

# The "Penny Dinner" priests

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By Michael Gleeson

Francis Gleeson was born on 28 May, 1884 at Farrenderry, Templemore, one of thirteen children. At the age of 10 he witnessed the eviction of his parents and family from their 36-acre farm. Educated at Clonliffe College, Dublin and at Maynooth, he was ordained a priest at Maynooth in 1910 and held a number of appointments in the Dublin Archdiocese before the outbreak of war in August 1914.

In November 1914 Fr. Gleeson was appointed chaplain to the 2nd Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers. A year later he returned home, but rejoined the "Munsters" in May 1917, completing his military service in May 1919. Back home again, he was appointed C.C. in Dun Laoghaire and in 1959 became P.P. of Meath St., Dublin, where he spent over 20 years.

Canon Gleeson (as he became) founded the popular Dublin charity known as the Penny Dinners. Business people in the Liberties spoke of his generosity to the less privileged during his years in that area. Many war veterans sought to relive their better days by borrowing from the Canon, often "blowing" what they had got from him on a pub crawl!

Canon Gleeson's photograph as a chaplain, seated on horseback, was a familiar sight in Dublin in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1922, when the Four Courts were occupied during the Civil War, a cousin of his, Jim Gleeson, owned a public house nearby. His premises were selected to be set alight by anti-Treaty forces. As Jim and his wife and children pleaded for restraint, an uneasy silence suddenly descended. When the Republican officer in charge of the "firing party" saw the familiar picture of Canon Gleeson, he realised the publican was a relative and ordered his men to withdraw.

Fr. John Meagher, who hailed from Cahir, was a curate in Meath St. under Canon Gleeson from 1952 until 1968. A member for nearly 30 years of the Committee of the Catholic Record Society of Ireland, he contributed many articles to historical journals. As a boy Meagher, whose father was an official of South Tipperary GAA, was a spectator at Croke Park on Bloody Sunday, 1920 and retained a clear memory of the shootings to the day he died.

On Canon Gleeson's death his curate preserved his memorabilia, and Fr. Meagher in turn duly bequeathed his own papers to the Dublin Diocesan Archives. They are believed to include a biographical study of the martyred Tipperary priest Fr. Nicholas Sheehy. The Gleeson papers include diaries describing his experiences in France in 1914 and 1915. Mr. David Sheehy, Director of the Dublin Diocesan Archives, hopes to publish them.

While a chaplain during the Great War, Canon Gleeson met a famous military artist of the period named Matania, who was also a chaplain. He painted a picture of Fr. Gleeson blessing the Munster Fusiliers before they went into battle in May 1915. The originals of Matania's war pictures hang in the Louvre in Paris.