
The Three Letters of Father C. Jos. Immel

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Spring 1900. Life was not easy for the Roman Catholic priests that lived and nurtured their assigned communities in Southern New Mexico. It was the time when Bishop Granjon² wrote Father Vabre, then the priest serving Hillsboro, Colorado (now Rodey), and other parishes in the area³ to inform him that he was being transferred to the parish of Flagstaff in the Arizona Territory.⁴ Although Father Vabre was responsible for several distant Catholic communities, his parishioners from Hillsboro were the ones at the forefront of trying to convince the bishop not to transfer Father Vabre.⁵

Bishop Granjon stood by his decision and in late November 1901, Father Vabre was transferred to the Church of the Nativity in Flagstaff, then in the territory of Arizona, where he remained until his death in 1924.⁶ As a replacement for Father Vabre, Bishop

Granjon appointed C. J. Immel. Little is known about him. His personnel file in the Archives of the Diocese of Tucson provides only the following information: his first and middle initials, his last name, and the date and place of his death, on February 9, 1903, in Hillsboro, New Mexico.⁷ This Archive also possesses three short letters written by Father Immel addressed to Bishop Granjon written respectively on January 7th, 1901, May 21, 1901, and July 9, 1901 and signed C. Jos. Immel.⁸

This does not provide us with enough information to learn more about Father Immel. Therefore we must rely on two sources: the possible linguistic origin of the surname Immel and the texts of his letters.

As concerns the surname, there is a possibility that it could be German in origin (i.e. the noun Himmel which means “sky” in English), When we looked for its presence in Germany today, we found that there are several hundred people with the last name Immel all over that country.⁹ As many of the priests present in southern New Mexico had come from France, we attempted the same search and we found that Immel is found mostly in southern suburbs of Paris and in the area around Marseille in southern France. However, there seems to be no more than about one hundred instances of the presence of this last name in France.¹⁰

We cannot determine if Father Immel spoke either German or French as the three letters he wrote to Bishop Granjon were all written in English. Yet, we do not think that Father Immel was French because his letters to the French bishop are not written in French while most of the other French priests and missionaries tended to write their correspondence in French with their bishop. The fact that the letters were written in English, however, provides us with interesting clues. First of all, upon reading them, it becomes quite obvious that Father Immel is not a native speaker of the English language as demonstrated by the following diagram which includes representative examples from Father Immel’s three letters. Further, they show linguistics features that may help us understand from where Father Immel came:

Letter A (*January 7, 1901*).

- Item 1** Enclosed I send you by money order 2,50\$ the cathedraticum ...
- Item 2** The devotion of the fourty (sic) Hours cannot be observed in the next time
- Item 3** An other cannot yet
- Item 4** With the best wishes and regards

Letter B (*May 21, 1901*).

- Item 5** My health is for some weeks very poor
- Item 6** I don’t feel well since more than 6 weeks
- Item 7** I only like to ask you
- Item 8** Two weeks or two and an half

Letter C (*July 9, 1901*).

- Item 9** The place has given an American Protestant
- Item 10** my Mexicans will build the chapel, for the interior part I got 100\$
- Item 11** The same is in th two other missions
- Item 12** On each place
- Item 13** health is in pretty good condicion
- Item 14** Hillsboro where I am going next Tuesday

Although the sample with which we are working is limited, we can make the following conclusions based on the excerpts included in the diagram above. In the

letter of January 7, 1901, there are several features that are typical of German written by a native speaker (using a comma for the currency in item 1, capitalizing the noun “Hours” in item 2, and to a lesser degree the use of “with the best” in item 4). The same phenomenon occurs in the letter of May 21, 1901, with item 5, item 6 and item 8.¹¹ The letter of July 9, 1901 is also interesting in the fact that it demonstrates some confusion in the author’s syntax such as in item 9, as well as a certain Spanish influence as in item 13 where he uses the Spanish spelling *condición* for the word *condition*.¹² It could be also that the spelling of “Thursday” in item 14 is the result of an association with the Spanish *Jueves*. By the time Father Immel wrote this third letter, he had lived for almost eight months in a community and served others with a large number of Spanish Catholics as we found in a letter from his predecessor in Hillsboro. In a letter dated July 7, 1900, Father Vabre, indicates the Catholic population of the parish was 2,255, most of which were Mexican Catholics.¹³ While it is always possible that Father Immel came from Mexico, we have not been able to find any records that could verify this fact.¹⁴

The three letters provide glimpses about the public life as well as the private life of a priest in a rural area of southern New Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century.

As we look at the public life of Father Immel, we notice first that the various parishes for which he was responsible were spread over a large area. Traveling over unpaved roads had to be accomplished regularly in what were probably difficult circumstances to keep in touch with each community. In his letter dated May 21, 1901, from Hillsboro, Father Immel mentions that he traveled by wagon.¹⁵ As some of his parishes are not close to each other, we can easily assume that this was his usual means of transportation.¹⁶

Early in the year 1901, Father Immel sent a moneyorder in the amount of \$2.50 to cover the cathedralicium for 1900 to Bishop Granjon.¹⁷ This cathedralicium is a sum of money that is contributed on an annual basis to support a bishop and, in these days, was supposed to be paid on the occasion of the bishop’s annual visitation of his diocese.¹⁸ Father Immel sent his contribution by a money-order because, traditionally, bishops in his diocese could not undertake a yearly visitation due to the extremely large territory for which they were responsible and the limited staff that was at

hand.¹⁹

One could expect to find several priests in larger communities such as Las Cruces. In the case of a smaller community like Colorado, the local priest would work alone and be responsible for other small communities. At the time of Father Immel’s tenure in Colorado, he also traveled to say masses, perform baptisms, marriages and funerals.²⁰ This heavy agenda may explain why Father Immel wrote to Bishop Granjon in January, 1901, that he would not be able to observe the upcoming devotion of the forty hours: it is quite likely that he did not have the time to spend forty hours in continuous prayer before the exposed Blessed Sacrament.²¹

Father Immel was a missionary who also devoted a part of his busy schedule in spreading the Catholic faith. Therefore one of his activities was to build chapels where they were needed.²² The major part of his letter of July 9, 1901, deals with this activity. He explained to Bishop Granjon that he was ready to build a chapel in Las Gallinas. As this construction could not take place without the blessing of the bishop, Father Immel requested the bishop’s permission. To convince the bishop that he should approve this new mission, he informed him that land had been donated by an “American Protestant” and that his “Mexicans will build the chapel (...)”.²³ Father Immel had \$100.00 for the construction of his mission. This letter provides us with an additional, important piece of information, a drawing of the design of this chapel. There is nothing outstanding or revolutionary in it from an architectural point of view; rather, it reminds us of many of the simple chapels that are scattered over the southwestern part of the State of New Mexico today, many of which were erected then through the diligence and missionary faith of priests like Father Immel.²⁴

In the same letter, Father Immel also stated that he had raised an additional \$150.00 to build two more missions. He added that they will be located in places named “Las Gallinas,” “Arroyo Bonito” and “Placers – Andrews”.

Where are these three places located? Robert Julyan’s *The Place Names of New Mexico* provides explanation for the location of these place names. We feel relatively certain that Las Gallinas is the site of the current village of Salem, which was once known as Gallinas, just as Arroyo Bonito is the modern day Arrey, and Placers- Andrews, although no longer in existence, was

situated a few miles from Hillsboro.²⁵ Given the locations of the churches and chapels to which Father Immel attended, the location of these new chapels makes sense as they are located on the routes connecting the already existing churches.

There were also personal issues with which Father Immel needed to deal in his letters. In response to Bishop Granjon's letter, Father Immel stated in his letter of May 21, 1901, that he would "offer the holy Sacrifice for the repose of the soul" of an unnamed reverend father. We have not been able to find out who is mentioned in this letter, given the scarcity of the information. All we can note is the fact that in the weeks preceding this letter, Ignatius Mrak, the second Bishop of Marquette, originally from Austria passed away in Marquette on January 2, 1901. Bishop Wigger, also of German extraction, passed away three days later.²⁶ If Father Immel were of German extraction, it would make sense for Bishop Granjon to inform Father Immel of the death of someone with whom he may have been acquainted.

However the most important the personal issue is mentioned in his letter of May 21, 1901. In it, Father Immel informed the bishop about an event that took place at the end of 1900:

My health is for some weeks very poor, ever since I had the misfortune, on the 30th of December to turn over with the wagon in the Rio Grande and to stay in [crossed out in the original text] there in the ice for a quarter of an hour. I don't feel well since more than 6 weeks, am spitting blood & lost my voice entirely.²⁷

He added that he had traveled to Las Cruces the week before he wrote this letter where he met "the Rev. Father Lasseigne [sic] who wants me to go to El Paso in the Hospital (...).²⁸ As he could not afford the Sisters' hospital stay, he asked the bishop's permission for "a vacation of two weeks or two and an [sic] half weeks after the Sunday of Trinity".²⁹ Father Immel admitted that he wanted to have this vacation so that he can take "the boy of the family Schroeder from Beaver Creek" who had spent time with him "to the Sister-school in Flagstaff."³⁰ This short sentence provides us with the only piece of information regarding the earlier life of Father Immel. Prior to coming to Colorado, he appears to have resided in Arizona where he was acquainted

with a family that trusted him enough to let their son spend time with him hundreds of miles away in a small locale in New Mexico.³¹

Despite our research in the Archives of the Diocese of Tucson, we have not been able to find more correspondence or information pertaining to Father Immel. His personnel file indicates that he died in Hillsboro on February 9, 1903. Based on our research, it would appear that the place and time of his death are inaccurate. *El Labrador*, a Las Cruces newspaper, in its edition of February 6, 1903, has a report in Spanish announcing the death of Father Immel which reads as follows:

Nuestro parroco el Rev. P Lassaigue recibió un despacho el lunes de el pueblo del Colorado, en donde le participan la muerte del Rev. C. J. Immel cura parroco de aquel lugar. El Rev. Immel cojió un refrio dias pasados el cual se le confirmó en pulmonia habiendole causado la muerte unos dias despues. El Rev. P. Lassaigue al recibo de dicho despacho salió para aquel lugar inmediatamente.³²

This notice shows without a doubt that Father Immel died in Colorado rather than in Hillsboro a few days before the publication of the issue of *El Labrador* dated 7 February 1903, rather than the date of 9 February 1903, listed in his personnel file in the Diocese of Tucson.

Given the fact that Father Immel did not receive any medical treatment after his fall into the icy waters of the Rio Grande in December 1900, it seems likely that this episode contributed to his eventual demise especially as we have no idea of his age at the time of this incident.

In conclusion, the three letters of Father Immel and his personnel file at the Catholic Diocese of Tucson do not provide us with any additional information. It would seem that prior to his arrival from Flagstaff, Father Immel had spent enough in Arizona to make some strong connection within the German community in the area.³³ Just as we can only venture on Father Immel's life prior to his arrival in New Mexico, we still have not been able to locate his burial place. While we can assume that the most likely place for it should be the Colorado cemetery, there is no record of his burial there. The place of his burial must therefore remain a mystery at this time.³⁴

APPENDIX

The Text of the Three Transcribed Letters of Father C. J. Immel³⁵

LETTER A

Colorado, January 7th 1901
Hatch P.O. N. Mex.

Right Reverend and dear Bishop,
Enclosed I send you by money – order 2,50\$ the Cathedralicum for 1900.

I think the best time for pastoral visitation would be after Easter in April.

The devotion of the fourty Hours cannot be observed in the next time on any place in the parish.

There is one parochial school in Colorado. An other cannot yet be established in other missions.

With the best wishes and regards,

I remain yours in Xto

Rev. C. Jos. Immel

LETTER B

Hillsboro, 21 – V – 1901
N. Mex,

Right Reverend & dear Bishop

Your kind letter came duly to hand last night, and I am very sorry, to hear of the death of the Rev. father. Surely, I will offer the holy Sacrifice for the repose of his soul.

My health is for some weeks very poor, ever since I had the misfortune, on the 30th of December to turn over with the wagon in the Rio Grande and to stay in there in the ice for a quarter of an hour. I don't feel well since more than 6 weeks, am spitting blood & lost my voice entirely. Last week, I went from Colorado to Las Cruces to see the Rev. father Lasseigne [sic] who wants me to go to El Paso in the Hospital; but I cannot afford what

the Sisters want. I only like to ask you for a vacation of two weeks or two and an half after the Sunday of Trinity, as I intend to bring the boy of the family Schroeder from Beaver Creek, who did stay here with me, to the Sister – school in Flagstaff.

Recommending me to your prayer and asking your Episcopal blessing

I am yours in Xto

Rev. C. Jos. Immel

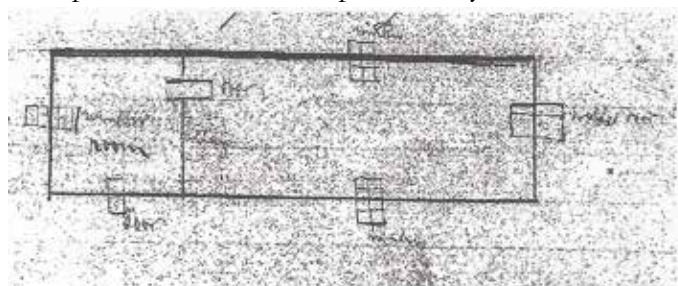
LETTER C

San Isidro, July 9th 1901
Garfield P.O. N. Mex.

Right Reverend & dear Bishop,

As I am going to build a chapel

In one of my missions, Las Gallinas, I kindly ask your permission for it. The place has [been?] given [to?] me by an American Protestant; my Mexicans will build the chapel, for the interior part I got 100\$. The same is in th [sic] two other missions, Arroyo – Bonito and Placers – Americans [?], where I intend to build the next months two other chapels. for each one I got 75\$. On each place I intend the chapel this way³⁶



For the two other chapels, I got for each one 75\$. Thursday a week ago I arrived in my parish, & thank you, my health is in pretty good condicion.

Hoping to get your permission soon, I remain with the best regards

Yours truly in Xto

Rev. C. Jos. Immel;

NB Please send the answer to Hillsboro, where I am going next Tuesday

Endnotes

- 1 Dr. Claude Fouillade is a professor of French at New Mexico State University. He has a long standing interest in the translation of historical documents as well as the French presence in North America. Frankie Miller is a M.A. candidate in the Department of History at New Mexico State University where she is completing a study on Father Jean Grange of San Albino in Mesilla. The authors gratefully acknowledge the Centennial Grant they received from the New Mexico Humanities Council which was primordial in developing the research for this study.
- 2 Most of the southern half of the state of New Mexico was then administered under the Diocese of Tucson. The then bishop was a Frenchman, Henri Granjon, who had recently been ordained bishop on June 17, 1900. He remained bishop of this diocese until his death in France on November 9, 1922.
- 3 The other parishes are San Isidro, Rincon, Santa Teresa, Arroyo Bonito, Kingston, Angostura and Florida. The parish priest lived in Hillsboro while Colorado was the largest Catholic community he served. Father Vabre to Bishop Henri Granjon, Colorado, 7 July 1900. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 4 Father Vabre's correspondence with Bishop Granjon shows that he was being transferred to the Catholic parish in Flagstaff. See Father Vabre's correspondence with Bishop Granjon, especially on 29 December 1900. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives
- 5 We have discussed this topic in a presentation (28 May 2009 at New Mexico State University) entitled "Petitions to Bishop Granjon from Parishioners in Southern New Mexico (1900-1907)" that is awaiting publication. The residence of the Father Vabre was located in Hillsboro which may explain why its residents were so vocal in their support of Father Vabre.
- 6 For further information on Father Vabre, see *The Coconino Sun* dated 22 February 1924.
- 7 C. J. Immel personnel file, the Archives of the Diocese of Tucson.
- 8 Letters of Father Immel to Bishop Granjon. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon. Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 9 www.dastelefonbuch.de provided this current information. It is also interesting to note that in a historically German community like Fredericksburg (Texas) the surname Immel is still present. In searching Vital statistics for the State of Texas (1850 to date), we have found several hundred instances of the same name, although none matched Father C. Jos. Immel
- 10 This up-to-date information can be found at <http://www.nomfamilie.com/nom-immel.html>.
- 11 Interview with Professor Gabriela Buchenau (Department of Languages & Linguistics at New Mexico State University) on October 19, 2009. Professor Buchenau also felt that the handwriting looked German.
- 12 It could be argued from looking at the original text that there is an attempt to include an acute accent over the last "i" vowel as one does in Spanish to make the word read *condición*.
- 13 Father Vabre only lists a total of 55 American Catholics out of this number. Letter, Father Vabre to Bishop Henri Granjon, Colorado, 7 July 1900. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 14 We have checked the records of several dioceses in the states of Colorado, Texas, and Arizona, as they were in existence at the time but have yet to find a record with Father Immel's name besides the three letters that are the basis of this study. However, the 1900 census for Arizona lists a Father Peter Joseph Immel who may have been one of his relatives. It was not uncommon at the time for several members of a family to enter the priesthood. One such case took place in the Diocese of Tucson where two Jouvenceau brothers served together.
- 15 Letter, Father Immel to Bishop Granjon, Hillsboro, 21 May 1901. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 16 Whenever priests traveled over a long distance, many documents mention that priests travel by stagecoach and later by train.
- 17 Letter, Father Immel to Bishop Granjon, Colorado, 7 January 1901. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 18 See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03441a.htm> for more information of the cathedra.
- 19 Yet in response to a request from bishop Granjon, Father Immel writes in his letter dated January 7, 1901, that the Sunday after Easter [April 14, 1901] would be "the best time for pastoral visitation". 19 Letter, Father Immel to Bishop Granjon, Colorado, 7 January 1901. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 20 It is interesting to note that each letter is written from differ-

- ent locations, namely Colorado, San Isidro (near Garfield) and Hillsboro. In his letter of 9 July 1901, from San Isidro, Father Immel asks bishop Granjon to send his reply to Hillsboro because this is where he will be the following Tuesday. Letter, Father Immel to Bishop Granjon, San Isidro, 9 July 1901. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 21 See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06151a.htm> for more information of the devotion of the forty hours.
- 22 In the modern transcription of a report by Bishop Granjon in 1901 (most likely addressed to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith), the bishop reports the building of 45 church and chapels. Given the limited number of priests and missionaries in the diocese of Tucson, this shows us that Father Immel is a very active missionary. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 23 Letter, Father Immel to bishop Granjon, San Isidro, July 9, 1901. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 24 We are thinking in particular of the chapels that were built in Cuchillo and Monticello near Truth or Consequences, as well as those that line the lower Mimbres Valley.
- 25 See Robert Julyan, *The Place Names of New Mexico*, rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 24 [for Arroyo Bonito], 308 [for Gallinas] and 16 [for Placers-Andrews].
- 26 See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10624d.htm>. The second Bishop of Marquette, U.S.A., was born 16 October, 1818, in Hotovle, in the Diocese of Laibach (Carinthia), Austria; died at Marquette on 2 Jan 1901. See also <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10779c.htm> for further details on the Rev. Dr. Winand M. Wigger, The third Bishop of Newark, born of German parents in New York city, died on 5 January 1901.
- 27 Father Immel to Bishop Granjon, Hillsboro, 21 May 1901. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 28 Ibid. Father Pierre Lassaigue arrived in New Mexico in 1865. He served in various locations in Arizona and New Mexico. In 1882, he was appointed Pastor in Las Cruces where he remained until his death on 18 July 1909. See Nancy Hanks, *Lamy's Legion: The Individual Histories of Secular Clergy serving the Archdiocese of Santa Fe from 1850 to 1912*, (HRM Books: Santa Fe, 2000), 72-73. It seems to us that a Frenchman would have known the correct spelling of Father Lassaigue's name.
- 29 In 1901, the Sunday of Trinity took place on May 26, the seventh Sunday after Easter.
- 30 Letter, Father Immel to Bishop Granjon, Hillsboro, 21 May 1901. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.
- 31 The boy mentioned in this letter is most likely one of the children who can be seen on a photograph titled "Schroeder Family at Ranch on Beaver Creek, 1903". Black and white photograph, item 7369. The Cline Library Digital Archives, Cline Library, Special Collections and Archives Department, Northern Arizona University.
- 32 El Labrador, Las Cruces, Nuevo Mexico, Viernes 6 de Febrero de 1903 (numero 49), page 3. Our translation of this article follows: "Our priest the Reverend P. Lassaigue received a dispatch this Monday from the people of Colorado, in which they announced to him the death of the Reverend C. J. Immel, priest of this village. The Reverend Immel caught a cold a few days earlier that in turn gave him pneumonia which was the cause of his death a few days later. The Reverend P. Lassaigue left for Colorado immediately after receipt of this dispatch." A similar notice was published on page 3 of the *Las Cruces Citizen* dated February 7, 1903 (vol. 1 No 45).
- 33 This almost certainly explains that the "Jos" he uses in his signature stands for "Joseph", a common German name.
- 34 We searched the grounds of the cemetery in Rodey as we considered this to be the most likely location of his burial. Although we have not found its location, we found the resting place of Jean Monfort, a former priest in residence at San Albino in the early 1880s. If such an old burial place can be found, it makes it quite certain that Father Immel has to be buried somewhere else. None of the local newspapers we have consulted record any information about his burial either.
- 35 These transcriptions are based on the original letters held in the collection of the Archives of the Diocese of Tucson. They are faithful to them to the point of maintaining the spelling, syntax, markings and self-editing done by their author.
- 36 This drawing is taken from a copy of the original letter of Father Immel. The sacristy is on the left side. Letter, Father Immel to Bishop Granjon, San Isidro, 9 July 1901. Papers of Bishop Henri Granjon, Diocese of Tucson Archives.