



DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



15 June 2011

**NEWS RELEASE
For immediate release**

DEATH OF BISHOP AMBROSE GRIFFITHS OSB

Bishop Ambrose Giffiths, Bishop Emeritus of Hexham & Newcastle and former Abbot of Ampleforth, died peacefully on 14 June 2011 at the age of 82. He had retired as Bishop in May 2004 and returned to the Benedictine parish of St Mary, Leyland, where he had served as parish priest for eight years before becoming a bishop.

Bishop Ambrose was born in London in 1928 and educated at Ampleforth College, going on then to Balliol College at the University of Oxford where he gained a First in Chemistry. He joined the monastic Community at Ampleforth in September 1950 and six years later was on the teaching staff at Ampleforth College. He was ordained priest on 21 July 1957 and had a number of roles in the monastic Community and the school. As Procurator, he was responsible for a number of buildings on the Ampleforth campus, ranging from new boarding houses to a sports centre, thus revealing his grasp of what was physically needed by way of buildings to replace the old ones and also what was particularly desirable in order to reduce running costs. Indeed, he was the first person to produce a blue-print for future development, a fact well-summed up in an appreciation of him written in *The Ampleforth Journal* in 1984: "The debt that the Community owes him, with his meticulous grasp and mastery of detail, for his work on the material development of Ampleforth over the past fifteen years is itself enormous".

After the appointment of Abbot Basil Hume to Westminster in 1976, the monks of Ampleforth elected Ambrose Giffiths to be their fifth Abbot (7 April 1976). He saw his office as Abbot as one of service to his brethren and his humility made it natural for him to be found helping with any job that needed doing.

At the end of his eight-year abbacy, Abbot Griffiths went to work as parish priest of St Mary, Leyland, where he stayed for eight years before being appointed Bishop of Hexham & Newcastle in 1992.

The transition from monastic community to diocesan bishop cannot have been easy but it never occurred to him to do anything other than take it in his stride and to accept wholeheartedly the new direction of his vocation. However, one of his first tasks on moving to Bishop's House, Newcastle was to invite three Sisters of Mercy from Oaklea Convent in Sunderland to become housekeepers – the community life which had nurtured him for so long was to continue.

On arrival in the diocese he set himself the task of getting to know lay people and priests. In a diocese that stretches from the Scottish border to the Tees this meant a great deal of driving (which he did for himself.) He would use many journeys as opportunities to 'drop in' on some unsuspecting parish priest whose door he happened to be passing; this could cause consternation especially if the priest had gone to bed. However, the concern which he had for his priests was recognised and appreciated, particularly by those who were in difficulties. He made a special point of caring for newly ordained priests and would join the group for those ordained less than five years. After a meal with them (and indeed in other situations) he would insist on helping with the washing up. His vision of ministry was that every priest must strive to conform himself to Christ who has called him and loves him; this was the way in which he himself lived out the priestly vocation.

His vision of the Church was very much that of the Second Vatican Council; collaboration between clergy and laity was at the heart of all he did in the diocese and was manifested in the seriousness with which he regarded the Diocesan Pastoral Council and Council of the Laity. He was genuinely interested in everyone he met and could engage in conversation with them. Following a Confirmation, or some other parish celebration, he was often the last person to leave.

His time at Ampleforth meant that he understood young people and was at ease with them. He had a great passion for encouraging them to evangelise their peers and to this end enabled Fr Dermott Donnelly and others to set up what is now the Youth Ministry Team; towards the end of his episcopate in the diocese he oversaw the establishment of the Youth Village as a centre for retreats for young people. In a quite unselfconscious way he was at home with young people and they loved and accepted him. When John Paul II convened World Youth Day in Rome, Ambrose made the journey on a coach with young people from the diocese. Quite oblivious to the inevitable noise going on around him he would put his head down and sleep, waking refreshed and ready to engage with his travelling companions.

Following the Church of England's decision to ordain women as priests he was approached by a number of Anglicans seeking a new ecclesial home. His understanding of what had led them to this point showed itself in the kindness of his welcome.

Bishop Seamus Cunningham was Administrator of Newcastle Cathedral during Ambrose Griffiths' time as Bishop. He says "Bishop Ambrose died as he had lived – full of gratitude and hope. His gratitude was for those who were caring and praying for him; his hope was in the Lord whom he has served so faithfully. His infectious enthusiasm meant that his ministry as Bishop of our diocese was a time of great blessing for us. Always approachable to laity and clergy alike we will miss him and pray for him with great thanksgiving."

A Funeral Mass will be held in each of the key churches associated with Bishop Ambrose's ministry. On Thursday 30 June, the first Funeral Mass will be held in St Mary, Leyland, at 11.30 a.m. The body of Bishop Ambrose will then be taken to the Cathedral Church of St Mary, Newcastle, where it will be received at 7.00 p.m. on 30 June. A Funeral Mass will then be celebrated in the Cathedral at 12 noon on Friday 1 July. The body of Bishop Ambrose will then be taken to Ampleforth Abbey, where a Funeral Mass will be celebrated at 11.00 a.m. on Saturday 2 July, followed by burial in the vault under the Abbey church.

An appreciation of Abbot Ambrose, written at the end of his abbacy in 1984, is eloquent testimony to Ambrose Griffiths OSB (1928-2011): "His reign as Abbot made it possible for the Community both to accept change and also to appreciate the need for a clear sense of direction that is shared by all. However, what we value most in him are his personal qualities of humility, fairness, kindness and generosity of which he gave so unstintingly. Few were more surprised than he was when we elected him; nobody was more grateful than he was when we elected another; we thank him for all that he has given us; we will value all that he did for us".

ENDS

For further information please contact:

Fr Chris Jackson, Communications Officer for the Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle
(Tel 0191 385 2434) frchrisjackson@yahoo.co.uk

or

Liam Kelly, Media Officer for Ampleforth Abbey (Tel 01439 766710) lfk@ampleforth.org.uk)