

= Francis Gleeson (priest) =

Father Francis Gleeson (28 May 1884 ? 26 June 1959) was an Irish Roman Catholic priest who served as a British Army chaplain during Ireland's involvement in the First World War . Educated at seminaries near Dublin , Gleeson was ordained in 1910 and worked at a home for the blind before volunteering for service upon the outbreak of war . Commissioned into the Army Chaplains ' Department and attached to the 2nd Battalion , Royal Munster Fusiliers he served with them at the First Battle of Ypres . During this battle Gleeson is said to have taken command of the battalion after all the officers were incapacitated by the enemy . He was highly regarded by his men for tending to the wounded under fire , visiting the frontline trenches , and bringing gifts .

On 8 May 1915 , on the eve of the Battle of Aubers Ridge , Gleeson addressed the assembled battalion at a roadside shrine and gave the general absolution . The battalion suffered heavily in the battle and when paraded again afterwards only 200 men were assembled . Gleeson 's absolution was the subject of a painting by Fortunino Matania that was made at the request of the widow of the battalion 's commanding officer . At the end of his year 's service in 1915 Gleeson returned to Dublin and became a curate but rejoined the army as a Chaplain in 1917 and remained for a further two years . After the war he returned once more to Ireland , becoming a priest at churches near to Dublin and being elected canon of the Metropolitan Chapter of the Archdiocese of Dublin before his death on 26 June 1959 .

= = Early life = =

Gleeson was born on 28 May 1884 at Templemore , County Tipperary in Ireland , one of thirteen children . Gleeson decided to become a Catholic priest and was educated at the Holy Cross College in Dublin and St Patrick 's College in Maynooth . He was ordained as a priest in 1910 at St Mary 's Pro @-@ Cathedral , Dublin and lived in Glasnevin before going to St. Mary 's Home for the Blind in March 1912 . Gleeson was a Jesuit , a nationalist and a speaker of Irish Gaelic .

= = Outbreak of war = =

On the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914 Gleeson volunteered for service with the British Army , one of only 17 priests to do so . He was commissioned as a Chaplain to the Forces , 4th Class (equivalent to a Captain) the Army Chaplains ' Department on 18 November 1914 and was soon serving with the 2nd battalion , Royal Munster Fusiliers on the Western Front in France . The battalion , regular troops who formed part of the 3rd Infantry Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division , were amongst the first British troops to be deployed to France , seeing action during the Battle of Mons , and after Gleeson joined them they participated in the First Battle of Ypres . British officer and poet Robert Graves recalled in his autobiography Good @-@ Bye to All That that during this battle Gleeson found himself the only unwounded officer of the battalion and , having removed his chaplain 's insignia that indicated his non @-@ combatant status , took command of the unit and held until relieved . Later in December that year he joined the battalion in a counterattack at the Battle of Givenchy . On Christmas Day the Munsters were in part of the front line unaffected by the Christmas Truce and Gleeson chose to conduct a Mass in one of the front line trenches that was frequently under fire . The mass was in memory of the seven officers and 200 men of the Munsters who had died in a failed attack on 22 December .

Gleeson was an advisor to men of all faiths in the regiment and kept careful records of their names and addresses so that he could write to the families of those that died . He ended each letter with the words " They paid a great sacrifice " , which was later used as the title of a book published in 2010 that details the wartime service records of men from Cork . Much of his time was spent answering letters from families in Ireland concerned about the wellbeing of their sons and husbands . At times the task almost overwhelmed him and this is evident in his personal diary when he wrote , in June 1915 , " I got 12 letters today ; just after reading them . What answering they will take tomorrow . I like to give these poor people all the solace I can , anyhow , but still there ? s no limit to

the sorrowing inquiries . The tragedy of these letters " .

Gleeson made frequent visits to the front lines and often conducted burial services there with wooden grave marker crosses that he made himself or entering no man 's land to comfort dying soldiers . His men said that they were always sure of a cup of tea from him when he visited the trenches late at night and he was certain to check that they were not short of ammunition . Gleeson sent requests to Ireland for hymn books for the men in the field and also bought mouth organs for their entertainment . One of Gleeson 's men said " He 's a warrior and no mistake . There 's no man at the Front more brave or cooler . Why , it is in the hottest place up in the firing line he do be to give comfort to the boys that are dying . " His work as a chaplain was renowned , one war correspondent stated that " If you meet a man of the 2nd Munsters , just mention the name of Father Gleeson and see how his face lights up " .

= = Aubers Ridge = =

Whilst moving forwards to the trenches on 8 May 1915 , in preparation for the Battle of Aubers Ridge , Lieutenant @-@ Colonel Victor Rickard ordered the battalion to halt at a roadside shrine in Rue du Bois , near Fleurbaix . The shrine was in fact the altar of the Chapel of Notre Dame de Seez which had been destroyed by shells earlier in the war . Gleeson , who had ridden at the front of the column , addressed the assembled 800 men and gave them the general absolution whilst still mounted on his horse . The men then sang the hymns Hail , Queen of Heaven , the Te Deum and Hail Glorious Saint Patrick before Gleeson moved along the ranks bidding farewell to the officers and encouraging the men to maintain the honour of the regiment . The battalion then moved off to the trenches from which they launched their attack at 5 @.@ 30 the next morning . The Munsters were largely cut down by machine gun fire before they had advanced more than a few yards although enough men survived to capture the German trenches , the only unit to do so that day , before being forced to withdraw .

Casualties in the battalion amounted to 11 officers and 140 men killed , including Lieutenant @-@ Colonel Rickard , in addition to 8 officers and 230 men wounded . Gleeson made it his duty to attend to the wounded and dying , comforting them and delivering the last rites , despite German shells landing close by him . After the battle the Munsters once again assembled at the Rue de Bois , though only three officers and 200 men were found fit to parade . Rickard 's widow , Jessie Louisa Rickard , requested that war artist Fortunino Matania immortalise the parade at Rue de Bois in a painting that centred on Gleeson delivering the absolution (Rickard is also depicted in the background) . Gleeson later donated the stole he wore for the parade to the regimental museum .

Gleeson further distinguished himself later that year by assisting in the defence of a trench against enemy attack . He had a strong commitment to the idea of freeing Belgium from German occupation but was known to be critical of what he considered anti @-@ clerical views held by the French authorities . Gleeson was familiar with the realities of war and , in December 1914 , wrote that " if ... advocates of war were made to be soaked and caked and crusted with cold , wet trench mud , like these poor soldiers , and to wear those mud @-@ weighted coats they would not be so glib with their treatises on the art of war . These militants should be made undergo a few nights in cheerless billets [and] mud @-@ river trenches to teach them a lesson . What is it all for at all ? " .

Having originally agreed to serve for a year Gleeson wrote to Father Bernard Rawlinson , the senior Roman Catholic chaplain , in October 1915 requesting that he be relieved of duty stating that " I am sorry to be leaving the dear old Munster lads , but I really can 't stand it any longer . I do not like the life , though I love the poor men ever so much " . He became a curate at the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes in Dublin but requested permission from his Archbishop , William Walsh , to return to army service for another year . He was recommissioned in his previous rank on 15 May 1917 and would serve another two years . When the Royal Munster Fusiliers were transferred to the 48th Brigade , 16th (Irish) Division on 29 January 1918 Gleeson remained with the 1st Infantry Division .

= = Post @-@ war = =

After the Armistice with Germany Gleeson returned once more to Ireland , being discharged from the British Army in May 1919 . Gleeson encountered hostility with Irish republicans after the war due to his association with the British Army . On 4 June 1922 he attended the dedication of Étreux British Cemetery which holds the remains of 110 men of the Royal Munster Fusiliers who were killed in the defence of Étreux against superior German forces whilst acting as a rearguard for the Great Retreat of August 1914 . Gleeson served as a chaplain to the armed forces of the Irish Free State from February 1923 and was with them during the Irish Civil War .

= = Dramatist = =

Gleeson successfully wrote and produced two dramas ; the first was a drama of the first Holy Week , entitled Bethany to Calvary which was staged at the Theatre Royal , Dublin in February 1931 and received high praise from many authorities on sacred drama . It was subsequently staged in the Abbey Theatre Dublin in April 1935 . In March 1938 it was presented again during the Sundays of Lent and the Passion Week with a cast of seventy at Our Lady 's Hall in Inchicore , Dublin .

His second drama Rose of Battle was laid in the French lines during the 1917 @-@ 18 war , in which one of two soldier friends is reconciled to his faith and Church after his friend is killed but he , though badly wounded , becomes miraculously cured through the prayers of his friend 's sister , a hospital nurse . The drama was widely acclaimed in 1935 when staged at the Abbey Theatre , Dublin (casting Cyril Cusack) , the Opera House , Cork , and the Theatre Royal , Waterford .

= = Later life and legacy = =

He worked later as a priest at Bray , Aughrim and was at St Catherine 's in Meath Street , Dublin from August 1944 . He was elected a canon of the Metropolitan Chapter of the Archdiocese of Dublin on 7 May 1956 and died on 26 June 1959 . Gleeson was buried at the Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin . The Old Comrades Association of the Royal Munster Fusiliers honoured him in their annual report , stating that he was " a canon when he died . A saint when next we all meet " .

A stone tablet at the Island of Ireland Peace Park near Ypres , Belgium is inscribed with a quote from Gleeson describing his efforts to comfort the wounded . The stole Gleeson wore during his famous absolution before Aubers Ridge was rediscovered in August 2014 in the collection of the National Army Museum , having been acquired by them in 1959 . A memorial was unveiled in May 2015 at the recently rediscovered site of Gleeson 's absolution at Rue de Bois . Gleeson 's war diaries are held by the Archdiocese of Dublin and the National Museum of Ireland at Collins Barracks , Dublin . The diaries , notes and records from the diocesan collection were digitised in an 18 @-@ month @-@ long joint project with the University College Dublin that was completed in April 2015 .