



Denis Canon Browne

Born 24th of April 1929

Ordained 21st of June 1953

Died 11th of December 2013

Denis Canon Browne (1929-2013)

By Francis O'Dwyer

(March 2016)

Foreword

This article recounts the life and times of Denis Canon Browne. It was originally written thus, and a condensed version is to be found in the excellent parish book titled “Grange Past and Present”, which was published in 2015. This article, therefore, lends itself with an underlying reference to the parish of Grange, which is located 3 miles North of the town of Bruff in South East County Limerick.

Though not born in Grange, the area and surroundings played a significant part in Denis’s life, and, likewise, he had a significant impact in the area. His family connection with Grange originated in 1939 when his aunts purchased a house, close to the internationally famous Grange Stone Circle. Sixty five years later, when Denis retired, he lived out his final years in that same house.

Personally, I got to know Denis from his time visiting Grange on his summer holidays during the 1980s, when I served Mass for him in the local church. My mother, Helen O’ Dwyer, being then and still is now, the church sacristan. Denis was a very special, gentle and humble man. It is my fervent hope that I have encapsulated his personality and life in a manner befitting him.

Introduction

“I love to run in the dawn. It is beautiful to see the day dawning don’t you think.....”

(Quote from Fr Denis 2003)

When Denis Canon Browne, or Fr Denis as he preferred to be known, went to his eternal reward on December 11th 2013, he left a legacy of athletic promotion and achievement to add to his ministerial calling in life. Having served in six parishes, in two of these as a parish priest, over a 51 year period, Fr Denis is fondly remembered as a priest of great compassion, humility, gentleness and devotion. All, who knew him, describe him as simply a lovely and gentle man devoted to his faith.

As well as his pastoral duties, he had two other callings in life, namely the promotion of the Pioneers Total Abstinence Association of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and athletics. In every parish and indeed in the entire region, he was widely known for his involvement in youth athletics. As a runner himself, he completed twenty one marathons and also won thirteen All-Ireland medals for track and field events. Remarkably, these athletic achievements occurred between the age of 51 and 74, after he had returned to running in 1980 following a 27 year absence.

When he retired in 2004, Fr Denis took up residence beside Grange Stone Circle, in a house that has been in the Browne family since 1939. He said daily Mass in St. Patrick’s and St. Brigid’s Church in Grange, and when, after a few years into his retirement, he could no longer drive, he walked to church every morning. If the weather was inclement, he still walked to church, attired in his cap, gloves and wellingtons. Such athleticism was a hallmark of his life and was as natural to him as the gift of strong faith that he had, which he practised and promoted in his unique gentle manner.

Early Life, Education and Maynooth

Born in Thomastown, Effin, Co. Limerick on the 24th April 1929, Denis Joseph was the second of five children of parents Dan and Kate Browne (nee McCarthy), who both originally hailed from Meelin, Newmarket in County Cork. His siblings were Jimmy, Davie (who also became a

priest), Cassie and John. Jimmy still lives in Thomastown, Cassie in Castletroy and John in Dublin. Fr Davie died at the age of 81 on the 17th October 2011.

His father, Dan, born in 1888, was well known for his activities during the war of independence in the North Cork area. He was a member of the IRB and the IRA and was a member of Liam Lynch's Flying Column, with who he was 'on the run'. In 1917, he helped form a small section of Volunteers in his home village of Meelin. In 1921, Meelin suffered one of the worst British reprisals during the war, with the use of incendiary devices (bombs), after the ambush of a black and tan raiding party, intent on carrying out a raid, on Dan's father's house. During this period, Dan actively took the fight to the British and was involved in numerous attacks in Cork, West Limerick and Kerry. He fought with the famous Sean Moylan, and by the time of the truce he held the rank of Adjutant 2nd Battalion Cork No. 4 Brigade. He also held the post of Registrar of North Cork District Court from October 1921 until June 1922, when civil war broke out.ⁱ

In 1926, Dan Browne and his new wife, Kate, came to live in Thomastown, where they had a farm. The Ireland of 1929 that Denis was born into was completely unrecognisable to that of today. It was an Ireland which, having only recently achieved independence and with the wounds of civil war still marking its landscape, was still trying to find its identity, both domestically and internationally. In a nationally closed economic environment, life in rural Ireland would have thrown up many significant challenges. Born into a family setting where farming was the main source of income, Denis had to attend to his chores along with his siblings. Milking cows with his brother Jimmy, was one of his favourite tasks, along with completing all the regular requirements of daily farm life. Of course, this was all very hard work, but Denis lived a very happy contented childhood and was known for his love of simply having fun.

At six years of age, in 1935, Denis commenced his education at the national school in Effin. The school principal, Mr. Tim Hannon, was also a famous writer for the Limerick Leader at the time, using the pseudonym "Rambling Thady". At the age of 12, at the suggestion of the local priest, Denis transferred to the national school at Charleville CBS. He was due to go into 5th class, but a mistake saw him placed erroneously in 6th class, resulting in him only spending one year in the CBS. Losing out on a year at primary school did not affect his educational achievements, as at the end of his primary school education, he attained one of only two scholarships available to attend St. Munchin's College, Limerick, that September. This achievement was reported in the Cork Examiner of the 30th July 1942, with the newspaper headline "Successful Charleville Student" before going on to outline: "At the recent examinations held at Limerick, Master Denis Browne of Thomastown, Kilmallock won one of two scholarships offered by the Diocesan College", concluding that "Master Browne is aged only thirteen years".ⁱⁱ

He boarded at St. Munchin's, which was then located on Henry Street in Limerick city, at a location which is presently the site of Garda Headquarters. It was while at St. Munchin's, that his love of athletics would flourish. Towards the end of his first year and with a sports day looming, one of the priests of the college arranged a run, around one of the school pitches, which was located on the Ennis Road, for Denis's class. Having seen the potential of his students, the priest gave each student odds on success for the official sports day. He gave Denis short odds, and, knowing there was a reward for being successful, Denis blitzed the course, winning all around him. Thus began a lifetime involvement in and love for athletics. It also saw the emergence of a competitive streak which would be a hallmark of his athletic prowess and career.

During his summer holidays from St Munchin's and later Maynooth College, Denis and his brother, Davie, would cycle to track and field events locally and throughout Munster. By August 1948, such had been his success, the famed historian An Mangaire Sugach, had penned a poem of admiration of his achievements, noting that "In four years' time he will rattle world

champions in a great battle and to Ireland will bring a medal to symbol an Olympic title”.ⁱⁱⁱ An Mangaire Sugach was the pseudonym name used by Mainchin Seoighe, from Tankardstown, Bruree, in his weekly *Limerick Leader* newspaper column, *Odds and Ends*, which spanned from 1944 to 2002.^{iv}

Recorded evidence of Denis’s athletic success during this time is limited. However, notes recorded in the *Limerick Leader* for the National Athletic and Cycling Association (NACA) recall that on July 24th 1948 in Knocklong, Denis Brown(e) won the 880 yards county championship.^v Denis Brown(e) was also part of the Croom team that came second in the County Limerick novice cross country championships at Rathkeale on the 7th January 1950. Interestingly, this article also notes a Bruff team making its cross country debut at this event.^{vi} In Oola, on the 16th July 1950 Denis Brown(e) won the 880 yards event at the annual open sports day along with competing in the 100 and 220 yard events.^{vii} Similarly, Denis Brown(e) came second in the 220 yards and the 40 yard flat at the Muintir na Tíre event held in Knocklong on the 30th July 1950.^{viii}

It is interesting to note that all these sports competitions had a multitude of events, which included running, cycling, obstacle courses, long jump and high jump. Fr Denis, in later years, established these events for the youth of the parishes that he served.

During his teenage years, for pocket money, Denis cleaned the dikes on the home farm in Thomastown, for which his father received a grant from the State. His sister, Cassie, recalls that “He spent the majority of this pocket money attending the ‘pictures’ in Limerick” and that “He really loved going to the pictures”. Of course, at that time, the mode of transport to Limerick was by bicycle, and Denis would stop off in Holycross at his aunts’ house for refreshments to break the journey, going to and coming back from Limerick. His aunts, Katie and Maggie Browne, moved into that house beside the Stone Circle in 1939. Likewise, during the summer when time and pocket money would afford it, Denis and his brother, Jimmy, would take off on their bicycles to West Clare for a few days’ holiday.

Even at that young age, Denis had a love of gadgets - cameras and tape recorders being particular favourites, but these items were elusive in those years. On one such holiday, Denis came across a ‘Folding Brownie Camera’, which he was intent on purchasing. Even though funds were scarce, Denis managed to convince Jimmy to part with all of his pocket money and added to the money he had himself, the ‘Folding Brownie’ was purchased. Thereafter, everything considered worthwhile was photographed. A few years later he acquired a tape recorder. He was at home one evening, and, as was the tradition at the time, people called nightly to one another’s homes. On this particular evening, there was a group of his mother’s friends in the kitchen. At the time, Denis was studying for the priesthood and, of course, the local ladies were very polite to him. Unknown to the ladies, he placed the tape recorder in their vicinity and recorded what they were talking about. A short time later, he announced to them: “Now ladies, would you like to hear what ye were just talking about?” When he re-played the recording they were mortified to hear themselves! The men folk of the area were outside chatting at the cross roads, and, when they heard the commotion of the tape recorder, they moved a safe distance away and remained at their new meeting point for a few weeks, lest they be ‘caught on tape’!

It was in 1945, perhaps in anticipation, that Kate Browne bought her young son, Denis, a black suit. Having spent three years to that point in St Munchin’s College, as Cassie recalls - “It was kind of expected that, maybe, he would go on to become a priest”. The black suit, however, did not go down too well with Denis, and he refused point blank to wear it. Kate Browne need not have worried though as a year later Denis entered seminary life when he enrolled in Maynooth College to study for the priesthood. He spent seven years in Maynooth.

Along with his clerical studies, athletics would also feature. Almost every Sunday afternoon, some of the priests and students of the college would run on the college pitches, and, so, Denis was able to keep up his favourite sport. Easter week was also athletic week in the college and Denis loved this time of year. Students were not allowed home for Easter but did

have the week off from their studies. Therefore along with Easter ceremonies the week always saw organised athletic competition amongst the students. With students from all 32 counties competition was intense. In his last year Denis won the 440 yards, the 880 yards and the mile. All this would change, however, as when Denis was ordained in 1953 the stipulation at the time was that priests could not run competitively. So at the age of 24, the now Fr Denis and partaking in athletics had to part ways.

While his time in Maynooth was very content, he loved to come home to Thomastown for the holidays. The summer holidays afforded were the same as those as for school, and that meant he was home to South Limerick for an extended duration during the summer months. Once more, he would attend to his farm duties and compete in local sports events. He was very much a home bird, and when in St Munchin's and later in Maynooth he would, as Cassie recalls, "Go very quiet a day or two before he was due to go back".

He was ordained, along with 57 other clerical students, on June 21st 1953 in Maynooth, by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid. He was allowed home that evening. The following morning he said his first Mass in Effin Church, but not before there had been four settings of breakfast for family, neighbours and friends, to celebrate his ordination! The celebrations were cut short that day as, along with three other priests from the area, he got the midday train back to Maynooth.

Priesthood

Glenroe September 1953 – October 1960

Fr Denis's first parish following ordination was Glenroe, not too far from his home of Thomastown. As with every parish in which he ministered, he is recalled very fondly by those who lived in the area at the time. With the realisation that he could no longer run competitively, he did the next best thing. He started to train the youth of the area in athletics and had a very successful club in Glenroe. By 1957, Glenroe athletes were competing in cross-country events, and it was noted in the Cycling and Athletic Notes of the Limerick Leader of 19th January 1957 "How gratifying it was to see that the recent election of Rev. Fr Denis Brown(e) to chairman of the county board has once again aroused athletic interest in that district".^{ix}

The famous All-Ireland champion and decorated athlete from the area, John Downes, recalls that during Fr Denis's time in Glenroe, he organised very successful sports days that attracted large crowds of people to the village. Limerick NACA championships were held in Tom Walsh's field in the parish, for a number of years in the late 1950s, significantly raising the profile of athletics in the area. John recalls how Fr Denis "just had a way about him that attracted people to help him". He recalls meeting him one summer's evening, and he had his Volkswagen Beetle packed with the under 10 hurling team as he took them to a match in Kilmallock. When John enquired as to who was bringing the rest of the team, Fr Denis replied that he had them all in the car!! Packing children into his car to take them to sports and other events would be a regular feature of his parish life.

As well as athletic involvement, Fr Denis actively promoted the Pioneer Association in every parish he served. In Glenroe, during the Christmas period of 1954, he organised a pioneer rally that was attended by over three hundred people from Glenroe and Ballyorgan. As recorded in the Limerick Leader of the 3rd January 1955, "The rally concluded with dancing, music and a sumptuous tea served by the ladies committee!"^x

National Athletic and Cycling Association (NACA)

While in Glenroe, on November 11th 1956, Fr Denis acceded to the position of chairman of the Limerick County Board of the National Athletic and Cycling Association (NACA).^{xi} This was a position he held for a number of years, and he also held the post of president. His brother, Fr Davie, also held such positions.

The NACA was formed in 1923 as a thirty two county athletics body and represented the island of Ireland at the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), the world governing body responsible for the organisation of the Olympics. In 1924, the Northern Ireland Amateur Athletic, Cycling and Cross Country Association was formed after a dispute with the NACA. The Amateur Athletic Association which represented Great Britain accepted this breakaway group under its jurisdiction. Furthermore, the IAAF adopted an amendment to its constitution in 1930 which defined member organisations as being contiguous with political entities, effectively ratifying the Northern body's membership of the British organisation. The NACA rejected this ruling and was suspended from the IAAF, meaning no athlete who was a member of the NACA could compete at the Olympics. As a result, the 1936 Olympics in Berlin saw no Irish representatives.

In 1937, some Irish clubs broke away from the NACA to set up the Irish Amateur Athletic Union (IAAU), and this body became a member of the IAAF, meaning its members could represent Ireland at international events. It wasn't until 1967 that the NACA (now called the NACAI) and the IAAU (now called the Amateur Athletic Union of Eire) were both dissolved, and Bord Luthchleas na hÉireann (BLE) was formed, bringing an end to a 30-year dispute within athletics in the Republic of Ireland.^{xii}

It is interesting to note that at the Annual County Convention of Limerick County Board of the NACA, held on the 9th August 1959, as chairman of the board, Fr Denis outlined the boards' position with regard to the forthcoming 1960 Olympics. This extract shows a trait of his character that, perhaps, signifies the nationalistic upbringing his fathers background had on him.

"We would welcome any agreement by which NACA athletes could compete in the 1960 Olympics, provided they are not asked to sacrifice their principles. We have been suspended and our right to compete in the Olympics denied, simply because we refuse to be satisfied with anything less than a thirty two county Ireland. Great athletes of the past had sacrificed their right to compete in the Olympics because of that and there were really great athletes of the present who were also imbued with the same spirit. They were not prepared to depart from the principle of a thirty two county Ireland..."^{xiii} Along with the then political aspect of the organisation, the core aspirations of the board were to promote athletics amongst the youth, in every part of Limerick, at every opportunity, something Fr Denis would spend a lifetime completing.

Granagh October 1960 – June 1970

In 1960, Fr Denis was transferred from Glenroe to Granagh in West Limerick, and he spent ten years in the village. Fr Denis really loved Granagh, and the people of Granagh really loved him. Granagh Athletics Club was already in existence when Fr Denis arrived in the West Limerick parish, but it flourished during his time there. A short time after arriving in Granagh, he set up a training facility at his home. This included high jump, long jump and pole vault facilities on the front lawn and a cinder track around the house, where he would time his budding athletes as they completed their training in cycling and running.

By now, Fr Denis's younger brother, Fr Davie, had been appointed to the parish of Parteen. Fr Davie also had a great love of athletics. Every second Sunday the Volkswagen Beetle would leave Granagh, loaded up with youngsters, and travel to Parteen, where Fr Davie had his own team ready to take them on in competition. Events such as running, high jump, pole vault, long jump and bicycle racing were held, with points being allotted for each event, with the winner being the team with the most points at the end of the day. Such a day's activity surely has its origins in the sports days that both brothers attended as teenagers and then subsequently organised with the NACA, all over County Limerick. Of course, Fr Davie had to return the favour and bring a team to Granagh the following Sunday. Needless to say, the competition was good between the brothers, but, more importantly to both, was that, the children had fun.

At more established events, when Granagh Athletic Club was partaking, it was not unknown for Fr Denis to have a recording camera at the finish line of events that his athletes

were partaking in, so as to ensure all was 'above board'. As part of his service to athletics in the area, Fr Denis was somehow able to source good quality running shoes and then sold them on at cost to athletes of the area!

His love of the 'pictures', was also evident while in Granagh, and he would often arrange the showing of films in the schoolhouse.

Glin June 1970 – August 1976

1970 saw Fr Denis go further back into West Limerick when he was appointed to the parish of Glin, where he remained until 1976. He ministered here alongside the parish priest, Michael Canon Ryan. Coincidentally, during his stay in the village there was a Garda Browne and a Doctor Browne, fulfilling what would also have been very important roles in the parish at that time. Coincidentally, James Canon Costello, who currently resides in Bruff, served in Glin for a short duration from 1967 to 1968 and was a great friend of Fr Denis.

His six years in the parish saw him very well-liked by the locals, with him being remembered as "being like a breath of fresh air to the area". Rosemary Daly of Glin and a local group have very kindly provided the following tribute to Fr Denis of his time in parish:

"It is with a great sense of fondness and a deep sense of gratitude and privilege that we recall the wonderful memories that the name Fr Denis Browne evokes.

Fr Browne arrived in Glin in his beloved red Volkswagen, together with the gentle, smiling housekeeper, Mary Anne, and his playful happy dog, Trixie. Very quickly both children and adults alike knew we were lucky to have been gifted this special human being and priest. In his own quiet yet friendly way, he became the very core of the parish, ministering to the elderly with a kind of care and compassion that was exemplary, yet understated, getting to know the strengths and needs of his parishioners and helping the youth to blossom and share experiences that were the stuff of dreams back then.

Being in the latter group at that time, we felt the luckiest of all. Our summers were filled with the thrill of packing anything up to 12 small children into the 'Volks' (pre 'health and safety'!!) during the school holidays and heading off to Banna Strand, his beloved Béal, an odd time Ballybunion (which was full of undesirable and costly distractions like bumper-cars and candyfloss) and sometimes as far as exotic Inch on the Dingle Peninsula. We would spend the day swimming, playing in the sand, racing up and down the length of the beach and feast on sand and tomato sandwiches!! Oh the joy of it all. The journeys were always shortened by the variety of 'in house' entertainment as we sang our way to our destinations, told jokes, solved riddles and chatted the carefree chat of childhood. And, Fr Browne himself would often join in with a gloriously out of tune rendition of a Johnny Cash song or his own version of a whistled tune from James Last. Bliss.

Very soon word spread, numbers grew and the need for a bigger mode of transport arrived to carry his motley crew on their trips. We could not believe our eyes when we saw the minibus complete with an amazing roll-top roof. This was the stuff of movies, beyond our wildest dreams. It hardly dawned on us to ask where or how he got it, but he did tell us that himself and a Fr McNamee in Limerick city bought it to share. I don't ever remember it not being at our disposal, so, I suppose, the city crew managed without. There was no stopping us now, and by the time many of us had finished primary school, we had travelled the country from the top of Torc Waterfall outside Killarney to the most northerly tip of Donegal - Malin Head. We explored the Burren, climbed Galtee Mór, swam in Salthill and visited Yeats's grave at Drumcliffe. We made headlines when we had the excitement of being stranded on Scatterry Island on the day of the Munster Final and had to be rescued by a pilot boat from Foynes. We got to know our country, to love our heritage and to explore our talents, all the while having the very best of fun.

The discovery and development of talents was another wonder to behold. Fr Browne loved his camera and big reel projector, and perfecting his skills as a not so serious moviemaker filled many a pleasant hour for him. Filming the local festival's fancy dress parade or cows chewing the cud on Meade's Hill (sometimes speeded up or slowed down to match the carefully chosen, accompanying music) gave him an enormous sense of fun, satisfaction and pleasure. His converted garage became the cinema where we watched ourselves on big screen, where changes to the village were recorded when such things as the triangle at the bottom of the town was given a facelift and where evidence of Mr. Bill cycling across the Shannon estuary to Clare on his specially adapted bike could be seen again and again. Who needed Hollywood in those great days? We had Fr Browne! That garage was not only our cinema it was also the place where the children congregated to practise our singing, drama and music, for the many concerts and competitions that Fr Browne got us involved in. We gathered willingly on a couple of nights of the week to sing our songs and prepare to perform in local halls, nursing homes, rehab centres or competitions. Family bands were formed, a ventriloquist's doll was bought and abilities were discovered and nurtured - so much so that in the Munster Talent Competition held in Ballylanders, we swept the boards!!

And it didn't stop there! Fr Browne had a great love of athletics, fitness and general sense of well-being. He was truly a man before his time and yet very much of his time. We were introduced to track and field events, racing, long jump, high jump and even throwing the discus - our very own Olympics. This brought us in contact with the children of nearby parishes. The amazingly fast and athletic sisters, Ann and Grace O'Brien, as well as Cathy Morrissey, all from Ballyagran became the ones to beat, and, if memory serves me right, this was seldom achieved! But, with Fr Browne, it was never about the winning but simply about enjoying the taking part and that is why even the slowest of us loved the experiences and could happily disregard the challenge, while the talented deservedly had their many moments of glory.

We reminisce often of the glorious times we had with this amazing man, who was so generous in spirit, so kind, so honest and honourable and so much fun. Our childhood was special because of him. To this day, we feel a deep sense of gratitude and have an abiding sense of appreciation of all that he did with us and for us. He was a walking (often running) saint and a privilege to know. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam uasal."

Rockchapel/Bruree August 1976 – January 1983

1976 saw Fr Denis move to Rockchapel/Bruree and he would spend seven years there. It was while there that his love for partaking in running was rekindled. On arrival, again he immediately began to assist with the training of the youth of the parish. At the start of a training session in September 1980, prior to the commencement of rounds of the field, he warned his youthful athletes, "Don't go racing!" Knowing they would not heed him, as he recalled, "I took off my shoes and threw off the collar" and told them "I am going in front for two rounds and you continue on then at the same pace". What actually transpired was that he completed ten rounds, and, after a lapse of 27 years, he was hooked on running all over again.

October 1980 saw the staging of the first ever Dublin City Marathon and when one of his 12 year old athletes, a Jer McCarthy, suggested they should do it the following year, Fr Denis's initial reaction was "not in a hundred years!" Jer was persistent though, and eventually Fr Denis succumbed and agreed to purchase a book to see what training was involved. With the ban on priests competing in running that was present when he was ordained in 1953, being long since gone, he completed that first marathon in a sub four hour time of 3:48:42, with his young companion coming in 30 minutes later. He would complete another 21 marathons between then and 2003 when, at the age of 74, he completed his final race in 6:12:03.

Of the 21 marathons he completed, 19 were completed in Dublin where he would stay with his brother, John, on the eve of these events. On the morning of a marathon, Fr Denis would always celebrate Mass in John's house. John would then drive him into the city to take his

place at the start line. On completion of the marathon he would again overnight with John before taking a train to Charleville, where his other brother, Jimmy, awaited him. The other two marathons which he completed were in Cork in 1982 and 1985. It was in Cork in 1982 that he completed a career best time of 3:19:23, at the age of 53.

In the early 1980s, a visiting hurling coach to Bruree was very impressed with the training that the local hurling team were doing, when he noted a well-worn path through the long grass around the boundary of the pitch, only to discover that it was Fr Denis and not the hurlers who had worn the path with his training schedule! While in Bruree, he was also known for organising an annual sports day for schools of the parish and surrounding areas. These sports days would be held in Bruree or Kilmallock, and the children and teachers of all the local schools very much looked forward to attending these events, where they would partake in running, pole vault, high jump, long jump and so on.

Donoghmore/Knockea/Roxboro January 1983 – June 1989

Fr Dennis was made parish priest of Donoghmore on January 21st 1983, and he remained there until 1989. As noted earlier, when he was younger, Fr Denis had an interest in photography and on his days off would travel around the country taking photographs of ancient churches and settlements, in which he had a particular interest. This was his motivation, while in Donoghmore, to erect an outdoor crucifix to mark the canonisation of Irish martyrs including Archbishop Dermot O’Hurley. The crucifix was erected at Knockea Church, a few fields from Lickadoon Castle where Archbishop O’Hurley once lived. The archbishop was hanged for treason in Dublin in 1584.^{xiv}

During his time in the parish he was involved in the building of schools in Roxboro and Donoghmore. One of the fundraising initiatives for these projects that he arranged was sponsored walks, which he would run! He set up an athletic club named St. Patrick’s and was very much involved with community games. While in the parish, he was also involved with the South Liberties GAA club and was very active in promoting the Pioneers in the locality.



*Looking right back at you!! Fr Denis with a 1st Holy Communion Class.
He had a great love of gadgets and his camera was never far from hand.*

Ballyagran/Colmanswell June 1989 – September 2004

From the 8th of June 1989 to the 4th of September 2004, when he retired, Fr Denis ministered in the parish of Ballyagran/Colmanswell. After six years in Donoghmore, a parish he really enjoyed, but which Fr Denis classed as part of the city, he was thrilled to be returning once more to country life, where he was at his most content. The Pioneers would take on further significance for him during his time in Ballyagran/Colmanswell as, on the 8th October 1995, at a regional meeting in the Muintir na Tire hall in Athlaca, he was appointed as the spiritual director for the South Region.^{xv} He held this post until 2009, five years after his retirement. The South Region included Ardpatrick, Kilmallock, Athlaca, Bruff, Croom, Fedamore, Donoghmore and Roxboro. It also included Dromina and Newtownshandrum, both in County Cork. He would organise an annual sports day, normally held in Kilmallock, for young and old members of the Pioneers, which members recall “As a great day out”.

Fr Denis became Canon Denis while in the combined parishes, and he also celebrated his Golden Jubilee there in 2003. His family recall how good the people of Ballyagran/Colmanswell were to him at the time. They provided him with some of his favourite gadgets: a camcorder, a video, a television, a computer and a radio along with many other items. The following is a tribute taken from the Mass Booklet produced to commemorate the occasion of Fr. Denis’s Golden Jubilee:

“In 1953, whilst Hillery and Tenzing were making that historic trip to the summit of Everest and Queen Elizabeth was learning the ropes in preparation for her new role as head of state in Britain, there emerged from Maynooth College a kind and gentle soul – our very own Denis Canon Browne.

In due course it became obvious that this ‘kind and gentle soul’ had an inbuilt discipline and determination which saw him ‘first to the line’ in various athletic events. In recent years, he once again brought home the gold from a track event in Tullamore, where he showed a clean pair of heels to all the other septuagenarian competitors. Well done Canon Denis and watch out Ronnie Delaney!

In his early years, he set up athletics clubs and encouraged and trained the young people in various parishes to compete in various athletic events. His passion and great love of this sport is just as strong today. As the dawn breaks with each new day he maintains his level of fitness and can be seen jogging along the country roads – anywhere within a ten mile radius of home.

However, it is his priestly duties that come first. His involvement with his parishioners is never obtrusive, yet each one of them knows in his heart that he is always there for them. He has a special holiness, the kind that has to do with everyday things, like kindness, gentleness, courtesy, consideration for others and above all, contentment with his lot. Not a man for worldly goods his demands are based on need rather than want. Some years ago, shortly after changing his car, and purchasing his present model, he was heard to remark, as he extolled the virtues of his latest purchase: ‘Sure, I don’t know myself. Don’t even feel the potholes in the road anymore’ (Please don’t tell this to our Minister for the Environment, Mr Martin Cullen!) This simple remark is a measure of his humility, a virtue he possesses in abundance.

He is a special friend of the elderly. They have a great trust in his innate goodness, and his calmness and gentleness puts them at immediate ease. The high esteem in which he is held was very evident as this celebration was organised. Politicians talk of ‘the great response at the doorstep!’ Well, this time it was for real. It was genuine and warm with a generosity to match. We hope he enjoys his many gifts, particularly his new computer!

As we celebrate this great occasion of his Golden Jubilee, we wish him many years of health and happiness before our heavenly father finally greets him at the real finishing line and presents him with his final trophy – due reward for a race well ran. But all that is for a far off day. For now, it's a time of celebration and a huge and sincere thank you from all your loving parishioners!"^{xvi}

The local national school principal of the time, Seamus Quill, recalls how every June the senior class would go on a day trip to Lough Gur with Fr Denis. Here they would meet the senior class from Patrickswell National School, where the local principal, Michael Quinlan,

would take the group on a historical tour of the area, followed by a lunch on the lakefront and a game of football in Holycross in the afternoon. No doubt, Fr Denis loved bringing the youth of his parish to the beautiful Lough Gur, a location he cherished himself.

He was of course very much involved with St Michael's Athletic Club in Ballyagran and also with the community games. St. Michael's had been in existence prior to his arrival, but it flourished under his guidance, with its membership peaking at 112 athletes. Training was held at the local GAA pitch, a ground and facility that he blessed on April 29th 1990, when it was officially opened, prior to a senior hurling challenge match between Limerick and Cork. He also brought children to Pioneer quizzes, helped in arranging Christmas concerts and, of course, he would pack youngsters into his car to bring them to sports events. Mary Keeffe, who was very involved in St. Michael's with Fr Denis, recalls when the car was loaded with youngsters and if they were approaching a bump in the road, Fr Denis would advise; "Watch out there in the back", to which he would receive the reply "Keep going Father until you hear the bang!"

Of course, he continued his own participation in marathons, track and field events and local running. He won 13 All-Ireland Medals at 400, 800 and 1500 metres at track and field events in Tullamore. The Castletown Ballyagran Notes in the Limerick Leader of the 4th September 1999 recalls that: "In the All-Ireland Veterans Track and Field Championships held in Tullamore, parish priest Fr Denis Browne won three medals, two gold and one silver, first in the 800m, first in the 1500m and second in the 200m". It concluded by stating that "St. Michael's Athletic Club will always treasure the achievements of Fr Browne".^{xvii} He was 69 when he won these medals. Most mornings he would run from Ballyagran to Granagh and back. In dark mornings, he ran with a flash light. In 1993, at the age of 64, he completed his fifteenth marathon in 3:53:00. From there to 2003 his times naturally increased, and he completed his final marathon in that year in 6:12:03. He quipped after completing this marathon, "I wasn't a bit sore after it".

Humour

From his childhood days Fr Denis had a real good sense of fun and humour. If he had one failing in life it was that he felt he was poor at remembering certain things. He devised various methods to try to improve his memory, and, while in Glin, he purchased a memory exercising book. The book was deemed to be a superb success, and Fr Denis showed it to and told everyone who was willing to listen of its value. That was until he went to get his car serviced in Glin one afternoon - while his mechanic was attending to his car Fr Denis was showing and



Fr Denis with Golden Jubilee committee members Agnes Sheehy, John O' Sullivan, May Walsh, Mary McMahon & Seamus Quill.

telling him about this brilliant memory book. The mechanic completed his work and Fr Denis went on his way, returning home. As he settled in for the night, a knock came to the door, and, low and behold, it was his mechanic holding the famous memory book that he had 'forgotten' at the garage!

A similar episode occurred, a number of years later, while he was parish priest in Donoghmore. He shared the parochial house with Fr James Ryan, who recalls that Fr Denis at this time used to try to improve his memory by reciting a few verses from the book "Around the Bowry Log". Fr Ryan recalls him coming down to breakfast one morning and announcing "This is very funny, but I can't remember where I left the book!"

It was while in Glin that his interest in gardening took hold. A green house was purchased for him by his family, and the green house followed him to Bruree and from there to Donoughmore. While in Donoughmore, the interest with gardening came to an end, with the green house eventually being used as a place to dry clothes! It had served its purpose though in its true incarnation and had been a success for growing all sorts of plants, fruits and vegetables.

Such ease, contentment and a willingness not to take him-self too seriously were strong traits of his personality. He was never one to make a fuss or get overly flustered but enjoyed life and was good fun to be around.

Grange and Later Life

As his sister, Cassie, recalls, "Every summer Fr Denis would spend two to four weeks holidays in Grange. Initially, this was in August, but he changed to July so as to get more daylight hours! He loved Grange and particularly Lough Gur. The family home, beside the stone circle, has a field at the rear that backs onto the shores of the lake. When Fr Denis went for a run, he would do some laps around the field, so that he could take in the views of the lake. It was a place where he found so much peace in the beauty of the surroundings". His favourite time of the day to run was early in the morning, just as dawn was breaking. For Fr Denis, there must have been peace, serenity and an uplifting for him spiritually, to train at that time of the day, when all was quiet, when the dew was still fresh on the grass and when he had time to lose himself in his own thoughts and prayers before the start to his day.

Cassie also recalls a humorous moment, when he was in Donoghmore Parish, with a parishioner, with regard to his summer holidays in Grange. It was July, and the parishioner wanted a Mass said specifically by Fr Denis. The Mass request clashed with his month's holidays. The parishioner tried valiantly to have the Mass said and was slow in taking 'no' for an answer. Still, Fr Denis would not accede. The parishioner accepted that she had to wait for him to return and in concluding asked where was he going on holidays, expecting a far off destination. There was bewilderment when he said he was going eight miles up the road to Grange, but his time in Grange was not going to be disrupted! He loved the natural beauty of Lough Gur and had a boat that he would take out on the lake, bringing with him his lunch and often spending long lazy hours relaxing on the water.

When he retired in 2004, he settled into a home that held so many memories and good times for him. It was here, as a teenager in the 1940s, that he would stop off to his aunts, for refreshments, when out on his bicycle travels. It was also here that his own parents came to retire in 1958, when his father passed on the farm in Thomastown to his son, Jimmy. Fr Denis filled his own retirement days in the same simple routine that marked the most of his life, in prayer and in celebrating daily Mass.

In later years, he walked a lot, still enjoying the natural beauty and nature of the area. While not many local people got to know him during his annual holiday stay, this changed when he lived in Grange permanently, and he became a great friend of many local people. When his health started to deteriorate, Helen O' Dwyer - Grange Church Sacristan, and another kind local lady, Mary Gallagher, were extremely good to him, in caring for him and in taking him to ceremonies in Bruff Church.

When people who knew him, those of Grange and those of the parishes he served going right back to 1953, speak of him, the one common theme, echoing softly down the years, was of a very unique, gentle, saintly, humble, holy and compassionate man who served the people and especially the youth of his parishes with complete dedication and respect. He was also a special friend of the elderly and his gentleness put them at immediate ease. People still speak of him with a real genuine warmth and affection.

His sister, Cassie, recalls that “People were just drawn to him and they simply loved him”. It is not that many people who have that gift of natural appeal to others. He especially loved the youth, he loved to bring a smile to their faces, be that in athletics, GAA, sports days, Pioneer quizzes or other simple everyday parish activities. Many people have recalled how he would bring children, not just all over the county, but all over the country to sports events. One such occurrence was when he brought a group of children to an event in Donegal, and on the way home it was snowing heavily. One of them wanted to run in the snow, so he stopped his car and let them run. There are so many other examples of such occurrences, where he brought joy and fun into children’s lives.

Filling his Volkswagen Beetle to overloading would, of course, not be allowed today, nor could a priest put himself in a position of such direct singular involvement with the youth, given the revelations of past failings by certain members of the clergy. But Fr Denis had, undoubtedly, an innocence about himself, where enjoyment, participation and spiritual well-being were his sole goals for young people.

He loved to run himself and he was very good at it, a real athlete who took his training seriously. He had a natural athletic ability, forged from his up-bringing of hard work and of having to walk, run or cycle everywhere. Sports gave him an outlet to make friends easily when he came to a new parish, and he thrived on it. His work with the Pioneers and the promotion of total abstinence was also a hall mark of his life.

In 2013, Fr Denis, due to failing health, had unfortunately to leave Grange and he moved to Milford House. On December 11th of that year he gently passed to his eternal reward. He is sadly missed by the people of Grange who knew him. He is interred in Ballyagran Cemetery, the last parish that he actively served.

Ultimately, it is appropriate that Fr Denis is best summed up by the words of a stranger, who wrote to a national newspaper in September 2008: “I had the good fortune to have a short break in the beautiful area of Lough Gur, Holycross, Co. Limerick, where each day I experienced a wonderful Mass celebrated by a retired priest in Grange Parish Church. There are many faults within the Church but when one experiences such a wonderful spiritual experience, then one must be thankful that Ireland has priests who will give up their spare time to say Mass.”

Ar dheis De go raibh a anam.



Fr Denis with his family, at his Golden Jubilee celebrations in Ballyagran, 2003.

Front row (left to right) – John Browne, Cassie Browne O’ Hanlon, Fr Denis, Jimmy Browne & Fr Davy.

Back row (left to right) Loretto Browne, Kay Browne, Brendan O’ Hanlon, Edel Browne, Dan Browne & Cassie O’ Carroll.



Appendix

Marathon Times. Total completed 21. *

Year	Time	Venue	Age
1981	03:48:42	Dublin	52
1982	03:19:23	Cork	53
1983	03:23:11	Dublin	54
1984	03:49:54	Dublin	55
1985	04:01:36	Dublin	56
1985	04:19:20	Cork	56
1986	04:27:34	Dublin	57
1987	04:02:23	Dublin	58
1988	04:29:13	Dublin	59
1989	03:55:56	Dublin	60
1990	03:34:06	Dublin	61
1991	03:39:33	Dublin	62
1992	03:56:12	Dublin	63
1993	03:53:00	Dublin	64
1994	None recorded		65
1995	04:51:24	Dublin	66
1996	05:08:02	Dublin	67
1997	05:28:02	Dublin	68
1998	05:57:06	Dublin	69
1999	05:07:38	Dublin	70
2000	None recorded		71
2001	06:05:25	Dublin	72
2002	None recorded		73
2003	06:12:03	Dublin	74

*With thanks to Carol McCabe, Dublin City Marathon.

ⁱBureau of Military History 1913 – 1921, Statement by Witness Document No. W.S. 785

ⁱⁱ Irish Examiner 30.07.1942 P.2

ⁱⁱⁱ An Mangaire Sugach August 1948

^{iv} www.askaboutireland.ie

^v Limerick Leader 07.08.1948 P.10

^{vi} Limerick Leader 14.01.1950 P.4

^{vii} Limerick Leader 22.07.1950 P.4

^{viii} Limerick Leader 02.08.1950 P.4

^{ix} Limerick Leader 19.01.1957 P.14

^x Limerick Leader 03.01.1955 P.3

^{xi} Limerick Leader 17.11.1956 P.6

^{xii} History Athletics Ireland

^{xiii} Limerick Leader 12.08.1959 P.16

^{xiv} Article by Fr Thomas J Ryan on the occasion of the funeral of Canon Denis Browne

^{xv} Limerick Leader 14.10.1995, P.27

^{xvi} Golden Jubilee of Denis Canon Browne 1953 - 2003 Mass Booklet

^{xvii} Limerick Leader 04.09.1999, P.38