

Brother Ambrose Gwynne (1939-2008)

Eulogy at Ambrose's funeral Wednesday, 30 July 2008, at St. John's House, St. Helens

In the bidding prayers, all of us who mourn the passing of Ambrose have been prayed for. His final home was in this house, where he was extremely well cared for. Thank you St. Helens for looking after our mutual friend. This is the home where he died.

However Ambrose's last work place was in our English Language Centre in Eccles near Manchester, not far down the road from here. We four of Ambrose's Brother companions, Brendan, Gerald, James and Philip, are all here to say a temporary Cheerio to our friend. Some Elanico students are here too, Ana Peña, Oscar Cordovilla, Rosa Gómez from Spain and José Carlos Pereira from Portugal representing the couple of hundred students who have come and gone during Ambrose's nine years in Elanico. Not least among them, Brother Fabio Gallego from Colombia, who has the honour of being the very last of Ambrose's students, not only in Elanico, but from anywhere: and Ambrose, you know, got around a bit.

We in Eccles are to going miss Ambrose's silent and unobtrusive gliding into a room where we were sitting, as he noiselessly joined us, his gentle voice being a reminder during the occasional high voiced oratory of one or other of us over some disputed point, that truth is true, as we see it, even when not emphasised by the blast of a trumpet nor the boom of a bassoon. Just on one occasion did I hear Ambrose change his usual soft approach. It was on 17 April this year, his 69th birthday. He came into the lounge and in a mock mournful voice announced: 'I have bad news. I have just begun my seventieth year'.

I once asked Ambrose whether he ever drank wine, and when he said no, I asked whether it was because of the medicinal pills he was wont to take. He answered 'Yes in a way, but you know, I also made the pledge'. That might have assisted his comparatively quiet, reasonable mode of discussion.

We have noticed in these last three weeks Ambrose's absence in our Eccles garden, which has been getting out of hand and it won't be long before the descendants of the

flowery plants he sowed are smothered or at least hidden among a mass of weeds. Brendan continues to tame the lawn, but the rest is becoming a wilderness. Ambrose undertook a load of jobs that few noticed until his recent sickness made his absence felt. He was the first port of call if anyone's computer went haywire: he wasn't an expert, but the rest of us were worse. It was the same with videos, CDs, DVDs and TVs when students needed help, he was the one they approached: perhaps too because he didn't give them a scowl when interrupted. In any case he had a gift for such things, perhaps reinforced by long practice on a variety of musical instruments: organ, piano, guitar, ukulele: no doubt such items trained his fingers and may be his patience.



There were two things he did not do: he didn't drive, though Philip told me that he was a very good driver earlier on, but his pills decided him to abandon the wheel in case of danger to others. The other thing he was reluctant to do was to cook, thus avoiding a similar danger to others. He would however look after everything necessary for cooking, like washing dishes and pans, setting tables etc, Ambrose saw to the preparation and decoration of the chapel, preparing for Mass and playing the organ for hymns.

For a time before coming north he had been editor of our De La Salle District Monthly Magazine .

He had an excellent rapport with his students in Eccles, many of whom afterwards corresponded with him from their missions in Africa, Indonesia and I don't know where else. Just before Ambrose's stroke his then students noticed he looked particularly tired. They wondered whether his meticulous lesson preparation was overdone and was tiring him out; perhaps those life-long and life-saving pills too were sapping his energy. Whatever the cause, that evening of the 20 June, he had the stroke from which he never recovered. Gerald found him lying on the floor and the ambulance was there in no time. Lots of us visited him in Hope Hospital, Salford, where he was very well looked after, but he was speechless and paralysed on one side: just eagerly grabbing us by the wrist with his good hand in recognition . Then he came here, to St. John's Community.

I've talked above about Ambrose last assignment, but his great period was when he was out in the Far East from 1968 to 1994. I would however like first go back a bit further and tell you that Brian Gwynne, (Ambrose) was born in Cardiff in 1939. It was only with the financial help from his grandfather that his working-class mum and dad could afford to have him enter the Brothers' prep school of St. Illtyd's, Cardiff. His Mother Mrs. Mary Gwynne will recall those days, for she is still with us down south at 90 years of age. A favourite teacher of Brian in St. Illtyd's was Brother Alfred Gilfoyle, headmaster and captain of the sea scouts. I am not sure whether Ambrose, Brian Gwynne in those days, was among the ship-wrecked mariners of Alfred's, who had to be rescued from a drifting boat by helicopter: neither Alfred nor Ambrose are here to remind us: perhaps his brother Robert can enlighten us: it might, in fact, have been Robert that Ambrose was talking about.

From St. Illtyd's senior school Ambrose set out to the Brothers' Junior Novitiate, called 'Juniorate'. He was accompanied on the train journey from Cardiff to Kintbury by Brother Patrick D'Arcy and Master Terry Collins, the latter a new recruit like Brian (Ambrose) to the brothers and like him from St. Illtyd's. Terry recalls seeing the Gwynne family strategically placed in a convenient spot as the train picked up speed, and he remembers seeing among them, two little girls waving as their brother's train passed by, and Ambrose, still called Brian, enthusiastically waving back. The two little girls in fact might have been three even then; certainly three 'little girls' are here with us now: fifty-six years later, Mary, Clare and Ann, as well as Robert, Ambrose's younger brother.

After the novitiate in 55-56, at some point and for some reason or other, Ambrose got a year behind Terry, so it was decided that, as he was known to be very clever, he should join the fast track and do A levels in one year in view of joining Terry and Co in a degree course. However Brother Ambrose (his name from then on), fell ill and was ordered to do no work of any kind for six months, not even piano playing. After that he went to Hopwood Hall De La Salle College of

Education instead. His first teaching assignment was in his Alma Mater, the Kintbury Juniorate in Berkshire, where one of his pupils was Brother Aidan Kilty, now Visitor of our De La Salle District, who says that in those days he seemed a very gentle and unassuming Brother, and radiated a deep sense of Faith. He was a fine musician and developed with Brother Jack Campbell the musical life of the Juniorate. Even in those days his health seemed fragile. In fact about that time, early sixties, when Brother Philip saw him, he was so slim that he looked like one of those victims of the wartime concentration camps. After that first teaching post of four years he spent three years in the school across the way from here, West Park as it was then known and now called De La Salle, St. Helens.

In 1968 began his great adventure; rather remarkable really given his poor health and his constant need of medication, but he never regretted the decision to go 'on the missions'. A typical snapshot of Ambrose shows him at the Training College of Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea. 'Brata' Ambrose is sitting on the veranda surrounded by the children of the staff each like himself armed with a ukulele or guitar. Though a bit shy he certainly was not turned in on himself. Dominating that life-long narcolepsy, he was a very competent organiser and teacher of music and religious studies. In earlier days at Rosary High School in Simbu Province he had taken a liking to bush walking in the spectacular scenery of the Papuan Highlands and chatting to the local folk in their gardens. Those were some of the recollections of Brother Peter Gilfedder, his Australian colleague.

Australian Brother John Cleary attributes the arrival of Ambrose in PNG to recently Canonised Brother Benildus. There was a shortage of manpower in Yule Island Teacher's Training College, so prayers were said to Benildus and Our Lady, then lo and behold, they received the news that a Welsh Brother had volunteered for that difficult mission. Standards rose in the departments of religious education, music and English soon after Ambrose had taken over there. When Bishop Klein came to the college he always wanted the 'Ambrosian Choir' to sing at Mass.

Brother Ambrose Payne, present visitor of Australia and



**Junior School
Circa 1948**



**Juniorate with
granddad
Circa 1954**



**Novice
1955**

Papua writes that even after all these years, people in PNG still ask after Brother Ambrose.

Rosary High School has been mentioned above. Brother Ignatius Kennedy says that Ambrose was director in that school in his time. One of the skills not mentioned before is that Ambrose made and had his students make from local materials the ukuleles that usually accompanied singing at religious services. He was a good director and organised weekend breaks for the brothers. On one such break Ignatius and he climbed the highest Papuan peak, Mount Wilhelm at 4,200 metres - not feet: metres: multiply by three, and that was at the time when he began an even more rigid regime of medications, 'but', writes Ignatius, 'Ambrose's condition never affected his demeanour or his professional responsibilities'. Seeing that his students were confused over the different pronunciation of for example 'f' and 'p' he composed phonetic sentences like: 'Five powerful people from Papnig'. Some of his then students now occupy responsible positions in the professions. Ignatius, who is still working near Simbu in Papua, tells us so, and people still ask after Ambrose, for example, the former dean of law at PNG university and now public prosecutor his ex-pupil of Rosary School, Kondiu.



**Papua New Guinea
Circa 1973**

When our former Elanico student, Carmen Espejo, learnt of Ambrose's death, she wrote to us saying: 'One day in class, Ambrose was showing us photos of India' (Carmen: improve your geography: it was Papua), and he said: 'My body is here in England, but my heart and thoughts are in India'. Far be it from Carmen to allow romantic Papua to overshadow Ambrose's important contribution to Eccles and its students. Perhaps a certain lesson was getting a bit heavy on the occasion Carmen mentions, because he never seemed to us to pine for things past, he got down to his job here and gave indispensable service. The Australian brothers mention how he was always prompt at the regular prayers of each community he served and it was the same here. His work and his religious sense no doubt have ensured a quick entry visa to heaven; but just in case, don't forget to pray for him and his sorrowing family and friends, that's all of us.

PS

Some material was received after the completion of the composition of the eulogy for Ambrose at his funeral. Time did not allow for its inclusion in the text. Thanks to those contributors.

Letters were received from Australian Brothers Edward Becker and Cletus Storey who had worked with Ambrose in PNG. They give details of his illnesses and how he surmounted them and did not allow them to interrupt his duties. They reiterate Ambrose's popularity with the students and his quiet and somewhat shy personality.



with mum at Elanico

[Brother James Connolly FSC](#)

July 2008