unreached*.

Another way of considering Br Austin's marvellous initiative is to imagine the thousands of beautiful icons spread over the floor of this room – what a wonderful tribute to Austin. Think too of the thousands of smiling faces of those whose lives were transformed thanks in some part to that marvellous tapestry of icons. I remember Austin's chemistry lab at Hopwood Hall transformed at the weekends into an icon factory. The benches were filled with intent students who had volunteered to trim rectangles of wood or paint them with a special black paint or affix wonderful prints of icons onto those pieces of wood and some to varnish the finished product. And there was the enthusiastic Br Austin kindly and efficiently supervising these generous-hearted student volunteers in their valuable work.

Before becoming a De La Salle Brother, Ronald Casson had distinguished himself as an assiduous school boy. His school report for July 1935, as he completed standard six at St Bede's Primary School in Rotherham received special congratulations from the Headmaster, Mr McClory. Mr Mc Clory then wrote a glowing letter of commendation that helped Ronald gain acceptance at De La Salle College in Sheffield. In joining the Lasallian fold, Ronald Casson came under the wise leadership of Headmaster Br Baptist Wall. He too was impressed with young Ronald's academic achievements. As a member of St Bede's parish Ronald also impressed his Parish Priest, Fr O'Riardan. When Ronald expressed his wish to become a De La Salle Brother Fr O'Riardan wrote a glowing testimonial for his young parishioner praising his fidelity to the sacraments and suggesting how suited to the Religious life he considered Ronald Casson to be.

Fr O'Riardan's judgement proved to be very sound. The Second World War began as Br Austin completed his novitiate in Ireland. As a student Brother he joined a Lasallian community of 14 other undergraduate Brothers at Cambridge University, reading Natural Sciences at St Catharine's College. Among his fellow undergraduates was Br Alban McCourt. Br Hilary Cluderay was sub-Director and arranged a number of concerts. In one particularly memorable duet, Hilary played violin and Austin piano for a virtuoso performance of a Mendelssohn violin concerto. Having completed his Tripos In chemistry with physics Austin took Part One of the Music Tripos. Among his many other talents, as one would expect of a Yorkshireman, Austin proved to be a fine cricketer.



**Getting ready to go in to bat,  
Coldharbour, 1953**

His first teaching assignment was at the newly established De La Salle Training College Hopwood Hall in Middleton near Manchester. He joined the other six talented pioneer Brothers that made up that first community in 1947. After two years lecturing in Chemistry he was posted to St Joseph's Academy in Blackheath south London where he joined a community of 14 Brothers. His friend from Cambridge, Br Alban was appointed Head and he Deputy Head. As well as distinguishing himself as a very able science teacher and administrator, his musical talents were also allowed to flourish. He became involved in instrumental and choral music education. The 38 girls who made up the local Convent choir in 1965 sent him a beautiful card in which each of them signed her name, thanking him for his ten years' of devoted service as musical director of the choir.



**Turning the pages  
Blackheath, c. 1960**

From London Br Austin returned to Middleton where the Cardinal Langley School was in its sixth year. He joined his old friend from Blackheath, the meticulously kind and patient Deputy Head Br Joseph LaSalle. When Austin was promoted from Head of the Chemistry department to be Headmaster on May 1st 1968 I remember the formidable Sheileh Jones then Head of the Physics department musing: 'It's good to have one of us as Head'. She meant more than simply Austin was a very able science teacher like herself. We all knew Austin as a man we could trust to lead the school with a focused objectivity and efficiency. He was a man who would treat his teaching staff with supportive appreciation and encouragement, and who would develop the education of his pupils with enthusiasm and wisdom. He cultivated an easy friendship with parents and a diplomatic discretion with all who became directly or indirectly involved with the school.



**With the Mayor and members of the  
Cardinal Langley Parents' Association  
including Mr & Mrs Healy (left) c. 1975**

As Head Austin encouraged the school's musicians to achieve remarkable performances as a fine school orchestra often accompanying wonderful musicals as well as talented smaller groups and remarkable soloists. He introduced to the Cardinal Langley staff the excellent music teacher that he had known from his years at Blackheath in London, Sr Cecilia, a Sister of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (Chigwell Sisters).

Br Austin returned to Hopwood Hall after a very successful career as teacher and administrator at Cardinal Langley in 1974. Thus we return to the college chemistry labs which doubled as a week-end icon factory. That woven fabric of Austin's life includes the majestic sounds of the splendid organ in the beautiful chapel at Hopwood Hall on important liturgical occasions. Perhaps even more characteristic the mellow, rhythmic beat as the strings of the double bass were modestly plucked within the more informal musical accompaniments to our liturgies at the College.

Alban remembers Austin as the last Director of 61 Victoria Road in Kensington and managing the disposal or not of the furniture much of which ended up at our Herne Hill Community where Austin was also the Director. Icons by the hundred decorated most horizontal and many vertical surfaces.

In retirement, if such a word is appropriate for such a man as Austin, icon production and musical accompaniment continued at Clayton Court after Austin arrived here in 1997. One young lady in particular appreciated Austin's musical talents; Deborah Fulford remembers a duet she played with Austin. It was a special arrangement of Beethoven's beautiful Septet that was particularly moving for her as Austin also sang a third part as he played the piano.

As others have observed I think it was a touching sign of the Good Lord's design that Austin should go to his reward on the Feast of the Patron Saint of musicians. Imagine a delightful duet with St Cecilia and Br Austin playing heavenly music together.

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