

Valiant Chaplain of the Bloody Tenth

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Much has been written about and, in two cases, statues erected in honor of Catholic chaplains who served during the Civil War. There was Father William Corby at Gettysburg, Father Abram Ryan, the poet priest of the Confederacy, and Father Peter Whalen, who, with his fellow priests, worked so unstintingly among the prisoners at Andersonville. However, little seems to have been recorded concerning the only Catholic chaplain to lose his life in action while administering to his men on the battlefield.¹ He was a quiet but energetic Benedictine monk, Father Emmeran Bliemel, pastor of Assumption Church in Nashville and chaplain of the 10th Tennessee Infantry.

As if to portend his future, the birth and early education of this heroic Confederate priest were strangely linked to St. Michael the Archangel whom Christians have always portrayed as a soldier in battle protecting man against the power of evil, and as the patron of the sick and dying. Father Bliemel was born on the feast day of Saint Michael, September 29, 1831 in Ratisbon, Bavaria and received his early education at the nearby school of St. Michael's Abbey in Metten.² During these years there also crossed his path a person who would later play an unusual role in his story, Otto Kopf, a classmate and constant friend. Both young men felt a similar call to leave their fatherland and become missionaries to German Catholics who had migrated to the sprawling new nation of America, and each was a constant support of the other in keeping that dream alive.³

Although Bliemel was a capable student of the humanities, he far surpassed all of his fellow classmates in mathematics and logic. Thus, in June of 1851, at the age of nineteen, when he arrived in this country with such fine recommendations, he was readily accepted in the

¹Aidam Henry Germain, *Catholic Military and Naval Chaplains, 1776-1917*, Dissertation for Catholic University, (Washington, D.C., 1929), 111-12. A thorough study of this volume and the excellent historical works of the Office of Chaplains, Department of the Army, indicates that Father Bliemel was the first Catholic Chaplain in United States military and naval history to have been killed in action while serving his men on the battlefield. Viz.: Roy Honeywell, *Chaplains of the U.S. Army*, (Washington, D.C., 1958); Herman Albert Norton, *Struggling for Recognition, The U.S. Army Chaplaincy, 1791-1865*, (Washington, D.C., 1977); Parker C. Thompson, *From Its European Antecedents to 1791, The U.S. Army Chaplaincy*, (Washington, D.C., 1978).

²Archives, St. Vincent Archabbey, Latrobe, Pa.

³St. John's University *Record*, II, (Collegeville, Minn., 1889), 69-70. Excerpt from the Atlanta *Constitution* quoting a speech of Rev. Otto Kopf O. S. B.

⁴Letter of Rev. I. A. Bergrath in *Wahrheitsfreund*, Oct. 1864, (Knoxville), translated by Warren D. Murrman, June 1980, Archives, St. Vincent Archabbey.

Novitiate of St. Vincent, a new and flourishing Benedictine community in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Soon, his grit and determination in learning the language became evident, and he was asked to put his talents to work teaching mathematics in the college attached to the abbey. On August 15, 1852, as he began his training for the priesthood, Emmeran made solemn vows as a monk. Four years later he and his friend Otto were ordained by Bishop Michael O'Connor of Pittsburg. Then, before moving on to preach the Gospel and offer pastoral care to the people in distant states, a short stay at nearby Pennsylvania missions was necessary in order to gain experience in the ministry.⁵

At first the young priest was sent to parishes in Hollidaysburg and Johnstown. Next there followed a term at St. Mary's in Elk County where his classmate Otto Kopf had been before him. Finally he served at Butler and Warren. In each position Father Bliemel gained the full respect of all to whom he ministered. During these assignments, in order to serve his people in the vast farmlands of Pennsylvania, the Benedictine priest had to ride long distances on horseback, at times fifty miles a day. Though he did not realize it at the time, the skill acquired in this way would one day become a major factor in his life as a future chaplain.⁸ Finally, in 1860, Father Bliemel was sent south to the Benedictine parish of St. Joseph in Covington and to the first of many Kentuckians on whom he would leave an indelible mark. From Covington he went to Augusta and extended his missionary work even further into southern Ohio.⁷

In the fall of 1860 Bishop Whalen of Tennessee issued a call for priests to come and help in the diocese of Nashville. Father Bliemel saw the need and immediately obtained the permission of his Benedictine superior to answer the summons. Shortly afterward he was appointed pastor of the small German parish of the Assumption in Nashville.⁸

Initially everything prospered in the new assignment, but the storm cloud of civil war was about to break loose over the area in all its fury. Nashville, located in a large slaveholding portion of the state, was suddenly caught up in the turmoil. Upon the news of Fort Sumter in April 1861, several companies of men were raised in the city, and by June, Tennessee voted to secede from the Union. Soon the capital, with its population of nearly 17,000, became the center

⁵Archives, St. Vincent Archabbey.

⁷Aloysius Plaisance, O.S.B., *Heroic Confederate Chaplain, The American Benedictine Review*, June 1966, p. 210.

⁸Archives, St. Vincent Archabbey; *Tennessee Register*, April 24, 1959. "Bergrath, op. cit.

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of Confederate manufacture and transportation in the west. Father Bliemel's parishioners began to scatter. When the men left to join the army, the remaining members of the congregation became discouraged because they found it increasingly difficult to maintain their church financially.

The demise of Fort Donelson in February of 1862 heralded another drastic change about to take place in all of Tennessee. As the main Confederate line to the north collapsed, the Federal army began to move southward and invest Nashville. A military governor, Andrew Johnson, was appointed and arrived on March 12, 1862.

The future vice-president had one main goal in view, that of restoring Tennessee to the Union. Anyone who opposed this, especially those in prominent positions, including clergymen, would be considered guilty of treason. Supervision of the local newspapers, even of the religious press, followed. In the face of all this it is not difficult to understand why deep indignation soon spread through the local citizenry. None of the churches were doing well. Only about half continued to hold services, and within a year most of the congregations were seriously disrupted in some way.

As midsummer approached, military matters began to dominate all of the Governor's time and attention. The main Federal forces were moving south, away from the capital, and the city was left with about 2,000 Union troops and rather weak defenses on its perimeter. With Confederate raiders like John Hunt Morgan and Nathan Bedford Forrest roaming the state, Johnson feared that Nashville would fall into their hands; so he asked for reinforcements. Then he began to impress the slaves of its angry citizens for the purpose of building fortifications on the outskirts of town and around the very statehouse itself.⁹ Soon the Confederate cavalry started to cut off the supply routes. As the Cumberland River fell to low stage, thereby hindering transportation, it became an even more difficult period for the townspeople. The food supplies ran out, prices soared, and business ground to a halt. But worse times were yet to come.

By late October, Major General William Rosecrans moved his Union army to Nashville to begin making preparations for the coming Federal campaign south. Now the capital became a boom-town filled with soldiers and the usual camp followers. The population soared to 80,000, a black market thrived, street crime and prostitution grew rampant. It was inevitable for Nashville to develop soon into an active center for the smuggling of contraband goods and military information to the Confederate army.¹⁰

In order to counteract the undercover activity, Rosecrans established a military police force, under Colonel William Truesdale, with a network of secret service agents to patrol every road, camp, hotel, hospital, train, and steamer. Some were even planted within suspected families, and many people were arrested as the police seized large amounts of medicine, clothing and arms.¹¹

Father Bliemel was warmly attached to the Southern cause and always spoke out in its defense. Yet he was allowed, by special permit, to carry on his priestly ministry wherever it was needed among the sick and wounded Federal soldiers in the numerous military hospitals. Through the influence of General Rosecrans and his brother, a priest who would later become a bishop in Ohio, the pastor of Assumption parish was given quite a bit of immunity. Perhaps he was allowed too much freedom, because he was soon suspected of making use of his privilege to

smuggle medicine to the Confederates. Upon hearing this, Rosecrans wrote to the Benedictine Superior in Pennsylvania and asked him to recall the priest. The message was written and sent, but there is no record of its ever having been answered. Due to the hectic military activity of the time, it may not have reached the Abbot.¹² In November, at the request of Bishop Whelan, Father Bliemel moved again. This time he went to live with the Bishop of St. Mary's Cathedral parish nearby. From there he could also continue to serve the remaining parishioners at Assumption.¹³

On December 11, 1862, the notorious Truesdale heard from one of the citizens of Nashville that a man "genteelly dressed and wearing specks" had purchased medicine in a side alley store to take south. Desiring to arrest the man with contraband goods in his possession, the chief of police asked the citizen to point him out so that a secret agent could follow him. The stake-out was established about one o'clock in the afternoon; contact was soon made and a policeman followed him from place to place. Late in the day the man was apprehended. It was Father Bliemel, and the agent arrested him carrying 4 oz. of morphine.

"Horn, "Nashville" 15-16; Bryan, "Nashville" 41. "Horn, "Nashville" 16-17; Bryan, "Nashville" 42. "St. John's University *Record*, op. cit. "Bergrath, *WahrheUsfreund*.

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When the priest was questioned, he made a statement to explain his movements. It revealed his attitude at this time concerning the conflict between the states. After declaring that he resided on the corner of Cedar and Somer Streets with the Bishop, he continued:

The bundle which I brought here to this office today I bought on the west side of Cherry Street at the 2nd door from the alley toward Cedar Street. It contained morphine. I bought nothing else there. I have never been to Murfreesboro. I bought it for an investment. I have no other goods of that kind . . . I have never taken an active part in this rebellion. I am a conservative Union man. I would prefer the old Union as it was, but believe that the South had been deprived of rights which justified them in this rebellion.¹⁴

The bundle also contained some snuff and a comb which had been purchased at another store. General Rosecrans dismissed the case and had him sent back to the Bishop with a stern admonition. Father Bliemel continued to administer faithfully to the people in Nashville whenever he was needed.¹⁵

Six months later another unfortunate incident occurred. On June 1, 1863, it was reported to Rosecrans that the priest had been arrested again under suspicion of being a correspondent and writing treasonable articles, over the name "Charlie", for the *Freeman's Journal*, a New York weekly which was sympathetic to the Southern cause. But, once again, after giving a satisfactory explanation, Father Bliemel was allowed to continue functioning in a limited way as a parish priest. The true author was Edward E. Jones, a prominent newspaperman in Nashville.¹⁸

When new battles broke out during December of 1862 and early in 1863, the number of wounded soldiers mounted. Churches, office buildings, and warehouses had to be converted into hospitals. Even Father Bliemel's parish Church of the Assumption was pillaged and taken over by Union forces.¹⁷ Nashville had truly become the largest Federal supply depot and army medical center west of the Appalachians. Such hard and unusual circumstances only made the priest more anxious to be with the men of his parish, nearly all of whom, by now, had joined the Confederate army. On more than one occasion he had sought permission from Bishop Whelan to depart and become a chaplain in the field. Southern officers were constantly

¹⁴National Archives, Union Provost Marshal's File, Papers on Citizens, M345, Roll 28. ¹⁵Nashville *Dispatch*, December 30, 1862.

¹⁶*Tennessee Register*, April 24, 1959.

¹⁷John L. Connelly, "Old North Nashville and Germantown," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 39 (1980), 128.

¹⁸U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion, A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 Vols., 128 parts and Atlas, (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), Series I, Vol. 16, Part 2, pp. 36-37, 242-243, 268; Stanley F. Horn, "Nashville during the Civil War," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 4 (1945), 12-14; Charles F. Bryan, Jr., "Nashville under Federal Occupation," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, January 1975, (Gettysburg), pp. 11,40.

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entreating the Bishops for priests to care for their men. However, Father Bliemel's services at home could not be spared, at least for the present.¹⁸

The unit that he wished to help was the 10th Tennessee Infantry. It had been first organized for state service in May 1861, then transferred to the Confederate army at Fort Henry in September. Seven of its companies were Irishmen from Nashville. When Fort Donelson fell, the regiment surrendered, but not before it suffered heavy casualties in bitter fighting there. The "Bloody Tenth," as it was thereafter called, was then exchanged at Vicksburg on September 24, 1862, and shortly after, on October 2nd, reorganized at Clinton, Mississippi. The Benedictine priest, who was known to be anxious to serve, was elected as its Chaplain even though he was still in Nashville and unable to join the troops. While he waited for permission, the regiment participated in the battles of Chickasaw, Bayou, Jackson, and Raymond.¹⁹ In the fall of 1863 when news of the terrible fight at Chickamauga reached the capital, it triggered another earnest plea by Father Bliemel to be allowed to join his men. Finally the permission of his superiors, which he so deeply desired, was granted.²⁰

The 10th Tennessee at this time was encamped in the vicinity of Chattanooga, and it would not be an easy task for the priest to reach the regiment. With the ever-increasing military traffic in the area, travel south on the main roads was forbidden. Trains were also halted as passenger service on the two railroads was suspended. Now, providentially, the early years spent on missions in Pennsylvania, where he had to pass many days in the saddle, would furnish him with the endurance and skill necessary to reach his destination.

The only protection for the Benedictine was his credentials from the diocese of Nashville. This document stated that he was a priest in good standing on his way to Humphries County to replace Father Orango for a time. The paper added that it might be necessary for him to pass beyond this point and even "to go out of Tennessee" for missionary work nearby. This was a true statement, as far as it went, but a Union sentry might guess that going "out of Tennessee" could also mean going to join and serve the Confederate army. He also ran the risk of having an enemy patrol somehow discover that the Vicar

¹⁸Bergrath, *Wahrheitsfreund*; Plaisance, *Heroic Chaplin*, 212.

¹⁹John B. Lindsley, *The Military Annals of Tennessee*, (Nashville, 1886), 284; *Tennesseans in the Civil War*, Part I, Civil War Centennial Commission, (Nashville, 1964), 193-94. ²⁰Plaisance, *Heroic Chaplin*, 213.

General of the Nashville diocese, Father Henry Browne, who signed the credentials, was himself the former Chaplain of the 10th Tennessee, before it surrendered at Fort Donelson.²¹

Father Bliemel first traveled west to McEwen, an Irish settlement, where the families of some members of the Tenth resided. These people provided him with a fine horse for his long and treacherous journey south. Unfortunately, the details of this adventuresome ride to Georgia, around and through the Union lines, are not known. They would, no doubt, make a thrilling tale, but even more excitement lay ahead.²²

Arriving safely at his destination, the chaplain was received with open arms by the "Bloody Tenth." On November 1st he presented his letter to Augustin Verot, the Bishop of Savannah, and was granted permission to serve in the area. From that day forward the priest's life became one of hard work and extreme danger in the crucible of war.

After the battle of Missionary Ridge on November 25th, the regiment spent the winter months in camp near Dalton. During January, having sought an official commission, Father Bliemel was formally nominated Chaplain by Colonel William Grace. The Confederate Secretary of War forwarded the Commission on February 2nd to date from the 10th, and it was accepted on March 3rd. Now, at last, through this unusual but not uncommon procedure, his position as Chaplain was official.²³

There is little known concerning the Benedictine's quiet daily ministry among the men throughout the spring and early summer of 1864 as the Confederates were falling back from Missionary Ridge through Rocky Face Ridge, Ringgold Gap, Buzzard Roost, Cassville, New Hope, Pine Mountain, and Kennesaw Mountain on their way to Atlanta. The few reports that exist all agree that in camp and on the field he was the same Father for every man, no matter what their religion or regiment. In battle he always moved forward with the troops, remaining just to the rear, where his services to the wounded would be most needed. There he pushed along with the litter bearers and was the first on his knees in prayer over the seriously injured; then it was back to the battlefield to help any others who might have been struck down.²⁴ At this time Father Emery, as he was familiarly

"National Archives, Record Group 109, M331, Roll 25, (War Department, Washington, D.C.)

"*Tennessee Register*, April 24, 1959.

"National Archives, Record Group 109, M268, Roll 156, (Washington, D.C.)

"William C. Davis, *The Kentucky Confederates Who Couldn't Go Home*, (New York, 1980), 232; Edwin Porter Thompson, *History of the Orphan Brigade*, (Louisville, 1898), 274; "Chaplains of the Fourth Kentucky," *Southern Bivouac*, Vol. 1, #12, August 1883, (Louisville), 117.

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called, also became closely attached to a group of men in the 4th Kentucky Regiment of the famous Orphan Brigade. This unit was part of Major General William B. Bate's Division in Lt. General William J. Hardee's Corps alongside the 10th Tennessee.

In late August the Federal forces under Major General William Sherman were about to seal the fate of Atlanta. Three of the four railroads from the strategic city had been systematically cut off in the battles of Peachtree Creek, Decatur, and Ezra Church. There remained only the Macon and Western line to the south. Convinced that cavalry alone could not disable the route properly, and reluctant to extend his lines too thinly around Atlanta, Sherman decided to move a large portion of his infantry and boldly attack Jonesborough, the remaining railroad junction linking Atlanta with the south.

As the plan was begun on August 25th, the Confederates became confused. Their lack of mounted scouts further complicated matters, and General John B. Hood miscalculated the full extent of the Federal movement. As a result he sent only the brigades of Brig. General A. W. Reynold and of Brig. General Joseph H. Lewis to the railroad junction sixteen miles south of Atlanta. They were supposed to be helping Brig. General Frank C. Armstrong's cavalry repel what was presumed to be a Federal raid. Hood thought that Sherman was sending a few detachments, not a whole army.²⁵

Advance units of six Federal infantry corps and two divisions of cavalry were on the move, and by nightfall of August 30th their lead elements crossed the Flint river outside Jonesborough. Here they dug in and prepared to strike the railroad on the next day. During the night, Hood, still overcautious, sent Lt. General Stephen D. Lee's and Hardee's Corps to Jonesborough but kept the rest of the army in Atlanta, which he still considered the most critical front.

The morning of August 31st found the Federals posted on a high wooded ridge facing Jonesborough and making ready to attack the outnumbered Confederates defending the Macon railroad. Meanwhile, the first of Hardee's weary troops, who had begun to arrive early, were waiting for Lee's men to join them. Hardee, whom Hood had placed in command, followed the original plan and attacked as soon as possible. It was a little after two o'clock in the afternoon. Lee's Corps was on the right and Hardee's force, now under the leadership of Major General Patrick R. Cleburne, was on the left.

"Official Records, Series I, Vol. 38, part 3, pp. 700-703, p. 633, p. 764; Robert U. Johnson and C. C. Buel, Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, (New York, 1956), Vol. 4, pp. 343-344; Errol MacGregor Clause, "The Battle of Jonesborough," Civil War Times Illustrated, November 1968, (Gettysburg), 12-23

Although Lee advanced successfully, some Union cavalry struck Cleburne's left and disrupted the whole Confederate assault. Lee's troops penetrated the Federal rifle pits in one place, but the Union cannon fire stopped them and broke up the uncoordinated attack. By 4:30 p.m. all the men in gray were forced to fall back.²⁸

Throughout the battle the slaughter was frightful. Close to 1,500 Confederates fell before the Union fire. Many of them were Father Bliemel's men, and he rapidly went to their aid with the litter bearers. It was just as he was making one of his trips forward to those lying on the ground at the rear of the assault column that the order to pull back was given. The heroic chaplain was caught in the heavy Federal fire that followed the retreating Confederates.²⁷

The Colonel of the 10th Tennessee, William Grace, a man of striking personal appearance and over six feet in height, was among those who went down in the attack.²⁸ Before dying he was able to recount to others what had happened.²⁹ The stretcher bearers and Father Bliemel found him. With a man under each shoulder they helped him stagger to the rear. After the Colonel was placed on the ground, the thirty-two-year-old priest knelt beside him to hear his confession. While pronouncing the words of absolution, he was suddenly struck in the head and fell dead right on top of Grace. This was verified by General Lewis of the Orphan Brigade. The officer was pulling back his broken regiments and keeping a careful eye on them as they made their way to the shelter of the original line. Just then he noticed Father Bliemel lift his hands in prayer as a deadly missile exploded and took away his head. This body collapsed upon the wounded man beside him.³⁰

All that afternoon the Federal guns continued to shell the Confederate position, stopping only for a short time to let the men in gray gather some of their wounded from the open field. In the evening, details were sent out to remove whatever casualties they could find. Before departing on the next day, the Confederates, who formed Father Bliemel's little flock, hastily but tenderly buried both the priest and his colonel near a clump of trees about a hundred yards southeast of an old stone depot. Another Confederate chaplain roughly marked the grave and fenced it in with pickets.³¹

²⁷Thompson, *Orphan Brigade*, 274.

²⁸"Reminiscence of Two Gallant Regiments," *Confederate Veterans*, March 1909, (Nashville), Vol. 17, p. 113.

²⁹St. John's University *Record*.

³⁰Davis, *Kentucky Confederates*, 233; Thompson, *Orphan Brigade*, 274.

³¹Davis, *Kentucky Confederates*, 234; Thompson, *Orphan Brigade*, 274; *Tennessee Register*, May 1, 1959 (Quote from the letter of St. M. Melaine Holliday, June 3, 1909).

If it had not been for the Hollidays, a resident Catholic family that accepted the responsibility of caring for the grave, the identity of the bodies might well have been forgotten and the location of the grave of the priest completely lost. A few years later, when the Daughters of the Confederacy had the bodies of their loved ones moved from their temporary resting places near Jonesborough and transferred to the Patrick Cleburne cemetery, the Hollidays made sure that the remains of Father Bliemel, Colonel Grace, and Ignatius Brooks, another Catholic who died of wounds in a nearby hospital were given a proper religious burial. They were placed in a special square of the cemetery, and the well-known Father Thomas O'Reilly, the heroic pastor of the siege of Atlanta, conducted the service.³²

The friends and confreres of the Benedictine from Pennsylvania had not heard from him since he left Tennessee to join the troops in the field. After the war there was still silence. Over the years many inquiries were made, but with no success. Then, one day, a vague report reached the Abbot in Latrobe that Father Emmeran had been killed somewhere between Nashville and Chattanooga and that his body had been buried in a garden belonging to an Irish lady. A search of that area was made, but with no success.³³

As time passed the Chaplain's disappearance continued to remain a mystery, until another unusual combination of incidents finally brought to light the truth. The Benedictines were invited to come to Alabama by Bishop O'Sullivan and, upon accepting, were assigned to St. Marys in Tuscumbia. To this mission in 1889 came Father Bliemel's friend Otto Kopf. Not long after his arrival and while he was still seeking an answer to the whereabouts of his confrere, a strange report reached him. It was said that a priest was known to have been killed at the battle of Jonesborough in Georgia and was buried there. His curiosity now fully aroused, Father Kopf wrote immediately to Father Kiely of Atlanta. He received a reply that the name of the priest was "Bluemel" and that his grave had been well marked and cared for. After this startling news, Father Kopf departed for Jonesborough as soon as he was able. There he was received kindly and allowed to take the precious remains of his close friend back to the cemetery of his Benedictine parish.³⁴ Today a large stone cross marks the grave of this monk of St. Benedict and soldier-priest from Tennessee, who was willing to risk his life to care for the souls he loved.

Perhaps the finest tribute paid to Father Emmeran Bliemel was that published in the *Southern Bivouac* in 1883 by a member of the 4th Kentucky Infantry regiment:

His quiet demeanor and frank face suggested that self reliant moral courage and intrinsic manhood which draws one to another. He just seemed to drop in with us, and go uncomplainingly along, helping this one to bear a burden, ministering to another who was sick . . . and . . . no man unless thoroughly and truly tried and notorious for absolute nerve and bravery, could get a place in our infirmary corps . . . Every hour of his stay was marked by the death-knell of a comrade. But this young priest followed the line of duty as if he was used, all his life, to war's direst alarms.³⁵

Such a person could not help but endear himself to men who were constantly going to battle. An indication of this is seen in an exchange made in later years between the survivors of the two units which he served. When the *Confederate Veteran* indicated that Father Bliemel was the official chaplain of the "Bloody Tenth", a soldier of the 4th Kentucky immediately sent a letter of protest saying, "the 4th will not stand for it. Father Bliemel... was ours; no other shall claim him. There is only a handful of the 4th Kentucky left, but there will be trouble in Tennessee if you do not give up the gallant glorious martyred Chaplain.

"Thompson, *Orphan Brigade*, 274; St. John's University Record; *Tennessee Register*, May 1, 1959.

"St. John's University Record." *Ibid.*"

"Chaplains of the Fourth Kentucky," *Southern Bivouac*, Vol. 1, #12, August 1883, (Louisville), pp. 117-118.

"Father Bliemel and Captain Gracie," *Confederate Veterans*, April 1909, (Nashville) Vol. 17, p. 186.

