

“YOU GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT...”

Life Sketch of a Martyr Catechist from the South Seas (New Britain)

by Fr. Carl Laufer, MSC

Surprisingly suddenly, in mid-August 1945, the news of the capitulation of the Japanese Army reached us interned missionaries, bringing the long-awaited liberation from three and a half years of captivity. The gates of our concentration camp in the forest valley of Ramale opened, and in the following days and weeks, crowds of Catholic natives from near and far streamed in, led by their catechists, to see their station priests and sisters again after years of separation. The joy of reunion was indescribable; but it was soon overshadowed by grief over the many gaps that the war had torn in the ranks of both the missionaries and the faithful.

Before me stood my old, dear friends and co-workers from Rakunai, pressing both my hands in deep emotion, unable to utter a word because of inner emotion. My eyes scanned their ranks and could not find the one I had most expected: “Why has To Rot, the head catechist, not come with you? Is he sick?” Suddenly heads were lowered, tears rolled down cheeks, and the old To Uvae sobbed: “Father, To Rot is dead, murdered by the Japanese!”

THE YOUTH OF THE DECEASED

When I began my work at the Rakunai Mission Station in January 1930, I first came to know the family of Chief To

Pula. To Pula was a thoroughly solid character, the most influential personality in the district, rich in possessions and dignity. He owed his position not to the favour of the white government in the land. By inheritance he had become the owner and supreme authority of the three districts of Rakunai, Navunaram and Vunavidir, and the natives revered him as their father and protector. At the founding of the station in 1901, as a young man he had offered his personal services to the first priest and had stood by him with advice and deed in the initial difficulties. The same loyalty he showed me until his death in 1938. His wife Ia Tumul was a dear, modest little mother. On my very first visit she introduced her four living children to me (two had died): Tatemai, Ia Varpilak, Petrus To Rot and Telo, the youngest.

Petrus To Rot was then a lad of 14 years. Whoever saw him had to like him, quite apart from the fact that as the chief's son he held a privileged position among the school youth. I remember that during the three years he attended the station school, I found occasion to punish him only once; I did not do it myself but left it to his father. With this father I also spoke about the future of his boy. I would gladly have sent him to the mission centre at Vunapope, where a small seminary for native priest candidates had recently been opened. To Pula, whom I asked for his opinion, thought for a while, then shook his head and said in his calm, sensible way: "No, Father, I do not believe that anyone from our present generation will yet become a priest. It is still too early for that; perhaps a grandson or great-grandson of mine may one day have that good fortune. But if you would like to have a good catechist in To Rot, then let him attend the teachers' school in Taliligap!" And so it was done.

At the beginning of the autumn semester in 1933, To Pula brought his son to me to say goodbye. As I gave To Rot my

blessing with the words: "Stay good and faithful," the old man drew himself up proudly and replied: "He will be, otherwise he would not be my son!" Then both set off in the direction of Taliligap: the father led his 17-year-old Petrus by the hand, in his left hand he carried the boy's new little suitcase, and the little brother Telo ran weeping loudly behind them. At the teachers' school To Rot soon felt at home; he enjoyed the lessons and brought home the best reports on every vacation. He became more serious, graver, more independent and soon became the right hand of the elderly catechist-father Fr. Lakaff, who took him on various journeys and often asked me to send more such boys to the school.

HIS CATECHIST ACTIVITY

Somewhat earlier than agreed, To Rot returned after three years of study to Rakunai, where I urgently needed him, since the teacher post at the station itself had become vacant due to the departure of a catechist. Although the youngest among my native teachers, he soon became their leader, precisely because he possessed a strong backbone, which most of our local natives still lack. They are full of good will, but like swaying reeds that bend with every gust of wind. To Rot was truly an exception. He possessed knowledge, genuine piety, empathy and healthy initiative — all qualities that qualified him as a first-class catechist. What he said and did carried weight with the people, who saw and honoured in him not only the missionary's co-worker but also the image of his father To Pula.

Evening after evening he sought out his Father to continue his English studies, to enrich his religious and scientific knowledge, and to discuss his work in the school or the affairs of the parish. With untiring interest he helped me in

my linguistic and ethnological studies and was on fire for the efforts to preserve and Christianize native customs. And it was not only once that he showed me ways and means to resolve difficulties in parish life. During these years Catholic Action flourished in the parish. Every Sunday evening after the Benediction, whenever the weather permitted, the Catholics of Rakunai held their assemblies on the church square or in the school, in which the sermon was repeated, parish matters were discussed, abuses were censured and quarrels settled. As soon as the priest had finished his address, To Rot took over the further direction of the meeting, actively supported by his old father To Pula. Much good was done for the mission community by both during this time. But also in not infrequent discussions with the Wesleyans, the catechist held his own and won over many through his superior and calm argumentation; he was respected by all non-Catholics as a "just" man.

How just and impartial he acted as a teacher in the school may be illustrated by the following amusing episode. Paula Ia Varpit was destined to be his future bride and attended the catechist's school lessons until the day of the wedding. When I entered the school one day, I saw Paula kneeling in front of all the children on the cement floor. Somewhat embarrassed by my astonished look, To Rot explained to me: "Paula has to kneel because she was chatting with others during the lesson." A few weeks later the two were married and their exemplary marriage was for all the natives an almost inimitable model. ¹⁾ The good God blessed their union with three little children, the last of whom was born just as To Rot gave his life in the exercise of his high catechist vocation.

DURING THE WAR

When the Japanese occupied the country in January 1942, I was at the central station Vunapope on account of illness, and Catechist To Rot was alone in Rakunai. Courageously he went to meet the Japanese vanguard advancing from the shore and asked them to spare the mission station. But while he was still speaking, a shot rang out nearby and at the same moment machine guns were directed at the deserted station and riddled the church, house and school. To Rot could count himself lucky that he managed, in the confusion of the moment, to slip away through the bushes to the rear. When the storm had somewhat subsided after a few days, he tried by roundabout ways to reach Vunapope and inform me of the destruction. To his horror he saw all the missionaries behind fixed bayonets and found no opportunity to approach them. In the darkness of night he set out, tired and dejected, on the five-hour journey back to Rakunai; from then on he felt solely responsible for his community.

After some time he made another attempt. Our detention had meanwhile been somewhat eased and To Rot managed to slip secretly into our camp. The news he brought us from outside was by no means all joyful; he himself needed consolation and advice. Secretly he attended my Holy Mass in the early morning, received Communion, and took the Viaticum home to the seriously ill and dying. These forbidden visits were repeated frequently from then on and he never came empty-handed, until towards the end of 1943 our detention was again tightened. Nevertheless, he still found a way twice more to make contact with us prisoners: he brought his wife and child with him. Paula was able to buy her way into the camp from the police in order to receive injections from the nursing sister. Although all conversation was strictly forbidden, she was able to

convey to me the wishes of the catechist and the greetings of my Rakunai people. Shortly afterwards Vunapope was completely destroyed and we were concentrated again in a forest area 6 km away.

When To Rot learned of our fate, he immediately organized a collection among the Catholics of Rakunai for blankets, clothing, foodstuffs, etc. The natives, who had themselves become impoverished through three years of oppression, gave what little they still possessed for their missionaries. A friendly Japanese offered to take the gifts to Ramale with his truck; To Rot went with him. The things were confiscated by the police of our camp! — Some time later three sisters who had remained in the Baining Mountains (St. Paul) were brought to our camp, the last from the outside world. On their way they had spent some days with the police stationed in Rakunai, where To Rot did everything in his power to ease their situation. The sisters were full of praise for his courageous works of love.

THE WAY OF SUFFERING

The beginning of the year 1945 brought official persecution of Christians for our natives. Even earlier To Rot had come into conflict with the Japanese Gestapo on account of his catechist activity. The first time he was taken by the police to Rabaul; who made the accusation is unknown. Yet he came back free, probably through the intervention of the former seminarian To Keta, who at that time was a big man with the police ¹⁾. He was allowed to continue his school activity "because the Catholic religion was not yet forbidden." Later an officer ordered the natives to hold a dance festival during Advent. To Rot explained to him that he must wait until after Christmas, since dances were forbidden to Catholics in Advent, and he stood by his

refusal despite the Japanese's threats that Christianity in the land would soon come to an end. And indeed, after a few weeks every religious activity was strictly forbidden by the Japanese police. The natives' huts were systematically searched for religious books, crucifixes, medals, holy pictures, etc. Possessing written records was directly life-threatening. To Rot possessed the station register, which he was able to hide in time with his own entries in the thatched roof of the school ¹⁾. Many natives hid their prayer books and catechisms out in the plantations; the statues rescued from the demolished church were hidden in earth caves. Whereas up to then To Rot had still been able to gather his people more or less regularly for evening prayer, Sunday services and school instruction, all this now came to a sudden end, at least on the surface. In secret, in the darkness of night and in earth caves, he prayed with small groups, gave religious instruction, baptized newborns and assisted at marriages. He went from place to place and encouraged his catacomb Christians: "They have taken our priests from us, but they cannot forbid us to be Catholic and to live and die as Catholics. I am your catechist and will do my duty, even if I must die for it." It speaks of his confessor's courage and fidelity to duty that even during this time of spiritual need not one child died without baptism, not one marriage in the parish was contracted without his assistance. And he did not limit his works of love to his own people. In the nearby village of Vunalaka a group of captured Celebes soldiers was quartered for labour service, among them a number of Catholics. To Rot became an intimate friend to them and collected field crops for them to still their hunger. The other frightened catechists of the station were sustained by his heroic example and acted according to his directions. ²⁾

The main terrorists of the Rakunai area were the two Japanese Gunto and Meshida, who exercised police power in Navunaram and surrounded themselves for this purpose with several willing natives as spies and torturers, one of whom was a Wesleyan named To Metapa from the village of Nondup. This man tried to alienate the newly married Catholic woman Ia Mentil from her husband To Vinau and win her for himself. When To Rot learned of this plan, he publicly confronted the police boy and gave him a definite: "It is not permitted to you." The dissolution of the lawful marriage did not take place, but To Metapa did not forget the setback he had suffered through the catechist. And a favourable opportunity for revenge presented itself easily.

THE GLORIOUS END

One day To Metapa met some women and men from the neighbouring station Vunavindir on their way to the catechist To Rot. On inquiry he learned that a Catholic marriage was to take place. In a dug-out To Rot assisted at the marriage of the couple To Kava and Ia Katarina in the presence of his two brothers as witnesses. To Metapa informed the Japanese police, who had reserved marriages according to Japanese rite for themselves. To Rot, Tatemai and Telo were arrested and their huts searched again. In Telo's house they found, among other things, some Australian banknotes.

Before the police the catechist was first asked whether he had performed the marriage and prayed with the people. To Rot answered with a firm "Yes! I did what my duty was." Thereupon he was first beaten by Meshida with a rod over the head, face and upper body, then by To Metapa with a piece of sharp-edged bamboo. He was sentenced to

2 months' imprisonment. His older brother Tatemai received one month's detention after similar torture for participation. The younger Telo also confessed to having attended the religious ceremony. When asked about the origin of the banknotes he explained: His relative To Vue was a taxi driver in Rabaul and had been paid with the money at the beginning of the Japanese invasion. During the earlier search of To Vue's hut the Japanese had thrown the worthless money outside and he (Telo) had picked it up and kept it, since To Vue was absent at the time. Meshida gave no credence to this report and had Telo hung by the arms from a tree and beaten half to death. In the following days the poor boy hovered between life and death. Since he was unfit for any forced labour, Meshida finally released him in the second week in exchange for a ransom price that his relatives had to pay. ²⁾

Of the 2 months' imprisonment imposed on him, To Rot served only 6 weeks. In vain his relatives and influential friends like Tata and Chief Tarue tried to buy him out of prison, as was successfully done with several other prisoners. To Rot himself seems to have received hints that left him in no doubt about his near end. To Chief Tarue, who lived near the police station, he openly said that he was certain he would not leave the prison alive. When he heard that To Vue, chief of Vunalaka, wanted to make another attempt to secure his release, he had him dissuaded with the words: "It is of no use; I am conscious of no offence, and if I must die, I die for my faith and my catechist vocation." All this shows that death did not come to him unexpectedly, and that he willingly and resignedly offered God the sacrifice of his life.

At this time To Rot contracted a slight cold through his constant stay and work in damp dug-outs. Chief Tarue seized upon this circumstance to ask Meshida to allow the

sick man to be cared for in his own nearby house until his recovery. After some hesitation Meshida yielded to his requests and To Rot moved for a few days to the friend's homestead, where his old mother and his relatives were also allowed to visit him. The day came when he was to return to prison. It was pouring with rain. Chief Tarue was ordered by the police to the distant village of Rakotop and detained there all day. At nightfall Meshida ordered that all prisoners without exception, together with all native police soldiers, should go to a certain place in the bush, where they should pass the time with play in the night and heavy rain. Everyone was astonished at this incomprehensible order; but they went. After an hour they were called back, but were not allowed to enter their usual night quarters, but had to lie down to rest in an earth dug-out. All had a dark premonition that something was wrong ¹⁾.

At a late hour of the night Chief Tarue also returned from Rakotop and wondered where the catechist To Rot had gone; he could not find him anywhere in his homestead, though he saw his carefully folded blanket in the house. His concern increased when he remembered that while passing the night-time police station he had heard suppressed choking and moaning, as from a sick man who is trying to vomit but cannot. But it did not occur to him in the least that a murder had taken place. At daybreak he was startled by a call from Meshida ¹⁾, who ordered him to inform the relatives of the catechist that To Rot had suddenly died during the night and that they should collect the corpse. The consternation of the chief was indescribable; he hurried there and saw the fellow prisoners sadly standing around the corpse, which they had covered with a cloth, for it had lain naked on the bare floor of the sleeping hut, one knee drawn up and the right arm cramped. Sobbing, Tarue ran off to fetch Tata and his people ¹⁾.

These took up the lifeless body in the presence of Metapa and the named prisoners in order to prepare it for burial in the homestead of Chief Tarue. All saw at first glance that To Rot had not died a natural death; his neck showed swollen strangulation marks, the veins were strongly swollen and from the corners of the mouth a semi-liquid mass that looked like liquid wax or yellow soap. On closer inspection they also noticed cotton wool in the mouth cavity and in the nostrils. Loud lamentation arose in the homesteads while the few friends rendered the dead catechist the last service and carried him on an improvised bamboo bier to his homestead Palmalama to his wife, who had just given birth to their third child. Here he was placed in a hastily made coffin and carried to the cemetery next to the mission station, where Chief Tata buried him at the foot of the large cross in the middle of the churchyard. The natives were forbidden to speak about the sudden death, and spies went around the homesteads to find out what the people thought and said among themselves. Nevertheless Chief Tarue ventured a few words: "Our friend To Rot died because of his education (kahinana) and his faith (lotu)." The exact date of the murder can no longer be established with certainty, since during the 2½ years under the Japanese the natives had lost all sense of time reckoning ²).

CONCLUDING WORD

With this ends this description of a holy catechist life on one of the islands of the South Seas. As Catholics it is not our concern to experience the earthly punishment of a criminal on the perpetrator; that justice and righteousness be done is the affair of the secular authorities. But what we Catholics have every right to rejoice in is that in the court proceedings against Meshida in Rabaul from October 1948 to January

1949 authentic material was placed in our hands showing that Petrus To Rot sacrificed his life for his faith and in defence of a Christian ideal of marriage. It is true that there are no direct eyewitnesses to his murder, which took place in complete secrecy; but the visible accompanying circumstances of his torture constitute a many-voiced testimony from Catholic as well as Methodist natives, strengthened by the testimony of a guilty police soldier and an uninvolved Japanese himself. That may suffice for us to thank God that He has deemed an ideal native catechist from the Gunantuna tribe worthy to die for Him.

His community of Rakunai, his priest, whose long-time faithful co-worker To Rot was, mourns him, but the mourning is mixed with an inner jubilation and a holy pride. The enlarged portrait of the deceased, which the former Apostolic Vicar of Rabaul, Msgr. Vesters, had made, has a place of honour in the church of Rakunai, an eloquent reminder to the still young Christian community to do as their murdered hero catechist and to become good Catholics and holy servants of God in His vineyard, the Church.