

*This article was written for the German magazine "Catholic Missions" in 1950. **This is the very first biography about Peter To Rot.** 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.*

TOO MUCH CHRISTO

1- Surprisingly sudden was the news which reached us interned Missionaries of New Britain, in the middle of August 1945, through the officials of the Japanese Army. The gates of our concentration camp in the forest valley of Ramale were flung open and, throughout the following days and weeks, flocks of Catholic natives from far and near, under the leadership of their Catechists, stormed in. They craved to see and speak to their Missionaries and Sisters from whom they had been separated for years. My old beloved friends and co-workers from Rakunai stood before me; some of them pressed both my hands, they were so deeply touched as to be unable to utter a syllable. I scanned the rows in search of the one I longed most to see. "Why isn't To Rot amongst you?" At this heads were lowered, and tears rolled down many cheeks. The old To Uvae sobbed: "Father, To Rot is dead. He was murdered by the Japanese".

THE CHIEF'S SON

2- In January 1930, I commenced my work at the Mission Station of Rakunai, and it was there that I became

acquainted with the family of the chief To Pula. To Pula was a sterling character, the most influential personality of the diocese. The natives revered him as their father and protector. At the founding of the Station in 1901 he, as a young man, offered his personal services to the first priest and stood by him in word and deed in the difficulties which accompany all beginnings. This same loyalty he displayed towards me until his death in 1938. His wife, Ia Tumul, was a reserved and lovable little lady. At her first visit she introduced to me her children, Tatamai, Ia Varpilak, Peter To Rot and Telo the youngest.

3- At this time Peter To Rot was a youngster of fourteen. He endeared himself to me at our first meeting. As son of the chief he held an exalted position among the school children. I recall that during the three years of his schooling under my direction, I was obliged to punish him but once. I myself did not do it but left the task to his father. Later I consulted with his father concerning his future. "No, Father, I do not believe that one of our present generation can become a priest. It is much too early for that. Possibly a grandson, or great grandson of mine, might attain to this good fortune. But if you would like to have To Rot as a Catechist, then let him attend the training school in Taliligap". This suggestion materialised.

4- At the opening of the autumnal semester in 1933, To Pula presented his son to say farewell. He was on his way to the Preparatory School. As I bestowed my blessing I said: "Be good and loyal". At this rejoinder, the old man drew himself up proudly and answered: "That he will be, otherwise he would be no son of mine". To Rot quickly felt at home in the Preparatory School. He liked to study and his annual reports were always of the best. Gradually he

grew more sedate, grave and independent and soon he became the right hand of the venerable Catechist-Father, Rev. Lakaff, M.S.C., whom he accompanied on various tours.

THE LAY APOSTLE

5- After three years of study, To Rot returned to Rakunal where he was sorely needed to fill a teacher's post which had been vacated owing to the resignation of a Catechist. Although the youngest among the native teachers, he soon became their leader, principally because he possessed strong backbone, an asset which is even now sadly lacking to most of our natives. To Rot was truly exceptional. Every evening he visited the Father in order to continue his instructions in English and to enrich his religious and scientific knowledge, to consult regarding his work in the school or conditions in the parish. With untiring interest, he assisted me in my language and ethnological studies and was aflame with zeal regarding my endeavours to perpetuate and Christianize native customs. Frequently he offered suggestions regarding parish difficulties. During these years Catholic Action flourished in the parish. Every Sunday evening after devotions, when the weather permitted, the Catholics of Rakunai assembled in the Church grounds or in the school. At these assemblies, the sermon was repeated, parish interests discussed, mistakes censured and quarrels settled. Upon the conclusion of the address by the priest, To Rot undertook the further direction of the assembly. In this he was actively assisted by his old father, To Puia. His firmness and impartiality as a teacher are evidenced in the following amusing incident. Paula Ia Varpit, To Rot's intended bride, was a pupil in his school till the day of their wedding. On one occasion, I

visited the school and there I noticed Paula kneeling on the cement floor in front of the class. Somewhat embarrassed by my surprised glance, To Rot explained: "Paula must kneel because she was talking during instructions". A few weeks later the two were married and their exemplary wedded life was for all the natives an almost inimitable pattern.

A FRIEND IN NEED

6- When, in January 1942, the Japanese occupied the territory, I was, due to ill health, at the central station in Vunapope. The Catechist, To Rot was alone in Rakunai. Courageously, he met the incoming Japanese vanguard and begged that the Station be spared. But while he still spoke a shot rent the air, and, in the same moment, machine guns were directed on the evacuated Station, and demolished the church, the house and the school. It was To Rot's luck, that in the confusion that followed, he could slip away. When the storm had subsided, he tried, despite many difficulties, to contact me at Vunapope and inform me of the destruction. To his horror he found all Missionaries behind drawn bayonets, and found no opportunity to get an audience. During the night, tired and dejected, he undertook the five hours' trudge back to Rakunai. From this point on, he felt himself solely responsible for the parish.

7- After a time, he tried again to pay a visit. Meanwhile conditions in the camp had improved a little and To Rot succeeded in gaining admittance. The news he imparted about conditions on the outside was anything but joyful. He himself needed consolation and guidance. In the early morning hours he assisted at my Holy Mass,

Communicated, and then took the Blessed Sacrament with him to the sick and dying. These forbidden visits were often repeated and he never came empty handed. At the end of 1943, rules governing the Camp became stricter. In spite of this, To Rot succeeded in coming into contact with us prisoners on two more occasions. His wife and child accompanied him. Paula was able to bribe her way into the Camp in order to get an injection from the Nursing Sister. Although intercourse with the prisoners was strictly forbidden, she managed to make known to me the wishes of To Rot and to convey the greetings of my Rakunai people.

THE DOLOUS WAY

8- The beginning of the year 1945, brought with it the persecution of our Catholic natives. Sometime before, To Rot had come into conflict with the Japanese Gestapo on account of his Catechetical activity. The first time he was taken to Rabaul. Who accused him is unknown. However, he came back safely. He was permitted to continue his teaching as "the Catholic religion was not yet forbidden". Later an officer ordered the natives to perform a dance during Advent. To Rot explained to him that Catholics were forbidden to dance in Advent and he abided by his refusal in spite of the Japanese threats that Catholicism in the land would soon come to an end. Actually, a few weeks later, every religious activity was forbidden by the Japanese police. The Natives' huts were searched regularly for religious books, crucifixes, medals, holy cards, etc. To possess any written documents was perilous. To Rot had in his possession the register of the Station which, together

with his personal entries, he succeeded in concealing in the grass roof of the emergency school-house.

9- What had been permitted up to this time, and carried on in the line of prayers, Sunday services and instructions, was now forbidden at least exteriorly. Secretly, at night, and in dug-outs, To Rot prayed with little groups, gave religious instructions, baptised the new born babies and officiated at marriages. He travelled from place to place and encouraged his catacombed Christians: "They have taken away our Priests, but they cannot forbid us to be Catholics and to live and die as such. I am your Catechist, and I will do my duty even if it costs me my life". This gives evidence of his spirit of faith and fidelity to duty which, during the time of spiritual need, allowed no child to die without Baptism, no marriage to be contracted without his assistance. His activity of love was not confined to his own people. In the vicinity of Vunalaka, a troop of Celebes soldier-convicts was sentenced to labour; among them was a group of Catholics. To them To Rot proved a friend and gathered fruits to still their hunger. The other Catechists on the Station were spurred on by his heroic example and acted according to his wise direction.

10- The leading enemies of the Rakunai territory were two Japanese officers, Gunto and Meshida. These were active as police in Navunaram. They influenced many natives to act as spies and torturers. One of these torturers was To Metapa, a Wesleyan from the vicinity of Nodup. To Metapa attempted to divorce the newly wedded Catholic couple, Ia Mentil and To Vinau, as he wished to claim the woman for himself. When To Rot received word of this, he appeared openly before the young police-boy and stated: "You are not permitted to do this". The separation of the married

couple did not occur. To Metapa, however, did not forget the reverse he had suffered through the Catechist. An opportunity to take revenge soon presented itself.

THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

11- One day To Metapa met some men and women from Vunadidir on their way to To Rot. Upon inquiring, he learned that a Catholic marriage was to be contracted. In a trench, To Rot officiated at the marriage of To Kava and Ia Katarina. His two brothers acted as witnesses. To Metapa informed the police of the marriage and To Rot was arrested. In the presence of the police To Rot was asked if he had officiated at a marriage and prayed with the people. To Rot answered with a definite: "Yes, I did what was my duty". Thereupon Meshida beat him over the face, head and body with a stick and To Rot was sentenced to two month's imprisonment. To Rot lived for six weeks after his arrest. His relatives, and influential persons such as Tata and the chief Tarue, sought in vain to ransom him. To Rot himself seems to have received several hints which placed him in no uncertainty concerning his future. He often expressed his opinion that death was inevitable to his friend, Tarue, who lived near the Police Station. When he learned that To Vue, the chief of Vunalaka, was taking steps to get him freed, he tried to dissuade him with the words: "It is of no use. I am conscious of having committed no offence and if I must die, I die for my faith and my Catechist's vocation". This proves that death did not come unexpectedly and that the gallant hero willingly made the sacrifice of his life to God.

12- It so happened that, due to lack of nourishing food and his work in the damp dug-out, To Rot contracted a slight cold. This incident was seized upon by Tarue to petition Meshida to allow To Rot to go along with him to his home until he recovered. The home of Tarue was nearby. After considerable coaxing, Meshida consented and To Rot spent a few days in his neighbour's home, where he was granted a visit from his old mother and his relatives. The day arrived on which he had to return to the prison. It poured. Tarue had been ordered to Rakutop, a village some distance away, where he was detained for the whole day. When evening came, Meshida ordered all prisoners in company with the native military police to retire to a designated place in the bush and to spend the night in entertainment, in spite of the downpour. Everyone was astonished at this inexplicable command. After some hours they were recalled, but were not permitted to return to their usual resting place and were to spend the remainder of the night in a dug-out. All had a presentiment that things were a bit awry.

13- Late that night Tarue returned from Rakutop and wondered where the Catechist, To Rot, was. He was nowhere to be found about the grounds. All Tarue could trace of him was his neatly folded blanket. His anxiety increased as he recalled that, in passing the Police Station, he had heard a suppressed choking and moaning. But it did not occur to him in the least that a murder was being committed. At dawn, Tarue was frightened by the call of Meshida, who ordered him to notify the relatives of To Rot that he had suddenly passed away during the night and they were to claim the corpse. Chief Tarue's consternation was indescribable. He hurried to the scene where he found

the corpse surrounded by his fellow prisoners. Sobbing, Tarue left in search of Tata and his people.

14- While To Metapa and the prisoners looked on, Tata and his helpers removed the corpse to the house of Tarue to prepare it for burial. They saw at a glance that To Rot had not died a natural death. His neck gave evidence of strangulation, the veins were distended and a semi-fluid mass (resembling liquid soap) trickled from the corners of his mouth. On closer investigation they noticed that the mouth and nostrils had been stuffed with cotton. A funeral wail resounded throughout the area while a few friends of the Catechist rendered him their last service. They placed the corpse on an improvised bamboo bier and carried it to his home in Palnalama, where they showed it to his wife, who had recently given birth to their third child. At this place, he was laid in a quickly constructed coffin and carried to the Mission cemetery. The chief Tata had the body interred near the large cross. The natives were forbidden by the Japanese to speak of the sudden death of To Rot and spies went about trying to ascertain what the natives thought and said about the event. In spite of this Tarue risked a few words: "Our friend, To Rot, died on account of his education and his faith".

15- The law-suit against Meshida, which was in progress from October 1948 to January 1950, produced authentic material which proves that To Rot had sacrificed his life for his faith and in defence of Christian marriage. At the opening of proceedings, Meshida, the Gestapo murdered who, on account of other atrocities, was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment, pretended to have forgotten all details in connection with the case of To Rot. Finally he admitted

having arrested To Rot on account of: “Too much Christo, Christo”.