

This short document was written in 1946, only few months after To Rot's martyrdom. It was written by Fr Carl Laufer, MSC, parish priest of Rakunai, Peter To Rot's village, from 1930 till 1949. He was not only To Rot's good friend, but also was his confidant.

The document describes the events, as the author knew them, which led to the execution of the catechist at the hands of the Japanese military in 1945.

A CATECHIST BECOMES A MARTYR

1- Peter To Rot, son of the late chief To Pula and Ia Tumul of Rakunal was born in 1916 and received his catechist-training in the Taliligap Catechist School. He was married to Paula Ia Varpit, and since 1934 he was employed as teacher at the Mission Station of Rakunal. When in 1942, at the command of the Japanese Marines, the priest in charge was forced to leave, To Rot assumed responsibilities in the parish and kept the Catholic people united. For approximately four years he was the sole spiritual director, substituting for the interned pastor. Regularly he assembled the children and adults for both religious and secular instructions, conducted the Sunday services, baptised infants, officiated at marriages, visited the sick and buried the dead. He recorded parish proceedings in the register and was considered the leading personality among the Catholic native population for the entire duration of the Japanese occupation.

2- For the purpose of bringing the little gifts of his people or to seek advice, he frequently and secretly visited the Missionaries in the Concentration Camp in Vunapope, (Kokopo). In 1944, due to the destruction of Vunapope, the

camp was transferred to Ramale Valley. When this news together with news of the dreadful plight of the Missionaries, reached To Rot, he undertook a campaign of voluntary donations consisting of blankets, articles of clothing, and garden produce, etc., and had these gifts delivered to the camp by a good-hearted Japanese chauffeur. The gifts, however, never reached their destination, but were confiscated by camp officials. The first report that my natives from Rakunal gave me after my release was that my Head Catechist, Peter To Rot, was murdered by the Japanese in Navunaram a few weeks after the armistice. Later I was to learn of the accompanying circumstances.

3- Sometime later the Japanese Military Police in Navunaram, of which Gunto and Meshida were members, assembled the chiefs of the district and explained to them that from then on every religious activity was forbidden: no more prayers, no marriages, no baptisms, etc. To this To Rot replied: "You have taken our Priests from us, but you cannot forbid us to be Catholics, and to live and die as Catholics". Repeatedly he ended his instructions with the words: "I am a Catechist, and I will do my duty even if it costs me my life". At this time, the Japanese Police Force employed certain natives in Rakunal and Navunaram as military police and spies; they were To Metapa and his brothers, Teu and Tirip, all Methodists. In Rakutop, a native called Philip served in the same capacity.

4- To Metapa attempted to divorce the married couple, To Viniau and Ia Mentil of Navunaram, as he wished to have the woman for himself. To Rot, supported by To Palangla, opposed this proposal with all his might and he succeeded in thwarting this evil plan. As a result of this, To Metapa

awaited an opportunity for revenge, and this presented itself shortly without any effort on his part. One day he encountered a number of natives from the vicinity of Vunadidir, bound for the village in which the Catechist lived. Upon inquiring, he learned from the women that To Rot was to officiate at a marriage, which event actually took place in a dug-out. To Metapa's hour had struck!

5- He informed his superiors, who immediately arrested not only the Catechist, but also his two brothers, Tatemel and Telo. Their huts were searched. In Telo's house they found a few Australian banknotes, in the homes of the others a few religious articles. To Rot was first summoned to the police and questioned as to his assistance at the Christian marriage and prayer with the people in spite of this being forbidden. Fearlessly, he admitted with the words: "I have only done my duty". Thereupon, Meshida struck his head, face and body with a rod, and To Metapa joined him in the striking with a bamboo stick. He was sentenced to two months' imprisonment. Telo was accused as having acted as witness for the ceremony and of having joined in the prayers. He admitted to this and was flogged. As Meshida would not believe Telo's statements as to the origin of the banknotes, he had Telo suspended by his arms from a tree and then half beaten to death by To Metapa. As a result of this torture the boy was bedridden for a long time. Because of his condition, he was released after about two weeks, his relatives having paid a few fowls for ransom. Naturally, Tatemel was cruelly treated for his having acted as witness of the marriage, but was released after a month's imprisonment.

6- Meanwhile, To Rot spent his time in prison near Navunaram, together with other convicts who were

supposed to have stolen tapiok from a Japanese garden. As a result of his stay in the prison and his work in the damp dugout To Rot contracted a slight cold. This ailment was used by To Rot's friend, the Methodist chief Tarue, as an excuse to ask the police to allow him, to undertake to care for To Rot at his home, which was situated near the police station. Meshida consented, but from the beginning made every attempt to get back his captive. To Rot was convinced that this time he would not escape alive. He told this to Tarue, and daily awaited his execution with which the police repeatedly threatened him. For this reason his end did come unexpectedly.

7- The Catechist had passed six weeks in prison when one day his friend, Tarue, was summoned to the police station at Rakutop, which was a considerable distance away. Here Tarue remained till close to midnight. That same evening, Meshida sent all his prisoners, in the company of the military police, to a place in the bush which was not far distant and in spite of the heavy rain and the darkness, he told them that they could entertain themselves with dancing and singing. No one could explain this ridiculous command, but they went. To Rot was left alone in the prison camp. After some time, Meshida summoned him to himself. To Rot knew to what he was going. He shaved, hung his Catechist's cross around his neck, folded his blanket and proceeded to the police station. Long after midnight, the prisoners and military police were recalled by Meshida, but they were not permitted to spend the remainder of the night in their customary sleeping quarters, but had to spend the rest of the night in a dug-out.

8- Towards midnight Tarue returned from Rakutop and was perplexed in not finding To Rot in his house. In the

morning, Meshida called over to the chief's house to say that To Rot was dead and someone should come for the corpse. Tarue immediately sent word to his relatives and the chief Tata, and then hurried over. There kneeling beside the corpse of To Rot, were To Kava, To Varmari and To Binabak, who were crying bitterly. The naked corpse, whose hands were cramped and whose feet were extended, lay on the bare floor. Sobbing, To Varmari turned to Tarue and said: "Oh, our good friend, To Rot is dead". Then he covered the corpse with a cloth.

9- Tarue also could not restrain his tears and, at this moment, it struck him that in the night, while passing by the prison camp, he had heard someone vomiting. He had thought that one of the convicts was ill and was vomiting. It had not occurred to him then, however, that a murder was being committed. Now the yard was astir with wailing. Tata and his people carried the corpse to Tarue's home to bathe it and prepare it for burial. At a glance they saw that the Catechist had been strangled to death. The nostrils and mouth had been stuffed with cotton and a semi-liquid substance resembling melted wax (apparently paraffin) trickled from the corners of the mouth as the body was moved. A swelling apparently caused by the pressure of a stick was visible on the throat. Both chiefs, Tata and Tarue, received a commission to forbid their people to speak of the death of To Rot. Spies went about in order to find out how the natives were disposed in this regard. Tarue was cautious and expressed himself thus to his people: "We all know that To Rot died on account of his education and religion".

10- The Catechist, To Rot, was interred in the Catholic cemetery near Rakunai. His grave decked with flowers, lies

at the foot of the large crucifix. An enlarged portrait of the deceased is on display near the altar in the parish church. Revered and loved by all, he was styled: "Our best and truest friend", by the Maylayan prisoners-of-war near Vunalaka. After the war, I was informed by the above mentioned that To Rot sympathised with them in their needs, and often supplied them with food. All his fellow Catechists in the Rabaul vicinity speak of him with admiration and even the Methodists call him: "The Just One". His people will ever remember him as a martyr in defence of Christian marriage and his Catholic faith.