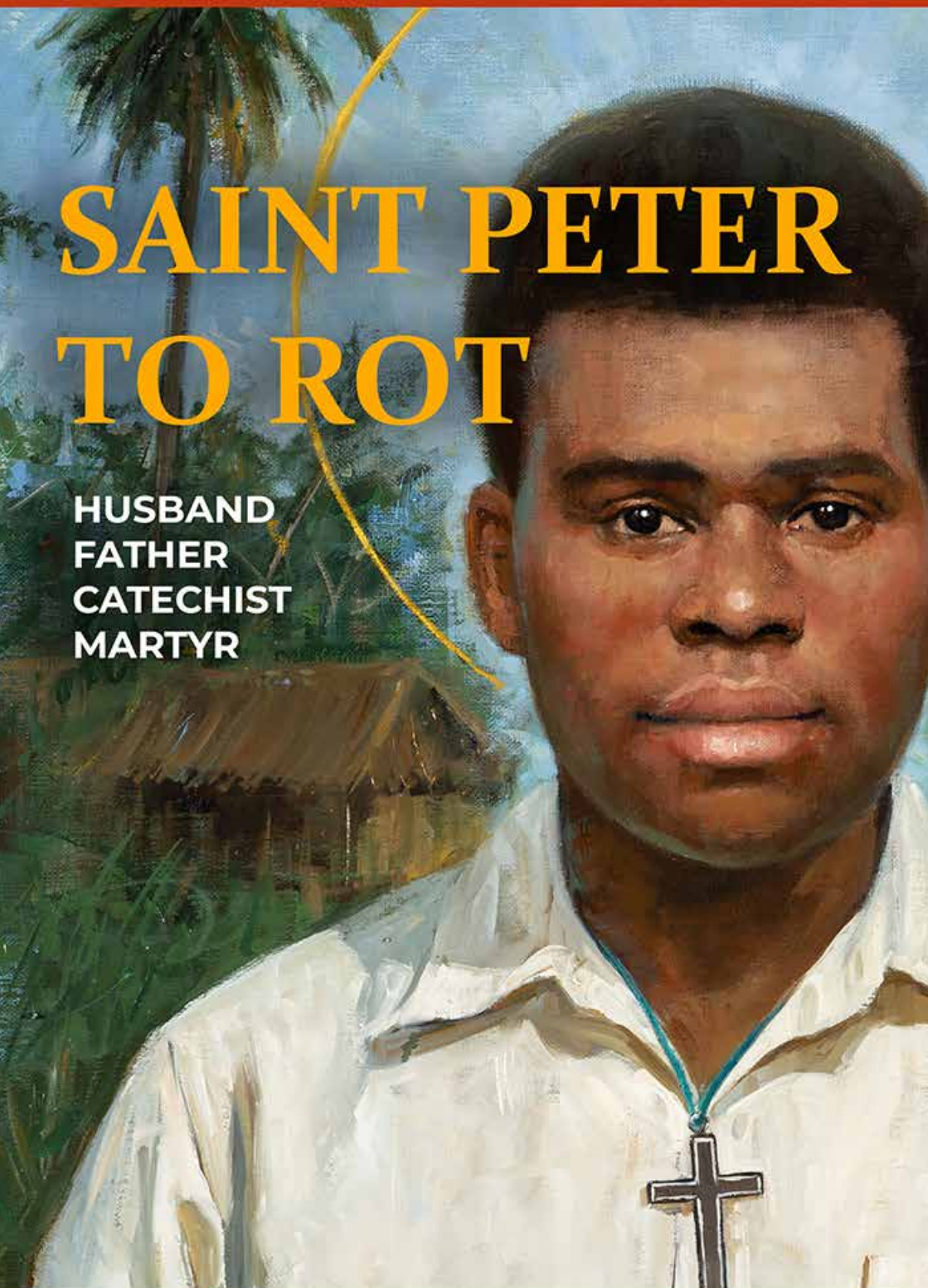


TOMÁS RAVAIOLI, IVE

SAINT PETER TO ROT

HUSBAND
FATHER
CATECHIST
MARTYR



FOREWORD BY CARDINAL JOHN RIBAT, MSC

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Bishop of Goroka

Dedicated to the missionaries in Papua New Guinea

FOREWORD

I was born in Volavolo, Rabaul, a mere twelve kilometres as the crow flies from Rakunai—the place of Saint Peter To Rot's birth, apostolate, and martyrdom. From my earliest childhood, I have heard tell of his life, and I am intimately acquainted with his story, his sacred places, his kin, and the circumstances of his martyrdom. I have visited the saint's village on countless occasions. Moreover, through bonds of blood and marriage uniting members of my own family with his, I may, in the Melanesian sense of an extended family, regard myself as in some way his kin. Yet, despite all this, I had never before encountered a biography as comprehensive as the one presented here. Without question, this is the most detailed and thoroughly documented account of Saint Peter To Rot ever written.

Saint Peter To Rot was born in 1912 in the village of Rakunai. He was the son of the first generation of Christians in his community, for his parents came to know the faith and were baptised as adults, shortly after the arrival of the first missionaries in the region in 1882. His childhood and adolescence were ordinary, much like those of any other youth in the village. He had friends, attended the mission school, and even engaged in youthful mischief for which his parents and parish priest rightly reproved him. Nevertheless, something set him apart: he possessed a profound Eucharistic devotion, attended daily Mass, and excelled in catechism classes. Though he sometimes vexed his parents with the typical foibles of youth, no account exists of any grave offence against the Lord. This virtue quickly drew the

attention of his parish priest, who saw in To Rot a promising candidate for the priesthood—at a time when no local priests yet existed. His father, however, forbade it, arguing that Christianity was still too new and that the native people were not yet mature enough in the faith to undertake such a responsibility. Had he consented, To Rot might well have become Papua New Guinea's first indigenous priest, and history would have taken a different course.

At the age of eighteen, he entered the catechists' school of what is now the Archdiocese of Rabaul. By twenty-one, his bishop and parish priest judged him sufficiently mature and well-formed to begin his ministry as a catechist in his native village. He discharged his apostolate with extraordinary responsibility and charity, surpassing the expectations of both his parish priest and the elder catechists. Three years later, in 1936, he married a young woman named Paula Ia Varpit, with whom he had three children. Yet his life took a dramatic turn in 1942, when the Japanese army landed on his island and imprisoned all the missionaries. In that decisive moment, Peter To Rot revealed the full measure of his capacity for heroism—a courage worthy of remembrance and imitation. Despite the invaders' prohibitions against liturgical celebrations and prayer, To Rot chose to follow the example of the Apostle Peter, declaring likewise: "*We must obey God rather than men.*" (Acts 5:29) Thus he persevered in his ministry amid grave threats and real peril. He devoted all his time to clandestine catechism lessons, baptising children, witnessing marriages, visiting the sick, burying the dead, and distributing Holy Communion—which he obtained by stealthily entering the prison where the missionaries were held, after six arduous hours of hidden travel through the jungle. These acts repeatedly led to his arrest and beatings.

Towards the war's end in 1944, the occupiers, sensing inevitable defeat and having lost their ships and aircraft to American assaults, feared permanent entrapment on the island with no means of escape. Having treated the local population with great cruelty in preceding

years, they now dreaded retribution. In a bid to curry favour and secure the goodwill of the men of the region, they resolved to reinstate traditional polygamy—long forbidden through the missionaries' efforts. Before long, many village leaders and men of influence began taking additional wives, even abducting very young girls against their will for these abhorrent purposes.

To Rot's response to this new outrage was entirely predictable: he opposed it resolutely. Not only did he publicly denounce the immorality and anti-Christian nature of polygamy, but he also persuaded many women to flee and hide from those who had seized them for such purposes. Inevitably, this earned him the enmity of local police, Japanese soldiers, and neighbouring village chiefs. From a merely human perspective, To Rot could not possibly prevail in this struggle.

In the early months of 1945, he was unjustly imprisoned and endured several months in captivity, until his adversaries realised that neither his faith nor his resolve could be broken. Were he released, he would resume what he termed "the work of God." The only way to silence him, they concluded, was death. On the night of 7 July 1945, two Japanese doctors entered the catechist's cell, and one administered a lethal injection. Soon afterwards, Peter To Rot began to convulse. The physician covered his mouth to prevent vomiting and held him firmly until he drew his final breath. From that very day, the people regarded him as a martyr.

The author of this volume, Father Tomás Ravaioli, IVE, serves as vice-postulator for the Cause of Canonisation of Peter To Rot. This is not his first work on the subject; his initial book appeared in 2020, marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of the martyrdom and the twenty-fifth of the beatification. In the years since, Father Ravaioli has pursued extensive research, bringing to light invaluable historical documents long thought lost during the war. These previously unknown sources have enabled direct contact with records from To Rot's village and neighbouring communities, allowing us now to

know finer details of our saint's life and to reconstruct more vividly the milieu in which he lived. In addition to exhaustive consultation of contemporary historical archives, the author has repeatedly examined the files of the Cause preserved in Rome, spanning from the process's inception in 1952 to the present day.

We are deeply grateful to the author for placing at our disposal so complete and well-documented a biography of our martyr, Saint Peter To Rot, who, with his canonisation on 19 October 2025, became the first saint of Papua New Guinea. I pray that Almighty God and the Blessed Virgin Mary may grant that this book inspire Catholics throughout the world.

With my blessing,

John Cardinal Ribat, MSC, DD, KBE, MBE

Archbishop of Port Moresby

April 2026

INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday, January 17, 1995, more than fifteen thousand people filled the Sir John Guise Stadium in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. The reason for the gathering was the beatification of a young thirty-three-year-old catechist presided over by Pope Saint John Paul II, during his third and final visit to the country. Just thirty years later, on Sunday, October 19, 2025, he was canonised along with six other new saints by Pope Leo XIV in a St. Peter's Square filled with more than seventy thousand people. The name of the catechist is Peter To Rot, and his name will remain forever written in the glorious pages of the martyrology, the book in which the Church collects the names of men and women who have reached the highest degree of holiness. His name will also be forever written in the pages of the history of Papua New Guinea, as to date he is the only native who has been elevated to the honor of the altars.

Peter To Rot was a married man and father of three children. For many, his life does not seem too different from that of the other men in the village where he lived. However, his life was entirely exceptional due to his love for Christ and the Church. His ministry as a catechist was carried out with immense dedication and responsibility. And his love for Christ present in the Eucharist is worthy of being compared to that of those saints whose lives are more known and familiar to us. He was a man of prayer, who tenderly loved his three little children and his wife Paula, with whom he prayed the rosary every night.

As a reward for his fidelity, still young and full of enthusiasm, Our Lord offered him the most precious gift a person can aspire to: the palm of martyrdom. And the good catechist was convinced that losing one's life for the love of Christ was not a defeat, but the most important victory a person could achieve. In fact, martyrdom is in no way a defeat, but rather a great triumph, the greatest of them all. Jesus himself has said: "*Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.*" (Jn 15:13) Our faithful catechist was ready to demonstrate his "*greater love*" with the very sacrifice of his life, following in the footsteps of his beloved Jesus.

In a famous homily in honour of the martyrs of the 20th century, Pope Benedict XVI invited us to learn about the lives of the saints and to follow their examples. On that occasion, he urged all Christians: "How useful it is then to look to the shining witness of those who have preceded us in the sign of heroic fidelity to the point of martyrdom!" (*Homily*, 27 April 2008)

In January 2020, the 75th anniversary of the martyrdom of the catechist and the 25th anniversary of his beatification were celebrated. For that occasion, I wrote a brief biography of Peter To Rot dedicated to the catechists of Papua New Guinea. Now, almost six years later, many things have happened. I had the opportunity to travel several times to the village of Saint Peter To Rot, and to meet some relatives who shared stories with me that are not found in other biographies. Some had even been baptised by him. I was also able to meet and talk with those who conducted the preliminary investigation for the beatification. They not only shared information with me that I was unaware of when writing the first book, but they also gave me access to new bibliography and photographs. I was even appointed vice-postulator for the cause of canonisation of the martyred catechist, which gave me unlimited access to a large amount of documentation preserved in the archives of Rabaul and the General Curia of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Rome, as well as in the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints. Furthermore, in recent years, original

documents and records from the time of Peter To Rot have come to light considered lost during the war, but which had been hidden in 1942 to avoid their destruction. They were hidden so well that we were only able to find them in 2024. Their discovery was a cause of great joy and a source of new and valuable information.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first part is shorter and contains a brief history of the evangelisation of New Britain, the land of our saint. The second, on the other hand, is a proper biography, along with some insights into the Tolai culture to which Peter To Rot belonged. To write it, I relied mainly on the *Positio super martyrio*, which was written in 1993 in prevision of a possible beatification, although this was not the only purpose. It goes without saying that this book contains the testimonies of eyewitnesses, relatives, friends, wife, and daughter of Peter To Rot. The quotes that are in quotation marks and do not indicate the source come directly from the *Positio*. We will save ourselves the trouble of citing the section of the *Positio* and the page of each one. The third and final part contains a summary of the itinerary of the canonisation cause from its inception in 1952 to the canonisation in 2025.

We hope and pray that this book will encourage many people to become real followers of Christ, by imitating Peter To Rot's virtues and teachings.

Pope Saint John Paul II teaches us:

Martyrdom is an outstanding sign of the holiness of the Church. Fidelity to God's holy law, witnessed to by death, is a solemn proclamation and missionary commitment *usque ad sanguinem [until the shedding of one's blood]*...The martyrs and in general all the Church's Saints, light up every period of history by reawakening its moral sense... By witnessing fully to the good, they are a living reproof to those who transgress the law, and they make the words of the Prophet echo ever

afresh: “*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!*” (Is 5:20) (*Veritatis Splendor*, 93)

Fr Tomás Ravaioli, IVE

March 2026

Acknowledgments: I thank His Eminence Sir John Cardinal Ribat, MSC, a fellow countryman of the saint and the first cardinal of our country, for writing the foreword of the book. To the current Archbishop of Rabaul, Monsignor Rochus Tatamai, MSC, great-nephew of Peter To Rot, for his friendship and for having invited me on several occasions to Rabaul. To the emeritus Archbishop of Rabaul, Monsignor Francesco Panfilo, SDB, for having made the *Positio super Martyrio* available to me. To Monsignor Dariusz Kaluza, MSE, Bishop of Bougainville, for his constant help. To the IVE missionary priests in Papua New Guinea, for their friendship, example, and patience. To the SSVM sisters Mary Altar of Sacrifice and Maria Mater Boni Remedii, for correcting the 2020 English version of this book this most recent version. Finally, I thank Fathers Ernesto Cerutti and Arnold Schmitt, CM, missionaries in Papua New Guinea, and Doug Tennant, for supporting and helping me from the beginning.

Many of the images that appear in this book have been taken from the *Australian War Memorial* and the *National Library of Australia* and are published with permission.

PART ONE

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF SAINT PETER TO ROT

1- THE HISTORY OF EVANGELISATION OF THE ISLAND OF NEW BRITAIN

If we want to deeply understand a person, it is not enough to memorise some dates and episodes of their life. It is also necessary to know the culture and the environment in which they lived. This is evident, for example, with the life of Christ. His life is much richer when we know not only what the gospels convey to us, but also when we become familiar with the environment, culture, and traditions of Israel at that time. By understanding the environment and culture of Christ, all his teachings and actions are enriched and take on new meaning. The same happens with the life of any person we want to know.

For this reason, before approaching Peter To Rot and his martyrdom, it is necessary to at least briefly understand some aspects of his environment and culture. Specifically, two things can help us better understand the figure of our catechist and his heroic testimony: knowing the history of evangelisation in New Britain, and also knowing —albeit very superficially— the culture and traditions of the Tolai.

* * *

Since the early 16th century, Catholic priests accompanied Spanish and Portuguese navigators travelling to Melanesia. However, they were merely crew chaplains, their purpose was not missionary work in these lands. And despite the existence of testimonies that demonstrate

they wished to establish a mission, this desire could not be realised until the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Saint John Paul II says:

From the earliest times, the peoples of Oceania were moved by the Divine Presence in the riches of nature and culture. But it was not until foreign missionaries came in the latter half of the second millennium that these original inhabitants first heard of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Those who migrated from Europe and other parts of the world brought with them their faith. For all, the Gospel of Jesus Christ received in faith and lived in the *communio* of the Church, fulfils and exceeds of the deepest longings of the heart, beyond any human expectation. (*Ecclesia in Oceania*, 1)

It was not until 1788 that both Catholic and Protestant missionaries were able to establish missions in Sydney, Australia. Sydney was to be used as a headquarters with the idea of establishing mission stations on small surrounding islands. From the small islands, they would attempt the evangelization of the larger ones nearby.

Six decades later, in 1844, the Holy See established the Vicariates of Melanesia and Micronesia, entrusting them to the Society of Mary, better known as the “Marists.” They were the first Catholic missionaries to take on the responsibility of this new land for evangelisation. Three years later, in 1847, under the leadership of Bishop Jean-Baptiste Epalle, they arrived in the southern part of what is today the Solomon Islands, and there they established the main mission from which they ventured into other regions. They chose the island of Woodlark (currently Papua New Guinea) as the main base for the mission on the continent, and established a second base on the island of Rooke, in the south of New Britain (see page 17). This base would become the starting point for evangelisation in the land of Peter To Rot.

The mission was not easy, and the missionaries had to overcome a great number of obstacles and difficulties. Of the twenty missionaries who arrived between the years 1847 and 1850, two bishops, four priests, and one lay brother died due to diseases or attacks by the natives. Another six missionaries suffered violent attacks and were completely incapable of continuing in the mission. For this reason, in April 1850, just three years after the mission had begun, the Superior General of the Marists wrote a letter to the then Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* (formerly the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, now the Dicastery for Evangelisation) asking to be relieved of the burden of the mission, entrusting that responsibility to another missionary congregation.

Two years later, in 1852, seven Italian priests from the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) replaced the Marists on the islands of Woodlark and Rooke. Despite the effort and good will, just three years later, in 1855, they also left the mission without prior notice. The case of Blessed Giovanni Battista Mazzucconi, a missionary on Woodlark Island, is well-known. When the PIME missionaries decided to leave the mission, he was in Sydney recovering from a severe case of malaria. Unaware of his fellow missionaries' decision, he returned to the island, where he was killed by the natives with a blow from an axe as soon as his boat reached the shore in September of that same year.

All attempts to evangelise the indigenous populations in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands had failed. The Vicariate remained vacant for 25 years, from 1855 to 1880, when in October of that year Father René Lannuzel (1846-1898), a French secular priest, arrived on the island of New Ireland, very close to New Britain. The following year, he travelled to Gazelle Peninsula (the homeland of To Rot) and was very well received by the natives. The local chief, To Litur, felt proud to welcome the French missionary, as his rival in the neighbouring village, Chief To Koropa, had a Methodist teacher from Fiji. Now Lannuzel could fully dedicate himself to the conversion of

the natives. There he established a small mission, which would be emblematic in the history of Papua New Guinea. He began teaching about two hundred adults from To Litur's clan along with their children, instructing them in the catechism and preparing them for baptism. On July 12 and 13, 1881, Lannuzel baptised about seventy-six Tolai children, who were the first Catholics on the island of New Britain. A short while later, he decided to travel to Sydney to seek financial assistance.

On September 2 of that same year, he wrote a letter to Cardinal Simeoni, then Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, in which he says:

Eager for the salvation of souls, I established the mission on the coast of New Britain, 40 kilometres from Port-Breton. New Britain, with a population of about ninety thousand is a densely populated island where nature reigns. The king received me with pleasure and asked the people to build a temporary house for me. As he knows a little English, the king and I have been able to understand each other very well. Furthermore he has gifted me vast lands in which to establish the Mission.

(...) During my stay on the island, a great number of indigenous people gathered round me to hear the teaching of the true religion. After fifteen days, they understood that they had a soul, that there is only one God, that there is hell to punish the wicked and paradise for the good. They asked me what they had to do to be saved. After six weeks with the tribe of Tolitoro, almost all pleaded for Baptism, declaring that they no longer wanted to be separated from me either on earth or in heaven. They also began sending me their children, insisting that I baptise them, and giving me leave to do whatever I thought was helpful for their salvation.

Around the same year, Pope Leo XIII asked Father Jules Chevalier, founder of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), to send

missionaries to New Britain and that they take responsibility for the vacant Vicariates of Melania and Micronesia.

On September 29, 1882, the feast day of St Michael the Archangel, three Missionaries of the Sacred Heart arrived in the area, taking over the mission left by Father Lannuzel during his absence in Sydney. Father Louis Navarre, MSC (1836-1912) was the superior of the group, and his name will forever be written in the pages of the history of Papua New Guinea. He travelled accompanied by Fathers Théophile Cramaille (1843–1896) and Mesmim Fromm (1860-1923). When Father Lannuzel returned to the mission in 1883, he found that the three MSC missionaries were making great progress in learning the language, culture, and geography of the mission. They spent little time together because the MSC mission and Father Lannuzel's mission were many kilometres apart, and because, that same year, Father Lannuzel decided to leave the New Britain mission permanently to settle in New Zealand, where he would remain until his death in 1898.

But yet again, the enormous generosity and enthusiasm of the missionaries were insufficient, they too had to face many difficulties: illnesses, land issues, restrictions on their activities, having fires set in their chapels and prayer centres, and a long list of other setbacks. But despite everything, the missionary work continued.

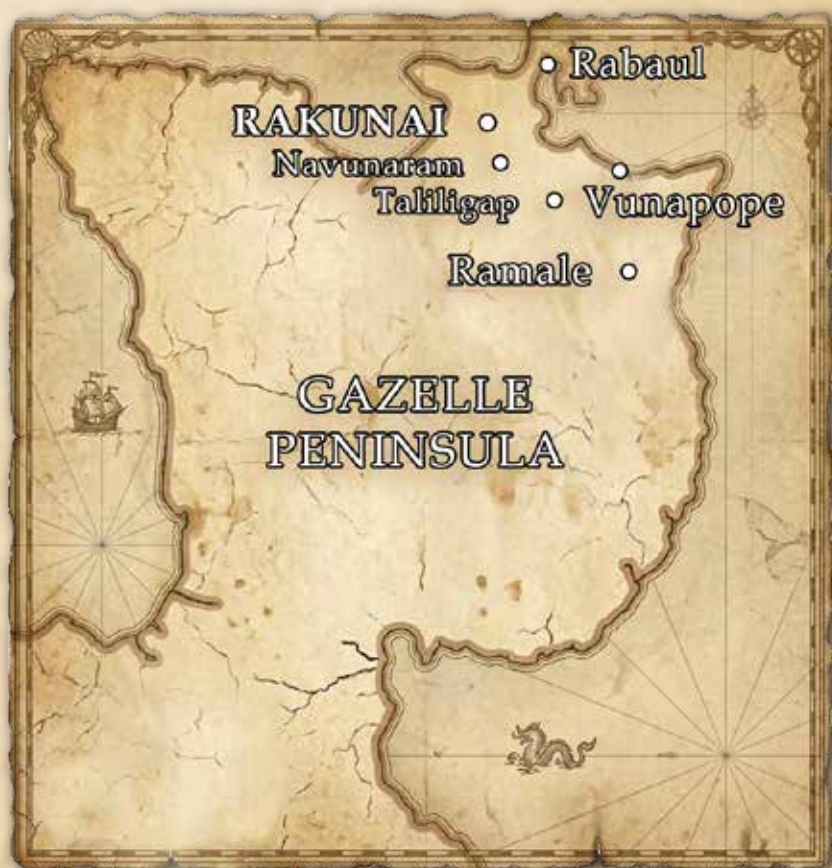
In 1887, just five years after arriving on the island, Father Louis Navarre sent a letter to the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide* in which he communicated the statistics of evangelisation in the Vicariates of Melanesia and Micronesia. These are the numbers he sent to Rome:

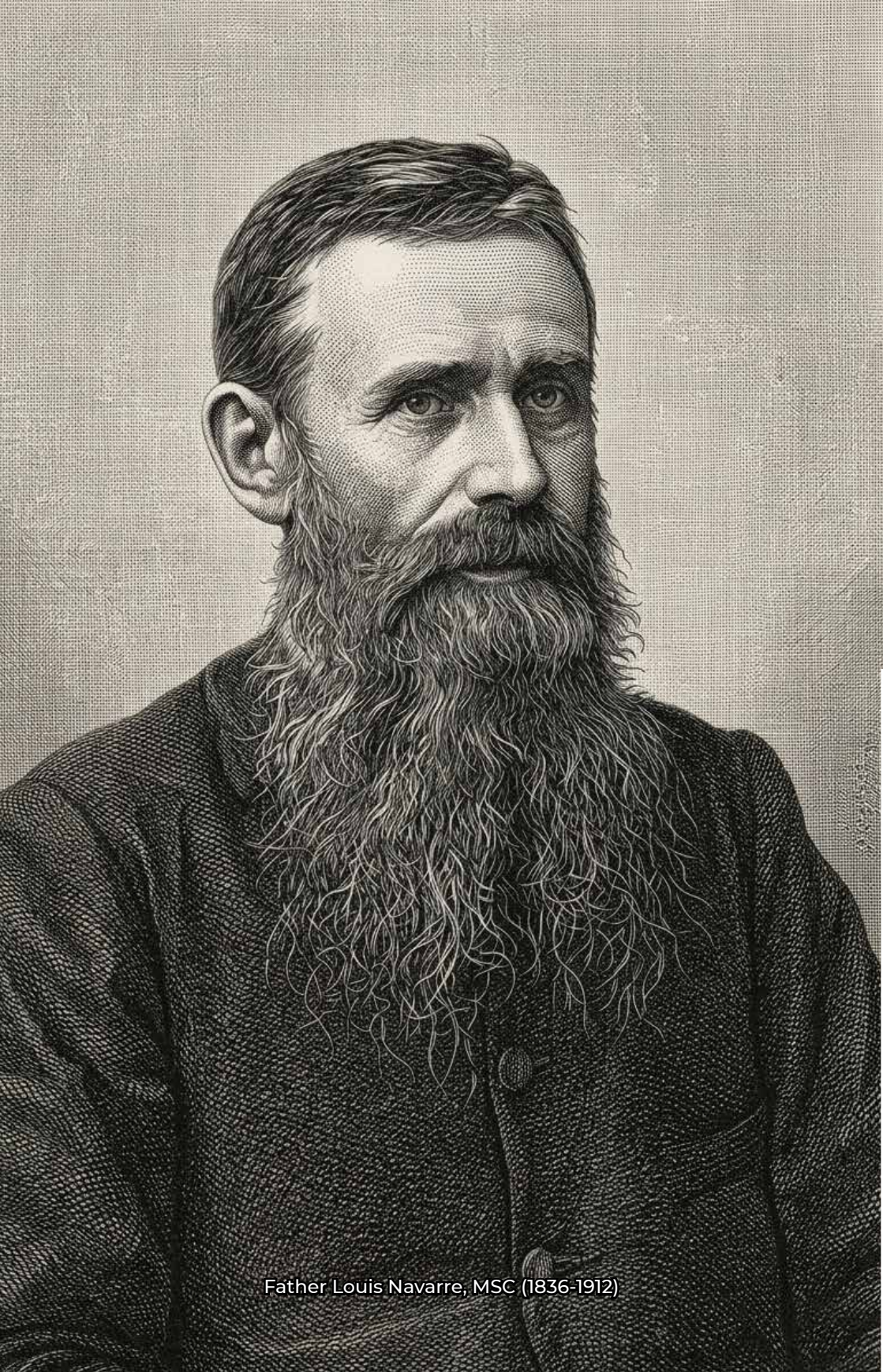
Seven hundred Catholics, of which one hundred are Europeans and six hundred are natives; approximately one and a half million pagans; four mission centres; seven schools where we educate about six hundred children; nine priests, six sisters, and one brother.

In other words, only sixteen missionaries were to evangelise hundreds of thousands of pagans. That same year, Father Louis was appointed Apostolic Vicar of Melanesia and ordained as a bishop. And God rewarded the generosity and effort of his workers with a truly great harvest.

Less than fifty years after the letter written by Father Louis —with discouraging numbers— at the beginning of 1933, Peter To Rot began his ministry as a catechist in his native village of Rakunai. At that time, Monsignor Leo Scharmach, MSC (1896-1964), was the bishop and Ecclesiastical Superior for the mission in New Britain. And by that time, according to the statistics we have from that period, the Catholics went from being just six hundred to more than fifty thousand. The four missionary centers were now four hundred seventy-two. The nine priests became more than sixty. The six sisters multiplied and were now one hundred and twenty-six (eighty European and forty-six native). The mission also had more than fifty religious brothers, four hundred and twenty-two primary schools in the villages (which were attended by more than twelve thousand children), more than four hundred and twenty male catechists and more than thirty female catechists, four centers for catechist training, three vocational schools, and a minor seminary. In this way, Christianity flourished in New Britain.

And it was in this environment where Saint Peter To Rot was born, grew up, and was formed.





Father Louis Navarre, MSC (1836-1912)

Matupit church, September 1902. Celebrating the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the first missionaries on September 29, 1882.







Rabaul Cathedral, in Vunapope. Year 1912.



Father Linckens, Provincial Superior of the MSC, in Vunapope, Year 1904.

2- THE MESSAGE OF THE FIRST MISSIONARIES

A word of acknowledgment must be said here for those brave and generous missionaries who, risking their lives, left everything behind for the sake of Jesus Christ and his Church. Out of love and for the salvation of souls, they came to Papua New Guinea to teach the eternal truths received from God Himself and passed on by the Catholic Church. With their lives and examples, they fulfilled the Latin motto attributed to Saint John Bosco: *“Da mihi animas, coetera tolle”* (*Give me souls, take away the rest*). These first missionaries were worthy disciples of Saint Paul because they too proclaimed, by the example of their lives, that: *“Preaching the Gospel is not a reason for me to boast; it is a necessity laid on me: woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!”* (1 Cor 9:16) They were the first people to pronounce the name of Jesus in this country and the first to work in the beautiful field of inculturation. To these intrepid missionaries, we, the current missionaries in Papua New Guinea, owe a great debt of gratitude, and to them we direct our most sincere admiration and profound thanks.

But what did the first missionaries teach this people of pagans who were immersed in the darkest ignorance? The message of these missionaries was not new. They did not seek to innovate or be original. They simply limited themselves to transmitting what they had received. And all their preaching can be summarised in the very words that, nineteen hundred years before them, the apostle Peter proclaimed before Annas, Caiaphas, and the other elders and scribes

gathered in Jerusalem: ***“There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to men by which we are to be saved.”*** (Acts 4:12) These first missionaries taught the native people that Jesus Christ *“is Lord of all,” “judge of the living and the dead,”* and thus *“whoever believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”* (Acts 10: 36,42,43) These brief truths were the starting point of all evangelization work. And they continue to be so even now.

The missionaries taught the natives that Jesus Christ is the only source of eternal salvation. And He alone is *“the way, the truth and the life”* (Jn 14:6), and he does not share this privilege with anyone else. The missionaries taught that Our Lord is not “a way” among others, nor “a truth” among others. But rather, he is the only way and the only truth in which we find salvation. And faithful to the Revelation and the teachings of the Church, they taught the natives that Jesus Christ is the only Mediator and Redeemer of mankind. It is extremely edifying to read the few writings that have been preserved from these missionaries, because in them shines the conviction that *“whoever believes and is baptised will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned.”* (Mk 16:16)

Thus the Church has always affirmed it, and thus it continues to affirm it in our times:

The thesis which denies the unicity and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ is also put forward. Such a position has no biblical foundation. In fact, the truth of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord and only Saviour, who through the event of his incarnation, death and resurrection has brought the history of salvation to fulfilment, and which has in him its fullness and centre, must be *firmly believed* as a constant element of the Church's faith. (CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF FAITH, *Declaration Dominus Iesus*, 13)

With courage and determination, the same Declaration continues:

It must therefore be *firmly believed* as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God. (14)

It is extremely sad and regrettable to see how these truths today find many opponents, even in the very mission lands themselves, and even within the very heart of the Church. It is not uncommon to find generous missionaries who claim to be more merciful than Jesus himself, and who preach a universal salvation granted in advance to all men, regardless of the god they believe in, the faith they profess, and the religion they follow. Some Catholics even consider missionary work as something useless because, according to their principles, one religion is as good as another. And some even wish that missions would end, as they insist that it is wrong to “impose” Christian ideas on cultures that, according to them, should be “left in peace” and free to follow their own beliefs. I remember reading not long ago the writings of a missionary priest in these lands who claimed that his mission was not to save souls, but to announce to the people that they were already saved, regardless of what they did or did not do, and regardless of the beliefs they followed. The Church, on the other hand, thinks differently.

It is not the intention of this book to make a theological defence of the salvific universality of Christ or for missions. Nor do we intend to condemn eternally those who have not known Christ. Therefore, to avoid misunderstandings, it is always useful to remember what the Church teaches on these points. *Dominus Iesus* teaches:

Above all else, it must be firmly believed that “**the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church.**”

(...) **For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, “salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace** which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. **This grace comes from Christ**; it is the result of his sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit”; it has a relationship with the Church, which “according to the plan of the Father, has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (20)

And explaining the meaning of the phrase “Outside the Church there is no salvation,” the Catechism of the Catholic Church adds:

This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church: “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may achieve eternal salvation.” (847)

he Church has always taught —and the Popes of recent decades have repeated it on many occasions— that missionary work belongs to its very essence, and therefore, it is missionary by nature. If it were not so, it would be betraying the desire of its Divine Spouse, who commanded it: “*Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to all creation.*” (Mk 16:15) Thus, for example, the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* teaches:

In inter-religious dialogue as well, the mission *ad gentes* “today as always retains its full force and necessity.” “Indeed, ‘*God desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth*’ (1 Tim 2:4); that is, God wills the salvation

of everyone through the knowledge of the truth. Salvation is found in the truth. Those who obey the promptings of the Spirit of truth are already on the way of salvation. But the Church, to whom this truth has been entrusted, must go out to meet their desire, so as to bring them the truth. **Because she believes in God's universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary."** (22)

The first missionaries were convinced that their evangelization work did not harm the culture and traditions of the natives. In fact, the Gospel could never attack or harm a culture. On the contrary, the Gospel heals, transforms, and purifies cultures. Speaking about the work of missionaries in Oceania, Pope Saint John Paul II wrote:

The process of inculturation is the gradual way in which the Gospel is incarnated in the various cultures. (...) Inculturation is born out of respect for both the Gospel and the culture in which it is proclaimed and welcomed.

(...) **The Word made flesh is foreign to no culture and must be preached to all cultures.** (...) The Church teaches the unchanging truth of God, addressed to the history and the culture of a particular people. (...) The Church, in her efforts to present Jesus Christ effectively to the peoples of Oceania, must respect each culture and never ask the people to renounce it. (...) The Gospel is not opposed to any culture, as if engaging a culture the Gospel would seek to strip it of its native riches and force it to adopt forms which are alien to it. It is vital that the Church insert herself fully into culture and from within bring about the process of purification and transformation. (*Ecclesia in Oceania*, 16)

This healthy conviction of the first missionaries encouraged them to preach Christ to the natives without fear and without lowering

the demands of the Gospel. They knew that Jesus Christ is not foreign to any culture, nor is he out of place in any situation or environment. Speaking to the Aboriginal people of Australia, John Paul II told them:

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks all languages.

It esteems and embraces all cultures. It supports them in everything human and, when necessary, it purifies them. Always and everywhere the Gospel uplifts and enriches cultures with the revealed message of a loving and merciful God. (*Address to the Aborigines*, 29 November 1986)

The evangelization of the first missionaries was convincing and fruitful because they taught the truth of Jesus Christ and were bold enough to challenge those elements of the culture that opposed the Gospel. John Paul II teaches:

An authentic inculturation of the Gospel has a double aspect. **On the one hand, a culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived. On the other hand, the Gospel challenges cultures and requires that some values and forms change.** Just as the Son of God became like us in all things except sin (cf. Heb 4:15), so the Christian faith welcomes and affirms all that is genuinely human, while rejecting whatever is sinful. The process of inculturation engages the Gospel and culture in “a dialogue which includes identifying what is and what is not of Christ.” Every culture needs to be purified and transformed by the values which are revealed in the Paschal Mystery. (...) Transformed by the Spirit of Christ, these cultures attain the fullness of life to which their deepest values had always looked and for which their people had always hoped. **Indeed, without Christ, no human culture can become what it truly is.** (*Ecclesia...*, 16)

In 2012, when the centenary of Peter To Rot's birth was being celebrated, the bishops of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands travelled to Rome for the *Ad Limina* visit. On that occasion, Pope Benedict XVI asked the bishops to continue teaching "the eternal truths of the Gospel," without the desire for innovation or originality. The Gospel has not changed over time, and therefore the truths that must be transmitted should not either.

While acknowledging the respective contribution of each culture and at times calling upon its resources in fulfilling her mission, the Church has been sent to preach the Gospel to all nations, transcending man-made boundaries. In the work of evangelization then, my Brother Bishops, **continue to apply the eternal truths of the Gospel to the customs of the people whom you serve**, in order to build upon the positive elements already present and to purify others when necessary. In this way, you play your part in the Church's mission to lead people of every nation, race and language to Jesus Christ the Saviour in whom we find revealed the fullness and truth of humanity. (*Address to the Episcopal Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands*, 9 June 2012)

Pope Saint John Paul II reminds us:

The Church teaches the **unchanging truth of God**, addressed to the history and the culture of a particular people. (...) An authentic inculturation of the Gospel has a double aspect. On the one hand, a culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived. On the other hand, **the Gospel challenges cultures and requires that some values and forms change**. Just as the Son of God became like us in all things except sin, so **the Christian faith welcomes and affirms all that is genuinely human, while rejecting**

whatever is sinful. The process of inculturation engages the Gospel and culture in a dialogue which includes identifying what is and what is not of Christ. Every culture needs to be purified and transformed by the values which are revealed in the Paschal Mystery. In this way, the positive values and forms found in the cultures of Oceania will enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived. (...) Cultures are not only not diminished by this encounter; rather they are prompted to open themselves to the newness of the Gospel's truth and to be stirred by this truth to develop in new ways. (...) **Indeed, without Christ, no human culture can become what it truly is.** (*Ecclesia in Oceania*, 16)

Inculturating the Gospel, then, according to what we have read from John Paul II and Benedict XVI, does not mean diminishing the message of the Gospel or the demands of faith, but continuing "to apply the eternal truths of the Gospel to the customs of the people." The Gospel does not need to be lowered to adapt to culture, but rather it must challenge it and demand "that some values and forms change." And this is what the first missionaries did, to whom we feel indebted and for whom we are deeply grateful.

Before concluding this brief section, it may be useful to say something about inculturation and liturgy. Many times, we may be tempted to understand the term "inculturation" as synonymous with adapting the liturgy and rites to a local custom or tradition, but it is far from that! Inculturating the Gospel means permeating the teachings of Jesus into a particular culture, purifying and enriching that culture with the message of Our Lord. In other words, we are not inculturating the Gospel by having "adapted" our liturgies and rites to the customs and traditions of a particular culture. Thinking that we are doing a good work of inculturation just by using some musical instruments or local dances within our liturgies is a mockery of what the work of inculturation truly means.

Let's read what then-Cardinal Ratzinger wrote five years before his election as Supreme Pontiff:

At this point, a brief remark about the theme of liturgy and inculturation suggests itself. (...) Everywhere these days the liturgy seems to be the proving ground for experiments in inculturation. **Whenever people talk about inculturation, they almost always think only of the liturgy, which then has to undergo quite dismal distortions.** The worshippers usually groan at this, though it is happening for their sake. An inculturation which is more or less just an alteration of outward forms is not inculturation at all but a misunderstanding of inculturation. Moreover, it frequently insults cultural and religious communities, from whom liturgical forms are borrowed in all too superficial and external ways. **The first and most fundamental way in which inculturation takes place is the unfolding of a Christian culture in all its different dimensions:** a culture of cooperation, of social concern, of respect for the poor, of the overcoming of class differences, of care for the suffering and dying; a culture that educates the mind and heart in proper cooperation; a political culture and a culture of law; a culture of dialogue, of reverence for life, and so on. This kind of authentic inculturation of Christianity then creates culture in the stricter sense of the word. (...) As the Greeks so rightly saw, **culture is, before all else, education.** (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, 200-201)

It is interesting that the future Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that, unfortunately, when we talk about inculturation, we think, almost exclusively, of the liturgy, "which then has to undergo quite dismal distortions." And he couldn't be more right! Experience shows us that liturgy often becomes the laboratory where the most

outrageous experiments are tried in an effort to bring the gospel closer to culture, and the result is always the same: it gets so close that the sacred disappears, and not a trace of Christ remains. How many times have we attended liturgical celebrations that were practically indistinguishable from the festive celebrations held in the villages? Many times these liturgical celebrations seem like shows for tourists, where all the color, tradition, and local music are displayed, relegating Christ and his gospel to a second or third plane. And it hurts to know that those who organize these celebrations believe they are providing a great service to the Church and evangelization. The curious thing is that most of the time those who tend to promote and encourage this type of de-inculturation are the same missionaries, who insist that people perform these barbarities, when in reality that same people —forced to perform the spectacle so as not to disappoint the missionary— would prefer to be participating in the Holy Mass with devotion.

Recently, I was able to read the minutes of a bishops' meeting held in Rabaul in 1936, when there were only five bishops in present-day Papua New Guinea. I really don't know who recorded the minutes, but he did a fantastic job because he did it with great professionalism, and reading the minutes, one can go back almost a century in time and imagine what the situation was like back then. Toward the end of the minutes, one of the bishops made a very interesting comment, and I wonder what he would think of us now. He said that the people in his vicariate complained about four things the missionaries did:

- 1) The missionaries copied the style of the native constructions to build the churches and chapels, using the same materials, types of sculptures, patterns, etc. The people, on the other hand, told the bishop that when they went to church, they did so precisely because they wanted to "leave behind" the earthly and enter the divine realm. Instead, the church was no different from the village houses, and that was an obstacle for them to elevate themselves to the celestial realm.

- 2) The missionaries adapted the village music to the liturgy, changing

the lyrics of the songs but keeping the same rhythm and style. The people, on the other hand, asked the bishop to tell the missionaries to please teach them sacred songs, because they really wanted to learn new songs, and they had no intention of using in the church the same rhythms they used in the village.

3) The missionaries insisted that the locals bring their own traditional musical instruments to the celebrations, so they could incorporate them into the liturgy. The people, on the other hand, asked the bishop not to do it, because they said that in the celebrations they sought silence and reflection, and the traditional instruments only brought noise and confusion.

4) Finally, the same people suggested to the bishop that he establish some dress code for attending Mass, so that everyone would be well-covered and in the most dignified manner possible. Nowadays, however, there are those who insist that locals participate in Mass with their bodies uncovered and painted, believing that by doing so they are evangelizing the culture and bringing people closer to Christ. As an example to illustrate what I am saying and to avoid exaggeration, it suffices to look at the images of the readers and those who brought the offerings at the beatification Mass of Peter To Rot in 1995 in Port Moresby, which for reasons of decency and modesty I prefer not to include in this book.

In the book *The Power of Silence Against the Dictatorship of Noise*, Cardinal Robert Sarah wrote: “I am an African. Let me say clearly: the liturgy is not the place to promote my culture. Rather, it is the place where my culture is baptised, where my culture is taken up into the divine. Through the Church’s liturgy (which missionaries have carried throughout the world) God speaks to us, He changes us and enables us to partake in his divine life.”

According to the text by then-Cardinal Ratzinger, then, we can only carry out a true work of inculturation when we generously dedicate ourselves to transmitting the message and mercy of Jesus. We will only be able to truly inculturate the Gospel when the

message of Christ, in all its fullness, reaches the people whom we are evangelising. And this is what the first missionaries did in our beautiful nation, and thanks to them Papua New Guinea is today a Christian nation. We are deeply grateful to them and will always be in their debt. May God grant that we may be worthy followers of such a great army of missionaries.



**Apostolic Vicars Louis André Couppé, MSC (1850-1926)
and Leo Scharmach, MSC (1896-1964)**



First Holy Communions in Vunapope, Year 1937 c.

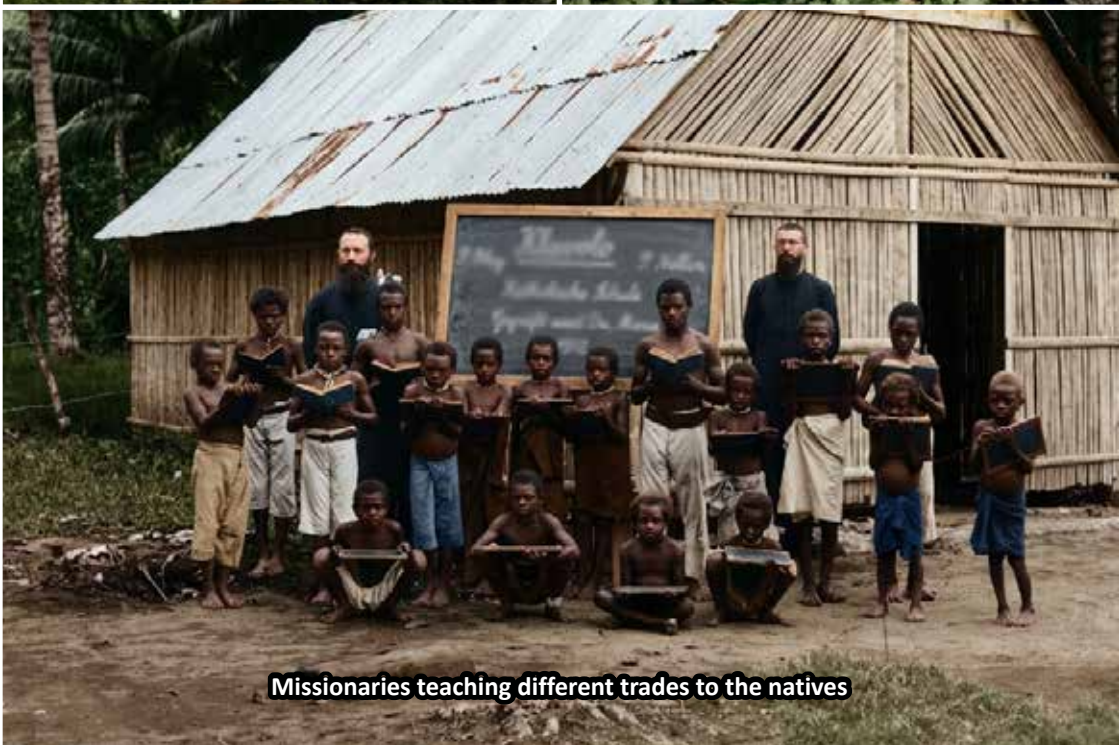
Corpus Christi in Vunapope, Year 1937.

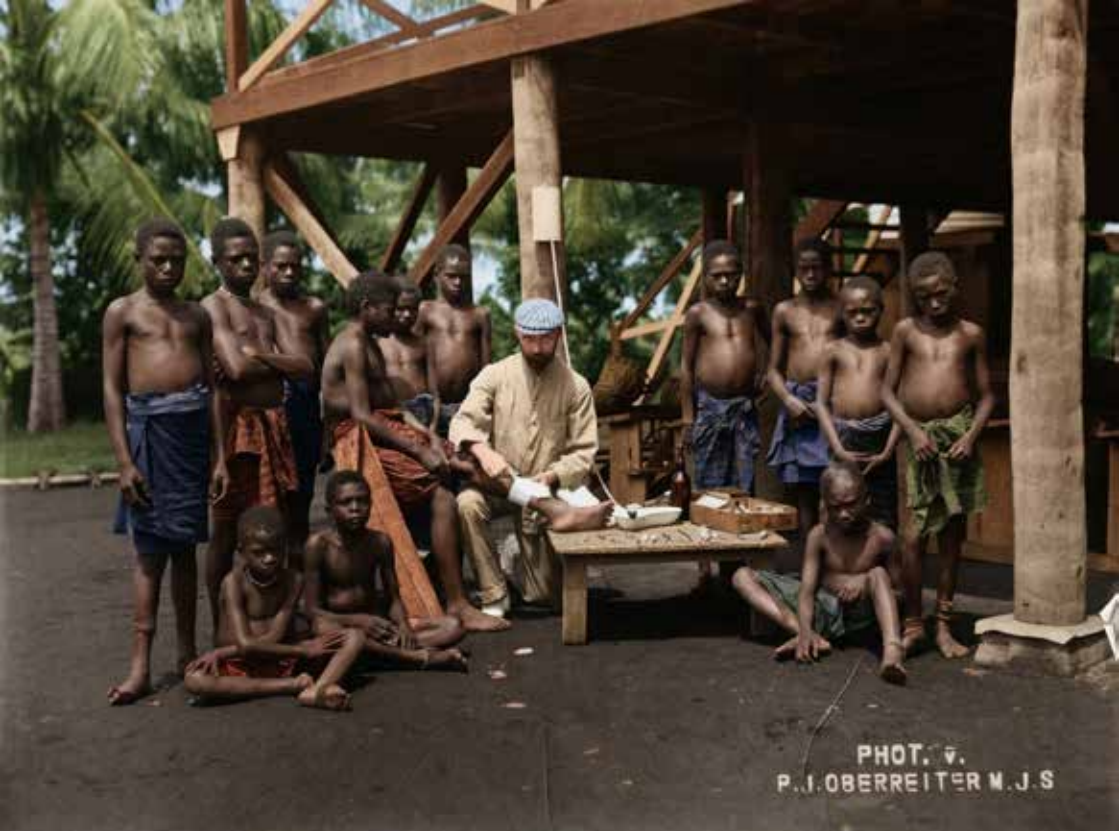




Archbishop Louis Couppé in Vunapope







3- THE LACK OF LOCAL CLERGY

When in 1930 To Rot was eighteen years old and had to start thinking about what to do with his adult life, Father Carl Laufer, parish priest of the village of Rakunai, asked to speak with the young man's father, Angelo To Puia. Father Carl spoke to him about the extraordinary qualities he saw in To Rot and suggested that it would be good to allow his son to join the MSC to become a priest. To Puia listened attentively to the parish priest's proposal and was pleased that his son was held in such high regard by the missionary. However, he refused, saying: "No, Father, I don't believe that one of our generation is ready to be a priest. It is too early for that. Perhaps one of my grandchildren or great-grandchildren will be that lucky. But if you want To Rot to be a catechist, please send him to the Catechist School at Taliligap."

To understand a bit the urgency and need for a local clergy at that time, it is useful to recall a document written by the then Apostolic Vicar of the area in 1925 titled "*De possibilitate sacerdotii indigenae*" (On the Possibility of Indigenous Priesthood). The document begins with these words: "Of all the issues concerning the well-being of the mission, the issue of the indigenous clergy is certainly of the utmost importance and is surrounded by the greatest difficulties."

In this document, some of the reasons that illustrate this "utmost importance" and urgency of beginning to form a local clergy are listed. Among other reasons, three are mainly listed:

1) A lack of European missionary priests may not be able to be sufficiently compensated by European clergy. The document states: “One single calamity, such as a war or a plague, can in a few months deprive the entire mission of priests, or at least significantly reduce their number.” In fact, it was so: at the end of World War I in 1918, a law was issued stating that all German missionaries were forced to leave the island. Thanks be to God and the insistence of the missionaries, that law was rendered ineffective. But if it had been carried out, practically no missionaries would have remained, because the vast majority were German or Dutch. Something similar happened during the time of To Rot, when in 1942, during World War II, the Japanese army imprisoned all foreign missionaries, and the people were left without priests.

2) “The adaptability of European priests has its limits (...) and Western methods always exert their influence among the indigenous people, to the evident detriment of the apostolic work.” There can be no doubt that truly good indigenous priests, although not perfect, can exercise the ministry more effectively than many European or Western priests. Because the locals are sons of the land, knowing their peoples customs and traditions better, they will understand them better and be understood by them, and they will be able to use more suitable methods of interaction and apply appropriate remedies.

3) “The coldness and indifference of many Catholic communities can be partly explained by the state of mind of the indigenous people, who do not consider the religion as their own,” but as something brought from abroad and in the hands of foreigners. The local clergy, without a doubt, would give much strength to the mission.

Up to this point, the advantages of forming a local clergy. Let’s now see what the document says about the real possibility and the difficulties of carrying out that desire in the times of To Rot.

1) First of all, the document recalls a basic principle of spirituality: grace presupposes nature. The Apostolic Vicar says:

Regarding the question of possibility, I also consulted the Fathers, of whom fifteen gave me their opinion in writing. It is noted here that the question was raised and that the answer was not always in the sense of what grace could theoretically achieve, but rather in terms of the human and natural dispositions of our indigenous people, which then assume the cooperation of grace. Thus, it is necessary to provide, because grace usually takes natural foundations.

Although the idea of having local priests was very tempting, the missionaries still doubted the human formation and natural dispositions of the natives. One of the priests who was consulted maintained:

The issue is not yet mature, because we still do not have true names of mature Christians. (...) The religion is still very recent, there is still little family life, little firmness in faith, and laxity in customs.

2) *Ignoti nulla cupido* (no one desires what is not known). The document says:

The Fathers unanimously recommend that prayers be made among the faithful to obtain indigenous clergy, and that some instructions be given on the greatness and holiness of the priesthood, and on the desirability of indigenous priests in the mission. The first thing perfectly aligns with the supernatural concept of the sacred vocation, the second with the philosophical principle: "*ignoti nulla cupido*." Indeed, the majority of the indigenous people, even the catechists, have

never seriously considered the possibility of such a thing, because they see the priesthood as an exclusively European institution; not because they judge it to be so sublime, but because in reality they have very little knowledge of it, knowledge that certainly needs to be expanded.

One of the missionaries said: "It can be reasonably said that there is hope." And it is true, because they remembered that "in forty years more than forty thousand fierce pagans were made Christians, of whom the vast majority lived well and persevered. Certainly, there are many vices and many abuses, but it does not seem impossible that some young people of better disposition, from a tender age, can be preserved from the harmful environment, strengthened, and confirmed with all supernatural means. In other parts of the world, it has already been started for some time and with good results."

3) Another real difficulty is that the young, potential candidates are already too immersed in the local culture and traditional superstitious and pagan practices, and the missionaries considered it practically a lost cause to try to reverse that situation. That's why they suggested the following:

They should be accepted even at a very young age, certainly before the age of twelve, even better at six or seven years old. A central school or seminary for the entire Vicariate would make it easier to find suitable teachers, while smaller boarding schools would better promote individual education and pose fewer risks to good morals. Having thus completed their preliminary education, those who happily persevered and showed good promise would be educated in higher studies at some central institute until the age of twenty-eight or thirty, and then gradually admitted to the orders, because by that age the maximum danger has

ceased. The Fathers consulted to draft the report, although hesitantly and confessing that they hardly expect a positive outcome, nevertheless recognize that in no case would the work and expenses be wasted, because a good education is always a fruitful seed and, on the other hand, some of those young people, if they do not reach the priesthood, will at least become excellent future catechists.

To carry out this mission, then, they saw the need to establish a minor seminary, which would indeed be founded in 1936. The document says:

The reason is primarily practical: young children are better educated and instructed in their own region by teachers from that region and people, and in their own language. (...) As all agree, candidates must also be received at a very young age; after the age of twelve, children are already irreparably formed and the way of being of those men can no longer be changed. Therefore, all the Fathers agree that they should be received from the age of five or six, when they are still uncorrupted and free from the superstitions of the environment. They should be chosen from families of second-generation Catholics and entirely Catholic, not necessarily from catechists (who are not always the best), but from those where the parents care for the children, educate them, and pray for them, so that from the beginning they have the highest esteem for all religious matters. One should also avoid taking them from certain families or places that seem infected by a particular poison of immorality or superstitions. (...) When the children are received, a pact should generally be made with the parents that they hand over their children unconditionally, so that the time of formation is not interrupted or broken.

Finally, the fathers propose the separation of future candidates from the indigenous community to which they belong. They said:

This condition is essential and needs no explanation for anyone familiar with the indigenous people. In a week, the work of many years would be destroyed, and latent instincts would awaken in the souls of the children that would endanger their formation. Holidays, if ever granted outside the seminary, should only be allowed in the native village and for a short time, with some priest on the mission.

The difficulties, then, were serious and well-founded.

* * *

The first minor seminary in Papua New Guinea was established in Vunapope, the seat of the Archdiocese of Rabaul, in 1936, and was under the supervision of the MSC. It is the St. Mary's Seminary, whose creation was decided and carried out in 1936 during the bishops' conference we mentioned earlier. In 1942, when World War II interrupted the studies, it already had twenty-three students enrolled, coming from the vicariates of Papua, Northern Solomon Islands, and Rabaul. In 1938, two years after the founding of St Mary's Seminary, the Missionaries of the Divine Word (SVD) initiated something similar in Alexishafen, near Madang, on the northern coast of the country.

Regarding the major seminaries, it was decided that all local vocations would study in a single seminary. The first was the Holy Spirit Seminary, which opened its doors on March 1, 1963, in Kap, near Madang, and was also run by the SVD. In 1965, it moved to Bomana, in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, where it operates to this day.

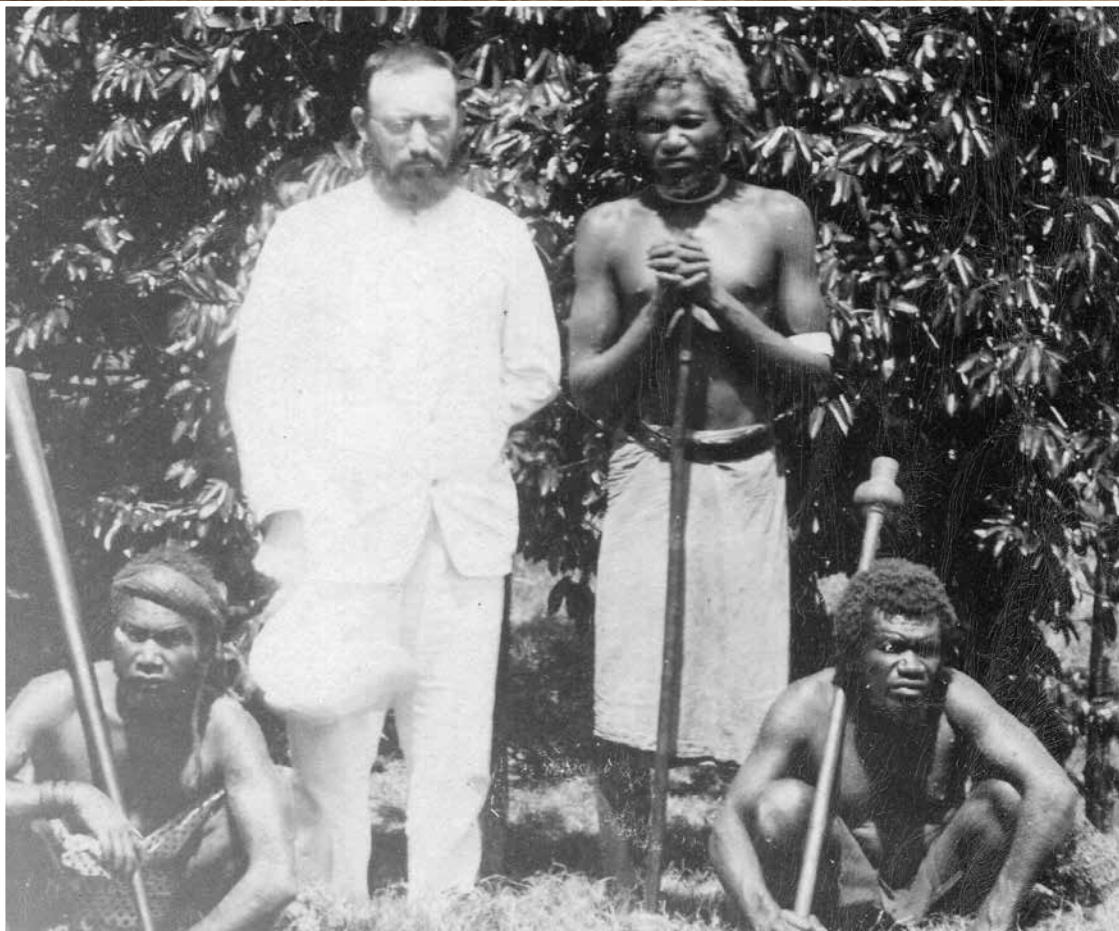
The first local priest of Papua New Guinea was Father Louis Vangeke, MSC. Born in 1904 in Veiga'a (in the Mekeo region),

he was educated by the MSC on Yule Island. At the age of twenty-one, thanks to his exemplary conduct and ability to remain celibate, he was invited to prepare for the priesthood. He studied Latin in Papua New Guinea under the tutelage of the missionaries, and in 1928 he was sent to a Jesuit formation house in Madagascar for his postulancy, novitiate, and studies in philosophy and theology. The choice of Madagascar was due to the warm climate (similar to Papua) and the lower racial discrimination compared to Australia or Europe, where a Papuan might face more difficulties. For example, there was the precedent of a candidate who had died of pneumonia in France due to the cold. Fr Vangeke was ordained a priest on June 14, 1937, in Madagascar, and in August of the same year, he returned to Papua New Guinea. Four years later, in 1941, he was formally admitted to the MSC. On December 3, 1970, he was consecrated bishop by Pope Paul VI at St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, Australia. He became the first indigenous Catholic bishop of Papua New Guinea. He was initially appointed auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Port Moresby (1970-1976), with the title of titular bishop of Culusi. There was some initial resistance from a few European priests to serve under a native bishop, and his administrative skills were questioned, although his spirituality was widely recognised. In 1976, he was appointed bishop of the Diocese of Bereina (in the Mekeo region, near his birthplace), where he served until he retired as bishop emeritus in 1979. He died on December 15, 1982, in his hometown, at the age of 78.



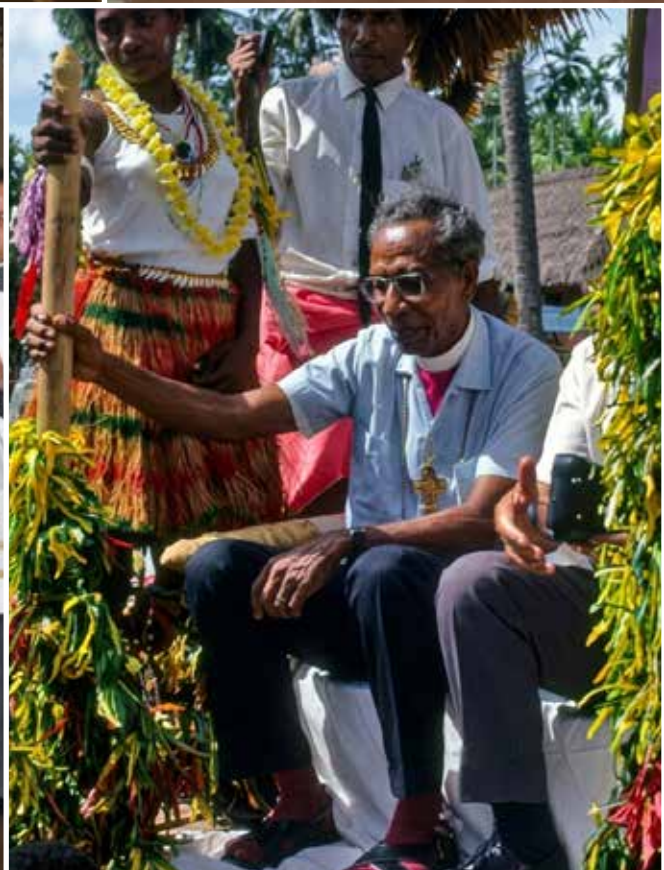
A village of Rabaul in the time of Saint Peter To Rot







Louis Vangeke, MSC, was the first local priest and bishop, ordained a priest on June 14, 1937, and consecrated a bishop by Pope Paul VI in Australia on December 3, 1970



4- THE CATECHISTS IN THE TIME OF PETER TO ROT

We do not want to talk now about Peter To Rot's ministry as a catechist or his training for the ministry, because that will be discussed later. At this point we want to briefly explain what the condition of catechists was like at that time. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of these men and women, will help us, on one hand, to have a more realistic idea of the situation in which To Rot lived. And at the same time, we will be able to better appreciate the exceptional nature of their ministry and their coherence of life.

No one doubts the goodwill and dedication of these men and women who, thanks to their human and spiritual qualities, were chosen to assist the missionaries in the enormous task of evangelization that lay ahead of them. But nevertheless, in the times of To Rot, the situation of the catechists was far from ideal. The catechists faced great difficulties in carrying out their ministry with a coherent life, because although they had offered themselves to work for Christ, many of them continued to live like pagans, leading a double life. This not only seriously affected the mission, but it was also the cause of many disappointments and headaches for the missionaries.

To discuss this, we will once again refer to a document written in 1925 by the Apostolic Vicar of Rabaul titled "*De conditione actuali catechistarum*" (On the Current Condition of Catechists).

The document begins by calling them "guardians and teachers" of the faith. And it says:

It is evident the enormous usefulness—if not necessity—of catechists in the mission. The Catholics, indeed, although not so numerous, live dispersed across an immense region—in this case, many islands—and inhabit countless and distant villages. Of course, a priest cannot be assigned to each congregation. And yet, precisely because they are neophytes not firmly established in the faith, they cannot be left without any guardian or teacher.

At this time, catechists received their instruction directly from the bishop or a priest, because the school for catechists had not yet been properly established. In the past, an attempt had been made to create a school to centralize and unify the training of catechists, but for various reasons, it had not worked. The school To Rot attended was not opened until 1925, and its fruits would appear a few years later. Such being the case, it was the bishop or the priest who had trained them who decided if the candidate was ready to start working. No formal agreement or contract was signed; instead, they received the position without any time limitation.

The catechists were divided into three groups: after assuming the office, for three years they were called “assistant catechists.” After three years, if they had done things well, they were promoted and received the title of “catechist,” with which they would be honored for at least ten years. Finally, those who had behaved entirely laudably for ten years were called “principal catechists.”

But what was the situation of the catechists during To Rot’s time? As we mentioned a few paragraphs above, it was a time of both strength and weakness, of lights and shadows.

Regarding the lights, the document states:

In the foundation of new Christian communities, in the preparation of grounds for the faith, in the preservation of the stations, and in the defense against heretics, the catechists

have certainly done much. It is enough to remember the vast region of Nakani, which our catechists preserved for us for several years. (...) Likewise, the Tabar, Lihir, Tanga islands, and other regions that still await a priest. There is no doubt that, due to their profession, they have suffered discomforts and dangers, even death itself, although it cannot be denied that human motives often intervened as well.

Without a doubt, the catechists were irreplaceable, and they did the work that the missionaries themselves could not do. They kept the flame of faith alive in regions where there were no missionaries, and they were even the first to evangelize remote and untouched areas, preparing the ground for a future mission.

The document adds:

The common opinion is that the greatest usefulness of catechists lies in the fact that their presence keeps Catholics united and steadfast in faith, encourages them in the external practices of religion, and generally prevents them from being effectively attracted by heretics. Despite lacking either the zeal or audacity to work for either mass or individual conversions, the Fathers almost unanimously attribute to them the trait of attracting both catechumens and heretics. At this point, one Father makes an exception: he mentions three entire towns, already considered lost, that were reclaimed by their catechists and fervently returned to the faith. In this regard, it must be said that a few are praised by the Fathers almost without restriction for their zeal, constancy, and good example.

At the same time, the report we are referring to talks about the shadows of the catechists, and unfortunately, it does not give us a very encouraging outlook. On the contrary. It points out, for example, the following:

It is generally said that our catechists, despite some training and despite their number, have remained in the true sense “indigenous.” Our current catechists belong to the first two generations: the former of pagans, this one of neophytes. The elders, coming from paganism, are generally more faithful and generously devoted to religion, but prone to old customs. The young people generally do not have that enthusiastic adherence; they know religion better, but they are lazier; they still follow pagan customs too much and, in general, are very superficial. (...) Most of our catechists have had almost no schooling, or at least —and this is largely due to the various vicissitudes of the catechist school in the past— they have not received intense and methodical training. Some came from pagans, many workers were made catechists immediately. Circumstances often did not allow for any other path.

The report takes the time to highlight the intellectual difficulties and moral problems of the catechists. Regarding the intellectual difficulties, it says:

The catechists, especially those who attended school for some time, have some knowledge, although not very extensive, and can retain something; but what they generally do not know is how to reason, compose, or demonstrate. That’s why the Fathers complain that catechists can only present the concrete points of doctrine, which they always repeat for hours and months, but they don’t know how to show the connection or relative importance. Fathers universally maintain that catechists cannot prepare catechumens for holy baptism or children for their first communion; that further work always falls to the Fathers. It seems certain that they ignore the entirety of the religion and only touch on particularities. Similarly, in their talks, they either simply

read a book that seems impossible to comment on, or they speak freely and then continuously repeat some points they have memorised, often omitting the most important ones. It is added that almost all catechists are teachers in schools, where they perform poorly, because they themselves learned little and have no method.

And as if that weren't enough, it adds:

They also lack the desire to develop their knowledge: they rarely study, even though they have some books; they rarely ask the Fathers about anything worth knowing. It must be said, however, that their homes are by no means suitable for study: there is no light, no proper table, or anything of the sort. Therefore, in teaching, they often tire of idleness; the slightest reason is enough for them to consider themselves excused from the task, because they truly feel unfit. This state is understandable under the current circumstances. Therefore, in school, Catholic students must be taught regularly and methodically for several years. (...) As their mind is completely limited to the concrete, they must be continuously and patiently trained to grasp the abstract, seek reasons, compose, find connections, develop, demonstrate, and confirm.

Regarding moral issues, the report is even more discouraging, and we are copying it almost in its entirety. However, before reading it, a prior explanation is necessary to understand it. The report constantly refers to the "*tabu*." What is it? The *tabu* (also "*tambu*") was the traditional currency of the Tolai, made from small marine shells, cut, perforated, and strung into strips of rattan or plant fiber. It was —and still is— the traditional currency that functioned as personal wealth, a means of payment, a status symbol, and a

ritual object. With those shells, not only could goods be acquired using them like current money, but they were also used to pay a bride price, resolve disputes, make gifts, pay debts, collaborate in funerals, etc. Accumulating tabu conferred great prestige and turned the possessor into someone important. The tabu, then, was not just money: it was wealth, prestige, a ritual object, and a central part of Tolai identity. Now, let's read the report:

We have already mentioned elsewhere that, since they come only from the first or second generation and because there was generally a lack of time or opportunity for training, our catechists have remained, in a true sense, indigenous. This is especially noticeable in their moral qualities.

Generally, the indigenous people are characterised by immense materialism that is almost incorporated into their tabu veneration, which is accompanied by a propensity for parties, dances, and superstitions. That cult or veneration of the tabu is in the blood of the indigenous people and equalizes all the events and accidents of indigenous life, up to and including death. The acquisition of the tabu is the reason for each person's existence and inspires all actions. Everything is done for the tabu, and without the tabu, nothing has value; all dignity and esteem also come from the tabu.

This materialism is naturally accompanied by feasts with abundant banquets and prolonged recreations, especially dances. Very numerous superstitions generally also take root in this materialism, as they serve to increase, recover, or avenge goods.

A natural consequence of materialism is selfishness, which among the indigenous people is very intense and takes on all forms according to the objects or circumstances. The spirit of revenge and deceit are certainly just varieties of selfishness, while ignorance refers to that same relationship.

Moreover, the Fathers observe that most catechists either persist in that indigenous state (although they often show a different appearance) or gradually abandon it after a certain period of time. Many of them continue to engage in tabu acquisition, whether through plantations, fishing, or other industries, often during the time they should be fulfilling their duties. Hence the negligence and all its consequences. It is also claimed that this is why many catechists prefer the station in the Nakani region, because there they can find and make tabu.

The same reason partly explains why many actively join secret societies [magic and witchcraft], practice superstitions, and want to participate in all the festivals and dances; not always openly (for fear of the priest), but secretly. This ancestral materialism will also explain many subsequent events among the catechists. It is a very fatal state that can only be destroyed over a long period of time and with serious formation in the catechist school, especially through supernatural means: the constant preaching of the evangelical doctrine (so opposed to this materialistic spirit), the separation from indigenous society and customs, and no less the cautious and vigilant frequentation of the sacraments, the Holy Mass, and all acts of piety.

(...) Here, a matter of utmost urgency and great difficulty is raised, as one priest put it: the fact is that, in general, among the indigenous people, the condition of catechist is not valued, and therefore few desire it. This clearly proves that the orientation of the indigenous people remains very materialistic and that idealism has not yet made its place. The appetite and the standard of estimation of the indigenous people is the tabu; however the role of the catechist does not bring tabu, but rather deters from its acquisition. That is why this role is not valued. This mentality is still quite general,

so much so that the indigenous people no longer consider catechists or students of the catechetical school as true members of their own community, and they try to distance them from everything else of their purpose. It is worth noting that among the Methodists, the role of catechist has a better reputation, apparently for two reasons: first, because among them, catechists regularly receive gifts from the faithful and thus increase their tabu. Second, because Protestant catechists differ little from the ministry [of Protestant pastors] and have almost the same role: they are in some way leaders of their own religion, whereas ours are seen as assistants to the Father in an external religion, that is, European. It is a psychological phenomenon that we must pay attention to.

(...) Among the other trait that the Fathers attribute to catechists, one might be considered as the root of the others: indolence. Here, indolence should be understood as laziness toward any object other than the tabu and things related to it, because in acquiring the latter, they are less indolent.

(...) Therefore, there is a lack of sense of duty, responsibility, because this sense is not governed by self-interest but by the ideal. Altruism, which rises above self-interest is lacking. Zeal and diligence, which directly oppose indolence are lacking. What is lacking is perseverance, which is the continued effort to achieve some often intangible good. Humility is lacking, submission is lacking, which are always tied to self-interest. All these qualities, so interconnected, are lacking—more or less—in the majority of our catechists, according to the Fathers.

Many are servants only in appearance and perform their duties while the Father watches them. Their hearts are often not in the work, and generally even the best, after some time, get tired and abandon their job. At the slightest correction, they lose all spirit, withdraw, or even completely break away from Catholicism.

They must be continuously monitored, directed in everything, and guided by the hand. The Fathers especially insist on this trait of a total lack of initiative. (...) The zeal properly speaking, is almost nonexistent among many; they do some external things, but do not seek the internal aspects of religion: the conversion to God, the correction of pagan abuses, the exhortation to fervor among the faithful. It is felt that intimate spiritual correction and guidance are lacking; hence they cannot give what they do not have.

The same indifference is evident in their own way of acting: they must be an example for their faithful whom they guide, but often they are no different from them. One Father writes that they pray rarely and poorly; of several, that they do not attend Mass and communion more than many of the faithful; almost all declare that they are very deficient in the raising of their own children. Especially this last point is very significant, because it relates directly to their own profession: *“Whoever cannot preside over his own house, how will he take care of the house of God?”* (1 Tim 3:5) The Fathers maintain the fact that the children of many catechists do not know more nor behave better than any other child. From this, one can already deduce their zeal for other people’s children. The strong paternal bond between father and children, according to indigenous customs, in no way can excuse this lack of care. In the catechist, it is a serious and pernicious negligence.

Up to this point, the discouraging account of the report on the situation of catechists during the times of To Rot. And as we mentioned earlier, knowing these negative aspects of the colleagues of Peter To Rot will give us a greater appreciation of the exceptional nature of his life and ministry.

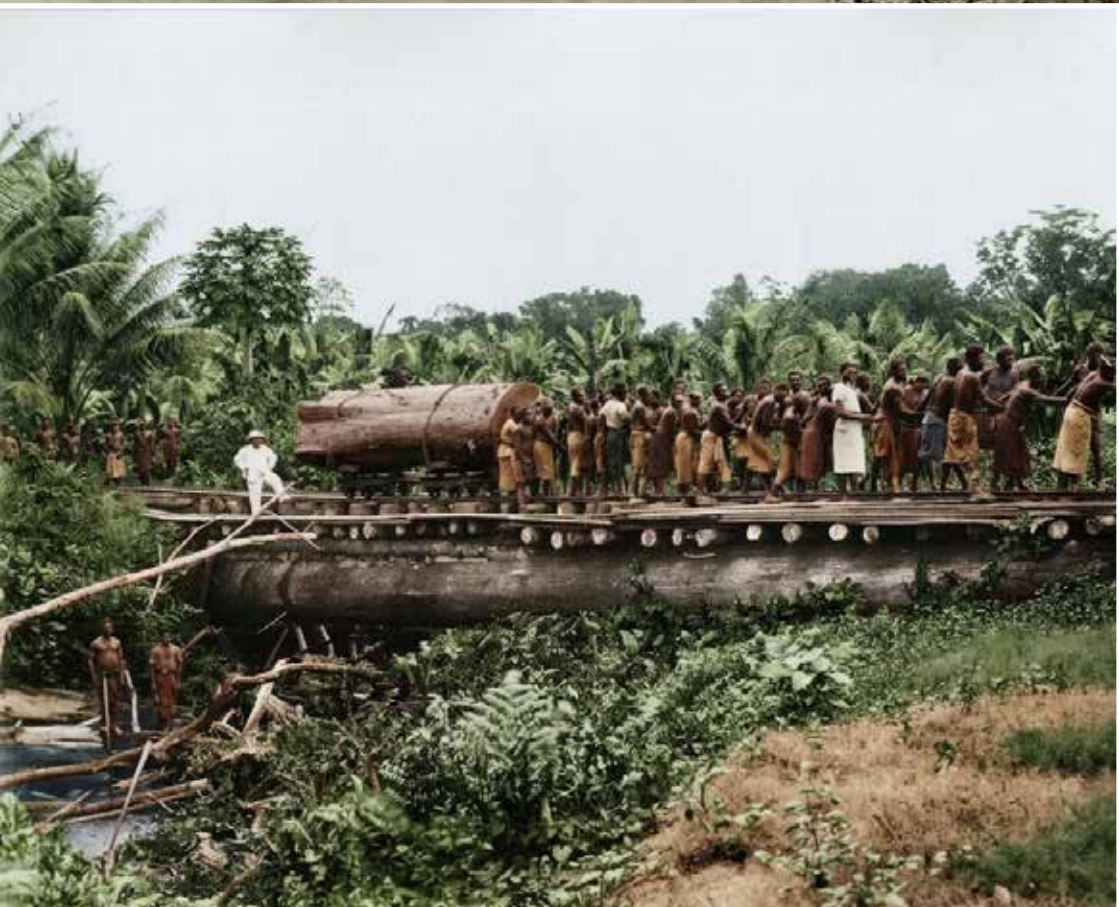


Rabaul's market in the time of Saint Peter To Rot

Rabaul, 1930s.







SECOND PART

LIFE OF SAINT PETER TO ROT

Before beginning to read the life of Peter To Rot, it is necessary to thank the great work done by Father Carl Laufer, MSC. Father Laufer —whose name will appear many times in this book— was the parish priest of Rakunai, Peter To Rot’s village, from 1930 to 1949. He was a friend and confidant of To Rot and his family, and it was he who advised and encouraged him to become a catechist. Peter To Rot received daily communion for many years from Father Laufer’s hands, and it was he who confessed and advised the future saint. No one knew Peter To Rot better than Father Laufer. We owe him not only the first biography of Peter To Rot but also other documents that are, without a doubt, the most important for getting to know the figure of the catechist martyr. These documents are:

1) ***A Catechist Becomes a Martyr*** (Vunapope, 1946). This document is the first report on the murder of Peter To Rot. It was written a few months after the martyrdom of the catechist and presented to the Allied Forces War Crimes Tribunal in Rabaul. The original was written in English.

2) ***Too Much Christo*** (Boon, 1950) is an article that was written for the German magazine “*Catholic Missions*,” and tells about the story of Peter To Rot’s execution.

3) ***You Good and Faithful Servant. Life Portrait of a Martyr Catechist from the South Seas (New Britain)*** (Vunapope, 1952). It is a brief nine-page biography written at the request of Monsignor Scharmach. The original text was written in German, and it was completely unknown until the year 2024.

4) ***Rakunai Mission Station*** (Vunapope, 1952). This document recounts the daily life and activities that took place in the parish of Rakunai, the birthplace and ministry of the catechist martyr. It was written at the request of the then Apostolic Vicar of Rabaul, Leo Scharmach, MSC, during the preliminary canonical investigation for the cause of beatification.

As sources for writing this book, in addition to the three documents by Father Laufer, we have consulted other fundamental writings:

1) ***Positio super martyrio*** (Rome, 1990). Written by Father Yvon Beauddin, OMF, Relator of the cause for beatification, together with Father Lucio De Stefano, MSC, Postulator of the cause. It is the investigation and report sent in 1990 to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. It is precious and invaluable material, as it includes, among other things, the testimony of twenty-six eyewitnesses of the life and martyrdom of Peter To Rot, including his wife, daughter and many other relatives and friends.

2) ***Relatio et vota congressus peculiaris super martyrio*** (Rome, 1992). This document, written in Latin, English, and Italian, collects the opinions of the various Consultors of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to whom the Positio was presented.

3) ***This Crowd Beats Us All*** (Sydney, 1957). Written by the then Apostolic Vicar of Rabaul, Leo Scharmach, MSC, it recounts in the first person the life of the missionaries and the Catholics of the Diocese of Rabaul during World War II, and the years of imprisonment in the Japanese internment camp. Although the book dedicates only a few pages to To Rot, it nonetheless provides an overview of the environment in that area during the period when the catechist carried out his ministry.

4) It should be noted that **many relatives of Peter To Rot are still alive**. In fact, the current Archbishop of Rabaul is the saint's great-nephew. His own grandfather was the one who, apparently, betrayed the catechist and reported him to the Japanese authorities. Since I started working on the cause of canonisation in 2020, I was able to speak with some people who personally knew To Rot. Actually, one of them was baptised by him. And although they were very young at the time and therefore had few memories of the martyr catechist, they have grown up hearing many stories about him that are not written in the previous documents. We must not forget that the Tolai culture is purely and exclusively oral. To this day, even knowing how to read

and write, no Tolai writes memoirs or memories, no matter how important they may be. However, they can spend long hours around a fire telling stories. This book, then, also gathers the testimonies of these relatives and other people who have heard their parents and grandparents recount the life of Peter To Rot.

5) Finally, throughout this book, **documents from the Rabaul Archdiocese archive** will be cited.

1- THE BACKGROUND OF SAINT PETER TO ROT AND TOLAI CULTURE

Peter To Rot was a “Tolai,” and he was proud of it. This term is, even now, used to refer to the people whose homeland is found on the Gazelle Peninsula, on the Island of New Britain. They received this name because of the words “to” and “lai,” which were a form of greeting frequently used to welcome anybody whose visit was awaited. For this reason, strangers and foreigners came to designate them as “Tolais,” and that is what we still call them today. The land they inhabit is, probably, the richest and most fertile in the entire country.

The Tolais are believed to have been a sea-faring people, who made their way to New Ireland and from there, to New Britain. This took place some centuries ago, but nobody knows exactly when. They are depicted as a virile race who had no difficulty in defeating the original owners of the northern part of New Britain and settling permanently on their land. The Tolais held the land nearest to the coast, which is probably the richest and most fertile land in all of Papua New Guinea.

According to writings by the first European navigators who arrived on the island, the Tolai were very violent people and cannibalism was a normal practice among them. These navigators do not tell us whether cannibalism was due to some religious practice or if it was a form of revenge against enemies. In fact, the name of the village of the first mission in these lands is Tavuvutavur, and the “tavor” is a

large sea conch that was used to call the villagers for the distribution of human flesh. Even today, there are villages in this area whose names end with “-tavur,” which shows that this practice was indeed widespread throughout the region.

Regarding religion, the Tolai were animists, and they believed that the lives of people and other natural events were governed by spirits. These spirits are divided into three main groups: the spirits that govern the sky, those that govern the earth, and the spirits of deceased people. All of them can be “manipulated” through magic, witchcraft, or rituals. And since ethics and religion always go hand in hand, Tolai ethics was far from being Christian. An author says:

The Tolai’s main ethical principle was “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” which they observed fanatically in their pay-back system. There was no revulsion against crimes such as murder and large theft, but these crimes had to be paid back by the relatives of the victim, which resulted in interminable feuding between families and groups. (*Positio...*,8)

Regarding upbringing of children, Tolai children were —and still are— raised by maternal uncles. From a young age, they were separated from their nuclear families and sent to be cared for and raised by one of their mother’s brothers. It was the obligation of the maternal uncles to teach the children everything related to village life and adulthood, with special attention to everything concerning future marriage and family. We will return to this topic later, when we talk about To Rot’s childhood.

Children were taught the basic rules of working the land and to be skilled at hunting and fishing. They were not interested —and therefore no one knew— in learning to read and write, and mathematics was reduced to addition and subtraction with a system called “kurene.” It is a system similar to the abacus, although it was truly gigantic, as it was made with coconuts. Regarding art, the Tolai did not work with

wood like other tribes in Papua New Guinea; instead, they limited themselves to reproducing patterns of geometric figures with which they adorned the most important buildings in the villages. As for their clothing, they simply did not wear any. And so they lived for many centuries, without receiving any kind of influence from other regions, and without knowing what was happening in the world beyond the coasts of New Britain.

A complete and brief summary of the beliefs and practices of the Tolai can be found in the letter addressed by the Postulator of the cause of Peter To Rot to the Holy Father, in the 90's. There he writes: "In the last decade of the 19th century, the Tolai of New Britain experienced the grace of a mass conversion to the Catholic faith, with the rejection of an age-old tradition of devil worship, pagan superstition and brutal cannibalism." This is how the Tolai lived for centuries: worshipping the devil, practicing magic and witchcraft, and—literally—eating each other.

All this panorama helps us understand why the first missionaries were unable to stay among the Tolai for long. A few pages back, we read about some of the difficulties the missionaries had to face, which led both the Marists and the PIME missionaries to decide to abandon evangelisation in these lands. And it was not due to a lack of enthusiasm or generosity on the part of the missionaries. It would be a great lie and injustice to claim otherwise. It was simply a matter of survival because, as we know, homicide and cannibalism were common practices among the Tolai. Let us remember, for example, that of the twenty Marist missionaries who arrived between the years 1847 and 1850, two bishops, four priests, and one brother died due to diseases and attacks by the natives. And another six missionaries suffered violent attacks and were left absolutely incapacitated to continue the mission. And all this, in just three years.

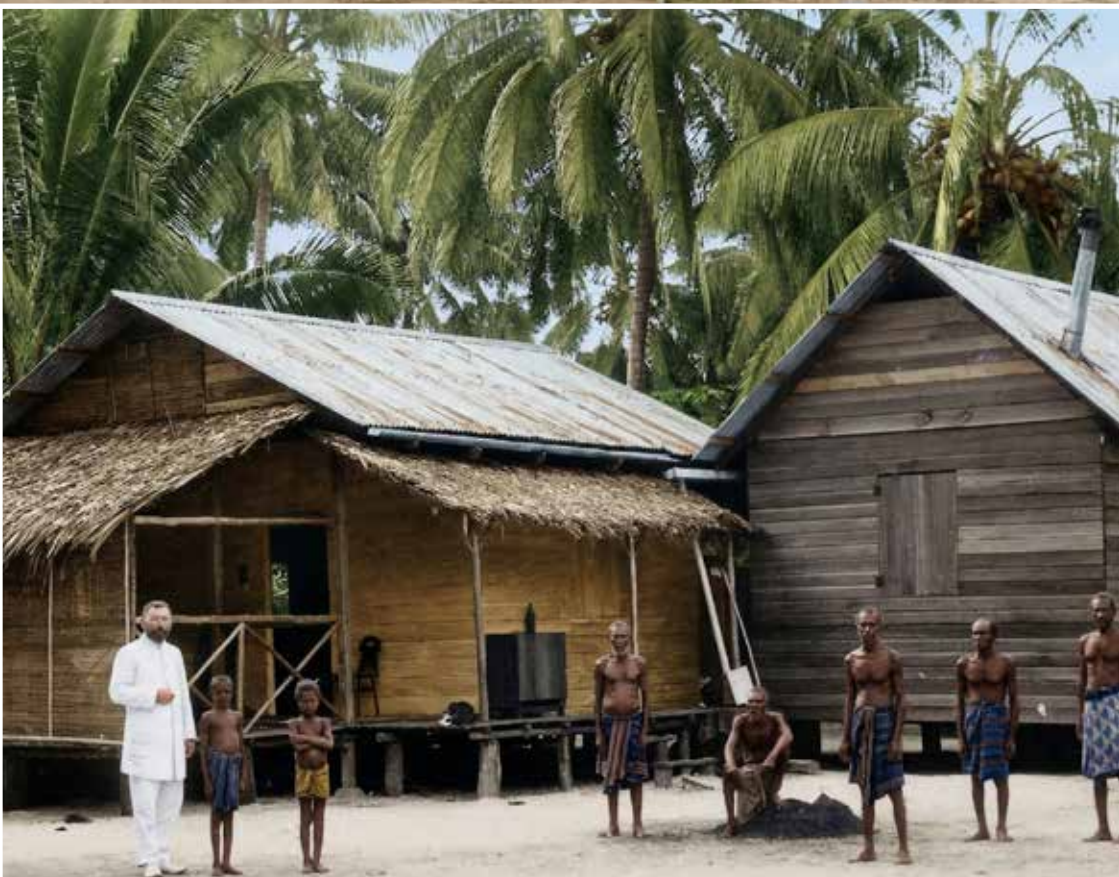
However, despite the enormous difficulties, the missionaries did not give up. With much sacrifice and not a few crosses, they managed to get the message of Christ to begin penetrating the souls

of the Tolai. Over time, the practices of devil worship, cannibalism, tribal fights, and disproportionate revenge began to diminish. Thus, Christianity truly challenged the ancient Tolai religion that was based on fear and vengeance. And the missionaries were constantly amazed that this was happening.

This was, then, the environment and culture of Saint Peter To Rot.



MSC missionaries in the 1930s





2- BIRTH

Rakunai, the village where Peter To Rot was born and lived, is located about eleven kilometres from Rabaul, the largest and most important city on the island of New Britain. In the Tolai language, “ra kunai” means “grass field,” and the village—which still exists and can be visited—receives this name because it is located in a highly fertile region. Located just a few kilometres from the sea and along one of the most important routes, in the times of Peter To Rot, the people did not have to worry too much about subsistence: the land provided them with all kinds of fruits and vegetables, the sea was an inexhaustible source of fish, and the jungle offered them countless animals.

When in 1902 Father Joseph Meier, MSC, took charge of the Rakunai mission, he found that the census book indicated there were between four hundred and five hundred Catholics in Rakunai, of whom only eighty regularly attended church. After a year of hard work, the situation began to improve:

Hundreds of children began to attend the church activities, and around a hundred of them enrolled in the mission school. Father Meier began organising the work of the catechists and distributing them into two areas. A brother helped him with the school. With the help of the village leader, in April 1904 he was able to complete the construction of a large church. Nevertheless, the natives remained quite indifferent

and unwilling to cooperate. On one occasion, while preaching about the evil practice of secret societies [magic and witchcraft], some men who were in the church jumped out of the windows, ran into the jungle, and disappeared because they did not want to be part of what was being said. (*Rakunai Mission Station*, 8)

Nowadays, it is taken for granted that Peter To Rot was born in the year 1912. However, if we want to be honest, we must admit that, even now, we do not know exactly when he was born. And regarding the day or month of his birth, we absolutely know nothing. There are articles and prayer cards of Peter To Rot that precisely indicate March 5, 1912, as the date of birth, but the truth is that this date is not recorded in any document.

As we mentioned earlier, the Tolai culture is exclusively oral, which is why there are no birth records or records of any other type. The only ones who carried out this work were the missionaries, and the names and birth dates of all the people in the villages were found in the baptism, confirmation, marriage, and death records. Unfortunately, all the records of the Rakunai parish were confiscated by the Japanese army during the war, and some of them have never been recovered. Even the duplicates, which were in the bishop's house, also partially disappeared during the air raids, when the bishopric, the cathedral, and the "headquarters" of the Catholic mission were reduced to rubble and ashes. In 2024, we were able to find some of those files that were considered lost, but we could not find the baptismal book in which To Rot's date of birth should be recorded. We have, however, found the original record of his marriage and the baptisms he performed during the war, as well as other invaluable material. But his own baptismal record, has not appeared as yet. For this reason, it is simply impossible to know with exactitude on which day and year our saint was born.

There are two more or less probable dates, and each one has arguments for and against.

- **The first possibility is that To Rot was born in 1912.** This is the most widely accepted opinion today and, in fact, it became the official date. Although there is no official record that confirms 1912 as Peter To Rot's birth year, the *Positio* does collect some testimonies that in one way or another lead us to conclude that this is the most likely date.

On one hand, we have the testimony of Peter To Rot's family members and schoolmates. For example, people born in 1910 said that To Rot was younger than them, people born in 1912 said they were classmates in school, and people born in 1914 said that To Rot was older than them. This argument seems quite weak, and indeed it is, because it is no secret that the Tolai have no interest in retaining and remembering precise dates. Moreover, reading the statements of these relatives and companions, one realises that there are a great number of contradictions.

On the other hand, Father Carl Laufer, MSC, wrote on August 10, 1952:

Father Emil Jakobi [parish priest of Rakunai from 1909 to 1922] found a willing collaborator in Chief To Puia, and baptised his third son, Peter To Rot, in 1912. (*Rakunai Mission Station*, 9)

However, in 1946 and in 1950, he had stated that To Rot was born in 1916. Those who prepared the *Positio* say that the 1952 text is more reliable because it was requested by his bishop to investigate the possibility of initiating a future cause for canonisation, and without a doubt, it is a more serious investigation than the previous ones.

Also, Father Joseph Theler, MSC, successor to Father Carl as pastor of Rakunai from 1949 to 1984, affirmed it twice in his biography *A Short Biography of Peter To Rot*.

Finally, on January 4, 2025, I received an email from the Dutch journalist Marianne Visser van Klaarwater, in support of this opinion.

Her uncle was an MSC missionary priest on Manus Island, very close to Rabaul. The missionary uncle was named Bernard van Klearwater, MSC (1896-1943), and his life deserves a separate book, because for twenty years he dedicated himself to evangelising an area heavily marked by cannibalism, tribal wars, and isolation. However, it was not the cannibals who ended his life, rather, it was the Japanese soldiers. In 1943, after the Japanese occupation of the region, he was captured along with other missionaries and civilians. There were around sixty people in total. On March 18, 1943, aboard the Japanese destroyer Akikaze in the Bismarck Sea, near their mission in Manus, the prisoners were brutally executed: shot one by one and thrown into the sea, including children who were thrown alive. Father Bernard was only forty-seven years old.

Father Bernard was a friend of the parish priest of Rakunai, and in January 1926 he decided to visit him in the village. And a few days later, on the 25th of January, 1926, he wrote the following to his sister:

I had the opportunity to visit the Rakunai station starting from Taliligap. I was accompanied on this excursion by the young Peter To Rot, a fourteen-year-old boy, and we rode on horseback. A winding, extremely picturesque road led us through the highlands, offering wonderful views of Blanche Bay on one side and, on the other, an immense expanse of prairies and rolling hills that resembled an endless chain of greenish fortresses. The walk was very pleasant, made even more enjoyable by the interesting stories that young Peter To Rot told me about the catechism.

Evidently, Father Bernard asked To Rot how old he was, and he replied that he was 14 years old in 1926, so he must have been born in 1912.

- **The second possibility is that To Rot was born in 1916.** In favour of this position, there are two documents written by the saint's friend and confidant, Father Carl Laufer, MSC.

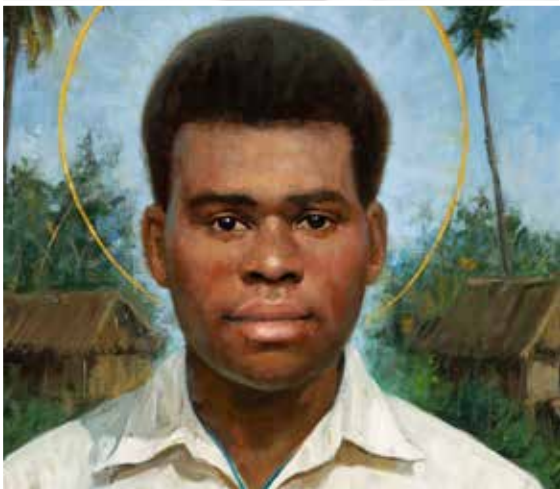
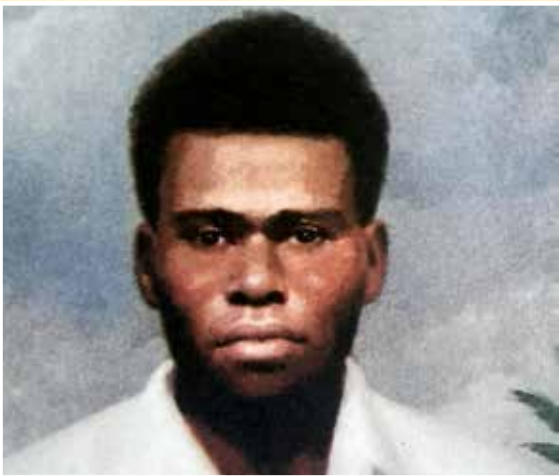
Thus, in 1946, he wrote the first biography of the martyr, which begins with these words:

Peter To Rot, son of the late chief To Puia and of Ia Tumul of Rakunai was born in 1916 and received his catechist-training in the Taliligap Catechist School. (*A Catechist Becomes a Martyr*, 1)

And in 1950 he wrote:

In January 1930, I commenced my work at the Mission Station of Rakunai... At this time, Peter To Rot was a youngster of fourteen. He endeared himself to me from our first meeting. (*Too Much Christo*, 2-3)

In summary, it is necessary to admit that, so far, we cannot have any certainty about the year of the saint's birth. Those who knew him best (his family, friends, and parish priests) do not concord, and indicate to different years. Even so, it seems that 1912 can be established as the most likely year of his birth.





Monsignor Louis Couppé on a trip to Europe in 1900, accompanied by two Tolaï children who were baptised in France



Waisenhaus & Knaben Haus der Missionare
 Selbstbeschule
 Im Hintergrund Kokospflanzung d. Tolaïer - Conr.



Haus d. Schwestern M. F. K. Kuchenhauz
 Waisenhaus der Mädchen Küche, Backofen, Tensio nat. & Mischküche.





B. Kübler, M. Gladbach

Kirche der bischöfl. Residenz, Vunapope, Neupommern.

Rabaul. 1930s.







Photographs sent by MSC missionaries to family members and benefactors in Europe



Neupommern-Kinigunan: Werkstätte der Brüder und Waisenknaben.

3- FAMILY

Peter To Rot's father was named Angelo To Puia, and he was one of the leaders or "clan chiefs" of Rakunai. His mother was named Maria Ia Tumul, and the testimonies collected in the *Positio* remember her as a kind, patient woman dedicated to her family. Being the wife of a leader, she also enjoyed the prestige and respect of the village inhabitants. Peter To Rot was the third of six children. The order of the siblings is as follows: Theresia Ia Varpilak, Joseph Tatamai (grandfather of the current Archbishop of Rabaul), Peter To Rot, Gabriel Telo, Ia Mama, and To Metek. Unfortunately, the last two died while still very young.

Angelo To Puia, the father of the family, also deserves some words of recognition in this book. If it weren't for the good upbringing he gave his children, we very likely wouldn't be talking about Saint Peter To Rot today. The faith and charity of this man were known to everyone in the village, and his son To Rot was a reflection of this great father.

Father Laufer, friend of Peter To Rot's family and parish priest of Rakunai and from 1930 to 1949, remembers Angelo in this way:

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 one of the chiefs, Angelo To Puia. To Puia was a sterling character, without a doubt the most influential person in the diocese. The natives revered him as their father and protector. At the founding of the Station in 1901, he,

as a young man, personally offered himself to the first priest to help him in any way that was needed. And this he did, standing by him in word and deed in the difficulties which accompany all beginnings. This same loyalty was displayed towards me until his death in 1938 [the correct date is 1937]. 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. (*Too much Christo*, 2)

We know that To Puia received the sacrament of Baptism in 1898 and was one of the first natives in the area to receive this sacrament. Father Laufer wrote: "In 1898, there was a large and spectacular Baptismal ceremony in Malagunan. The first adults from Rakunai were received into the Church at this time and received their spiritual rebirth through the Sacrament. Among them was To Puia, the father of To Rot." To Puia was still a chief of the village in 1930 when Peter To Rot left home in order to become a catechist, To Puia exercised this role in total for around 40 years, until his death on the 18th of September, 1937.

The *Positio* collected testimonies that assert To Puia was a good father and an excellent Catholic. Despite belonging to the first generation of Catholics in the village, his faith and charity did not waver looking back nostalgically at the pagan practices and traditions of his ancestors. On the contrary. His was a faith that translated into concrete actions, and all of the testimonies remember him as a man who did his best to alleviate the needs of the poorest and the orphans, whom he brought to live in his own house. The other leaders of Rakunai and the neighbouring villages always sought his advice and consulted him when they encountered great difficulties. He was happy with the friendship he forged with the European missionaries, whom he always invited to get to know both the village and his family. In fact, it was To Puia who donated the land so that the missionaries

could build the great church of Rakunai, the mission school, and the missionaries' house.

Angelo To Puia was a true leader for his people, and for this reason, the people of Rakunai followed his example and his orders. And it was in this way that he was able to guide the people of his village towards the true faith. During his forty years as the village leader, he always worked alongside the missionaries and contributed in an exemplary way to the growth of the mission.

A priceless witness of what we have said is given by his own daughter, Theresia Ia Varpilak, who, speaking of her brother and her family, testified, "My father was a clan leader. He was always took an interest in his children, our upbringing, the advice we received and our general wellbeing. Our family was well-known as a truly Catholic family, and our parents brought us up in accordance to the faith."

Another testament collected in the *Positio* is that of Joannes To Varto, a classmate and life-long friend of Peter To Rot: "To Puia was one of the most important and influential persons in the village. In local language he was a 'patuana' or 'luluai,' that is the local chief or leader. At the time of To Rot's birth, he was not only one of the leaders of the village but also a type of mayor. I knew him well. To Rot's mother was a quiet, gentle and loveable woman, committed to the upbringing and general wellbeing of her children. There really were a good Catholic family."

Anton Tata, successor of To Puia as chief of Rakunai, gave the following testimony: "To Rot was a chief's son. His father was To Puia. To Puia was chief in Navunaram for many years and was the religious leader in Rakunai."

Among all the testimonies that speak about the virtue and religiosity of Angelo To Puia, it is important to mention that of Father Joseph Theler, MSC, parish priest of Rakunai from 1949 to 1984. During his years as a parish priest, he dedicated himself, among other things, to gathering information about Peter To Rot and his family. And he declares, "Angelo To Puia was a respected wealthy chief and a

fine character. He was without a doubt the most respected person throughout the areas of Navunaram and Rakunai. He was the seen as the protector of the indigenous people.”

One of the documents that were considered lost and came to light in 2024 is the death and burial records of Rakunai. Thanks to it this document, we now know for certain that To Puia died on the 18th of September, 1937. In fact, Peter To Rot’s first son was born on December 5, 1939, and the saint named him To Puia, in memory of his late father.

Father Laufer remembers:

The wife and children of a chief enjoy a position of honour among the people, as long as the chief lives, but rarely after he has died, which makes what happened in the case of To Rot something worthy of mention. It has to be said, that, when To Rot commenced his ministry, his father’s authority supported him. But the fact that To Rot continued to have such great authority after his father’s death, can only be explained in consequence of his own great strength of character. He inherited neither position nor possessions from his father, and none of his siblings were influential enough to enhance his position in any way. This is a brief outline of To Rot’s family background, insofar as regards his father’s position and that of his wife and children. (*Rakunai...*, 5)

It is necessary to remember that Angelo To Puia and Maria Ia Tumul were among the first adults from Rakunai to be baptised. This was of vital importance for To Puia and his family, as well as for the rest of the people in the neighbouring villages. The fact that a leader received baptism and became a fervent Catholic had great and positive consequences in the lives of those villages. In some way, the baptism of To Rot’s parents and other adults in Rakunai was the starting point for the number of Methodists to begin to decline, and

at the same time, certain suspicions and slanders against the Catholic missionaries and their activities began to be abandoned. The faith and charity of To Puia were the path that Providence chose to gradually transform Rakunai into a Catholic village. To Puia was not only the great defender of the natives, but also of the missionaries. Thanks to him, Rakunai became a large and flourishing mission that, in addition to having one of the largest and most beautiful churches in the entire vicariate, also had a very respectable school and mission center, which at that time were luxuries that not all missionaries could afford.

Without a doubt, as we mentioned at the beginning of this second part of the book, the most important testimony is that of Father Laufer, MSC, parish priest of Rakunai for almost twenty years, from 1930 to 1949. He was not only a parish priest but also a friend and confidant of To Puia and his son To Rot. And he wrote:

It is of my twenty years of missionary work in Rakunai that I have been asked to write. It was during this time that I came to know To Rot. The first two years in Rakunai were hard for me as a missionary. It took me a long time to come to understand some of the attitudes and behaviour of the people. (...) The natives saw that I was genuinely interested in their lifestyle, their traditions and their needs. They saw that I could discuss matters which were of concern only to themselves. I tried, at the same time, not to compromise our Christian views of life in any way while still listening and giving careful consideration to other points of view and ways of thinking. I often asked the advice of Chief To Puia and other elders of the village. I asked for their advice regarding the opportuneness of the type of activities and projects I wished to conduct, and also regarding the best ways and means to make them a reality.

(...) After many attempts had failed, we were able to persuade the people, first from the local areas, and then

from further out, to come to the station on Sunday evenings. (...) During 1930, seven thousand people received Holy Communion, and the number swelled to thirty-two thousand by 1939. The school flourished. Many irregular marriages (i.e. non-sacramental) were rectified. The birth-rate increased. The Church calendar became filled with days of celebration. The parish grew in size. Rakunai once again had a respected name in mission circles.

To Puia and his son To Rot played an active part in all the above events. Many evenings I spoke with them about my plans and my concerns. To Rot exhibited a comprehension and determination such as I had never before found in a native. To Rot became a necessary part of my life, and on evenings when he did not come to me, I felt very down. And that is not exaggeration. A missionary who works, day after day, with the interests of the natives so much at heart, feels the need to talk as often as possible about these things with someone who shares similar interests. This is how I could speak with To Rot, finding no barrier between us. (*Rakunai...*, 10-12)

4- BAPTISM

Regarding the name given to Peter To Rot by his parents, it is necessary to know that surnames are not passed down from parents to children among the Tolai, as is customary in Western cultures. This is still the case even now in practically all regions of Papua New Guinea. In such a way that a child can have a surname completely different from that of their father, mother, and all their siblings. And this is the cause of no small amount of headaches for missionaries when it comes to searching for names in sacrament records to issue certificates. It is a tradition among the Tolai that the mother's brothers choose the names of their nephews or nieces. The prefix "To" that we find at the beginning of most men's names means "boy," while the prefix "Ia" that we find in women's names means "girl."

As we mentioned earlier, it is lamentable that a large part of the baptism records from the Rakunai missionary station were lost or destroyed during the war. For this reason, it is impossible to know with certainty the date on which To Rot received the sacrament of baptism. However, we know from Father Laufer that To Rot was baptised shortly after his birth by Father Emil Jakobi. Father Laufer says: "In 1909, Father Joseph Meier was replaced in Rakunai by Fater Emil Jakobi. As his predecessors had done, Father Jakobi found a willing helper in chief To Puia. It was Father Emil who baptised his third child, Peter To Rot, in 1912." (*Rakunai...*, 9)

At this point, it is useful to pause for a moment to consider something very important. Peter To Rot belonged to the second generation of

Catholics because his parents were the first adults to be baptised. This is important, and we must remember that To Rot did not come from a long Catholic tradition. And this, in some way, makes all his actions even more meritorious, as he had to be a saint in an environment that had only a few years earlier abandoned paganism, devil worship, all kinds of magic and superstitions, and even cannibalism. In any case, as we have said before, To Rot was blessed with exemplary parents, and that allowed him to grow up in a healthy and truly Catholic environment. His family was always closely connected with the origin and spiritual and material continuity of the missionary station in their own village.

5- CHILDHOOD

A few years ago, the grandson of Joseph Tatamai —the older brother of To Rot—, told me that his grandfather had been raised and educated by maternal uncles, according to Tolai custom. Angelo To Puia and Maria Ia Tumul had given their firstborn son to an uncle to be the father figure and ensure that the child lacked nothing. We have already mentioned this practice previously. It would be lengthy to explain the origins and meaning of this still-current practice, but we can summarise it by saying that in Tolai society, maternal uncles act as the main authority figures for their nephews and nieces. They educate, discipline, transmit cultural knowledge, help with payments of a bride price, and give an inheritance of property to their nephews, especially to the eldest son of the sister. It is not a total or permanent adoption, but a temporary and shared upbringing with the parents. The children spend significant periods living and being raised by maternal uncles to learn traditions, clan responsibilities, land management, rituals, and leadership. The maternal uncle, then, has a stronger role in upbringing and education than the biological father. And in the case of Joseph Tatamai, unfortunately, the fruits of this practice were terrible. The uncles who took care of his upbringing were not Christians (or at least, did not live as such), and they taught the child all kinds of superstitions, even initiating him into witchcraft and black magic. When the biological parents realised what was happening, it was already too late, the damage had been done. And to prevent this from happening again, when To Rot was born, they decided to raise him themselves. In fact, one of his early biographies

says: “As was the native custom, To Rot sometimes went to visit his uncle To Livuana. (...) But his father never let him stay there for a long time, and took him home as soon as possible.” (*A Short Biography...*, 5)

Peter To Rot, then, is the result of the Christian upbringing received from his parents. It was from them that he received education not only about the natural things in life but above all about the faith. It was at home where Peter To Rot learned the most important lessons of his life. And education within the home was the father’s responsibility.

While reading the testimonies of all the eye witnesses of To Rot’s life that appear in the *Positio*, it is surprising how many testimonies underline his obedience to his parents. His sister Ia Varpilak said, “Peter To Rot spent the years of his childhood in Rakunai. Those years were marked by his obedience to his parents... He had a peaceable and gentle nature.” His brother Tatamai goes still further, “As a child To Rot always obeyed his mother and father. He worked with them and never refused to do anything he was asked, whether the task involved doing the cooking or whatever else.” To Rot’s cousin, Gabriel To Uratun, also declared: “To Rot was his father’s favourite child because he was always obedient and always did whatever he was asked to do. To Rot was very fond of his parents and always helped them with their work.” Anton Tata, successor of To Puia as chief of Rakunai, testified, “To Rot was his father’s favourite child. If he ever failed in some minor matter, the error of his ways was explained to him, he accepted his correction, and he never repeated the same mistake again.”

It is very interesting what the short biography written by Father Theler, parish priest of Rakunai from 1949 until 1984, includes:

There was something very special about To Rot, even in his early youth. People stress that he was an especially docile child and obedient to both his father and his mother. This may have been the reason for him being his father’s favourite. Probably To Puia had recognised that To Rot was heir to

his strong character and therefore loved him particularly... According to Tata, To Puia's successor as chief of Rakunai, the father did not spoil his son. He reprimanded and punished him whenever he failed in trifles, and he always gave him advice. (*A Short Biography...*, 6)

When Peter To Rot was approximately seven years old, he was received into the parish primary school of Rakunai. His brother Tatamai said, "When he commenced going to school, there was never a day he took leave of absence unless he had suffered some injury or was otherwise ill. When school was over for the day, he immediately returned to his parents' home."

Father Theler's account continues:

From the time when the approximately seven-year-old To Rot was admitted to the village school, he never missed a day, except those when he could not walk because of illness or wounds. As school was not obligatory at the time, this gives a highly creditable picture of the both the parents who sent their child regularly to school and also of To Rot himself.

At school To Rot excelled not only in good behaviour, but also in his quick comprehension of subject matter. "He was always the first to answer all the questions," a former classmate told me. Another told how To Rot always offered himself to answer the questions and to speak whenever Bible recitation was in question and never made a mistake. So it was that he could be admitted early to receive his first Holy Communion.

Outside the school, To Rot was the boy's leader in work and games. All obeyed the chief's son who, moreover, showed promise to be a leader. He had a good influence on them. He often prevented them from stealing by asking the parish priest to give him some coconuts for them. Naturally, sometimes he participated in mischievous games and the

use of rough language, but as soon as things started to get serious, he took a stand for principle and went away. (*A Short Biography...*, 3-4)

The *Positio* includes other testimonies that also deserve to be read her, because they help us to better comprehend the child's character:

The child, Peter To Rot, benefited greatly from the years of his primary school education because of his regular presence at lessons and because of the diligent and disciplined way he undertook his studies and participated in all school activities. At the 1952 preliminary investigation, all of his classmates testified to the careful attention he always paid to the teaching of the priest and the catechist To Maraba.

Anton To Burangan spoke thus of Peter To Rot's classroom behaviour when Father Jakobi was in charge of the school: "Whenever a question was asked in class, To Rot was always the first to answer." The same witness also reported that, "when the children were left in the care of the catechist, To Rot continued to be the best student and became so good at learning the Bible by heart that he could recite the text word by word, as catechist To Maraba checked his performance in the book itself."

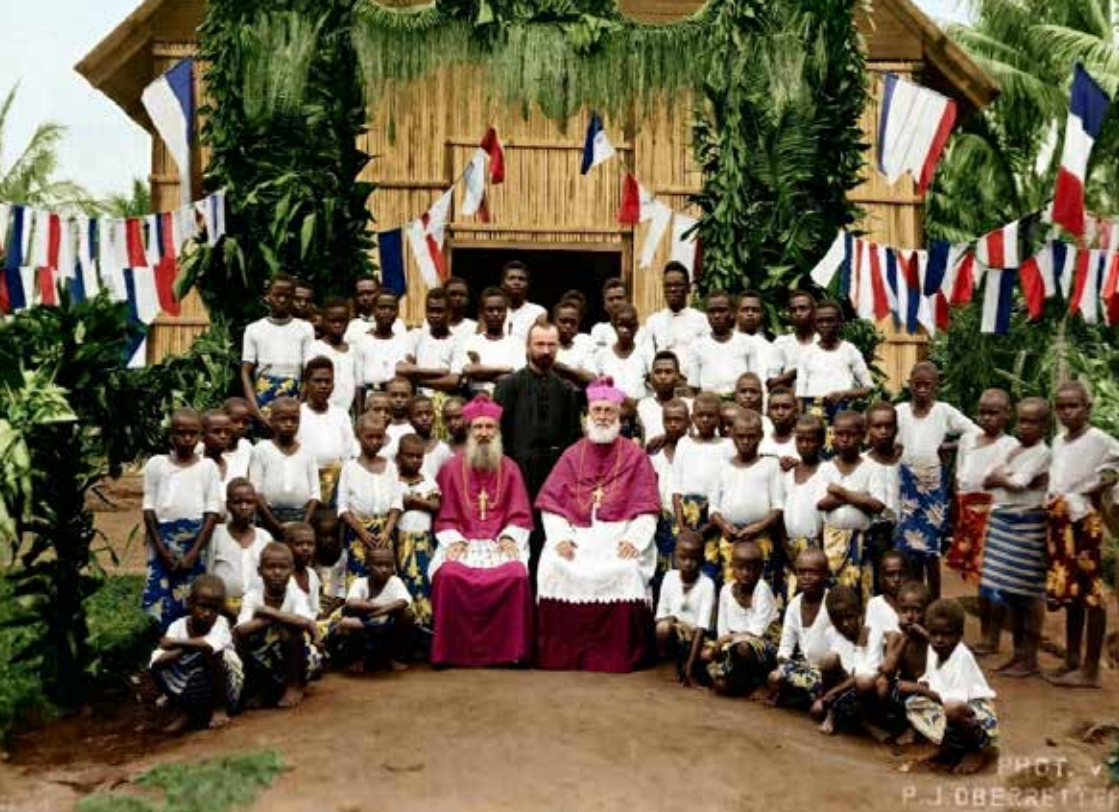
Many years later, testifying at the 1987 diocesan inquiry, Anton To Burangan still maintained of his classmate and very close friend: "He was a serious, hard-working student. He was noted for honesty and uprightness." Marta Ia Kot, also a classmate of Peter To Rot, remembered the Servant of God as one "who never gave any trouble; he was better than his brothers, who were less obedient."

As stated by Father Theler, school attendance was not compulsory at the time, which helps us to know what kind of parents To Rot had.

We should never forget that only two decades previously, they had abandoned paganism to Christianity, and now, we find them giving not only themselves but also their own sons and daughters to the care of the missionaries.

Anton Tata, successor of To Puia as chief of Rakunai, said, “When the boy was old enough, To Puia sent him to school. He paid careful attention to what the priest and his catechists taught, and To Rot had a high achievement record in schoolwork. Each day, when he came from school, To Puia would ask To Rot about what he had learned in school that day, and To Rot always had plenty to say. To Puia was very proud of his son and never failed to praise him.”

To save information that might be considered useless or uninteresting, we will not discuss the type of education To Rot received during primary school at the Rakunai missionary station. It suffices to say that, according to the preserved documents, we found that the curriculum, methodology, and religious instruction were very similar to the type of educational program used in European schools of the time, along with careful consideration of cultural modifications.



Monsignor Alain De Boimenu, MSC, Apostolic Vicar for Southern Papua, visiting his friend Monsignor Louis Couppé, MSC, in Rabaul. Circa 1936.

Rabaul. 1930s.



Neupommern-Kinigunan : Einige Waisenkaben.





6- FIRST HOLY COMMUNION

Once again, we must regret not having any record or document regarding Peter To Rot's first confession and first communion. As we have said on several occasions, the vast majority of parish and diocese records were lost during World War II. For this reason, it is sometimes difficult to find precise and accurate details about the dates of his life. Father Theler said: "To Rot received his first communion from Father Bender," and we know that Father Bender was the parish priest of Rakunai between 1922 and 1926. This means that during this period To Rot was a child between ten and fourteen years old.

The same information is given by Anton To Burangan, a friend and classmate of Peter To Rot: "After Father Jakobi's departure in 1922, Father Bender took control of the Station, and the children were left in the care of the Catechist. To Rot continued to be the best student. Father Bender gave To Rot and his classmates their first Holy Communion."

While it is impossible to know with certainty the exact date of To Rot's first communion, we do know that he received it before the usual age. It was a privilege granted by the parish priest because he was very impressed by his behaviour and, above all, with his devotion to the Eucharist. A biography of Peter To Rot written in 1973 by a Tolai priest who was very familiar with all these events says: "To Rot received the sacraments of confession and first communion before the usual age." This "usual age" was the third grade of primary school, as is still done to this day in most Catholic schools in Papua New

Guinea. Therefore, if the usual age was twelve, then we can conclude that To Rot made his first communion one or two years earlier, when he was still a boy of ten or eleven years.

Before proceeding with the biography of Peter To Rot, it may be useful to pause for a moment to say something about To Rot's devotion to Jesus truly present in the Eucharist. While we will later talk about the love for the Eucharist that he had as an adult catechist, it can also be enlightening to know something about the tender and innocent love he had for this sacrament during his childhood.

Father Theler tells us:

Father Ulrich, who was made head of the mission in 1926, wanted voluntary acolytes on a weekly basis but wanted them to come regularly. Again, To Rot was the first to apply. When the children were asked at school which of them had said their morning and evening prayers, To Rot always would raise his hand to show that he had done so. When the children were asked to write an account of the things they had done yesterday, To Rot's story always began with his morning prayer and then itemised all the things that he had done for his father and mother the day before. (*A Short Biography...*, 5)

To Rot's classmate and friend To Burangan said: "The priest-in-charge of Rakunai in 1926 called for two boys to be regular Altar servers every week. He wanted only volunteers. To Rot was the first to volunteer." To Rot's sister Theresia Ia Varpilak goes still further, testifying that To Rot did not only attend Mass weekly, but daily. It was out of his love for Our Lord in the Eucharist that To Rot decided to leave his own house and move to a relatives' house, in order to be closer to the church and so participate in the daily Mass, which was celebrated very early in the morning. She said: "Peter To Rot was a regular Altar server. He asked and obtained his father's

permission to live with relatives near the church, so as to be able to attend Mass daily.”

The *Positio* tells us:

Here, it is important to note that Peter To Rot’s volunteering to serve Mass daily was not an empty gesture or even an act of childish vanity. It was, instead, proof that a Christian home education, his contact with the parish priest and God’s grace were having their intended effect on the soul of this Tolai boy, planting in it the seeds of Christian virtue and making a young lad very different from his peers.

Without hesitation we can say that his love for the Eucharist was To Rot’s biggest secret and greatest treasure. It was thanks to the Eucharist that he came to know Jesus and developed a deep friendship with him. The very fact that he daily was close to the priest acting *In persona Christi* and helping him to perform the biggest miracle that we can imagine, as it is the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, developed in his small soul a true and sincere love for Our Lord.

A few years ago Pope Benedict XVI, addressing a group of altar servers said:

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the bond of friendship with Jesus. You are very close to Jesus in the Eucharist, and this is the most important sign of his friendship for each one of us. Do not forget it. This is why I am asking you not to take this gift for granted so that it does not become a sort of habit, knowing how it work and doing it automatically; rather, discover every day anew that something important happens, that the living God is among us and you can be close to him and help him so that his mystery is celebrated and reaches people. If you do not give

in to habit, if you put your innermost self into carrying out your service, then you will truly be his apostles and bear fruits of goodness and service in every context of your life: in the family, at school, in your free time. (*General Audience*, August 2, 2006)

The young To Rot was a friend of Jesus present in the Eucharist, he was close to Him and thanks to this friendship he became not only a great apostle but also a martyr. In one of his parables, Our Lord speaks of a treasure hidden in a field, which whoever finds it must leave everything they have to buy the field, for that treasure is worth more than anything one might give up. That treasure is Christ Himself. And To Rot discovered it at a very young age. He always lived —and thus died— with the conviction that in that small host lies Jesus, the true treasure that is always waiting to be discovered by us.

7- ADOLESCENCE

We want this brief biography of To Rot to be as realistic as possible, and for that reason, we do not try to present him as someone conceived without original sin or confirmed in grace already from his mother's womb. Peter To Rot, even though he was an exceptional young man, was also a normal young man. And by "normal," we mean that he, too, during his adolescence, got involved in problems that were normal for his age-group. To Rot, like many others during these adolescent years, sometimes disobeyed his parents, and on more than one occasion, he had to be punished for his behaviour or for his use of vulgar language. However, these episodes in his life, far from being a "black mark" on his "record," should be a source of comfort and hope for us. And despite the fact that the *Positio* collects testimonies of these acts of disobedience or misbehaviour or misuse of language, we do not find a single testimony of any serious sin committed by the young To Rot. And this already makes him someone exceptional.

To Rot's friend and classmate To Burangan declared: "He sometimes joined in the mischief initiated by other boys, and he sometimes used the kind of language that they did. But if things started to get out of hand, he would straightaway tell them that enough was enough, or otherwise he would leave."

In the biography written in 1952 we read:

To Rot was not born a saint. His father had to reproach him, rebuke him for his foolishness and even punish him.

At school, Father Jakobi who took care of Rakunai until 1922, also once got angry with the boy and boxed his ears. His schoolmate, To Burangan, who relates the story, does not remember why. Once, during a writing lesson, To Rot wrote a childish love letter on his slate and showed it to his sister Theresia after school was over. His sister told their parents about the letter; To Rot, called upon to answer for this, admitted immediately that he had written it. (*A Short Biography...*, 6)

His friend and confidant Father Laufer recalls:

In January 1930, I commenced my work at the Mission Station of Rakunai... 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. (*Too Much Christo*, 2-3)

Father Theler also says:

Naturally, sometimes, he participated in mischievous games and the use of rough language, but, as soon as things started to get serious, he took a stand for principle and went away. (...) He lived in peace and harmony with his brothers and sister. People also liked him because he was polite to everyone. He was the son of the big chief, but he knew neither arrogance nor obstinacy. He held the poor in high regards. Often, he climbed up the palm trees and knocked down coconuts for them. As was native custom, To Rot at times went to visit his uncle To Livuana. There, too, he was industrious

and obedient, but his father never let him stay there for a long time, and took him home as soon as possible. (*A Short Biography...*, 5)

The *Positio* and the other documents consulted to write this book do not contain many stories or anecdotes about this period of To Rot's life. However, all the family members and friends who testified during the preliminary investigation for the beatification cause agree on some important points. Everyone agrees that the young To Rot had a kind character and it was easy to befriend him. He never boasted about being the leader's son. On the contrary, he took on that responsibility, setting an example for his friends and classmates. He learned from his father To Puia to take care of the poor and the orphans, who never left him without something to eat. When he got involved in problems or was disobedient, he accepted the correction and fulfilled the penance. And he never lost the love for Jesus present in the Eucharist that he had as a child when he served at the altar for the first time.

To Rot continued growing until he became a young man. Soon, the time came to pay taxes for the first time. Now he had the right to leave school, but he continued his education until he went to the Catechist School in Taliligap.

Father Laufer, who always considered To Rot an outstanding child, had high expectations for him. He would have liked to see To Rot become a priest because of his ardent love for the Eucharist, his exceptional good behaviour, and his distinguished study skills. That was his intention when he approached To Puia to discuss the child's future. As soon as Father Laufer spoke about the possibility of To Rot becoming a priest, his father responded: "No, Father, I don't believe that one of our generation is ready to be a priest. It is too early for that. Perhaps one of my grandchildren or great-grandchildren will be that lucky. But if you want To Rot to be a catechist, please send him to the Catechist School at Taliligap."

8- CATECHIST TRAINING

It was during the opening months of 1930, when To Rot was 18 years old, that he came to Saint Paul's Catechist Training College in Taliligap. When he was leaving Rakunai in order to join the Catechist School, the parish priest gave him the farewell blessing and said: "Be good and behave well," at which the boy's old father drew himself up and proudly said: "He will, or he would not be my son!"

At this point, and before beginning with the education that To Rot received at the catechist school, it may be useful to recall some teachings of the Church about the importance, dignity, and work of catechists. In many countries, the word "catechist" is often identified with the person who, once or twice a week, dedicates a few hours of their time to prepare children and adolescents to receive the sacraments of initiation. However, in other countries —and Papua New Guinea is one of them— catechists dedicate their entire lives not only to preparing people to receive the sacraments but also to maintaining the faith in places that do not have the permanent presence of a priest. Here, in Papua New Guinea, this type of catechist is absolutely indispensable and performs invaluable work. They are the ones who daily gather people to pray and lead the prayers. They are the ones who prepare children and young people to receive the sacraments of initiation. They are the ones who prepare couples who wish to get married. They are the ones who visit the sick. And when the priest visits the village once or twice a year, he finds that the people are not only well-prepared to receive the sacraments, but he also finds a

vibrant and enthusiastic Christian community. Without them, the evangelisation of Papua New Guinea would have been impossible. Since the arrival of the first missionaries, the catechists have done an incredible job and a large part of the credit for evangelisation belongs to them. To this day, they are the “right hand” of the priest, and we, missionaries in Papua New Guinea, will never tire of thanking them for their generosity and dedication.

In 1997, Pope John Paul II spared no praise for catechists, stating that “without them, flourishing churches would not have been built today.” He wrote:

I am anxious to give thanks in the Church’s name to all of you, lay teachers of catechesis in the parishes, the men and the still more numerous women throughout the world who are devoting yourselves to the religious education of many generations. Your work is often lowly and hidden but it is carried out with ardent and generous zeal, and it is an eminent form of the lay apostolate. (...) How many of us have received from people like you our first notions of catechism and our preparation for the sacrament of Penance, for our first Communion and Confirmation!

(...) **But the term “catechists” belongs above all to the catechists in mission lands.** Born of families that are already Christian or converted at some time to Christianity and instructed by missionaries or by another catechist, they then consecrate their lives, year after year, to catechizing children and adults in their own country. **Churches that are flourishing today would not have been built up without them.** I rejoice at the efforts made by the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples to improve more and more the training of these catechists. I gratefully recall the memory of those whom the Lord has already called to Himself. I beg the intercession of those whom

my predecessors have raised to the glory of the altars. I wholeheartedly encourage those engaged in the work. I express the wish that many others may succeed them and that they may increase in numbers for a task so necessary for the missions. (*Cathechesi Tradendae*, 66)

Years later, the same Pope recalled that catechists enjoy a place of honour in the heart of the Church. On that occasion, he called them “specialists, direct witnesses and irreplaceable evangelizers.”

Among the laity who become evangelizers, catechists have a place of honour. The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church speaks of them as **“that army of catechists, both men and women, worthy of praise, to whom missionary work among the nations owes so much. Imbued with the apostolic spirit, they make a singular and absolutely necessary contribution to the spread of the faith and of the Church by their strenuous efforts.”** It is with good reason that the older and established churches, committed to a new evangelization, have increased the numbers of their catechists and intensified catechetical activity. But “the term ‘catechists’ belongs above all to the catechists in mission lands.... Churches that are flourishing today would not have been built up without them.”

Even with the extension of the services rendered by lay people both within and outside the Church, there is always need for the ministry of catechists, a ministry with its own characteristics. **Catechists are specialists, direct witnesses and irreplaceable evangelizers** who, as I have often stated and experienced during my missionary journeys, represent the basic strength of Christian communities, especially in the young churches. (*Redemptoris Missio*, 73)

Saint Paul's Catechist Training College, the school attended by Peter To Rot, was a training center for catechists established in 1925 by Monsignor Gerhard Vesters, MSC, at that time Apostolic Vicar in Rabaul.

In a brief document called *The Catechist*, Father Joseph Lakaff, MSC, himself gives us some details about the life and work of the catechists on the island of New Britain. It is an article published in 1932 in the magazine *Pioneers of the South Seas*, in which the work done by catechists over the past fifty years is recounted. We must remember that Father Lakaff was the director of the catechist school in Taliligap, which To Rot attended from 1930 to 1933. That is to say, **this document was written while To Rot was still a student at the school**, and therefore it can help us better understand the type of education he received during those years.

Father Lakaff, MSC, wrote:

The number of foreign Missionaries is never adequate, and the education of a sufficient number of native clergy is a long drawn out process, so that it is impossible to do justice to the demands of the Apostolate without the help of a large army of Catechists. The effectiveness of a Missionary is as dependent upon his Catechists, as the effectiveness of a General in an army is dependent upon the character of his subordinate officers. In their Catechist schools, the Catechists are trained to assume responsibility for various pastoral needs in the parishes to which they will be appointed. In his own sphere, the Catechist is a true Missionary. He is explorer, outpost-teacher, watchman. He loosens the soil in the unploughed fields in which the seed of faith will be planted. (...) He cautions against dangers and prepares the way for the final triumph of the faith. Because Catechists are acquainted with the mentality of their own people, their life styles, traditions, ideas about various aspects of life, their language, they give a

priest working, with their assistance, among a native people, a distinct advantage over the unassisted foreign missionary.

(...) In the presence of thirty Missionaries the solemn dedication of St. Paul's College took place on the 19th February 1925.

The fruits of the Catechist Training School did not delay, and in very few years, the number of students joining the "army of Catechists" could be counted in hundreds. Father Lakaff's accounts continues:

In the last eight years, more than a hundred students have been accepted into the Preparatory School and 420 into the College. These students have come from more than thirty different language groups in the Vicariate. Also, during these eight years, two hundred and forty students have graduated from the College and have taken up appointments.

The catechist school was located on a large expanse of land that the mission had bought years ago, fifteen kilometres away from Vunapope, the headquarters of the Catholic mission for the islands of New Britain, New Ireland, and Bougainville, the largest island in the Solomon Islands archipelago.

Father Louis Navarre, MSC, in his book *Handbook for Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Working Among the Natives* states:

At the end of his catechist training, a young man should have: developed specific spiritual qualities to fit him for his vocation life; acquired an understanding of several different procedures to be used in the evangelization of pagans; familiarised himself with his responsibilities and the form of ministry he was to exercise among Catholics, both when a priest was present on a mission station and when he was

unavoidably absent; received sufficient training to be able to organize a village primary school, to learn a local language if necessary, to give religious instruction, to teach secular basic subjects, to keep school records, to write reports, and to be able to promote school activities.

When Peter To Rot was enrolled at Taliligap, Father Lakaff was the Director of the College, assisted by one priest, one brother and one catechist. We know that To Rot was happy with his teachers, his fellow students and life in general. Since the very first day, according to his parish priest, To Rot felt at home. He liked to study, and his annual reports were always some of the best. Gradually he became more serious and independent, which made Father Lakaff gain his confidence and trust. Shortly after his arrival, To Rot became Father Lakaff's right hand and accompanied him on a number of journeys.

Thanks to To Rot's fellow catechists who gave testimony during the inquiry for the beatification, we can know the rhythm normal day in the College was. The daily routine began with the Holy Mass, at 6 am. After this, the students had some time for a general clean-up of the place and breakfast. After breakfast, they went inside the classroom for their instruction, which included Bible study, catechesis, English, basic teaching and choir practice. Morning classes concluded at 12 noon, followed by lunch. After lunch, they had some time to work in the farm until 3 pm. This was followed by a bath and study until 6 pm, which was the time for supper. Finally, they had some free time before going to sleep. Father Lakaff, director of the Catechetical School during To Rot's times, wrote:

The daily life of the student Catechist is dedicated to serious study, but this is reasonably interrupted with recreation, gymnastics and physical activity in their gardens. Understandably, most of their time is dedicated to the study of religion and to religious practice. Since the village school

will be their main field of endeavour later on, they have also to be educated to be proficient in all the elementary school subjects. The students thoroughly enjoy their singing, sport and gymnastics. Every year on the 24th May, Empire Day, the students and teachers go to Rabaul there to give a visible display of some of their scholastic abilities, along with students from other schools, in the presence of the Governor of the colony. The "Olympic Games" which take place annually before the Feast of St. Joseph, also make for a big break in the routine life of the College. Oral and written examinations precede the games, and then on March 19th awards are distributed. Three times a year there are vacation periods for all students, at Christmas, Easter and again in August. In September, before the students begin the new academic year, they have a day of retreat. The visits of many important people, who come to Taliligap not only to enjoy the beautiful view but also to assess the work and activities of the School, are also exciting occasions for the students. (*The Catechist*, 10)

The catechists were trained to be true soldiers of Christ. As soon as they finished their training, they would be sent to different villages, and most likely they would find themselves alone. The villages with a stable presence of the missionary priest were really very few, therefore all the responsibility fell on the catechists. They were responsible for teaching the faith and morals, visiting the sick, visiting families, preparing for the sacraments, teaching primary school classes, and a long list of other activities.

Let us follow the Catechists in the field of labour entrusted to them. They call the new Christians together for morning and evening prayer; teach them both their family and religious duties, and caution them when they do something wrong.

They teach the children; they stay with the dying in the absence of the missionary, pray with them and prepare them for the voyage into eternity. They read the prayers at the graveside of the deceased person. When two distant villages come into conflict, they use all their authority to bring about a reconciliation and to establish peace. The catechist is always watchful that good Catholics are not led astray by the bad example of others who are not so strong in the faith, and if this kind of situation threatens to get out of hand, he reports it as quickly as possible to the Missionary to give him every opportunity to nip the trouble in the bud. Oh, how much good have these hidden apostles brought to the communities whom they serve, and how little they spare themselves in the constant dedication they show to their vocation. To how many children have they opened the gates of heaven, which would otherwise have been closed to them. To how many adults have they given conditional baptisms at the hour of death and obtained for them eternal happiness. How many would not have been converted from their erroneous ideas but for these Catechists. How much quarrelling and strife and murder and manslaughter have they prevented.

(...) All missionaries unanimously agree that good Catechists are precious, indispensable co-workers. It is said that Pius IX remarked to a certain Vicar Apostolic who was full of praise for the zealous work of his Missionary priests: "As long as you have not educated good Catechists, there can be no depth or permanency of your work." (*The Catechist*, 2, 4)

Father Theler, the school director during the end of To Rot's period as a catechist student, was still alive during the investigation carried out in 1952, so he left us a summary of what he remembers from those years:

When To Rot arrived at Taliligap, he noted that the pupils were eating, playing and learning together. He wanted to adapt himself to their ways as soon as possible and asked the boys who had been there for some time already, to explain the rules of the institute so that he could comply with them. His behaviour in class was praiseworthy. He sat quietly in his place and looked always to the front. Although at times he was persuaded by other boys to join them in mischief-making, he refrained at once when the teacher admonished him. Neither did he shy away from work in the plantation. He was a healthy young man and was physically strong. He was never headstrong, but followed the orders given him. He never abandoned a job, even when it was very hot, for he had already recognised the expiatory value of work. (*A Short Biography...*, 7)

During these years, as when he was a child, the love and devotion shown by To Rot to Jesus present in the Eucharist caught one's attention. He was convinced of those words of the Saviour, when speaking to his disciples he said: "*For without me, you can do nothing.*" (Jn 15:5) This is why he made the Eucharist the center of his life, even when it put his own life at risk, as we will see later. He never gave up his visits to the Blessed Sacrament, even amidst all his activities and responsibilities. It was a practice he had acquired as a mere elementary school child, and which would accompany him for the rest of his life. The aspiring catechist was convinced that every action aimed at the glory of God, the salvation of souls, and one's own sanctification finds its strength and efficacy in the Eucharist. Thus, several decades later, Pope John Paul II would teach it:

Every commitment to holiness, every activity aimed at carrying out the Church's mission, every work of pastoral planning, must draw the strength it needs from the

Eucharistic mystery and in turn be directed to that mystery as its culmination. In the Eucharist, we have Jesus, we have his redemptive sacrifice, we have his resurrection, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have adoration, obedience and love of the Father. Were we to disregard the Eucharist, how could we overcome our own deficiency? (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 60)

The same director of the catechist school recalls To Rot's love for the Eucharist and his frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament in this way:

To Rot prayed often and with great pleasure. At church, he prayed with true fervour. He went to church before going to work and also on his way home, after meals, and many times in the course of the day, when lessons left him some time for himself. **His love for Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament was immense. He received Holy Communion every day: for he knew that Our Saviour is His workers' strengthening power.** (*A Short Biography...*, 8)

Even with these exemplary and unusual attitudes, we should not think that the life of the future catechist was entirely different from that of his peers. Although his virtue was already proving to be exceptional and everyone recognised it, he still remained a village youth who enjoyed joking and playing with his companions. Even so, during those games and jokes, he tried not to lose his virtue and displease Christ. That's why his companions will remember him, among other things, as a peacemaker:

Certain times (at the school) were allotted to sport. He (To Rot) did not regret this, nor consider sport worthless. He was aware that God also wanted his participation in sport. Therefore, he played with heart and soul, be it football or

any other game. But when players started quarrelling, he quit the game at once, because he did not approve of brawls. When two people quarrelled, To Rot went over to them and talked to them in a joking way. He wanted to make them laugh, so that their wrath could blow over. He himself liked to joke. If someone made him angry, he never gave a thought to revenge.

One day some of the students were playing on the highway. One boy made the others so angry that they caught him, tied his hands and feet and ran away. To Rot did not run away, he hid nearby, he wanted to untie the mischief-maker as quickly as possible. After this, To Rot asked the other boys to forgive this lad and did not leave the offender until the others left in peace. If someone was discouraged with life in the institution and wanted to run away, he would try to persuade him not to do so and encourage him to stay. (*Idem*)

Thanks to Father Theler's account, we can discover To Rot's application to study, his obedience, his attitude towards sport, and his dedication to work and other physical activities. More importantly, we can also discover To Rot's concern for spiritual values: his fervour in prayer, his daily reception of the Eucharist, his frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, his happy peace-loving nature, and his ability to counsel and console others who had problems or were becoming discouraged.

There are more witnesses who can prove what we have just said, but it is not necessary to multiply quotes or testimonies. It is enough to know that all his companions agree in praising To Rot's faith and firm principles. Everyone remembers his obedience, humility, loyalty, and punctuality. Everyone agrees in pointing out To Rot as a young man with true leadership qualities and the ability to make peace. Finally, everyone also remembers his calm and gentle nature along with great self-control when provoked.

Joseph To Pupuke, a fellow classmate at Taliligap, said: “I took special note of Peter To Rot because I saw in him the qualities of an ideal catechist. In particular I observed his obedience, humility, loyalty and punctuality. For me, To Rot stood out among all the students as the one to follow.”

Simeon To Palauva, another fellow student, also recalled:

Some fine catechists, men of principle and strong faith, passed through the College, but in my opinion Peter To Rot was outstanding among them in virtue. He never grumbled or hesitated in obedience. He was charitable to all, irrespective of tribe clan or any other factor and was universally loved and respected. At times, some of the students tried to test his virtue in different ways, but he remained calm and controlled in all circumstances. I could not gauge whether To Rot’s virtue sprang from his natural character or from the effects of grace, but it was certainly evident to all. He was a daily communicant, which was unusual in those times.

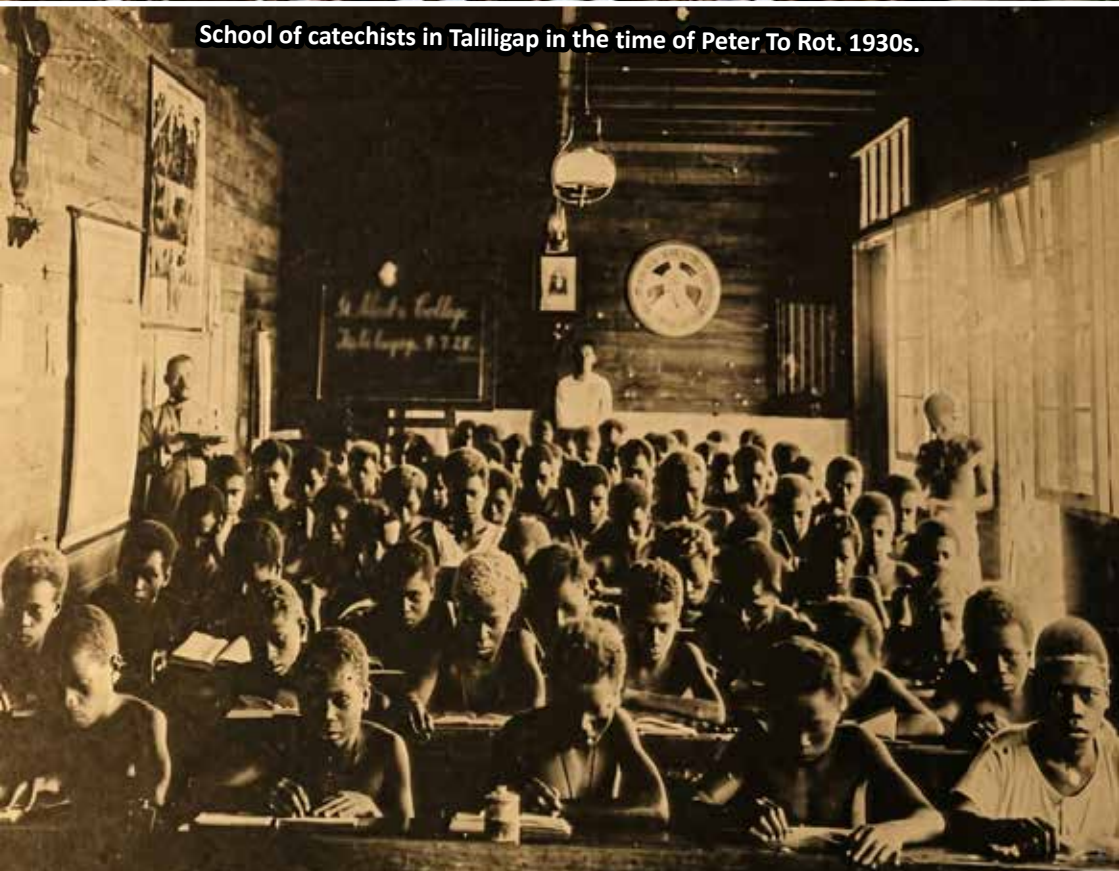
In Taliligap, the formation of catechists lasted for three or four years, after which they received notice of the places to which they have been appointed. The responsibilities of their office were contained in the handbook, the contents of which were expected to become etched into their very hearts, since these determined their lifestyle and the fruitfulness of their apostolate.

However, in Peter To Rot’s case, these three or four years’ of formation were not possible. A catechist in Rakunai, his home village, left the ministry, and a replacement was urgently required. Even though he had not completed the prescribed period of time for a complete catechist training course, at the beginning of 1933, he left the school in Taliligap and returned home to help the parish priest of the mission . Father Theler recalls this episode as follows:

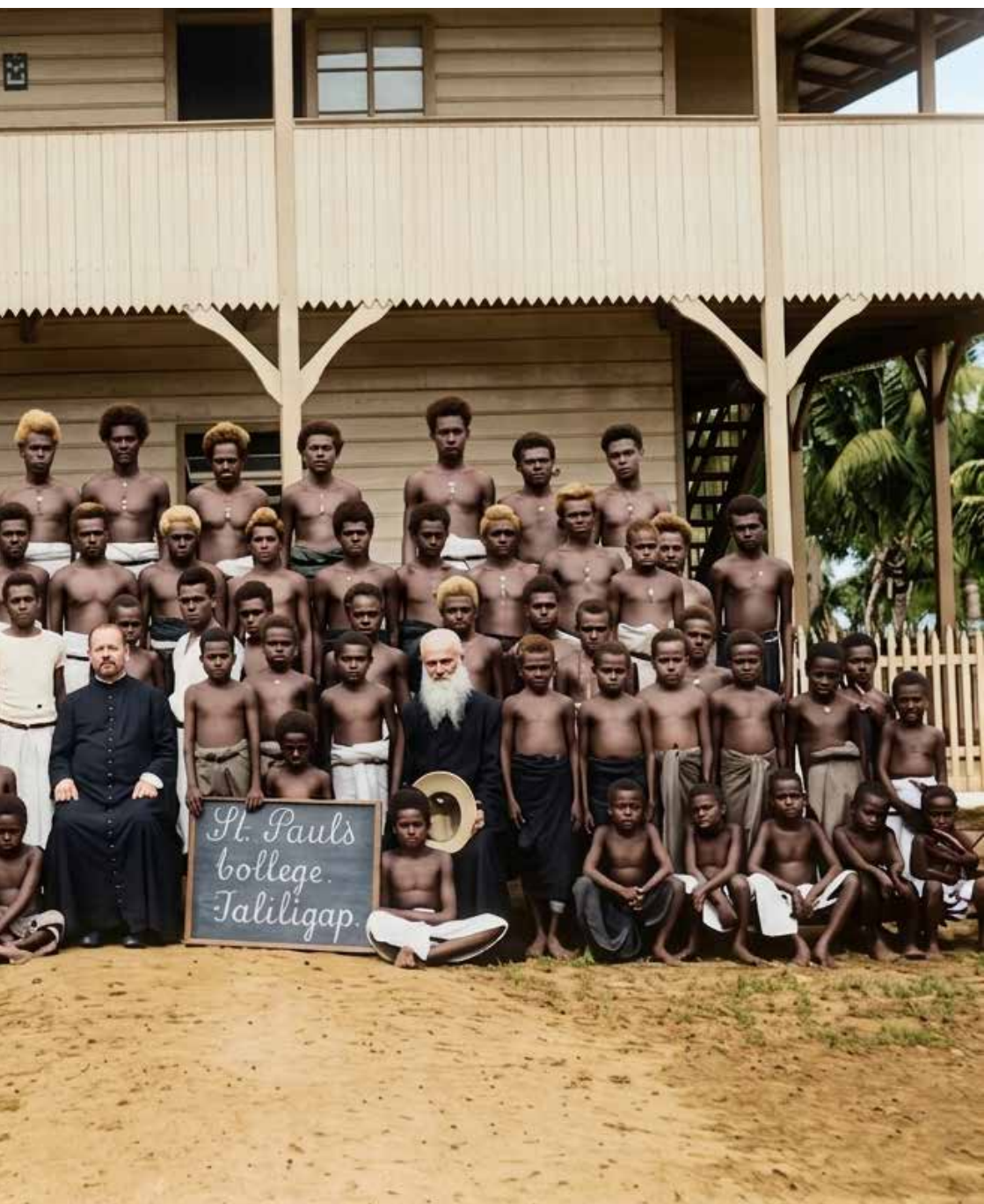
To Rot did not remain very long at the catechist school. His parish priest needed him urgently and called him back before the end of the third year. To Rot obeyed and returned home at the beginning of 1933 and became the youngest catechist aiding the parish priest of Rakunai Station. As his fellow catechists remember, he was modest, and there was no conceit in him, neither because of his background nor his youthful capabilities. He let the older catechists guide him in his work and accepted their advice. But quickly he out-shone them all and became their recognised leader, despite being the youngest. Even so, he never changed his attitude and was modest and amiable as ever, so that there was no envy or ill-will among them. Frequently in the evenings, he went to his parish priest; he wanted to improve his education and to ask him questions to which he himself could find no answer. He not only wanted to learn new things, but also to understand them, which is an uncommon phenomenon among natives. (*A Short Biography...*, 9)



School of catechists in Taliligap in the time of Peter To Rot. 1930s.







Monsignor Vesters, MSC, with four catechists who served for 25 years



Original documents from the time of Peter To Rot

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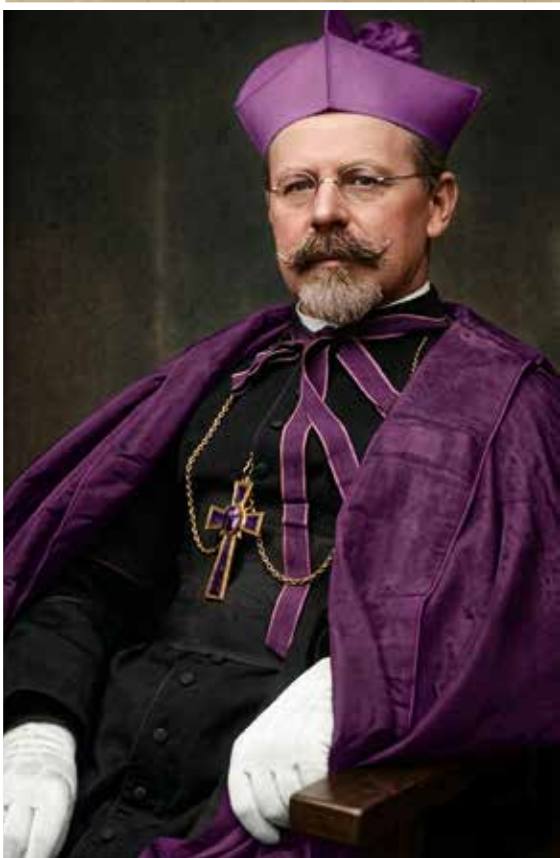
Catholic Mission of the Society of the Sacred Heart

(No) NATIVE TEACHERS

Name	Sex	Age	Office and Station	Name of School	No. of Pupils (1911-12)	No. of Pupils (1912-13)
Kombe-Distr. Talasea.						
To Varpin	M	35	Kadoka	Pati	12-18	18-24
Tuklia	M	25	Kautaga-Mou	Gagelo	12-18	18-24
To Valagur	M	30	Vase	Mova	12-18	18-24
To Vulpitia	M	25	Kalapesi	Kaindavu	12-18	18-24
Somalani Mogelepula						
Kikivoeai Tukuni tult.						
To Matarore	M	25	Guhu	Mai	12-18	18-24
Vogevoqe Kase						
Gurugulen	M	35	Mukakau	Anou	12-18	18-24
To Vuse	M	35	Moileagani	Mangai, tult.	12-18	18-24
To Anit	M	25	Kapo	Kamboi	12-18	18-24
To Ulavai	M	30	Nutanovua	Sale	12-18	18-24
Kali-Distr.						
To Oita	M	25	Renga	/	12-18	18-24
Lapua						
To Rot	M	30	Taveleai & Ketenge	Moivovo Vorou	12-18	18-24
Vase						

XXXXX Jahresstatistik 1936 XXXXX

1. Stationes principales:	53
2. secundarias:	415
3. Catholici	51047
4. Communicantes residentes:	10771
5. absentee:	2372
6. extranei:	1076
7. Catechumeni et	
8. adherentes:	36762
9. Haeretici:	25000
10. Pagani:	25000
11. Ecclesiae cum Sanctissimis:	61
12. sine	1372
13. Oratoria semipublica:	5
14. Associationes:	33
15. Sacerdotes:	60
16. Fratres laici:	51
17. Sorores europaei:	296
18. indigenae:	46
19. Catechistae viri:	421
20. feminae:	34
21. Scholae elementares:	422
22. Magistri europaei:	53
23. indigenae:	410
24. Element. pueri:	6630
25. puellae:	5871
	12501
26. Collegia educationis:	21
27/28. Magistri 11. magistrae	20
29. Alumni:	189
30. Alumnae:	61 (615)
	804
31. Collegia catechistarum:	4
32/33. Magistri europ. indigenae:	5
34. Alumni:	200
35. Scholae professionali:	3
36. Alumni 13. alumnae 39:	52
37. Hospitia:	124
38. Hospites in anno:	7558
39. Pharmacopolia:	42
40. Curae sanitatis:	418 000
41. Sarcophagi:	2
42. Parvuli tractati:	8425
43. Mortalia spiritalia:	12
44. Conversi ex haeresi:	113
45. Leprosi in haeresi:	112
46. Baptismi adultorum in periculo mortis:	459
47. extra periculum mortis:	2312
48. infantum prout christianorum:	1842
49. paganorum in per. mort.:	166
50. extra per. mort.:	1720
51. Communiones de praescripto:	29751
52. Devotionis:	1130066
53. Primae:	1171740
54. Defuncti adulti 1039, 61. infantum 1019	
summa:	2050



9- THE CATECHIST PETER TO ROT

In this section, we will quote many testimonies of the people who knew To Rot well. We consider that a “first-hand account” of a relative or a friend is much more interesting and useful than what the Author of this book himself has to say.

When To Rot returned to his hometown at the beginning of 1933 to begin his ministry as a catechist, he was a young man of just twenty-one years. Those who were witnesses during the beatification process remember him as a strong and healthy man, whom everyone looked upon with love and respect for his work, his virtue, and also for being the son of the leader. One of his primary school classmates in Rakunai said of him: “I noted that on his return from Taliligap, he was more mature and aware of his new status, but without having lost his dispositions to humble service. He was given full reverence and respect by the people.”

Those who knew him well say that **To Rot had only one ambition: he wanted to be a good catechist.** He knew that helping his own people and being available to the parish priest and the parish’s missionary activities was the only important thing. And it was during the 1930s that Rakunai became a respected village, imitated by other missions, thanks to the generous work carried out by the missionaries and catechists.

Let’s briefly look at some of the virtues and qualities of the catechist To Rot.

Humble and Kind

The young catechist To Rot began his ministry in Rakunai in all modesty and humility, making himself immediately beloved by everyone. He never boasted about his knowledge nor about being the member of an important family of the village. Father Theler remembered To Rot as “a calm and kind-hearted person, always ready to fulfil his duty and generous in his work.” His brother Tatamai said that To Rot “was never angry, was ever calm, and ever showed compassion for underprivileged people.”

Something very important to highlight is the fact that, in addition to the formation he had received in Taliligap, Peter To Rot always asked for advice. He was humble and never thought that his formation was enough to solve all the problems. First of all, he would seek the advice of his parish priest, but at the same time, he would listen to the other catechists of the village. Father Theler said:

He let the older catechists guide him in his work and accepted their advice. (...) And he was always as open and sincere with his parish priest as he was with the people. He never concealed anything from him, but rather reporting all the difficulties and problems that may occur. At the same time, he always openly defended the priest (...) Frequently in the evenings he approached his parish priest; he wanted to improve his education and to ask him questions to which he himself could find no answer. He not only wanted to know things but also to understand them. (*A Short Biography...*, 9)

A fellow catechist of To Rot, Paschal To Uvae, recalled:

To Rot's work as a catechist was most admirable. He seemed capable of handling any task that came his way. We senior catechists frequently spoke with the young, recently arrived

recruit, and he always gladly accepted and thanked us for our advice. Within a short time, to our great surprise, without having realised it was happening, we began to look to him as our leader! Everyone liked the way in which he taught religion and gave religious instruction. This style of teaching meant his classes were always interesting. His daily life reflected his teachings. When they think back on the days when To Rot still lived among them, this is what people remember best of him.

To Rot's classmate and friend, Johannes To Varto, testified:

To Rot continued to take private lessons from the priest. Even at night he would often go to see the priest to seek his advice about many matters which gave him some concern, especially teachings about God and the Catholic faith.

Another witness, Raphael To Labit, said:

I knew To Rot as a catechist from his very first days in Rakunai. He was always very humble. He never forced his ideas to anyone. He followed the advice of us older men, and was always ready to listen to anything we had to say. All the local people liked him, some because of the style of religious instructions he gave, some because of the way he lived, **because he always practised what he preached.** He was not one who was subject to moods, but always exhibited the same even temperament. He was always open with the priest and kept no secrets from him, and he showed the same openness to his own village folk. He encouraged them to a better way of life, always in a kindly fashion. I don't remember that To Rot ever showed anger to anyone. Certainly, if he ever was angry, he never let it be seen.

Defensor of the Catholic Faith

Although he had a natural gentle temperament, To Rot never reduced the eased the expectations of the faith attempting to please or satisfy his own relatives or friends. He sought to please God alone. He always showed himself as a strong defender of the Catholic faith, no matter what the people could think or say about him. Concern for what others would think of him, one of the worst enemies of our apostolates, did not exist in him. Father Theler's account says:

He defended openly and on every occasion the Catholic faith and morals even reprimanding when necessary. One night, he and some friends went to Vunadidir and collected the magic amulets hidden by the people. Afterwards, he reproached them strongly because of their false Christianity.

The people of the village knew that To Rot sought the spiritual well-being and salvation of their souls. That's why, even when he pointed out a person's mistake and condemned them harshly, everyone knew that behind the fervour of his correction lay the love of his catechist heart. Everyone witnessed that To Rot practiced what he preached, and for that reason, his corrections bore much fruit.

We can say that To Rot applied to himself the mysterious words of Jesus: *"My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me."* (Jn 7:16) He sought to faithfully transmit the doctrine of the Church that he had received, without adding or subtracting anything of his own. Peter To Rot did not seek preach his own doctrine or a new doctrine but preached only the doctrine he had received, Jesus' doctrine, as taught by the Catholic Church. To use an expression of Pope Saint John Paul II, this made him "Christ's spokesman," Pope Saint John Paul II tells us:

We must therefore say that in catechesis it is Christ, the Incarnate Word and Son of God, who is taught —everything

else is taught with reference to Him— and it is Christ alone who teaches, anyone else teaches to the extent that he is Christ's spokesman, enabling Christ to teach with his lips. Whatever be the level of his responsibility in the Church, every catechist must constantly endeavour to transmit, by his teaching and behaviour, the teaching and life of Jesus. He will not seek to keep directed towards himself and his personal opinions and attitudes the attention and the consent of the mind and heart of the person he is catechizing. Above all, he will not try to inculcate his personal opinions and options as if they expressed Christ's teaching and the lessons of His life. (*Catechesi tradendae*, 6)

To Rot's own blood sister, Theresia Ia Varpilak, said:

To Rot always defended the faith, especially in the case of mixed marriages, which were frowned on by the Church at that time. This caused conflict with the Methodists in the area, and Peter To Rot was known to have had arguments with them.

Once again, it is his friend To Varto who recalls To Rot's ministry in the following way:

Regarding the virtuous behaviour of Peter To Rot, I particularly remember his frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament. He was zealous and wished to faithfully follow the instructions he received from his parish priest regarding visits to the sick or to sinners who lived far from God. He was an example to everyone in his prayer life and his dedication to the ministry of catechist. He was truly an extraordinary man.

Also, Johan To Keleto, a young teenager who received religious instruction from To Rot, recalls the following: “I especially respected To Rot for his honesty, his fairness, and his nobility.” With his life, he taught us how we, young adolescents, should behave.

And Bernardet Ia Oget, To Rot’s first cousin, also remembers:

To Rot was a man who dedicated himself entirely to his mission: he performed marriages, baptised, prepared the sick for a holy death, and many other things. On one occasion, during the war, he hid the Blessed Sacrament in his house, fearing that the Japanese would profane it. And in all these things, he set a great example of Christian virtue for all of us. He spoke with conviction, showing that he truly believed in what he taught. And then, he always acted according to his faith.

Friend of Sinners

The inhabitants of Rakunai remember To Rot as someone who, while condemning sin and pagan practices, sought to befriend and be close to sinners. Just like his Teacher, he too hated sin, but sought out sinners and was patient with them. He tried to win them over with his peaceful character, simple advice, and kind words. And he not only sought out the most hardened sinners, but also paid close attention to Catholics whose faith was beginning to wane and who were abandoning religious practices.

Martin To Kau, a Rakunai farmer said:

Peter To Rot contacted those who had fallen away from the Church and asked them to help him in some sort of manual work. He then tried to influence them to return to the practice of their religion. He had great devotion to daily Mass and tried to influence some of his peers in that direction.

Gregor To Vaninara, chief of Vunalaka, a nearby village, remembered the catechist as follows:

Peter To Rot loved and respected people. He was always trying to keep the peace among quarrelling groups and families. He was a man who lived by the gospel. He carried his Bible with him wherever he went, which in those days was unusual. He had an extraordinary gift of knowing when a person needed help and correctly identifying and rectifying the problem.

His friend To Varto also remembered that once he himself was straying from the Catholic Church, and it was To Rot's love and dedication which won him back:

Once, I was not practising the religion, and To Rot came to talk to me. He spoke with such conviction and charity that I was moved to return to the Church. He was even-tempered and knew how to interact with all types of people. He defended the teachings of the Church strongly (...) Occaisonallu he got into arguments with Methodists. He would say to them: "Give up your parrot talk. You are mouthing words that you have been taught, but you have never understood what the words mean."

Charitable Towards Everybody, Especially the Sick, the Orphans and the Poor

Regarding To Rot's charity towards the most needy, absolutely everyone who knew him says it was something exceptional, impossible to forget. It is necessary to include here the testimony of his own brother, Joseph Tatamai, who lived for many years in the same house with To Rot.

My brother helped the priest, as he had been trained to do, and the people loved the way in which he carried out his ministry. He was really a very good man, he was never angry, he was always calm and always showed compassion for the disadvantaged and underprivileged people. He disliked arguing, even with those whose ideas were obviously wrong. He used his powers of persuasion to bring back to Jesus those who found it too much of a burden to have to serve God and to be found worthy to receive Holy Communion. He took care to visit the sick. He was an excellent teacher of Catechism. Everyone understood the instructions he gave, and people would repeat to one another what he had said when they returned in the evenings to their farms.

And among all the testimonies we are collecting, the one from the person who probably knew Peter To Rot best deserves a special place: his wife Paula Ia Varpit. They lived together from 1936 until the death of the catechist in 1945. Later, we will talk more about her and the family. For now we want to quote the testimony she left us about her husband's ministry as a catechist:

I testify to To Rot's strong Christian personality. All his time was spent helping others. He displayed exemplary virtue, especially regarding charity. I never knew him to be angry, and the only occasion I rebuked him was concerning the risks he took in the exercise of his duties. He continued to lead community prayers and carry on his works. (...) Peter To Rot had a strong faith. He frequently prayed with the local community, and encouraged everybody to pray the Stations of the Cross as an act of reparation for sin. He was also devoted to the Rosary.

His hope gave him confidence in God's guidance and care, especially in times of trial. This was made evident during the

war period. His strength of purpose was very evident in his life. I was aware that he was different from the others, and I know how fortunate I was to have such a husband.

Peter To Rot's charity was outstanding. Clan commitment or what is known as the *wantok system* was never the motivation of his charity.

Another interesting testimony regarding To Rot's charity and love for the poor and needy, is given by Margareta Ia Kaian. She was a little girl when her mother died, she and her three sisters were adopted by To Rot's parents. She lived alongside To Rot for many years, sharing both a house and daily life. During these years they formed a great friendship which was maintained until the catechist's death. She said:

I was aware of his kindness, especially to orphaned children like myself. Father Laufer was parish priest at that time, and Peter To Rot did a lot of parish visitation and was loved by all. (...) He led an exemplary Christian life always and was seen as a man of strong faith: his work itself exemplified this. I saw his daily life of prayer and how he maintained a good Christian life among his people. To Rot's life spoke of his strong hope in a future life with God. He was outstanding in his zeal for all that concerned the Church.

Never before had the village seen the likes of Peter To Rot, in going after lapsed Catholics to get them back to their faith. It was always done with gentleness and kindness, never harshly. He was particularly zealous in the care of orphans, the neglected, anyone in need, often having them in and around his own home. His charity embraced all. This is especially noteworthy in relation to the custom of his own people, where each one looked only to his own good.

Anton Tata, chief of Rakunai during To Rot's last year, knew To Rot very well and recalled:

The fine example of Christian living which he was to give us over the years was pleasantly and happily apparent from the very start of his career as a catechist.

At church on Sundays, if a man was sick or injured, and To Rot would look around for him in vain, he would afterwards go to the man's home to find out just how sick or injured he really was. If someone was really ill, To Rot would be tireless in his attention. He would pay the sick person frequent, regular visits and bring medicine to him. If the sickness became terminal, To Rot would notify the priest so that the sick person could receive Viaticum and the Last Rites.

He visited the sick daily and always prayed for a speedy recovery or happy death. He often elicited sincere acts of repentance. If someone had wronged someone else, To Rot was accustomed to give them the good advice which, when they recovered from their illness, would give them the strength to right the wrong that they had done. This was the kind of lifestyle which caused us to be really fond of our catechist and admire his work among us in Rakunai.

Lover of the Eucharist

Reading the interviews and testimonies of the twenty-six people who were interviewed during the preliminary investigation for the cause of beatification, it is striking that almost all of them spoke about To Rot's love for the Most Holy Eucharist. Even John Paul II emphasised this aspect of the catechist's life when, in the homily of his beatification, he said: **"Daily Mass, Holy Communion, and frequent visits to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, sustained him, gave him wisdom to counsel the disheartened, and courage to persevere until death."**

It was in the Eucharist where To Rot learnt how God loves us and how, therefore, we must love Him in return. The Blessed Sacrament became for him that “school of love” of which Pope Benedict XVI said:

The Eucharist is, above all else, the great school of love. When we participate regularly and with devotion in Holy Mass, when we spend a sustained time in adoration in the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, it is easier to understand the length, breadth, height, and depth of his love that goes beyond all knowledge. (*Message for WYD*, 27 January 2007)

Reading the testimonies given by eyewitnesses, we can find four different practices in which To Rot’s love for the Blessed Eucharist was clearly revealed:

1- Daily Mass: We have already mentioned that, when he was still a child of only ten or eleven years old, To Rot decided to leave his parental home to live with a relative whose house was closer to the church. The reason was that, under no circumstances, did he want to miss the daily celebration of the Holy Mass and the opportunity to serve at the altar. His schoolmates remember both that To Rot was the first to offer himself when the priest asked for volunteers to help him as altar boys, as well as the concentration he showed during moments of prayer. This attitude, born at the age of ten or eleven, did not change or disappear over time. On the contrary. It grew and became more evident to everyone’s eyes. And this is exactly what the people of Rakunai remembered about To Rot as a catechist. Throughout his life, the young catechist made the daily Mass the most important moment of life, and he loved the Eucharist more than anything else in the world.

2- Daily Communion: In Peter To Rot’s time, daily communion was not as frequent and widespread a practice as it is now. Even so,

To Rot was convinced that without Christ he could do nothing, and so he received Holy Communion every day. Those who knew him say that when To Rot started this practice, everyone in the village was a bit perplexed, as it was not a normal practice among them. However, both the parish priest and To Rot never tired of explaining to the people that, in the absence of a serious obstacle such as a mortal sin, daily communion is not only a possible practice but even recommended. Even John Paul II himself, as we read in his homily during the beatification, acknowledged that the Eucharist not only sustained To Rot but also gave him wisdom and courage. And became evident during his martyrdom, as we will see later.

3- Frequent Visits to the Blessed Sacrament: Let's remember that, according to his parish priest, To Rot had begun to visit the Blessed Sacrament frequently even as a child, and it was normal to see him kneeling in front of the tabernacle during school recesses. And this beautiful practice grew and strengthened over time, to the point that these visits to Jesus in the Eucharist were what most caught the attention of the people in the village and those who were his companions in the catechist school. Nowadays, it is quite normal to know people who go to Mass and receive Communion daily, but it is not so normal to know people who visit the Blessed Sacrament daily. Nor was it normal in his time either, which is why people were surprised to see the good catechist kneeling in silence before the tabernacle.

As many witnesses say, To Rot was a true worshipper of Jesus in the Eucharist. And these frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament were the fruit of his love for the Holy Mass and his frequent reception of communion. The beautiful words of Benedict XVI when he spoke about the relationship between the Holy Mass and Eucharistic adoration apply to him:

An intrinsic connection exists between celebration and adoration. In fact, Holy Mass is in itself the Church's greatest

act of adoration: “No one eats of this flesh,” as St. Augustine writes, “without having first adored it.” Adoration outside Holy Mass prolongs and intensifies what has taken place in the liturgical celebration and makes a true and profound reception of Christ possible. (*Angelus*, 10 June 2007)

4- Risking His Life for the Eucharist: Later, we will talk about To Rot’s ministry during the years of World War II, in which he risked his life on many occasions out of love for the Eucharist. For now — since we don’t want to get ahead of ourselves— it is enough to know that he often risked his life while seeking the Blessed Sacrament given to him by the missionaries who were imprisoned. The prison of the missionaries was five or six hours away from the village of Rakunai, and it was five or six hours (by foot) during which the catechist had to pass through several Japanese checkpoints, risking his life at each one. And To Rot not only brought the Eucharist to his own village to distribute it among the faithful, he also took it to the neighbouring villages, because many of the catechists in those villages had abandoned their work out of fear of the Japanese threats. On several occasions, he had to hide the Blessed Sacrament in his own house to protect it from desecration, which was a common practice among the invaders. There are many testimonies from missionaries who recount that the Japanese, seeing the tabernacle as a “pretty box” and generally gilded, thought that valuable objects were hidden inside. And upon opening them, they were so disappointed with the contents that they scattered the hosts on the ground or fed them to the animals.

* * *

These numerous virtues and beautiful pious practices that embellish To Rot’s soul and ministry which were witnessed to by so many, were well summarised by Saint John Paul II during his Address to

the clergy, religious and lay faithful in the parish of “Mary, Help of Christians” in Port Moresby, on 16 January 1995:

The villagers of Rakunai were drawn to Christ and helped to follow him by the radiant charity and zeal of Peter To Rot. His spiritual maturity showed in his apostolic maturity. He paid particular attention to those who had become lukewarm in the practice of the faith or who had abandoned it. As a catechist devoted to the spiritual welfare of others – even in situations where he risked arrest and imprisonment – he went in search of the sheep who had gone astray, and did not rest until he had found it (cf. Lk. 15:4). How the young Churches of this part of the world need men and women of Peter To Rot’s calibre!

... of St. Patrick's Day Celebrations Committee. It was a very happy choice, as the thousands of children he has directed, the teaching sisters, and the public know.

Mr. Talty's crowning effort was at four o'clock last Saturday afternoon, when nearly five thousand girls, at a given signal, presented their grand tableau as described on another page. At the request of His Grace the Archbishop the picture was reproduced. The display

was as near perfection as was possible.

... on drugs, metals, coal, minerals, etc., novels by Fathers Benson, John Ayscough, etc. Address them to Rev. Father Guinard, S.M., Namosi Catholic Mission, via Vaila P.O., Fiji.

Rev. Father Siara, S.C., who was amongst the first band of three Salesian Fathers who arrived in May, 1923, has been transferred from the Kimberley Aboriginal Mission, W. Australia, to Mdian, China. Father Siara will later leave for the interior of that country.

Kimberley portion of our continent is being



A Big Day at Taliligap.

The first anniversary of the inauguration of St. Paul's College, Taliligap, in the Rabaul Vicariate, New Guinea, was the occasion of great festivities on the 19th February. "When his Lordship Dr. Vesters blessed the new building" (1925) writes the Very Rev. Director, Father Lakaff, M.S.C., "sixteen Rev. Fathers, six Brothers, and three Sisters, with the girls of the orphanage, 1100

dancers, and 2000 visitors attended. Pupils of the old preparatory school numbered only 26, and the catechist students 36. Now we have 44 pupils and 60 catechist students. During the last year 18 students got their appointment as catechists and teachers, often in quite new countries. You see that the Sacred Heart, to whom his Lordship entrusted St. Paul's College, has really blessed and protected us."

... looker than Mr. Talty. The carnival officials are grateful to the musical firm named for loaning that gentleman to them year after year. Great credit is also due to the Rev. Father J. Muirhead (Diocesan Inspector of Schools) for the part he played in co-operating with Mr. Talty. Both worked enthusiastically and deserved the successful results of their efforts. A letter of their appreciation for the work of the girls and sisters is published in the report of Saturday's carnival.

It is not generally known that the Father Lej... Missionary, whose name figured in the "Freeman's Journal" recently, in the "Around the Catholic World" columns,

... Brother of the Salesians Congregation of Don Bosco, and three Fathers and five Brothers of the Pious Society of Missions (Palatine Fathers), under the jurisdiction of Right Rev. Bishop Coppo, S.C., whose headquarters are at Broome. This vicariate, established in 1887, covers an area of about 120,000 square miles, and stations are established at Broome, Beagle Bay, Carnarvon and Lombadina. The Fathers are assisted by 27 Sisters of St. John of God and 8 Presentation Sisters. A community of recently arrived

... Mr. Joseph Vincent M'Lee, secretary of the Kincumber Orphanage, who gave

Article in an Australian newspaper, March 18, 1926, commemorating the 1st anniversary of the catechist school

1882—The New Britain Mission 1932

Golden Jubilee Celebrations



THE LATE ARCHBISHOP COUPER.

A little more than 50 years ago the Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, at that time probably the youngest religious Congregation in the Church, was approached by the Holy See and invited to begin a mission in the South Sea Islands. In those far-off days the Islands and their dusky people carried little admiration or envy even among the most ambitious of European Powers. Enterprising companies and individuals, it is true, had made frequent attempts to open up avenues of commerce and gain in the South Sea, and were constantly urging their respective Governments to proclaim protectorates or colonies in the Islands, and establish responsible rule, but all to no purpose. In the early eighties, however, first one Power and then another seemed to realize the potentialities of the scattered South Sea Islands, with the result that in the scramble for territory the Islands were parcelled out under different flags.

Long before organized Government was established the difficult task of evangelizing the native races had engaged the attention of the Holy See, and even among missions in healthier lands peculiar difficulties were foreseen in the establishment of a Pacific Island mission. The islands are very scattered, difficult of access, and are peopled by races of varying degrees of mentality whose cretaceous of isolation had only deepened in their paganism and superstitions.

MILAN MISSION.

The Society of Mary, better known perhaps as the Marian, opened up, at the request of the Holy See, a mission in the South Sea Islands about the middle of the last century. A beginning was made in the Solomon Island group, and many zealous members of that young and devoted Missionary Society were called upon to sacrifice their young and promising lives in the service of their Divine Master, unable to sustain their lives, the Marias were reluctantly compelled temporarily to withdraw their few remaining members and await a more propitious time. The Missionary Society of Milan then undertook the difficult task, but a series of troubles and misfortunes followed in the footsteps of their ardent missionaries, and being too weak numerically and financially to deplore its early losses, the Society of Milan was obliged to resign the Holy See and withdraw, offering to Our Lord only the sacrifices of the missionaries as the fruit of their labours. Shortly after the withdrawal of the remaining Milan missionaries the invitation to begin a mission was made to and readily taken up by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. Though everlastingly engaged in reversing the difficulties necessarily associated with early foundations the young Society is a remarkably short space of time had collected and sent its first few members to the South Seas. After a long, circuitous and delayed voyage, the first group of missionaries led

by Father (afterwards Archbishop) Navarra, reached their destination; and, landing on the hot, sandy beach of Matupit Island on the coast of St. Michael, September 29, 1882, Holy Mass was offered for the first time, and the reign of the Sacred Heart solidly established in the Islands. The original Vicariate, so scattered and extensive, has now been divided into six distinct missions; but three of them are under the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. To mark the completion of its first 50 years of arduous and highly successful work jubilee celebrations were arranged and planned by the mission, and, as was natural, the opening ceremonies took place at the historic Matupit.

Sacred Heart Mission.

On the morning of September 28, his Lordship Right Rev. Dr. G. J. Ventura, M.S.C., the present Bishop of the mission; Right Rev. Dr. T. Wade, S.M., the recently-constituted Bishop of the Solomon Islands; all the missionaries—priests, brothers and nuns—who could conveniently leave their mission stations for a short period, as well as hundreds of native catechists, native children from the different enclaves, thousands of natives from different villages, half-

At the conclusion of the Bishop's address a procession was formed, and moved down to the little Catholic cemetery adjacent, the entrance to which a solid, simple but beautiful monument, surmounted by a cross, had been erected in grateful remembrance of the golden jubilee. The monument was blessed by his Lordship Dr. Ventura, who explained to these present what it was intended to convey to them—50 years of devoted missionary service by, with, and for the Cross of Our Divine Master and Model.

At the close of the Matupit ceremonies all those assembled departed as soon as possible for Vunepopo, the headquarters of the Mission, 20 miles distant, by the semi-circular road around the large harbour, and about 50 miles by water. Practically every means of conveyance was in action—motor cars, motor boats, planes, lorries and countless rickshaws. Vunepopo is a remarkable place. Fifty years of steady progress has brought institution after institution into being, with the result that today the headquarters of the Catholic Mission, with its numerous buildings, is like a little city town in the Australian bush. Numerous schools have collected at the place, in past years, striking witnesses of the faith, piety and enthusiasm of the Catholic people; but I do not think that the measure of personal and social progress of the golden jubilee celebrations have ever been surpassed.



THE GATHERING IN VUNEPOPO FOR THE JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS.

cent and Chinese and a few Europeans assembled on the island, and when the solemn High Mass began at half past eight Matupit could claim to have collected together the largest gathering in its history.

The church dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel, on whose feast day, 50 years before, the first little group of missionaries had landed on Matupit, was, of course, too small to hold even a portion of the assembled crowd, so a temporary altar was erected at the entrance to the church, and the solemn High Mass celebrated in the open. Temporary choirs on both sides of the altar were erected for their Lordships Dr. Ventura and Dr. Wade. The celebrant of the Mass was the present Missionary of Matupit; Rev. Father Luongo, M.S.C., deacon; and Rev. Father Henricks, M.S.C., sub-deacon. The choir was the famous Matupit native choir, under the leadership of Stephen La Palua, the catechist. After Mass Dr. Ventura delivered a very impressive sermon in the native language, reminding his hearers how when the Emperor Augustus entered the faith and granted freedom to the early persecuted Christians, the first Catholics came forth from the Catacombs, and erected and planted the Cross, the emblem of their holy faith, wherever they went, so the early missionaries came 50 years before to the Islands, planted the Cross on the hot sands of Matupit, and have since laboured and prayed to spread the Kingdom of the Sacred Heart in the Islands of the Pacific. When the first missionaries landed on Matupit the people were the slaves of the law and degrading customs, as opposed to the sweet joys of the Sacred Heart; how different now, when natives from far and wide have assembled to praise Our Lord, and thank Him for His goodness in the very place where the first missionaries began their glorious work.

Ceremonies at Vunepopo.

The ceremonies at Vunepopo opened with a procession of the priests and missionaries from the Bishop's residence to the Pro-Cathedral, where Pontifical Benedictions of the Holy Mass were given by his Lordship Dr. Ventura, Rev. Father Oberster, M.S.C., being deacon; Rev. Father Meyer, M.S.C., sub-deacon; and Rev. Father Hughes, M.S.C., master of ceremonies. In the evening at 7 o'clock the Bishops, missionaries and visitors were present at an entertainment given by the different schools—half-cent, village, and orphan children—singing, drilling, recitations and a song-part comedy made up an excellent programme. The display was a remarkable demonstration of what half-cent and natives can do if skillfully and perseveringly trained; and also of patient and untiring efforts of the Mission Sisters in teaching such an entertainment. Unfortunately rain forced a postponement of the latter portion of the evening's enjoyment.

The golden jubilee—opened with Pontifical High Mass, celebrated by his Lordship Dr. Wade, S.M., deacon, Rev. Father Henricks, M.S.C., sub-deacon, Rev. Father Hall, M.S.C., deacon; the Rev. Father Hall, M.S.C., deacon; at the throne, Rev. Father Grande, M.S.C., and Schumann, M.S.C., master of ceremonies, Rev. Father Hughes, M.S.C., sub-deacon. Rev. Father Hall, M.S.C., deacon; at the throne, Rev. Father Grande, M.S.C., and Schumann, M.S.C., master of ceremonies. A temporary altar was erected on a large platform in the middle of the ground to give those present an opportunity of hearing Mass.

After the Gospel Father Joseph Hughes, the well-known missionary, and a very able apostle who has given nearly 30 years of useful service to the vast mission, was the preacher, and a better choice could not have been made. Beginning his sermon with an expression of gratitude to God, Father Hughes reminded his hearers what the jubilee ceremonies really meant, and traced for them the history of the mission, and how they have emerged from darkness to light under the guidance of the Gospel teaching. Bishop Epalle, S.M., had been killed by natives whom he had come to save. Now the missionaries are known and their work appreciated. Before, there was every



RIGHT REV. DR. VENTURA, M.S.C., VICAR APOSTOLIC OF ISLANDS.

form of crime and superstition; as Holy Mass; no Government; no good example; no schools. Now all that is changed, and the Catholic Mission established, amidst hardship and suffering 50 years ago has been a powerful factor in bringing about the happy change. Father Hughes concluded his eloquent appeal by exhorting the natives to live as good Catholics, and to remember those who have lived, worked and died for them.

Entertainments.

On Thursday evening the entertainment which had been given the previous evening for the missionaries and the natives was staged again for the benefit of the European population. His Honor the Administrator, and a number of the members of the professions, company managers, Government officials, in fact, practically the whole European population who could conveniently make the trip, gathered out from Rabaul to be present—a remarkable tribute to and recognition of the esteem in which the Catholic mission is held by all sections of the community.

Friday, September 29, was the closing day of the jubilee functions. At half past seven a solemn Requiem Mass for the repose of the souls of all the departed missionaries was celebrated by Rev. Father Solinas, M.S.C., Rev. Father Lafoff, M.S.C., deacon, and Rev. Father Lafoff, M.S.C., sub-deacon. After the Requiem Mass in the Pro-Cathedral a procession was formed, and moved to the community cemetery to a short distance, where the graves were blessed and a beautiful address delivered by Dr. Ventura, who referred to the lives and virtues of these priests, brothers, nuns and catechists who in life gave every thing to promote the reign of the Sacred Heart in the Islands, and now rest in peace awaiting the final resurrection.

In the centre of the little cemetery is the simple tomb which now enshrines the remains of the late Archbishop Louis Couper, the pioneer missionary, whose remarkable spirit of faith, love for Our Divine Lord and far-seeing vision will always, please God, remain an inspiration and consolation to all other Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in the mission of New Britain.

The mission now enters upon another era of service. Many of the able generations of missionaries will assist in the Vicariate task part in the silver jubilee celebrations 25 years ago. Rev. Father Henry, M.S.C., will live and minister to a large district, although he has been in the mission field, closely resembling Archbishop Couper in appearance, Father Henry has not only watched the progress of the mission during its long life, but has been one of its most active members.

Under Mary Catherine, of the Community of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, still performs a regular round of arduous work in any duties every day, although she has been more than 40 years in the mission.

Although she has been accomplished during 50 years, yet many large districts and many islands in the Vicariate are still strangers to missionary influence. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart pray daily that the day will soon arrive when every pagan native may be reached, and induced to part with his pagan superstitions to become a follower of the good and gentle Master—Our Divine Lord.

J. G. MADDOCK, M.S.C.,

Rabaul and Matupit Island.

Territory of New Guinea.

Australian newspapers from the 1930s that mention Talilgap

New Bishop of Rabaul Came from Poland

OCTOBER 3, feast day of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus, was this year a double feast day for the Catholics of the Rabaul Vicariate. It was the day chosen for the consecration of the new Bishop of Rabaul, Most Rev. Leo T. Scharmach, D.D., the successor of his Lordship Bishop G. J. Vesters, M.S.C., who ruled the vicariate during sixteen years, and had to retire on account of continued ill-health. Bishop Vesters is at present in Melbourne for the Centenary celebrations.

The new Bishop, Most Rev. Leo T. Scharmach, M.S.C., was born at Saraken, Poland, in 1893, and arrived in New Guinea in 1923, since when he has laboured tirelessly to open up new areas for mission work.

It was the second episcopal consecration on record in the history of the territory of New Guinea, the first hav-

Consecration of Most Rev. Leo T. Scharmach, D.D.

Four Bishops were in the sanctuary, representing four nationalities, whereas eleven different nations were represented by the missionaries in attendance and twenty-four tribes of different languages by the natives present. Indeed, a Catholic community.

The ceremonies were very impressive.

In 1938, his last function before leaving the mission was to assist at the consecration of his successor—Bishop Gerard Vesters, M.S.C., who had been called from the East Indies to take charge of the mission.

Dr. Vesters took up the work in the Vicariate where Archbishop Couper

At the Bishop's health did not improve, he made a trip to Baguia in the mountains of Manila in the hope of being restored to health, and although some improvement was noticed for a time, still Dr. Vesters realised that his strength was not sufficient to meet the demands of the growing mission. So he tendered his voluntary resignation to the Holy See and asked to be relieved.

Bishop Vesters, who, on the occasion of his retirement, was honoured by the Holy Father with the title of assistant Bishop at the Papal Throne, left the Vicariate in satisfactory conditions. It numbers actually 62,000 living Catholics and 23,438 adherents—that is to say, more than half of the existing population. The vicariate, which has 14,657 pupils; 1,739,652 Holy Communion were received last year. The medical treatments amounted to 462,508. There is a maternity home, which already gives good results, and tends to diminish the high child mortality. The Sisters, M.S.C., have the care of the Government's Leprosy Station.

Finally, a minor seminary exists at present ten candidates for the priesthood, free of them belonging to Papua. Nearly 200 white missionaries and over 500 native catechists give their talents and their life for the propagation of the Faith, and it is those brave men and women who are responsible for the remarkable progress of this Pacific Islands Mission.



MOST REV. LEO T. SCHARMACH, D.D.

ing taken place in 1923, when Bishop Vesters was consecrated by his Excellency the Apostolic Delegate, Most Rev. Bartolomeo Cattaneo. On that occasion the predecessor of Bishop Vesters, Most Rev. L. Couper, was privileged to act as assistant Bishop at the consecration. This time Bishop Vesters was the consecrator, having for assistants the Vice-Apostolic of North Solomon, Most Rev. Bishop T. J. Wade, S.M., and the Vice-Apostolic of Central New Guinea, Most Rev. Bishop J. Lerka, S.V.D.



THE SCENE AT THE CONSECRATION CEREMONY.

and were witnessed by a good number of white residents and a big coloured crowd. Especially the enthronement of the new Bishop and his first blessing to his flock, as he proceeded in the pro-Cathedral in full regalia, provoked a wave of spiritual emotion.

That day and the following days saw many touching and sincere demonstrations of joy and loyalty towards the new Vice-Apostolic, who is a man of great missionary initiative and wide experience, with a broad and loving heart.

The retiring Bishop also had his share in the emotional demonstration of the common sympathy, which was expressed by all the various communities and individuals during many days.

Early in 1937, the late Archbishop Couper realised that the growing needs of the mission called for a younger and more energetic leader, so he asked the Holy See to be relieved in order that he might pass the remainder of his life in retirement at St. Mary's Towers, Douglas Park, N.S.W. There he died

had it down and during his sixteen years' apostolate remarkable progress was made. It was Bishop Vesters who established St. Paul's College, Lallup, for the training of native catechists, and opened a splendid maternity hospital to check the infant mortality so rampant in the islands.

Another great work established by Bishop Vesters was the taking over of the care of all the lepers in the Territory. How gladly the Federal Government granted itself of the kindly offer of the Bishop to take charge of this work! The latest work undertaken by Bishop Vesters was the opening of the Little Seminary at Vunapu for the training of native priests.

Shortly after the eruption, two and a half years ago, Bishop Vesters became ill. During that trying period he drew the whole resources of the mission open to those who had to hasten from Rabaul, and he won general admiration for his work. He was honoured by the King with the title of O.B.E. for his activity during the eruption.

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10- MARRIAGE

In 1936, after having served for three years in the ministry of catechist, Peter To Rot had already earned the love and respect of everyone in Rakunai and the neighbouring villages. His parish priest truly appreciated the work of the young catechist and entrusted him with great responsibilities. And his colleagues and the leaders of the various villages held his ministry in high regard.

On November 11, 1936 —and this is the only date in To Rot's life that we know for certain— he received the sacrament of marriage in the parish church of Rakunai. His wife was a sixteen-year-old girl named Paula Ia Varpit.

We are quite fortunate regarding To Rot's marriage, because —in addition to knowing the date with certainty— we also have numerous witnesses who have left us “first-hand” accounts. Thanks to them, we know how the celebration took place, including the preparations and the festivities. And among all the testimonies we have, without a doubt, the most special and important one is that of the young wife, Paula Ia Varpit. Also, other family members, friends, and guests have done the same during the preliminary investigation for the beatification of the catechist.

Let's talk a little about his wife. Paula Ia Varpit was born in Ramalmal, a village near Rakunai, on June 27, 1920. She moved to Rakunai in 1934 to live on her mother's farm. And since she was fourteen years old and baptised, she was immediately admitted to the Rakunai primary school. There she became a student of the catechist

To Rot, who at that time was twenty-two years old. According to Tolai custom, a young woman of her age was already ready to be married, and this detail did not escape the families who had sons of marriageable age, among whom were Angelo To Puia and Maria Ia Tumul, parents of the catechist To Rot. Although Paula arrived in the village when she was fourteen years old, the marriage would take place two years later, when Paula turned sixteen.

Paula recalled:

I met To Rot soon after his installation as a Catechist in Rakunai. Because my mother, Ia Nalili, came from Rakunai, I also came, as a schoolgirl, from Ramaimai to stay on my mother's farm. I attended the classes given by To Rot at the Mission School. Later on, when the 'bride price' was paid, I became engaged to him.

At this point, it is necessary to make two important clarifications, otherwise our Western minds might somehow be scandalised by the fact that Peter To Rot "paid" a "price" to marry a sixteen-year-old girl.

Regarding the bride's age, we must know that in Tolai culture, a girl over fourteen years old was already considered suitable for marriage. This fact did not go unnoticed to Angelo To Puia, whose son To Rot was twenty-two years old. And this custom continues in Papua New Guinea to this day. It is not uncommon to see young girls of fourteen or fifteen years old who are betrothed, and shortly thereafter decide to go live with their future husband. The missionaries in Papua New Guinea, often see this among the girls who attend our primary schools. It hurts to see how many of them, as soon as they finish primary school at fourteen or fifteen years old, abandon everything and go live with their future husband.

And regarding the payment of the "bride price," it is also necessary to explain what this practice consists of. In Melanesian culture, "paying" for a future wife does not mean "putting a price" on the

woman, as if she were a commodity. Absolutely not. Many people are shocked when they hear this expression, but that shock is due to their lack of understanding of the meaning of this practice. “Paying” for a woman, in Melanesian culture, is a way of thanking the bride’s family for everything they have done for her from birth until the moment she leaves her parents’ house to start her new family. It was the parents of that woman who cared for and educated her until she became what she is now: a good, mature, and responsible young woman capable of starting a family. And that’s why the man who wishes to marry her should in some way thank her parents for everything they have done for his future wife. After all, if that young woman is now an well brought up, good, and responsible woman, it is the merit of her parents and not her future husband. And that’s why the future husband feels obligated to give something in return to the parents, for all the effort they have put into raising the young woman. Moreover, it must be taken into account that from the moment she gets married, this young woman will stop working for her family and her clan, and will have to work for her husband and her new family. In such a way that the parents and members of the young woman’s clan “lose” something when she gets married, and therefore the future husband and his clan must compensate in some way. And this payment not only does not diminish the woman’s dignity, but rather exalts it. Even today, future brides feel honoured if the “price” is high, because it demonstrates the high esteem and consideration that the future husband has for her. And on the contrary, they feel humiliated and offended if they are not “paid for,” or if the “price” is low.

This custom of “paying” for the bride has been distorted over time, and nowadays—in many places, at least—it is just a caricature of what it used to be. In the past, the “price” to be paid for the bride usually consisted of animals and other types of food, with which a grand wedding feast was held that could last several days, to which the entire village was invited, and absolutely everyone benefited from the “price” paid. That is to say, it was a winning situation

for everyone: the young bride was honoured in front of the entire village for the price paid, the young groom could finally marry his fiancée, the bride's family saved on the party expenses, the groom's family gained another member, and the entire village ate for free for several days. This no longer exists today. Now the "price" demanded by the bride's family is usually cash, which the father, brothers, and uncles of the girl squander in a few days. Moreover, the payment is given so much importance that the bride's family prevents her from receiving the sacrament of marriage until the groom has paid for her. And since sometimes the amounts demanded by the bride's family are absolutely ridiculous and impossible to pay, the result is that the young man never pays for the bride, but they still start living together and live in concubinage for decades. And even though twenty or twenty-five years have passed and they have children and even grandchildren, the woman still does not want to receive the sacrament until the man has paid for her, because her family demands it. And the man also doesn't want to get married without having paid, because he fears what the bride's family might do to him. In the times of To Rot, it was very different.

Father Laufer, who lived among the Tolai for many decades and knew their culture perfectly well, explains to us:

The phrase "bride price" sounds inhuman and barbaric to European ears, but it is not a price tag put on the bride; it is more of a recompense to the relatives of the bride. She has always had to work for her family group but now will have to work for her husband, so some recompense has to be made to her family by offering them a present of money and goods, called "bride price." This does not give the bride's husband any absolute rights over the bride. His rights over her are only conditional, as we shall soon see. The payment of a "Bride price" is not degrading for a young woman, as I used to think, but quite the opposite. Native girls are quite

happy to have a 'bride price' placed on them —as high as possible—, the more expensive the "price" asked, the greater their pride, as this increases their prestige within the community. Again the mission has done little to interfere with this practice, except to guard against abuse of the system and to suggest that the "price" be considered in the nature of an engagement present, which is more in line with Christian practice." (*Rakunai...*, 3-4)

In summary, in Tolai custom, the "bride price" has two aspects. And I write with verbs in the present tense and not in the past, because this practice continues to this day. The first aspect refers to the bride's family, for whom the money received is just a token of appreciation for everything they have done for the bride from her birth until the moment of the engagement. The bride's family receives this "payment" also as a kind of compensation, because she will no longer be able to help them or work for them. The second aspect concerns the young woman herself, for whom the "bride price" makes her feel appreciated and desired, and is a source of joy and pride. In our humble opinion, this correct understanding of the "bride price" is the reason why missionaries not only allowed this practice in the past but still permit it today in many parts of Papua New Guinea, taking all the necessary observances into account.

Having made these two clarifications, let's continue with the story of To Rot and his future wife Paula Ia Varpit. One morning, then, the "bride price" was announced in the village: fifty necklaces made of mussel shells. It is a payment method that is still used today, as those necklaces are made up of many mussels, and each mussel has purchasing power in the villages, and can be exchanged for other goods, as if it were money. We have already talked about this when we explained the *tabu* in the first part of the book. With the introduction of paper currency, this practice has gradually begun to fade, and many today prefer money over shells. However, there are still places where

these shell necklaces are used as a means of payment. In December 2021, for example, I had the opportunity to attend a party in the very village where Peter To Rot lived and worked. Actually, it wasn't a party as we would usually think of it, it was a funeral. But it was the funeral of a holy woman, so it was celebrated it as if it were a party. There were many relatives of the saint, and the woman who had just died had been baptised by To Rot, and she was also related to him. The people wanted to honour me with several of these necklaces, which I wore around my neck for a few hours. Shortly before leaving the village, not quite knowing what to do with the necklaces—I didn't want to take them with me as a souvenir knowing that someone might use them to buy food—I decided to give them to some children—also relatives of To Rot—who had accompanied me everywhere during those days in the village. As soon as they received the necklaces, the children disappeared. And a few minutes later, they returned without the collars and with a large amount of food that would have required a lot of money to buy.

Let's return again to To Rot and his future wife Paula. According to Tolai tradition, it is the uncles who must negotiate for a future marriage. A maternal uncle of the groom must meet with a maternal uncle of the bride and arrange the wedding details. And once both uncles reached an agreement, a date for the ceremony is set and communicated, first of all, to the couple. However, this was not what happened in the case of To Rot and Paula. Peter To Rot's sister stated that, in the case of To Rot and Paula, it was not the maternal uncles who made the arrangements, but rather, "following Catholic tradition, it was the bride's and groom's parents who decided to do it." And it was To Rot's parents who initiated the talks with Paula's parents.

Now, having read about how the customs of the Tolai regarding marriage were—and continue to be—one might wonder to what extent the future husband and wife were truly free to marry. From what we have read so far, it would seem that everything was arranged

by the relatives, and the future spouses did not have a part in any decision. And we know that the freedom of the future spouses is a necessary and indispensable condition for the validity of the marriage. To respond to this objection, nothing better than the very words of the the bride, Paula Ia Varpit, who said:

Although the marriage was arranged by the two families it **was freely accepted by Peter To Rot and myself**. It was a church marriage, carried out according to the local customs. Mutual love among husband and wife was strong and constant.

Anton Tata, chief of Rakunai during To Rot's last year, also said: "The marriage of Peter To Rot and Paula Ia Varpit was the **outcome of mutual attraction**. Peter To Rot was completely faithful to his marital and family duties." Margareta Ia Kalan, the orphan girl who lived with To Rot's family, confirmed this: "**Mutual attraction** led to the marriage of Peter To Rot and Paula Ia Varpit."

Therefore, although To Rot's and Ia Varpit's families followed the local customs and left their elders to arrange the matrimony, among the bride and the groom there was real love, affection and a desire to form a family. They accepted each other with total freedom and happiness. It was something that they both desired, even though, in accordance with local traditions, it had to be organised by means of third parties.

Father Theler wrote:

To Rot really wanted to marry Paula, and likewise, she wanted to marry him. Just the same, she continued to attend the lessons of her fiance, but in lessons To Rot did not extend to her any privilege at all. In fact, one day a day-dreaming, inattentive Paula was asked by To Rot to kneel on the floor for a while with her arms outstretched, as was the common

means of punishment for students utilised by teachers at that time. (*A Short Biography...*, 14)

An important fact to highlight in the marriage of To Rot and Paula is that among the Tolai, there was a widely practiced custom that contradicted Christian morals. A practice that, unfortunately, continues to exist to this day. This practice consisted of what they called a “trial marriage.” Months before the ceremony took place, the future spouses were encouraged to live together in the same house, leading a couple’s life as if they were already married. After a few months, they had to inform the relatives and the leaders about how the experience had turned out, and in this way, it was judged whether the future couple would have a good future or, on the contrary, was destined to fail. If during that “trial marriage” they got along well and understood each other, then the ceremony would take place. Otherwise, they had to leave the house and each would return to their parental home, hoping for better luck in the future. However, this type of “trial marriage” did not take place in the case of To Rot and Paula. The missionaries strongly discouraged this practice, knowing that it goes against the moral teachings of the Church. And To Rot was convinced that being Catholic was more important than being Tolai. And for this reason, from the very beginning he opposed living with Paula without first having received the sacrament of marriage. And this—which may seem little heroic to some— speaks to the kind of Christian To Rot was. Because at that time—and even now— openly opposing any tradition of the village or clan could mean enmity with all the members of the family and the village. It took a lot of courage to openly oppose such a deeply rooted tradition, and doing so was always a risk. Abandoning a tradition was considered—even now— turning one’s back on the family, the clan, and the village. And that could have serious negative consequences.

The sacramental marriage took place on 11th November 1936. It was followed by the traditional village celebration to which the

chief's son was entitled. The relatives and friends that were present at the religious ceremony and in the festivities gave their testimony about both events during the 1987 canonical inquiry. For the sake of brevity, we will not quote them all here, for it is enough to collect only a few remembrances. All of them agreed saying that it was "a catholic marriage," a "big happy ceremony full of traditional honours" because "the marriage was an important one."

Father Theler wrote:

Their marriage was a very happy one. After her husband's untimely death, Paula did not want to marry again, although she was only twenty-five years old. She said: "I'd never find a husband like To Rot." (...) Just the same, this young couple, too, had initial difficulties in their married life. "In the beginning To Rot and I had some quarrels," Paula confesses. "The reason was that I was a bit of blockhead." (*A Short Biography...*, 15)

Friends and relatives agreed that To Rot's and Ia Varpit had a happy life together throughout their marriage. The expression "happy life" does not mean an absence of misunderstanding or discussions that are normal between couples. Paula herself said, as we quoted before, that "mutual love among husband and wife was strong and constant." As noted by their close friend, Anton To Burangan: "I saw Peter To Rot's family very closely. I was at times aware of small problems, mostly because of Paula, but nothing much."

During the second examination for the cause of beatification of Peter To Rot, Paula gave this testimony:

Question: Was your family life with Peter To Rot always happy and peaceful? Was Peter To Rot a good husband to you and a loving father to the children? Was Peter To Rot sometimes unkind, impatient, rude or violent with you?

Paula: Peter To Rot and I lived together quite peacefully and happily. Occasionally, when I had failed to do something To Rot had told me to do, such as gardening or something to do with the children, he would beat me, which was a custom at that time, and understood by all. Ordinarily, the wife would have gone home to her mother at such a time, but as I respected To Rot's catechist status, I didn't do this. After such a happening To Rot would apologise to me, which was quite exceptional. He was generally kind and thoughtful to me and the children.

Also, reading this testimony, we could be shocked. It's hard to imagine a saint canonised by the Church hitting his wife. But at the same time, it is necessary to know how this fact was seen and understood by the Tolai at that time. And understanding this is the key and the solution to comprehend this type of behaviour. If we judge it with a modern Western mentality, this fact deserves all our contempt. But the Tolai culture judged it differently, and that is why it is important to frame this event within that culture and that era. The *Positio* gives us help to understand it better:

It has to be noted that in Tolai society, traditionally, the position of "father" commanded absolute respect from mother and children. From time to time he was required to publicly demand this respect, and he was also expected to show his disapproval of any family disobedience or misbehaviour by yelling and 'beating' of the offenders. This uncharacteristic behaviour of the Servant of God, therefore, has to be seen to be necessary to maintain his own and the family's prestige within the Tolai community. Again, these actions which Western observers might think displayed nothing but reprehensible marital injustice, were deemed, by the reverse psychology of the Tolais, to be absolutely

necessary to indicate the extent of family dependence upon the mother-figure, unmistakably demonstrated by the public manifestation of the father's indignation at her occasional default in performance of her regular duties.

As we have said before, it would be scandalous to know that To Rot hit his wife on any occasion, unless we are familiar with the Tolai customs from a hundred years ago. Paula herself, who is the reason we know about these incidents, emphasised that To Rot always apologised to her, which was something exceptional in that culture. For the Tolai, a man should never "humiliate" or "degrade" himself to ask his wife for forgiveness, especially if the argument that led to the beating was caused by some fault on her part. As we mentioned earlier, the Tolai considered that hitting their wives was a way to show the rest of the village that the family was not out of control, and that the offender had already received their due. Therefore, this lamentable practice was not only accepted among them, but it was also what was expected of a good family man. The Tolai believed that if a man did not correct his wife or children in this manner, then the entire family was destined for ruin, because the one who was supposed to maintain order had already renounced this responsibility and lost all authority.

Aside from these isolated episodes and understood within this cultural environment, there is no doubt that the marriage of To Rot and Paula was exemplary. Everyone who knew them testified that the family was a model in the village, and Paula herself declared that they lived "in peace and happiness." Paula herself adds: "On all occasions, he was quick to agree with my ideas. **He did everything he could to please his wife.**"

It is important to know that To Rot and Paula have maintained a life of prayer as a family. The good upbringing and overall well-being of their children were their main concerns, and they never hid secrets from each other. Paula herself tells us:

We prayed together every morning and evening. To Rot often prayed the rosary for us both and often went to church alone. He frequently discussed his worries with me.

As we have already said, the marriage and family of To Rot and Paula were normal, without any extraordinary events or phenomena. During the years they were together, they always shared the joys and sorrows of the other families in the village, leading a normal life like the rest of the people of Rakunai. They were just another family among the families of the village.

Some testimonies given during the canonical inquiry should be quoted:

Anton Tata: "The marriage of Peter To Rot and Paula Ia Varpit was the outcome of mutual attraction. Peter To Rot was completely faithful to his marital duties. There was never any sign of scandal. He was seen as a good loving husband and a father."

Philip Tikot: "As far as I know, the family was a good one and stable. Peter To Rot was a responsible husband and father, and the couple were respected by the people."

Joannes To Varto: "When I returned to Rakunai, Peter To Rot was married and the marriage was seen as a good, happy one with a strong family life."

Margareta Ia Kaian: "The marriage was a happy one, with a good family life. I was not aware of any discord. There was always a good Catholic atmosphere around the home."

Mara Ia Kot: "The marriage was a good one, with strong family life and peaceful living, despite occasional minor arguments."

Adriana Ia Katai: "I lived at various times in the home of Peter To Rot and saw his marriage as good, strong Christian one, producing a good family." (Testimonies collected from the *Positio*...)

After the Japanese invasion of 1942—as Paula herself has stated—, the mutual love in the couple intensified, becoming stronger than before. Serious problems arose daily that threatened To Rot's life if he continued with his work as a catechist. And he always shared this with his young wife, something that was unusual in Tolai tradition, where men typically did not share their personal problems with their wives. Tolai men preferred to discuss their problems with other men, just as women discussed their problems with other women. In contrast, Peter To Rot fully trusted Paula and loved her deeply, and therefore, he never wanted to hide anything from her. Paula knew all of To Rot's secrets, and he entrusted her with things that no one else knew, such as the secret place where the records of marriages, births, and deaths, as well as other church objects, were hidden. Paula said: "To Rot organised the removal of all the church records, baptisms, etc., and arranged that I would see to their burial in a nearby place. I did this."

On the last night of his life, To Rot once again demonstrated his trust in Paula when he asked her to smuggle his official catechist uniform into the prison where he was detained. With this act, To Rot was also delicately warning her of his execution, of which he knew or had serious suspicions. That last night, the strong bond of love that existed between To Rot and his young wife Paula was expressed for the last time. She herself tells us that the couple simply sat in silence, close to each other. And after a long silence during which only God can know what went through each other's hearts, To Rot simply told his wife that it was time to take the children and to go home.

Paula Ia Varpit herself recalled this episode during the inquiry:

Two days before his death, I went to the prison to visit my husband as I frequently did. He asked me to bring him a razor, a laplap [a piece of cloth wound around the body to form a sort of skirt, used by both men and women] and his catechist's crucifix, which he had hidden in a suitcase

containing song-sheets. I arrived at the prison, earlier than usual, the next day, bringing with me the things he had asked for. I brought my two children with me. I also cooked for him, a chicken with some yams. To Rot appeared to have lost his appetite, and I was feeling somewhat uneasy, as he had not explained why he wanted the things he had asked to bring from home. Expressing my fears, I begged To Rot to give up the Catechist's way of life, and to take up, instead, a quiet, withdrawn style of living. To Rot had replied: **"Don't you worry about that. It is my duty to die for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and for my people."** Then he made the sign of the cross. He showed no sign of fear or grief. We sat together for a long time, and then To Rot urged me to take the children home.

Three children were born from the marriage of Peter To Rot and his wife Paula Ia Varpit. The first child was born on December 5, 1939, and they named him To Puia, in memory of To Rot's father. However, when he was baptised, they gave him the Christian name Andreas. To Burangan, friend of To Rot, remembers: "To Rot always prayed for his wife and children, especially for the firstborn." He took him everywhere, caressed him, and played with him, so the little boy spent more time with his father than with his mother. Andreas died of dysentery shortly after the war ended. The second child was a girl born in 1942, named Rufina Ia Mama. Rufina died in 2016, and she had three children: Peter, Henry, and Elaine. The third child of Peter To Rot and Paula Ia Varpit was a girl called Mary Ia Rot, who was born a few weeks after the death of his father To Rot, and died a only few days after being born.

An uncle of To Rot remembers: "To Rot was a thoroughly good man who never knew any deception. His words were as good as his deeds. Only religion was on his mind. His matrimony was sacred to him, and he fought the desecration of wedlock by others."

During the beatification homily of Peter To Rot, John Paul II also wanted us to look at the example that To Rot and Paula have left for couples around the world:

The Martyr's example speaks also to married couples. **Blessed Peter To Rot had the highest esteem for marriage, and even in the face of great personal danger and opposition, he defended the Church's teaching on the unity of marriage and the need for mutual fidelity.** He treated his wife Paula with deep respect and prayed with her morning and evening. For his children he had the utmost affection and spent as much time with them as he could. If families are good, your villages will be peaceful and good. Hold on to the traditions that defend and strengthen family life!



Paula la Varpit in the 1980s



Rakimäi 1926

MATRIMONIUM IN ECCLESIA RITE INIERUNT

No.	Die	N. N.	Filius N. N.	Ex Loco	Et N. N.
278	28/4 26	To Kabag Johannes	Ja Tübina	Hagnaginan Nig 2017	Ja Pavina Ligia
279	29/4 26	To Palom Pela	To Tancola Ja Kchillan	Tomasides Nig 2274	Ja Krawina Ligia
280	30/4 26	To Katala Kseimpt	- Ja Kadugut	Timulaka Nig 100	Ja Lig-Pidakia Kliakula
281	5/5 26	To Rapant	Ja Tancan	Timulaka No 84	Ja Tappilpit Karia
282	5/5 26	Talia Pichant	To Kallan Ja Kalabua	Tinacoras, Kalia 6	Ja Kadas Karia
283	2/6 26	To Rot Pela	To Pina Ja Timut	Rakimäi R 1009	Ja Pappit Pauila

Filia N. N.	Ex Loco	Praemissis Proclamationibus			CORAM	
		1	3	2	Testibus Notis	Et Sacerdote
To Agore La Tata	Nakimusi R 1151	"	"	"	To Ho La Tara	P. Carl
To Vigi La Tokone	Vincoviki R 1092	"	"	"	Tata La Hot	"
To Parani La Veligiane	Napuni R 1189	"	"	"	To Nini La Vincov	"
To Vot La Kila	Vincoviki R 1105	"	"	"	To Liana La Polo	"
To Rorovini La Kaga	Kilikiki R 1145	"	"	"	Tata La Pukuni	"
To Qu La Nili	Ramutani R 1177	"	"	"	Tata La Pol	"
						Cons. a

Original marriage record of Peter To Rot and Paula la Varpit

RAKUNAI 1939

SACRAMENTUM BAPTISMI ACCEPIT

No.	Die	N. N.	Natus (Nata)	FILII (FILIA) CONJUGUM		
				(Nomen Patris)	(Nomen Matris)	Ex Loco
2041	2/1	Baba Ia Karanamun	1/1	To Palavore	Ia Papit	Rapui
2042	2/1	Amilia Ia Lucania	1/1	Tekunagot	Ia Karanamun	Vinasidai
2043	2/1	Calina	1/1	To Palala	Ia Karai	Vimalaka
2044	2/1	Tominka	1/1	Timpin	Ia Kofina	Nagaguna
2045	2/1	Pelina To Mincak	1/1	To Pilepik	Ia Mitat	Vimalaka
2046	2/1	Aguas Ia Raga	1/1	Talia	Ia Madar	Kikibatu
2047	2/1	Juliana Ia Baba	1/1	To Baba	Ia Laj	Rakunai
2048	2/1	Romuald To Lavarun	1/1	To Pataina	Ia Lalaga	Rapui
2049	2/1	Brother Ia Katakot	1/1	To Lurba	Ia Katinga	Kikibatu
2050	2/1	Bernadette Ia Kik	1/1	Tarina	Ia Pal	Vimalaka
2051	2/1	Baba Ia Mincak	1/1	To Jura	Ia Malana	Vimalaka
2052	2/1	Olive Ia Kagina	1/1	To Tanot	Ia Bepita	Rapui
2053	2/1	Gabriel To Malana	1/1	Toutuna	Ia Ragana	Kikibatu
2054	2/1	Fuchal To Latura	1/1	To Kosa	Ia Taganta	Vimalaka
2055	2/1	Sophia Ia Kating	1/1	Tekut	Ia Pal	Vimalaka
2056	2/1	Kottinga Ia Talai	1/1	To Kua	Ia Nika	Vimalaka
2057	2/1	Ngoy Timpin	1/1	To Lina	Ia Taday	Vimalaka
2058	2/1	Pelina To Mincak	1/1	To Mitat	Ia Kana	Rapui
2059	2/1	Fidilia To Kunkun	1/1	To Pindal	Ia Patina	Nagaguna
2060	2/1	Kathilda Ia Kikila	1/1	To Kaina	Ia Malana	Vimalaka
2061	2/1	Josaf	1/1	To Kunkun	Ia Kaga	Rakunai
2062	2/1	Kikibatu To Katakot	1/1	To Kunkun	Ia Tina	Rapui
2063	2/1	Infans	1/1	To Kua	Ia Tokon	Rakunai
2064	2/1	Jakob Taro	1/1	illy	Ia Kunkun	Vimalaka
2065	2/1	Kara Ia Pindal	1/1	To Vida	Ia Pina	Rakunai
2066	2/1	Kagunika Ia Kaping	1/1	To Kikila	Ia Katinga	Vimalaka
2067	2/1	Tominka Ia Kungun	1/1	To Baba	Ia Tula	Nagaguna
2068	2/1	Kagunika Ia Katakot	1/1	Tene	Ia Tokun Lina	Rapui
2069	2/1	Amemoria Ia Benam	1/1	To Kikila	Ia Katakot	Nagaguna
2070	2/1	Katharina To Mitat	1/1	Timal	Ia Kaga	Rakunai
2071	2/1	Simon	1/1	Tisai	Ia Pina	Vinasidai
2072	2/1	Tadla	1/1	Tisai	Ia Pina	Vinasidai
2073	2/1	Kagunika Ia Pindal	1/1	To Laga	Ia Kunkun	Nagaguna
2074	2/1	Kagunika Ia Katakot	1/1	To Kunkun	Ia Katinga	Rapui
2075	2/1	Kadara	1/1	To Katakot	Ia Kaping	Rakunai
2076	2/1	Kagunika Ia Katakot	1/1	To Kunkun	Ia Katinga	Rapui
2077	2/1	Theresa Ia Kina	1/1	illy	Ia Malana	Vimalaka

Original record of the baptism of Andreas, first son of Peter To Rot

1939

Astanto Patrino (Patrina)	A MINISTROS		Prima Crisma nisi De nisi De	Confirma- tus De	Matrimonium init	Mortuus (Mortuus)	Notanda
	Nomen Baptizantis	Testimonium Rectoris Stationis					
Ja Aloja	P. Carl	Sanctus					
Ja Lavinia	P. Bogenhausen					2 39	
Ja Pel		//					
Ja Parvula		//					
To Maria		//					
Ja Kaga		//					
Ja Tobon		//					
To Moritz		//					
Ja Apollonia		//					
Ja Timotheus		//					
Ja Nika		//				2 39	
Ja Varpil		//					
Tindai		//					
To Kikaly		//					
Ja Kalar		//					
Ja Malana		//					
To Papien		//					
To Inaga		//					
To Cispomata		//					
Ja Varpil		//					
i. a. m. Ja Kaga		//					
To Kasia		//					
i. a. m. To Nika		//					
Ja Loto	P. Bogenhausen	P. C. Sanctus					
Ja Kalaru Eli.	P. Kallus	P. C. Sanctus					
Ja Kikala		//					
Ja Togaute		//					
Ja Varpil		//					
Ja Karsiti	P. Kallus	P. C. Sanctus					
To Nika		//					
Ja Koudori		//					
Ja Roromahesi		//					
Ja Pilak		//					
Ja Nalili	P. Kallus	P. C. Sanctus					
Ja Maige		//					

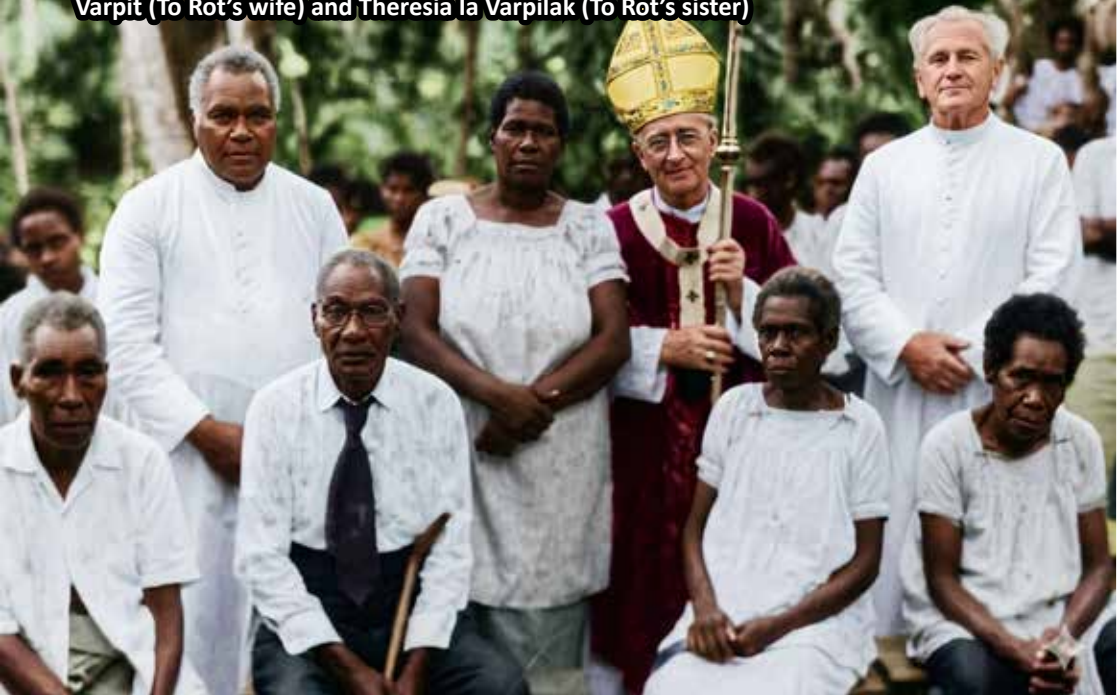
SACRAMENTUM BAPTISMI ACCEPIT

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Original record of the baptism of Rufina la Mama, daughter of Peter To Rot, baptised by her own father during the missionaries' imprisonment

**1980s. Above: Monsignor George To Bata (Auxiliary Bishop of Rabaul), Rufina la Mama (To Rot's daughter), Monsignor Albert Bundevoet, MSC (Archbishop of Rabaul) and Father Ewald Keisler, MSC (Parish Priest of Rakunai)
Below: Joseph Tatamai (To Rot's brother), Anton Tata (Chief of Rakunai), Paula la Varpit (To Rot's wife) and Theresia la Varpilak (To Rot's sister)**



Monsignor Rochus Tatamai, MSC, archbishop of Rabaul and great-nephew of Peter To Rot, together with Rufina la Mama, daughter of the saint

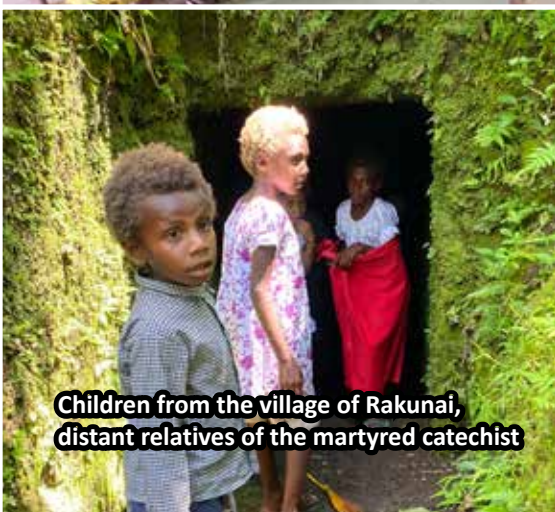




Peter To Rot's grandchildren with their partners during Pope Francis' visit to Papua New Guinea in September 2024. From left to right, the grandchildren are Elaine (second), Henry (fourth), and Peter (sixth).



Peter and Henry with Sister Celine Tirupia in Rome, for the canonisation of their grandfather



**Children from the village of Rakunai,
distant relatives of the martyred catechist**

11- TESTING TIME

Before we begin to talk about To Rot's ministry during World War II, it is important to clarify that in this chapter we will discuss solely and exclusively what happened on the island of New Britain. It is not our intention to discuss the events unfolding in other corners of Papua New Guinea or the world. We will limit ourselves to narrating the events that took place in New Britain from the Japanese invasion of the island in 1942 until its liberation in 1945. And we will also limit ourselves to narrating the events concerning Peter To Rot and the missionaries in that area.

During the years of the war in New Britain, it is necessary to distinguish three major moments. 1) The first period takes place with the invasion and occupation of the island in January 1942. During this time, despite having imprisoned all the missionaries, the Japanese army did not prohibit any pastoral activities. That is to say, To Rot enjoyed the freedom to carry out his ministry. 2) The second period takes place at the beginning of 1943. During this period, the Japanese army decided to partially ban religious activities. 3) And the third period begins in early 1944, this time the prohibition of religious activities was total.

1- First Period:

Japanese Occupation of New Britain

January 1942 - March 1943

The Japanese occupation of New Britain Island by the Japanese army began on 4th January 1942, and lasted until August 1945. Naturally, it was an event that had a great impact and forever changed the lives of the island's inhabitants, especially the Catholic missionaries. The Tolai, too, overnight and without any warning, found themselves invaded by thousands of armed Japanese soldiers. From this moment on, To Rot needed to demonstrate the strength of his faith and be willing to face many deadly dangers.

The *Positio* states:

When the first heavy Japanese air-raid of World War II on the Gazelle Peninsula occurred on 4th January 1942, followed by a large sea-borne invasion on 23rd and 24th January, the Australians had only a token force to oppose it. This was due to the conditions under which the League of Nations granted Australia the right to govern New Britain as a "C class" Mandated Territory after World War I, conditions which stipulated that no military development or large deployment of troops or military weaponry should occur in this area.

Australians taking care of the Gazelle Peninsula had to fight against the Japanese with obsolete equipment. Although they were just over two thousand men, they were scattered around the island, with the result that some military posts were guarded by no more than half a dozen soldiers. The Australians fought as much as they could and put up the best resistance possible, but it was not enough. After some weeks, the Australian Army retreated, and on 24th January 1942, the Japanese claimed possession of the Peninsula.

The day after landing on the island, the Japanese took Vunapope, the seat and “headquarters” of the diocese. Monsignor Leo Scharmach, MSC, then Apostolic Vicar of Rabaul, recalls that event in this way:

It is the record of the Catholic Mission of Vunapope, the headquarters of the Sacred Heart Mission which extends over New Britain, New Ireland and Manus. In fifty-seven main stations sixty priests attended to the spiritual needs of sixty thousand Catholics. (...) When the war arrived at Vunapope, the mission complex was comprised of seventy-eight permanent buildings. (...) They [the Japanese] landed in Rabaul in January 23, 1942, just forty-six days after Pearl Harbor. (...) The Government decided to evacuate all European women and children. An official visited Vunapope and asked each European sister separately if she wanted to leave. All volunteered to remain and offered their services as nurses for both friend and foe. (...) At Vunapope [the missionaries] were separated and counted according to their different nationalities: Australians, Germans, Austrians, Czechoslovaks, Poles, Dutch, Irish, French, Italians. (*This Crowd Beats Us All*, 3-12)

On that same day, Rakunai’s beautiful church was partly destroyed, as the Japanese suspected that an Australian soldier was hidden inside. Theresia Ia Varpilak, To Rot’s blood sister, recalled: “The Japanese army invaded New Britain during January 1942. They arrived in Rabauul on January 23rd, 1942. Two days later, on January 25th, they arrived in Vunapope, the Headquarters of the Catholic Mission, and in Rakunai village.”

Philip Tikot, a relative of Peter To Rot, recalled:

I was in Rakunai the time of the Japanese invasion. Fear was the uppermost feeling among the people who were under

the dominion of the Japanese. They were silent when their church was shot and destroyed by the Japanese in their search for an Australian soldier whom they thought to be hiding somewhere inside.

During these events, Father Laufer, friend and confidant of To Rot, was also in Rakunai. The Japanese police allowed him to stay in the village for a few months, but the situation changed drastically shortly thereafter. In October 1942, the Japanese decided to imprison all the missionaries and forced them to remain under strict internment in Vunapope. The premises were monitored twenty-four hours a day, and a barbed wire reminded the missionaries of the boundaries beyond which they should not stray. From this moment on, the people in the villages were left absolutely alone, and the faith of the brave catechists had to shine brighter than ever.

This is how Monsignor Leo Scharmach remembers the beginning of the prison in Vunapope:

Before the Japanese moved out for the Coral Sea Battle [May 1942], the common opinion at Vunapope was that once they were gone the war would be finished for us. On their return my view was: "Let us prepare for at least three more years of war." I advised everybody [the missionaries] to keep busy with some occupation lest they become mentally upset.

The Sisters, besides caring for our food and clothes, filled their days with lessons on nursing, music, language and other topics. The Brothers worked hard at improving our housing conditions and that of the other communities. The priests revised their philosophy and theology, and studied both the native languages and Japanese. For this we had a small booklet for the use of travellers in Japan. We made copies of it so that everyone had a copy. (*This Crowd...*, 40)

From the moment Father Laufer left Rakunai, Peter To Rot decided that the time had come to demonstrate his generosity and loyalty. Some time ago, the bishop had given him the crucifix of a catechist and had entrusted him by appointing him as the catechist of Rakunai. And the young catechist did not want to disappoint God, the missionaries, or his own people. He knew very well that the situation was dangerous and that his own life was at risk, but he did not hesitate to take charge of the care of the missionary station. Among the witnesses who gave their testimony during the canonical investigation, we only find praise and gratitude towards To Rot.

To Rot's sister Theresia Ia Varpilak said:

In the absence of the parish priest, who was interned with the other missionaries first in Vunapope and later in a concentration camp in Ramale, Peter To Rot expressed his determination to continue as head and leader of the church. He continued his pastoral activities, especially in caring for the sick and for the children.

Also Paula Ia Varpit, To Rot's young widow declared:

Peter To Rot continued his work as catechist during the war years, baptising, performing marriages, giving religious instructions, caring for the sick.

His friend and confidant Father Laufer, in the very first biography of Peter To Rot called *A Catechist Becomes a Martyr*, recalled:

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 pastor. **Regularly,**

he assembled the children and adults for both religious and secular instruction, 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.

Rakunai's leader of the time, Anton Tata confirmed the above testimonies in this way:

In the absence of the parish priest, Peter To Rot assumed full responsibility of the parish and began to care for the people. The Japanese Navy was the first in Rakunai, and they ordered the removal of the missionaries but did not forbid pastoral activity. Later the Japanese police moved in and it was then that prohibition of all religious activity began.

Although there are many other witnesses to quote, all of them gave the same testimony as above. We could dare to say there was nobody for whom To Rot did not care during this period. Witnesses talked about his care for the sick, to whom he visited often and gave the Holy Communion. He cared for the children, to whom he dedicated long hours of religious and secular instruction. He cared for the poor, for whom he did his best to help in their needs. He cared for the infants, and as soon as he knew that a woman had given birth, he would begin to organise the sacrament of baptism. He cared for the couples, to whom he gave catechetical instruction and officiated at their marriages. He cared for his fellow catechists, whom he visited and strengthened. He took the same care of the missionaries, to whom he used to bring food. Lastly, he also cared for the dead, to whom he buried in the Catholic rite which the parish priest had taught him. In other words, nobody in Rakunai was denied of To Rot's love and paternal concern.

A long testimony given by To Rot's cousin, Gabriel To Uraton, must be quoted in its entirety:

When, during the Japanese occupation, the mission station was left without a priest, To Rot was quite capable of assuming full responsibility for all that concerned its continued functioning. He baptised the new-born babies and officiated at the marriages of Catholic couples. Sometimes he would bring consecrated hosts from the central mission station at Vunapope, which was a five to six hours walk away, and then he would call the people together in the church at Palnalama to receive Holy Communion. (...) Nor did To Rot forget the missionaries in the Japanese Prison Camp. He used to collect eggs and other produce from the villagers and take these donations to the camp, or persuade other people to do so. After the bombing of Vunapope Mission, the place where the missionaries had originally been imprisoned, all the missionaries were transferred further inland to Ramale. To Rot collected a large mound of foodstuff and clothing and took it all himself to the camp in a Japanese truck, only to have everything confiscated by Japanese police.

For as long as he maintained his freedom, To Rot cared for everyone.

2- Second period:

Partial Ban on Religion

March 1943 - March 1944

The freedom that Catholics enjoyed during the first months of the Japanese occupation came to an end in March 1943. During 1942, pastoral activities had continued, and people had been able to pray freely and receive training from catechists. But, starting in March 1943,

a change began to be noticed in the attitude of the Japanese towards the native population, particularly regarding religious practices. As a consequence of several defeats suffered by both the Japanese navy and the Japanese army during 1942, the civil administration, which had been in charge of these two services, was transferred to the military police in 1943. In March 1943, after the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, the Japanese also lost air supremacy. It was at this same time that the situation drastically changed for the natives of New Britain under Japanese administration.

And Rakunai was no exception. The Japanese tolerance towards the religious practices of the Tolai quickly deteriorated, and the situation became even more dangerous than before. Peter To Rot and Anton Tata, who was the chief of Rakunai during those years, were identified by the Japanese and summoned to the military police headquarters in Rabaul. To Rot was interrogated about his activities as a catechist and ordered to restrict his work. From this episode, we have the testimony given by Anton Tata himself during the 1952 investigation:

It was not long before we were both called to the police station for the first time. We had to go to Rabaul. To Rot was asked if he was a catechist and if he still held religious services. He replied in the affirmative. To Keta, the Native Police Chief, tried to make things easier for To Rot. The religious services were not banned, but there were to be no large gatherings of people. If the people were to assemble at all, it was to be in the early morning hours because of the danger of air-raids. To Rot thought that proposition reasonable, and we all went home.

In addition, To Rot's cousin, Gabriel To Uratun, recalled the phrase used by To Rot to reply to the Japanese:

To Rot was summoned to the Japanese Police Headquarters three times because he continued to exercise his ministry as

Catechist. On the first occasion, he had to go to Rabaul, where he was questioned as to his activities. He told the Japanese police: **“Religion makes us able to bear the miseries of war. We do nothing wrong when we do God’s work; on the contrary, religion is to your benefit, as it teaches us to obey you as the lawful authority and forbids us to steal from you; and there are many similar teachings beneficial to you.”** On that first occasion no action was taken against To Rot, and he was free to go home.

Meanwhile, at Rakunai, the Japanese ordered the parish church to be destroyed. They said that it was strikingly visible to ally bombers and attracted large gatherings of people, making it a dangerous place and putting people at risk. Nobody in Rakunai believed that excuse, as they knew that since the very beginning, the Japanese used to look with distrust on all the church’s activities and gatherings. Despite this, To Rot obtained permission to build a smaller church in a less conspicuous spot. It had to be small, simple and in some way, camouflaged. In accordand with the Japanese’s orders given to To Rot, only small groups of people could gather there. With no delay, the good catechist organised the building of the new church, made in Tolai style with bush materials in a place called Palnalama, its name meaning “pal” = house and “na lama” = house of palms.

The elder brother of Peter To Rot, Joseph Tatamai, recalled this episode as follows:

One day he urged the people to build a church. We did as he asked, and the church was built. When the house of prayer was finished, we had a celebration. The children began their education there. When a couple wished to get married, they told To Rot so that he could obtain the required permission. When he had done this, he performed the church ceremony.

Marta Ia Kot, wife of the village chief of Rakunai during those years, added:

The people were very frightened and did not dare to disobey the orders of the Japanese. My husband was the go-between between the people and the military police, and he tried to help the people. Sometime after the invasion, the Japanese forbade large prayer gatherings and ordered that the church be destroyed and another built in the village. The Blessed Sacrament was removed from the main station. Peter To Rot organised small groups of people in various places and prayed with them.

One of the reasons why the Japanese began to oppose the religious practice was the fact that they were suffering great defeats on the war front. On one hand, the Japanese knew that the Tolai wanted the war to end as soon as possible. And on the other hand, they also knew that the Tolai supported the Australians and Americans. That's why they attributed the military defeats to the prayers of the Christians. Monsignor Scharmach tells us:

To Rot organised smaller groups who met in special houses and later in dugouts and tunnels. In the beginning, the Japanese had no objection to this practice, especially on Sundays. The different groups assembled in the early morning and, after their ordinary morning prayers, would recite the usual prayers for the different parts of the Mass. They even rang the bells when they arrived at the moment of the offertory, consecration and Communion. As they had not the Blessed Sacrament with them and no priest, all made a "Spiritual Communion," preparing themselves by contrition and lovingly inviting Our Lord into their hearts. That was the normal practice in the numerous Catholic communities during the Japanese occupation.

However, when the fortunes of war turned against the invaders and they realised their doom, they openly blamed the faithful for it. "You hate us and you pray to your God for our defeat, depriving us of our victories." (*This Crowd...*, 240)

In fact, the biography of To Rot written in 1950 by his friend Father Carl Laufer is titled *Too Much Christo*, which was the expression the Japanese used to disperse Catholics who gathered to pray. "*Christo*" was how the Japanese referred to Christ. Witnesses say that every time the Japanese approached a group of people who were praying, they would say with disdain: "Enough praying! Too much *Christo*! Too much *Christo*!" The Japanese turned this expression into the perfect excuse to justify many of their defeats during the Pacific War. According to them, the defeats were inevitable because there was *too much Christo* preventing them from winning.

This situation lasted exactly one year, from March 1943 until March 1944. In March of 1944, everything changed yet again. Again, a change for the worse.

3- Third Moment: Total Ban on Religion

March 1944 - May 1945

By this time, the war had definitely turned against the Japanese. The army had been expelled from the south of New Britain, and they only controlled the Gazelle Peninsula, which was completely cut off from new supplies brought by sea or air. The bombings, however, continued.

As the situation for the Japanese worsened and the end of the war approached, they decided to harden their relationship with the natives, and the Tolai people suffered even more. The partial prohibition of religious activities was, at that time, replaced by a total prohibition, which became official when the village leaders, as well as the Catholic and Methodist catechists, were summoned to the police headquarters

in Ramata. The catechists were interrogated about their religious activities, and the police informed them that all religious practices would, from that moment on, be absolutely prohibited. Although in previous years they had tolerated the work of the catechists, they were no longer willing to do so. To Rot tried to explain to them that their religious services had nothing to do with the war. On the contrary, religion strengthened them to endure the war and also taught them to obey and respect the Japanese. However, the police officer shouted at him to shut up and be quiet. Religious services were and would remain strictly prohibited. From that moment on, the apostolate became synonymous with martyrdom.

Paschal To Uvae, a fellow catechist with Peter To Rot who was called along with To Rot to the police headquarters, recalled this episode as follows:

On the second occasion he was summoned to the police station, To Rot was accompanied by To Vema from Raluan, To Rapuia from Rapui and myself. We were told that we were not to hold any more religious assemblies because, the Japanese alleged, Christian prayers were delaying a victorious end of the war for them. The Japanese believed that because the native people practised their religion so conscientiously, God no longer saw it fit to favour the Japanese.

To Rot went home, knowing that he could not pay heed to the prohibition. He told his people: **“They want to take prayer from us, but I shall do my work.”** From this moment, Peter To Rot was absolutely alone. At the beginning of the occupation, he had already lost the priests and the missionaries. Later, during the partial prohibition, he had also lost many fellow catechists. Some had abandoned the ministry out of fear of the Japanese. Others, on the other hand, had been imprisoned. Monsignor Schamarch remembers:

Quite a number of catechists were imprisoned, beaten and killed, some for giving help to airmen who crashed or soldiers in distress; the majority for refusing to neglect their religious duties. They preferred to die rather than to become traitors to their Faith. (*This Crowd...*, 242)

Now, with this last and total ban, To Rot lost all chances of being close to the people and doing apostolate because a new war was declared against religion. Father Laufer said:

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 school-house. 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. (*Too Much Christo*, 8)

With this new ban, To Rot had only two possibilities ahead of him. The first consisted of abandoning his ministry as a catechist, also abandoning his people, and forcing them to live and die without prayers or sacraments. The second, on the other hand, consisted of risking his life for Christ and, with prudence and wisdom, continuing with his ministry as a catechist. The good catechist did not hesitate and preferred to risk his life, "*because he was looking ahead to his reward.*" (Heb 11:26)

After the last meeting with the Japanese police, Peter To Rot decided to act with the utmost prudence, so as not to endanger others and to avoid being arrested himself. His proud parish priest and friend, Father Laufer, wrote:

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’m 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 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 of the station were spurred on by his heroic example and acted according to his wise direction. (*Idem*, 9)

Also Father Theler praised To Rot with these words:

Now the faith of the courageous, uncompromising catechist showed itself to be even stronger than before, and so did the pastor’s love for his people and his compassion for those severely hit by the war. He considered himself a caretaker, responsible for the whole community and a helper appointed to care for the ailing and the dying, and for prisoners.

(...) During this time, To Rot took particular care of the sick and the dying. He visited them and prepared them for death, kindled their repentance and buried the deceased. When this was no longer possible officially, he did it secretly, even in the dark of the night, fearless of eventual consequences. **His principle was: “God’s work is all and everything.”** At times he even walked to far-away Vunapope to fetch the Viaticum

for the dying. Afterwards, he invited the people to worship the Blessed Sacrament.

During this priestless period, To Rot also took care of the branch stations, where other catechists were employed. He called on them, gave instruction, encouraged them, baptised, and officiated at weddings. Later, when travelling became more difficult, he sent the catechists short written counsels and words of advice. (*A Short Biography...*, 18-19)

During this period of total prohibition, To Rot divided the people into three prayer groups, so that there wouldn't be many people in one place. Needless to say, he frequently visited those groups, as long as circumstances allowed. He advised them to pray quietly, without drawing too much attention. And he told them that, in case someone died and he couldn't be present, they shouldn't pray in the cemetery, otherwise they would attract the attention of the Japanese and the villagers who, to win the favour of the Japanese, acted as spies. He advised them to pray in the deceased's house the night before the burial, and to bury the deceased in complete silence the following morning. To Rot was prudent, and so he told the people: **"Do pray every day, but only in the morning and in dugouts."**

All the witnesses that gave their testimony during the canonical inquiry agreed in saying that To Rot did never abandoned his catechist's ministry, despite the prohibition and threats. He was much more prudent and astute than before, but he continued with his duty and was ready to persevere until the end.

Sister Adriana Ia Katai, a relative of To Rot, said that the courageous catechist "continued with his catechetical work with unabated zeal, disregarding the Japanese prohibition of such activity." Martin To Kau, a resident of Rakunai, said: "Peter To Rot continued his catechist's work right to the end." Margareta Ia Kalan, the girl adopted by the To Rot family, also expressed: "Peter To Rot continued firmly with his pastoral activities: visiting people, baptising, performing marriages,

caring for the sick, until his imprisonment. He never showed any fear when doing these things.” Johannes To Varto, schoolmate and friend of the catechist, also added: “I was impressed with the way Peter To Rot went about his work, and how he had the cooperation of the people in the disturbed conditions. At that time, the people were very frightened. Under Peter To Rot’s guidance, they continued to meet for prayer, although all forms of religious and Christian expression were forbidden. The people felt that the Japanese were against religion because they told us: no more *Christo*.”

Anton To Burangan said that one Sunday, in the church at Palnalama, To Rot announced: **“They want to take our prayers away from us; but, never fear, I shall see that my ministry continues!”** These words from To Rot had a clear meaning: he was willing to face the consequences of his faith and ministry, even if it meant imprisonment or death. And the prison we are talking about did not only mean deprivation of freedom, but also torture and cruel punishment. Many Tolai had been executed in their own district for offences less severe than deliberate disobedience to a police order.

The dangers that lurked around To Rot were not imaginary. They were real. Raphael To Labit, friend and fellow catechist, recalls that once the Japanese police told To Rot: “If you do not cease your religious activities, you will go to prison, and then you will have your head cut off.” These were not empty threats used to intimidate the catechist, but the punishments were truly cruel. Executions, floggings, and mutilations were common practices among the Japanese, and the Tolai had to endure them even for the slightest acts of disobedience. A witness recalls: “The Japanese were cruel to the people. Killings were not isolated events, even when there was no apparent reasons, even for a simple refusal to obey. (...) Some were killed for stealing foodstuffs from the Japanese.” Monsignor Scharmach also speaks of these cruelties in his book: “Some islanders (...) they helped themselves to army rations and rice. When caught, they were court martialled. Flogged terribly (we witnessed these thrashings) and sentenced to forced labour.”

We end this chapter with the words of John Paul II during the beatification of Peter To Rot:

During times of persecution the faith of individuals and communities is “*tested by fire*.” (1Pt 1:7) But Christ tells us that there is no reason to be afraid. Those persecuted for their faith will be more eloquent than ever: “*it is not you who will be speaking; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you*.” (Mt. 10:20) So it was for Blessed Peter To Rot. When the village of Rakunai was occupied during the Second World War and after the heroic missionary priests were imprisoned, he assumed responsibility for the spiritual life of the villagers. Not only did he continue to instruct the faithful and visit the sick, he also baptised, officiated at marriages and led people in prayer.

Peter To Rot was realistic, and knew that, if he continued with this ministry, he could expect the worst fate: prison and harsh punishment in the hands of the cruel Japanese soldiers. And eventually —as he had been warned—, death.

NEW BRITAIN LOST AND PAPUA MENACED

Japanese Invasion Now Deep in Australia's Pacific Territories

THE Mandated Territory of New Guinea (comprising the north-east section of the main island, the big islands of New Britain, New Ireland and Bougainville, and a number of smaller islands and groups) has passed out of the control of Australia, and the eastern parts are now controlled by Japanese.

Japanese have occupied Rabaul since January 23, and they appear to have landed at various other places (Kavieng, Kieta, Lorengau, Madang, Wewak); but it is not known whether they have remained there. There probably are at least 10,000 Japanese troops in New Guinea. They occupied Gasmata (south coast of New Britain) on Feb. 10.

All European women and children were taken away in December and early January. Many European men have also escaped. (See lists of evacuees on page 37, onwards.)

Others are either standing-to, as militia-men, in the few places which the Japs have not reached, or are refugees in the jungle, where they are defending and supporting themselves as best they can.

Up to this date (January 11), organised parties of refugees have been reported in the jungle west of Rabaul (from Rabaul), in the Namatanai district of New Ireland (from Kavieng), in the mainland district of Upper Ramu (from Madang) and at Wau (from Lae, Salamaua and Bulolo).

These refugees now are being removed to the southwards, as opportunity occurs.

Women and children were removed from New Guinea before the Japs struck—800 from the Rabaul area alone. The people were picked up all over the Territory, and sent by air and sea to Australia. The evacuation, as it proved, was completed just in time.

Details of how these people are being cared for are given on page 3, while lists of evacuees are published on page 37.

IT is expected that the Japanese gradually will extend their hold over New Guinea, until they are in a position to launch a big-scale attack upon Port Moresby and Torres Strait, which almost certainly is their main objective in this region. (See our main article, "What is Japan Trying to Do?")

An attempt to invade Australia is most unlikely; but military establishments, factories and ports in Queensland, and perhaps in New South Wales, probably will be the object of sporadic raids.

This position may last for months, while the Japanese are digging in, and the Allies are slowly preparing a counter-offensive which will blast them out of the North-west Pacific.

BLITZ ON RABAUL

IN the absence of an official narrative, and in view of the continuing and

paramount need for withholding useful information from the enemy, it is difficult to give a connected and accurate report of what has happened in New Guinea and Papua. The following indicates, generally, the course of events.

January 3—Jap reconnaissance planes flew over Rabaul and other places. Jan. 4—Jap bombers arrived about 11 a.m., bombed aerodrome, killed 12 natives and wounded 30. Others arrived at 7 p.m., and directed bombs at Talilligap aerodrome, 14 miles from Rabaul. Jan. 6—Rabaul aerodrome bombed late in evening, and our grounded aircraft were damaged. Jan. 7—Rabaul aerodrome bombed, in morning. Jan. 16—Jap bombers attacked at 1 p.m. and 7.30 p.m., and service property was damaged.

These attacks were mostly reconnaissance. Other outlying places (Madang, Manus, Kavieng) were examined by enemy airmen, but apparently not bombed. Then came the invasion.

ON Tuesday, January 20, waves of Japanese bombers and fighters, most of them apparently from an aircraft-carrier, arrived about noon. Rabaul and Talilligap aerodromes were systematically bombed, and service installations and military objectives were damaged. The attack continued all Tuesday afternoon, the Japs apparently returning to their ship for more fuel and bombs. They used carrier-planes, flying-boats and shore-based planes.

At least 100 planes were employed. The Rabaul defences were overwhelmed. Australian airmen attacked, very bravely, but they did not have a chance. Our anti-aircraft guns brought down three enemy machines.

Five Australian aircraft were lost, but the crew of one was saved.

During Tuesday (Jan. 20), while the sky was filled with Jap machines, Australian airmen were heroic. There were all too few Australian planes, but they attacked unhesitatingly against hopeless odds. As one crew bailed out, they were machine-gunned by the Sons of Heaven.

EARLY on Wednesday, Jan. 21, 40 bombers and 20 fighters attacked Kavieng (at the northern end of New Ireland); 3 enemy aircraft attacked Madang about noon; and, a little later, about 50 bombers and fighters flew over, apparently from the northern mainland coast, and bombed and machine-gunned Lae, Bulolo and Salamaua. Lorengau (Manus) also was attacked.

There are no official reports to indicate that the Japs, on Wednesday, 21st, continued Tuesday's aerial attack on Rabaul—in fact, officialdom's announcements, in relation to times and dates, are confusing—but it is presumed that the approaching Japanese fleet did not leave Rabaul alone.

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BIEY, H. NOLLEN, J. REISCH, 35
Lay Brothers; 33 Sisters.
Volavolo.—REV. J. HALT; 4 Sisters.
Malaqunan.—REV. H. JUNEMANN; 4
Sisters.
Takabur.—REV. J. ZWINGE; 2 Euro-
peans; 16 Native Sisters.
Tapo.—REV. B. MURCHE; 1 European; 6
Native Sisters.
Vunamarita.—REV. B. STAPLEMAN,
BRO. VAN DER ZONEN.
Matupit.—REV. W. BARROW.
Nodup-Korere.—REV. J. HALT.
Paparatava.—REV. B. MERTENS; 1
European; 5 Native Sisters.
St. Paul.—REV. B. STAPLEMAN; 4
Sisters.
Quananba.—REV. A. BERNHAUSER.

Ratogor.—REV. F. GRUNDL.
Rakunai.—REV. C. LAUFER.
Tavuiliu.—REV. G. BOGERSHAUSEN; 4
Sisters.

Vunavavar.—REV. A. SCHERHAG.
Kabaira.—REV. R. SCHUMM.
Birara.—REV. J. OBERREITER.
Ramalmal.—REV. A. WENDL.
Milimila.—REV. A. HERZOG; BRO. F.
RUSCHOFF; BRO. J. JASSMEIER;
4 European Sisters.
Mope-Rara.—REV. J. SCHNEIDER.
Vunadidir.—REV. J. SEELEN.
Kamanacham.—REV. A. HAGEN.
Lan.—REV. B. STAPELMANN.
Rabaul.—REV. W. BARROW; 4 Sisters.
Talliliqap.—REV. S. DARGAR; BRO. F.
HEESE.

Bitokara.—B. FRANK.
Valoka.—REV. J. WEIGL.
Ulamona.—REV. M. BAUMANN; REV. H.
BERGER; BROS. HENNEKE, PLEN-
GEMEIER, WECKHEVER, BRAND
and ROLEFF.

Poi (Nakanai).—F. KERSKERR.
Kilege (Nakanai).—REV. W. CADOGAM.
Bariai.—REV. L. BISCHOFF.
Lomingi.—REV. A. MEYRHOFFER.
Pillilo.—REV. J. SCHARMACH; REV. W.
O'CONNELL.

Makiri.—REV. B. KLAARWATER; BRO.
J. MAHROFFER.

Valinguo.—REV. W. HEBERMAN.
Also: REVS. J. DURKIN, W. CUL-
HANE, E. HARRIS, A. KLEIN-
TITSCHEN.

LAY-BROTHERS WHO ARE MISSING IN NEW BRITAIN

Doerfler, L.; Mueller, F.; Buescher, P.;
Deen, V.; van der Zanden, G.; Hatzig,
P.; Henneke, C.; Plengemeyer, J.; Sauli,
P.; Hollinger, J.; Packmor, A.; Licznarski,
I.; Hessling, H.; Boekenkoetter, B.; Aver-
beck, W.; Overkaemping, W.; Teutenberg,
J.; Lembeck, J.; Nattbrede, A.; Bah-
mann, F.; Weckheuer, B.; Mahrhofer,
J.; Herrmann, M.; Droste, J.; Brand, J.;
Kuenne, F.; Rueschhof, F.; Tisch-
macher, D.; Grewe, H.; Loehr, P.; Jass-
meier, J.; Lang, J.; ...
Christadler, E.; Wieschen, J.; Brenn-
inger, M.; Schr, N.; Epping, B.;
Homann, W.; Hatters, B.; Wochner, J.;
Brennan, C.; Huth, A.

ADMIRALTY ISLANDS

Papitalai.—REV. C. BORCHARDT; BRO.
C. SCHALLER.
Bundralis.—REV. F. UTSCH; BRO. F.
LOEHR; 4 Sisters.
Povat.—REV. J. DAHMEN.
Bipi.—REV. R. JUERGENS.
Also: REV. F. UTSCH.

GILBERT ISLANDS

Tarawa.—MOST REV. OCTAVUS, TER-
RIENNE, Bishop.
Butaritari.—REV. P. GUICHARD; 4
Sisters; 2 Brothers.
Marakei.—REV. A. VOCAT; 2 Sisters.
Apaiaing North.—REV. J. LEBEAU; 2
Sisters.
Apaiaing South.—REV. L. DURAND
(Director of Seminary); 4 Sisters; 1
Brother.
Tarawa (Betio).—4 Sisters; 4 Brothers.
Tarawa South.—REV. M. VIALLOIN; 2
Sisters.
Maiana.—REV. J. DRONEAU.
Apemana North.—REV. E. SABATIER
(also in charge of Kuria and
Aranuka).
Apemana South.—REV. A. MEYE; 2
Sisters; 1 Brother.
Nonouti South.—REV. A. QUOIRIER; 2
Sisters; 1 Brother.
Nonouti North.—REV. L. MARQUIS.
Tapeteuca North.—REV. C. RAMUZ; 2
Sisters.
Peru.—REV. E. CHOBLET; 2 Sisters.
Nukunau.—2 Sisters.

OCEAN ISLAND, NAURU

Ocean Island.—REV. J. PUJEBET.
Nauru.—REV. A. KAYSER (Menang); 3
Sisters.

NORTHERN SOLOMON ISLANDS

BOUGAINVILLE

Bishop: RT. REV. JAMES J. WADE.
Reported to be prisoner in Rabaul.
Tarlena.—Buka Passage: REV. J. Mc-
CONVILLE; REV. A. MOREI; BRO.
PAUL.
Konna.—REV. H. HEBERT; REV. R.
DIONE.
Patupatnai.—REV. R. O'SULLIVAN.
Paroran.—3 Lay Nurses.
Tsiabai.—Training College for Cate-
chists: REV. J. HENNESSY, D.D.,
Ph.D.
Timbutz.—REV. F. ALOTTE; REV. A.
LABEL; BRO. GREGOR; BRO.
HENRY; 3 Sisters.
Kieta.—REV. C. SEILLER; REV. J.
LAMARRE; REV. J. LEBRETON; 3
Sisters.
Tunuru.—REV. W. WEBBER.
Koromira.—REV. N. GOEDERT; 2 Sisters.
Mugui.—REV. P. SCHANK; 2 Sisters.
Turioboiru.—REV. J. B. PONCELET; 3
Sisters; 5 Native Sisters.
Metingu.—REV. J. SCHLIEKER.
... ISWARD.
... REV. B. TONJES.
... REV. A. MULLER.
Asitavi.—REV. H. FLUET.
Piano.—REV. F. MILTOUP and 2 Sisters.

BUKA

List of missing persons in Rabaul published in an Australian newspaper.
Father Carl Laufer, parish priest of Rakunai, is among them.





Native police officer of Rabaul. To Metapa was one of them.





Lieutenant General Hitoshi Imamura



Native police officers of Rabaul

12- IMPRISONMENT OF THE MISSIONARIES

Although this book is dedicated to the figure of Peter To Rot, we do not want to forget the heroic and generous religious who freely decided to stay in New Britain during the years of the war. Among the religious figures, two major groups must be distinguished: the native sisters and the European missionaries.

1- Daughters of Mary Immaculate

Native Congregation of Sisters

When we talk about “native sisters,” we are referring to the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (*Filiae Mariae Immaculatae*, called the “FMI Sisters”). It is a congregation founded by the then Apostolic Vicar in Rabaul, Monsignor Louis Couppé, MSC (1850-1926). In 1912, encouraged by the Holy Father, he decided to establish a female religious congregation under the patronage of the Immaculate Mary. However, during the early years of its existence, this new congregation depended on the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH Sisters), the female branch of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC). The OLSH Sisters and MSC Fathers guided this new congregation during its early years.

During the war period, while the European missionaries were imprisoned from mid-1942 to August 1945, the native sisters enjoyed a certain degree of freedom. The Japanese insisted that Japan was an enemy of Europe, but not of Papua New Guinea. That’s why

the native sisters were set free, on the condition that they obeyed the Japanese and did not attempt to communicate with or help the imprisoned religious.

Monsignor Leo Scharmach remembers:

When, in October, 1942, all the missionaries were brought into the prison camp at Vunapope, the native nuns were declared free, by the Japanese, to go where they liked.

The poor Sisters felt like orphans on being separated from their spiritual Mothers and Fathers. Crying and lamenting, they packed their few belongings; their residence was already occupied by the Japanese soldiers.

I assembled the poor Sisters and explained to them that under such circumstances, I was willing to give them permission to exchange their habits for ordinary secular clothes and allow them to go home. Not a single one accepted the offer; they emphatically insisted that they would stay together and wear their religious dress. With a sorrowful heart I gave them my last blessing and they departed, crying. (*This Crowd...*, 244)

Once separated from the rest of the European fathers and sisters, the native sisters went to Takabur, a village a few kilometres from Vunapope where their novitiate was located. They chose Sister Cecilia as their superior, and continued living a communal life until the end of the war. Only on very rare occasions were they allowed to visit the bishop and the other missionaries who were imprisoned, although they were permitted to approach the barbed wire. Monsignor Scharmach recalls:

On Saturdays, I stood there at a spot where they could see me well. I lifted my hand: Attention! A whisper went through their single file: Bishop, Bishop, Bishop... A second sign: I struck my breast as at the *Confiteor*, indicating

contrition. Then finally, I made the sign of the cross with my hand giving them general absolution. They understood me perfectly and rejoiced.

Every Saturday morning for nearly a year and a half, as private confession was impossible, they got the general absolution. (...) Any communication was strictly forbidden and practically impossible. (*This Crowd...*, 249)

They were years in which the sisters had to face many dangers and adversities. Despite being natives, they remained consecrated religious sisters. And we must not forget that all religious practices had been strictly prohibited, and the Japanese despised Christians. Throughout all these long years—as far as we know—they were only able to receive Holy Communion once, and they were deprived of the Eucharistic presence of Christ in the tabernacle. Neither could they pray openly or engage in any apostolate. And one of their greatest sorrows was knowing that the bishop—whom they loved like a father—and the rest of the missionaries were living in inhumane conditions.

Even enjoying a certain degree of freedom, the sisters were continuously monitored, and the Japanese police sought any excuse to try to make them abandon religious life and return to their villages. Monsignor Scharmach tells us:

One of the native police spies had reported that Sister Theresia had spoken disparagingly of the Japanese. She was accused of saying that the Japanese were “number ten” and that she liked the Americans and Australians better. That, of course, was a crime.

(...) Sister Theresia was charged with having made the aforesaid offensive remarks. She emphatically denied it. The Japanese had no witnesses; probably they had invented the charge for purposes of their own. Sister Cecilia accompanied her [to the police station]. The Japanese tried violently to

push the latter away, but she clung to Sister Theresia. “She is my daughter,” she said. “I will not leave her.”

The whole night through the Japanese continued their interrogation, with a bayonet at Sister Theresia’s throat and body, jabbing it at her in a savage manner. When they remarked that they would take Sister Theresia into the underground prisons of the police station, Sister Cecilia retorted: “I am going with her, you can’t separate me from her.” “We are going to kill her tonight,” they said. “Then you have to kill me first,” said the Superior.

When the other Sisters heard that, they shouted, one after the other: “Kill me, kill me, leave Sister Theresia alone” Now Sister Theresia spoke up: “Let them kill me, I have done no wrong and I am not afraid to die.”

In the meantime, the other nuns had not been standing around idle. The Japanese saw to that. The guards had devised a special treatment for all of them: the so-called bamboo torture. The nuns were ordered to form lines and kneel down. A long piece of bamboo was laid across their legs behind the knees. Two native police had to stand on both ends to weigh it down. The cruel torment is very painful. The poor Sisters started to whimper and to cry with pain.

Now Tagai, the Japanese interpreter, put in an appearance, sadistically laughing at them and sneering: “And you pretend to be true followers of *Christo*? Did *Christo*, when hanging nailed to the cross, whimper and cry as you do? You should be ashamed of yourselves.” That jeer silenced the nuns instantly. The Japanese admitted to them that there was no charge against any of them except Sister Theresia.

(...) The diabolical plan failed miserably. The inhuman treatment continued until four in the morning. Then the Japanese gave it up. By then they knew that the Sisters were true followers of “*Christo*” and that there was nothing that

could break their morale. The nuns had even volunteered to die. (*This Crowd...*, 247-248)

The sisters' luck changed in December 1944. At least, for a few minutes. On December 24 of that year, they sent a basket of boiled bananas to the bishop, who was in strict isolation along with the other missionaries. And hidden among the bananas, a small note that said: "Dear Bishop and Father, we want to let you know that we are in distress. For days and nights on end we have been crying and unable to sleep for sorrow. Christmas is so near and we know there will be no Mass and no Holy Communion for us even on Our Lord's Birthday. Can't you help us, dear Bishop? Signature: Your little sisters." Monsignor Scharmach writes:

This note stabbed like a dagger in my heart. I had tried repeatedly to make Mass and Holy Communion possible for them but so far, I had failed. I decided to try once more, and to try hard. As on many other important occasions, I remembered what Our Lord had told His Apostles: "*You will be brought before governors and kings on my account. Do not consider anxiously beforehand what you are to say; use what words are given to you when the time comes; it is not you that speak, it is the Holy Spirit.*" (Mk 13:9)

Ascending the steep path to the major's house, a thought flashed like an inspiration through my mind: in less than a second's time, a new plan, in all its details, came to my mind. Present for the interview were the major, doctor, chief of police and the interpreter. After outlining the meaning of Christmas, I requested permission for the native Sisters to have the benefit of Mass and Holy Communion on this great day.

First proposal: Allow the Sisters to enter our camp under police escort. In a secluded spot one priest would say Mass for them and give them Holy Communion.

An animated dispute followed between the two independent authorities: the major and the police. They talked and talked while I sat there and wondered. After some twenty minutes, they declared the concession could not be granted as it would be against the prison regulations.

Then I brought forward my second proposal: Let the Sisters stay in their compound but let a priest go there under escort and say Mass for them. Again, a long palaver with the same negative result: against regulations.

I was ready with my third proposal: "To safeguard your sacrosanct regulations, I would suggest that tomorrow morning at 6 am the Sisters stand outside the camp behind the fence, opposite my hut and about thirty yards away. From there they can see me saying Mass. We are just asking for that. There will be no talking from either side. If you wish you may even post your guards armed with hand grenades and fixed bayonets."

I considered this proposal foolproof. They discussed it for nearly half an hour. My hopes began to waver and dwindle. Then to my great relief they granted my request. "All right, Bishop, tomorrow at 6 am the Sisters will be at the spot indicated by you." I thanked them and said I had still another favour to ask. I pointed out that on the morrow, Christmas Day, they would witness a special ceremony. All the priests, Brothers, Sisters, boys and girls would come to the Bishop. Bending their knee they would kiss my ring. We would all shake hands and wish each other a happy Christmas. "I am asking for this favour to be extended to the native Sisters also," I said. "I wish to shake hands with them in the presence of all the authorities and the whole police force here at the station." This suggestion seemed to meet their approval. After a short discussion, they agreed. They could not find any possible danger to Great Nippon in that. In happy anticipation I left for my hut.

Before 6 o'clock on Christmas morning, I began the first of the three Masses. After a while my altar boy whispered that the Sisters Immaculata were there. I was happy and continued the Holy Sacrifice. After a few minutes, he whispered again: "The Sisters are gone. Chased away by the Kempi." When I had finished my Mass, I saw them sitting on the steep path leading to the camp, crying.

Rev. Father Kersken had already vested for Mass and was just about to begin when I advised him to put his altar table out in the open, right in front of my hut where the Sisters could see him. He was delighted to comply and the good Sisters still happier to hear Mass from approximately hundred yards distance. When I had offered my third Mass I walked up to the police office, where all the authorities were assembled. I was attired in purple soutane, rochet and stole. I started with the major and shook hands with him and all the rest, wishing each in turn a happy Christmas. They grunted something in return.

Then I exclaimed: "Major, now I wish to shake hands with all the Sisters." He assented and beckoned to them to come down. In single file they descended. The first nun knelt and kissed my ring. I calmly opened the ciborium I had hidden under my rochet and gave her Holy Communion. Quietly they approached me one after the other, going through the same ceremony of kissing the ring and receiving the Saviour born for us on the first Christmas night. (*This Crowd...*, 250-252)

2- European Missionaries

The fate of the European missionaries was very different from that of the native sisters. Previously, we have read the following text by Monsignor Scharmach that is worth remembering:

It is the record of the Catholic Mission of Vunapope, the headquarters of the Sacred Heart Mission which extends over New Britain, New Ireland and Manus. In fifty-seven main stations sixty priests attended to the spiritual needs of sixty thousand Catholics. (...) In all when the war came, Vunapope comprised seventy-eight permanent buildings. (...) They [the Japanese] landed in Rabaul in January 23, 1942, just forty-six days after blasting Pearl Harbor. (...) The Government decided to evacuate all European women and children. An official visited Vunapope and asked each European sister separately if she wanted to leave. All volunteered to remain and offered their services as nurses for friend and foe. (...) At Vunapope [the missionaries] were separated and counted according to their different nationalities: Australians, Germans, Austrians, Czechoslovaks, Poles, Dutch, Irish, French, Italians. (*This Crowd Beats Us All*, 3-12)

When the Japanese arrived in Rabaul in January 1942, one of the first decisions they made was to settle in Vunapope. Vunapope had seventy-eight buildings: schools, workshops, convents, a hospital, meeting rooms, a retreat house, chapels, rooms for priests and brothers, dormitories for students, the bishop's residence, diocesan offices, etc. It was a small town that lacked absolutely nothing. In fact, Vunapope could subsist without any need from the outside world, as it had not only a large number of animals and cultivated lands but also generated its own energy and drinking water. All of this caught the attention of the Japanese, who saw in Vunapope an ideal place to settle. Within a few days, they had vacated the greater part of the buildings and transformed them into rooms, dining halls, and infirmaries for the thousands of soldiers who arrived on the island day after day.

As we already know, the missionaries still enjoyed some freedom during the first few days. Although they had to continuously ask the Japanese for permission to leave the premises or make any movement,

that permission was almost always granted. In any case, that freedom was short-lived .

A month later, on February 26, the situation worsened for the missionaries. That day, a statement from Japan arrived ordering that all foreign residents in Rabaul who were subjects of any nation at war with Japan should be immediately arrested and imprisoned. “That was one of my darkest hours —the bishop recalls—. They were asking me to hand over my missionaries, especially the numerous sisters, to the delicate mercies of the Japanese troops! I would never do that in my life! I decided to fight.” And after long negotiations with the Japanese authorities, the bishop managed to ensure that no missionary was imprisoned in a jail. Even so, absolutely everyone had to stay on the premises, and leaving was now completely prohibited. From that moment on, the missionaries knew they could not leave the place until the war was over. Vunapope thus became an open-air prison. This is how Monsignor Scharmach remembers it:

We no longer expected an early withdrawal of the Japanese. Completely resigned to the will of God, we were prepared to accept every trial He wished us to endure. We had three chapels in our camp on account of the different communities. We made our meditation every morning, assisted at Holy Mass and received Holy Communion. That gave us strength and courage to bear all the hardships. (*This Crowd...*, 58)

Little by little, the number of prisoners began to increase. At the beginning, it was only the missionaries residing in Vunapope. Shortly thereafter, the bishop himself asked the Japanese authorities to allow mixed-race students who attended their schools to live with them. And within a few weeks, other missionaries began to arrive who, upon being discovered in their mission lands, were immediately sent to the open-air prison. In a few months, the number of prisoners reached three hundred and fifty. Scharmach recounts:

We had our morning and evening prayers, our meditation, Holy Mass and daily Holy Communion, recitation of the breviary and the rosary. We made out adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for we had our Eucharistic Lord in our chapels. On fixed days we had sacramental benediction, the Stations of the Cross and on Thursdays the Holy Hour. We even made our retreat. Consequently, we could afford to be cheery. (*This Crowd...*, 77)

During the first half of 1943, aerial clashes between Japanese and Americans intensified. And with the clashes, the material ruin of Vunapope also began. The American planes mercilessly dropped their bombs on any building that was suspected. And unfortunately, Vunapope had become a place too suspicious, due to the enormous number of Japanese it housed. Although there are countless anecdotes about these bombings, we prefer to stick with the following one. Scharmach writes:

One morning I was celebrating Mass at 6 am for the M.S.C. Sisters' community. Just before Holy Communion an aerial dog-fight began in the air above us. Howling, screaming motors machine-gunning from both fighters combined in a hellish roar. I had no intention of deserting the altar at this stage of the holy liturgy. The moment came when I turned to the Community, presenting the Sacred Host to them: "*Ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi*: Behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world." I started to distribute Holy Communion: "May the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ preserve thy soul unto life everlasting. Amen."

If we were to be killed by bombs and bullets, could there be a more propitious moment to depart from this unfriendly world than after having received Holy Communion? We were all united in this conviction. There was no panic or even

nervousness among the courageous Sisters. We felt secure in the presence of Our Lord. (*This Crowd...*, 121)

Although the missionaries had already been in prison for two years, the bishop himself tells us that “during 1942-1943 we lived our captivity without major incidents.” However, this would change forever at the beginning of 1944. In the early hours of January 1, 1944, Vunapope suffered a fierce bombing, which would be the first of a long series that would continue until it was reduced to ruins. And the worst of them came on February 11.

After an air raid alert, we saw long lines of bombers and fighters pass over Vunapope headed towards the sea. “That is all right, let them drop their stuff somewhere else,” we thought.

In a few minutes the planes changed course. I saw them heading straight for Vunapope. I had been detained by two Japanese doctors in the X-ray room. I had to cover a distance of many metres to get to our deep shelters. Realising the danger, I broke into a sprint. Ten yards from the entrance to our tunnel I was caught in a spurt of machine-gun fire. I threw myself on the ground, with bullets kicking up the soil around me. Lying down, I was a better target. So I jumped up and gained the entrance just as the first bomb crashed above the tunnel, showering me with loose dirt.

I was not hurt, but the raiders had smashed my cigar case in my side pocket. I thought it rather inconsiderate of them. The first part of the tunnel was empty. Here the Sisters and half-caste girls were in the habit of sheltering. Instinctively, everybody had on this occasion pressed into the innermost recesses.

By the time I reached them, all hell had broken loose over Vunapope. The ominous sound of diving planes, the scream of the falling bombs and their ear-splitting detonations,

the rattle and whistle of machine-guns and their bullets all combined in terrific pandemonium. In the tunnel all this noise was somewhat muffled but the exploding bombs made the shaft shake in the same manner as one experiences during an earthquake.

All the lights were out. We were engulfed by an infernal darkness. Yes, hell was all around us but not within us. All had received Holy Communion. There was grace and light in our hearts.

There was no hysteria, no terrifying screams, no swearing or shouting. But listen, what is that? It comes in gushes from all parts of the tunnel. Harmoniously blended, fervent prayers, charged with full confidence in God's and Our Lady's protection, winged their way to heaven. (*This Crowd...*, 139-140).

As the bombings continued, in June 1944 the Japanese decided to send the prisoners to a valley called Ramale, near Vunapope. On one hand, the valley was a safer place for the prisoners because it was covered with dense vegetation, making it invisible to the American planes that flew reconnaissance missions day and night. On the other hand, it was an elegant way for the Japanese to disassociate themselves from the prisoners, leaving them to their own fate. The Japanese were no longer interested in continuing to feed and share the few available medicines with the three hundred and fifty prisoners. Scharmach recounts:

According to statistics still in my possession, the average number of sicknesses per day during the fifteen months in Ramale was 23.6. That aggregate includes malarial cases confined to the bed. If all other afflictions such as digestive troubles and tropical ulcers were counted too the average would go up to 92.9 per day. The first two months and the last six months were the worst. (*This Crowd...*, 206)

By this time, the prisoners were from seventeen different peoples and nationalities, including four native tribes. There were: Australians, Americans, English, Germans, Austrians, Poles, Czechoslovaks, Dutch, Luxembourgers, French, Italians, Canadians, mestizos, gunantuna, manus, sulka, and baining.

Against all expectations, time passed quickly in Ramale. The secret was that the prisoners had set up a daily schedule, so that everyone was busy from morning to night. The first hours of the morning were reserved for spiritual life: morning prayers, meditation, and Holy Mass. Next came breakfast, which consisted of a cup of hot or cold water, two boiled bananas, and two ripe bananas. After breakfast, it was time for manual labour. The strongest went to work in the gardens, while the rest stayed in the camp and took care of cooking, bringing water from the river to the camp, manual labour, washing clothes, etc. Those with artistic skills used that time to work with wood and create various objects, from kitchen utensils to crucifixes. The priests also took advantage of the time to read and study. That activity not only kept them busy, but also gave them interesting topics of conversation during meals and recreational times. Monsignor Scharmach was convinced that the Japanese could take everything, except the books.

The priests took refresher courses in dogma, moral, canon law and other sciences. The books we brought from Vunapope proved a great blessing to all the communities.

During the evenings no bright light was permitted; just a small oil lamp or hurricane lamp in a position where it would not be seen by prowling planes on nocturnal reconnaissance missions. From 7 to 9 pm, each community met for a chat or informal exchange of news and views between its members.

The Fathers' met off to the side. We always looked forward to those evening meetings; they were very interesting as would be expected with such a number of learned priests,

theological, philosophical, moral, anthropological, scientific, technical questions and opinions were discussed. And, of course, political problems. (*This Crowd...*, 220-221)

The spiritual life of the prisoners was Monsignor Scharmach's priority. Under no circumstances did he allow his religious to neglect the daily Holy Mass, community prayers, and moments of meditation. They even held monthly retreat days and Spiritual Exercises.

It is a common practice among religious, such as missionaries to retire from their daily tasks for a week or so to devote themselves to special spiritual exercises. It is a time for a check-up, an overhaul of our interior life. We keep silence in those days in order to concentrate better on ourselves and not to disturb our communication with God, to whom we feel near indeed during such periods. A retreat master is appointed to give us four conferences daily, supplying us with matter for our meditations and spiritual improvement. The retreat is a wonderful time for restoring peace of soul and repose in God.

We made our retreats faithfully every year even in the prison camp, first at Vunapope, then at Ramale. I made mine privately. Having to deal so much with the Japanese I had to be free to shift the four meditations to the most convenient times. In spite of this arrangement, I still had to cope with a lot of disturbances.

I was often called out from contemplation in our chapel to meet officers. In due time I developed a sort of radio technique. My meditation was "switched off" and I went to discuss all sorts of trivial matters; then, again in the chapel, I my meditation was "switched on" again. Repeated practice made me quite expert at it.

At Ramale, the various communities went on retreat separately. The Sisters and Brothers succeeded in making

theirs without disturbance. It was the nearest approach to one made in the monastery or convent. The Fathers were less fortunate. The first morning conference was fixed for 8 o'clock. It was duly commenced but after a few minutes the air-raid alarm sounded. While the retreat master remained undisturbed, his audience jumped up and stampeded into the tunnels, well, it was similar to a stampede; the rush and the heavy wooden clogs conveyed that impression. Once the planes had gone, the audience returned and the retreat master continued. After a few minutes, another line of planes approached, with the same result.

We decided 8 am was no good and fixed 9 o'clock for the exercise. Unfortunately, the Americans made the same decision. Again, the devotions were disturbed. Next morning at 9 am we had the same experience and during the other conferences we didn't have much luck either. Even at 8 pm when we did not expect any disturbance, in came a plane and caused the same commotion. The Fathers finally had to resort to my practise and use the switch method.

Founder of the retreat system was St. Ignatius of Loyola, who, being himself an old warrior and prisoner of war, must surely have looked down from heaven and applauded our valiant efforts to make a good retreat in spite of raiders and prison camp. (*This Crowd...*, 229-231)

When the Japanese defeat was imminent and the war was about to end, the Japanese devised a plan to kill all the prisoners. There is documentation that was presented to the War Crimes Commission, which shows that August 23, 1945, was the set date for the execution of all prisoners. Thanks be to God, the armistice was declared on August 15, the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, exactly eight days before the execution. However, the release would come almost a month later, on September 13. During the six months

that followed the end of the fighting, the prisoners continued living in Ramale. In total, fifty-eight missionaries died: twenty-three priests, seventeen brothers, nine European sisters, and nine native sisters. Of the fifty-eight missionaries who lost their lives, twenty-one were murdered by the Japanese, while the rest died due to tropical diseases or malnutrition.

Barely ten years later, Vunapope rose from the ashes. Literally from the ashes. During the war, seventy-eight buildings were lost, including the beautiful cathedral dedicated to the Sacred Heart. In 1955, the mission was once again standing. Monsignor Scharmach managed to build a new cathedral, one hundred and twenty-eight new buildings, and more than fifty mission stations.



Monsignor Leo Scharmach, MSC

SANTONIO BUS



Father Stherhag, MSC, the oldest of the prisoners, who had been in Rabaul for more than thirty years





Above: Ramale at the end of the war
Below: Ramale today





**Father Reischl, MSC, leading a choir
of foreign and mixed-race children during the prison years**





Native FMI Sisters. The second from left in the first row is Sister Cecilia, Superior General of the congregation.



Native sisters recognizing Japanese soldiers at the end of the war

Children and missionaries at the end of the war







**Sister Maria Borgia, OLSH, writing her first letter to her family
after three and a half years in prison**



13- FIGHTING FOR THE SANCTITY OF MARRIAGE

This chapter will be divided into three parts. The first is a brief story about the issue of polygamy in New Britain and To Rot's reaction to this new challenge. The second, on the other hand, is the famous story between To Rot and To Metapa, the young native policeman who wanted to take a second wife, and for this, he needed to get rid of the catechist. The third and final part is a chronological summary of the events.

1- The Polygamy Issue

June 1944

In June 1944, the fate of the war was almost sealed, and the Japanese knew that defeat was inevitable. There was still more than a year left until the end of the war, but Japan knew that its fate would not change. And with the adverse luck of the war, the Japanese began to fear the Tolai. Japan had lost practically all its planes and most of its ships, meaning they would have no means to escape when the Allies arrived. The only thing they could do was hide, but for that, they would need the help of the natives. And the natives did not seem too willing to help those who, from January 1942 to June 1944, had been terribly cruel to them. There are testimonies—which in order to avoid unnecessary length we will not cite here—in which the whippings, mutilations, rapes, and murders committed by the

Japanese against the Tolai population are recounted. Now the tables had turned. And although for more than two years the Tolai had lived in fear of the Japanese, now it was the Japanese who feared the Tolai. They feared not only that the Tolai would hand them over to the enemies, but also that they would seek to avenge all the homicides and punishments with the same cruelty they had used.

Trying, then, to win the favour and cooperation of the village leaders, the Japanese authorities called a special meeting. As a result of the discussion about the reward that would be acceptable for the village leaders for their cooperation, it was decided that traditional Tolai polygamy, banned by Christian churches and previous governments, would be legalised for all who proved to be friends of the Japanese.

Thus, Monsignor Schamarch recalls this episode:

To announce this new edict, [the Japanese] gathered a large number of native chiefs and proclaimed that they would no longer be bound by Christian principles. And polygamy and brothels would be reestablished. (*This Crowd...*, 240)

To understand the context and reason for this new law, it is necessary to remember that polygamy had been a traditional practice among the Tolai since time immemorial. It was not frowned upon for a man to have as many wives and families as he wanted, as long as he could support them all. That was the only condition the village imposed on anyone who wanted to take more than one wife. What's more, the number of women a man had indicated the degree of economic well-being and social position that man had within society. Among the Tolai, the case of To Valia was famous, a great leader who had ten wives, but upon meeting the MSC missionaries, he not only changed his life and received baptism, but also donated a large amount of land for the mission.

This practice had begun to disappear with the arrival of the gospel, and as the villages became Christian, they themselves enacted laws

prohibiting this tradition. However, the Gospel had only arrived fifty years earlier. Thus, this tradition was still deeply rooted in the hearts of many men, and there were not a few who longed for it and remembered it with nostalgia. Many Tolai had stopped practicing polygamy solely because it had been legislated by the village leader, but without any inner conviction. And somehow the Japanese knew this, and they wanted to win the favour of the leaders and the men by giving them what they longed for and had abandoned against their will. With this new law, the Japanese military police not only legalised polygamy, but opposing this anti-Christian legislation became a punishable offence.

Paula Ia Varpit, wife and confidante of To Rot, learned about this meeting between the Japanese authorities and the village leaders. This is how she remembers it: “[To Rot] told me that the leaders had had a meeting, in which they had decided to legalise polygamy.” But he always spoke against this practice and warned about its consequences.

Raphael To Labit, To Rot’s fellow catechist, recalled:

To Lapar, the chief of Nangnagunan village, told me about a meeting of the chiefs and the assistant chiefs, which had been called by the Japanese. At this meeting, the proposition was put that they should all be allowed to take more than one wife, the idea being that, in return for this favour, they would be more prepared to cooperate with the Japanese.

Heinrich To Lapar, the chief of Nangnagunan village who was present in that meeting, gave this “first hand” account:

One day all the chiefs of this large territory were summoned to Vunakalkalulu. The Japanese officer, Kueka San, told us that all the chiefs should take a second wife. A few chiefs spoke in favour of the idea. Most chiefs thought that it was a good idea. Only two chiefs, To Lapar and To Vue, chief of Vunalaka, spoke against it.

We don't know exactly how many leaders or village chiefs participated in that meeting, although they must have been really many, because—according to what we just read—“all the chiefs” of this vast territory participated. And the fact that only two of them opposed the new law confirms what we said earlier: many Tolai longed for the traditional polygamy that had been prohibited, and the Japanese knew how to use it to their advantage.

Let's return to Peter To Rot. If the ban on religious activities was already something bad for his ministry, this new situation was, without a doubt, even worse. Once again, religion was under attack, and one of the most treasured jewels of Catholicism was at risk.

To Rot's attitude towards this infamous law was completely predictable: from the very first moment, he openly denounced polygamy as an unacceptable pagan practice for Christians. He used all the means at his disposal to persuade Catholics and help them avoid this practice. He knew that this could mean imprisonment and death for him, but at the same time, he could not remain silent in the face of this great danger. He knew that the love of spouses demands, by its very nature, the unity and indissolubility of the community of persons that encompasses the entire life of the spouses “*so that they are no longer two, but one flesh.*” (Mt 19:6)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches:

Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter - appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands indissolubility and faithfulness in definitive mutual giving. (1643)

Faced with this new situation, Peter To Rot was ready to fight with all his might and, if necessary, pay his last tribute to God with the

sacrifice of his own life. He did not fear meeting the same fate as the great martyrs of marriage, such as Saint John the Baptist, Saint John Fisher, or Saint Thomas More, among others. These saints gave us an astonishing testimony and wrote, with their lives and their blood, glorious pages in the history of the Church. Saint John the Baptist did not hesitate to confront the powerful King Herod, telling him: *“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”* (Mk 6:18) Neither Saint John Fisher nor Saint Thomas More hesitated to oppose and condemn the sovereign King Henry VIII. We can summarise it as did Cardinal Müller in 2013: **“The inner bond that joins the spouses to one another *was forged by God himself. It designates a reality that comes from God and is therefore no longer at man’s disposal.*”** (SCDF, *Testimony to the Power of Grace*)

Something interesting to highlight is the fact that Peter To Rot defended Christian marriage even within the intimate circle of his family. And this is something commendable, which may go unnoticed by those who are not familiar with the culture and traditions of Papua New Guinea. We have already spoken before about the exceptional nature of this gesture, which could have serious and painful consequences. To this day, there exists in the villages a sort of “tacit agreement,” whereby if a family member or relative does something worthy of reproach, the best course of action is to “look the other way” and pretend nothing happened. Or at least, pretend that one never knew. Pointing out a family member or relative’s mistake can be very risky because it involves exposing oneself to the possibility that everyone in the family and the village will start turning their backs on you. And that can become synonymous with having to renounce the family, the clan, the village in general, and the lands. In other words, it’s about losing everything. One must be very brave and have a great love for God to dare to correct a family member, because it can mean total ruin and the loss of everything.

In the case of To Rot, it was his own elder brother, Joseph Tatamai, who was one of the first men to want to take a second wife. Tatamai,

as many witnesses recalled, was quite weak in his faith. And as soon as he learned of the new law enacted by the Japanese authorities, he secretly went to see a woman of ill repute named Ia Tia, to take her as his second wife. To Rot did not care about the family bond, but firmly opposed his elder brother in a clear and decisive manner. In fact, he opposed his elder brother with more vigour than with those who were not related to him. He did not allow Tatamai to make Ia Tia his second wife, and even less to take her to live on the family estate, where To Rot and his brothers lived. When Tatamai insisted on living with her, To Rot kicked them both out of the estate.

Catechist Raphael To Labit recalled the episode as follows:

To Rot took his own brother, Tatamai, to court. He was not afraid to have his brother banned from their family lands if he was prepared to be unfaithful to God's law and although married, to appear publicly in company of another woman.

To Rot's wife, Paula Ia Varpit, also gave testimony about this incident:

Afterwards, when his brother, Tatamai, informed To Rot that he wished to take the infamous Ia Tia as his second wife, To Rot exclaimed: **"I will not have that woman in our midst. If you do not leave her, then you must leave our community as soon as possible."**

At first, Tatamai was too blinded to follow the advice of his catechist brother. He preferred to leave the family farm to go live with his second wife in another village. However, he didn't last long. Even being far away, it seemed as if he could still hear the reproaches of his younger brother. And shortly after, he left Ia Tia and returned to his legitimate wife. However, his relationship with To Rot would never be the same again.

Many witnesses believe that it was Joseph Tatamai who, following this episode, decided to make an accusation against his catechist brother to a local police officer. The police officer was a young Methodist named To Metapa, who also intended to take a second wife. But with To Rot in the middle, things wouldn't be easy for him either. And upon hearing Tatamai's complaint, the young policeman found the perfect excuse to get rid of To Rot: accusing him of disobedience to Japanese authorities.

However, To Metapa was not the only one. His case went down in history for being one of the first and for having succeeded in having To Rot killed. But the truth is that the vast majority of leaders succumbed to temptation, and the situation was completely out of control.

Father Theler writes:

The first to try to contract a double marriage was the black police youth To Metapa, of the Japanese police station Vunaiaara at Navunaram. (...) He tried to alienate the affections of the validly married Catholic woman Ia Mentil from her husband, To Vinau, and wanted her to be his second wife. (...) To Rot succeeded in making the attempt fail definitely; but To Metapa never forgot this.

There were other cases to follow, To Kabang, assistant judge to the chief To Lapar, took married Ia Lop for his second wife. To Lapar supported To Rot absolutely. He invited Tarue, the chief of Navunaram, to settle the case. Both tried to convince To Kabang to desist from his crime, unfortunately without success.

The second case was To Anot, auxiliary judge at Rakunai, who forced the married woman Ia Palakia, the wife of Tarere, to follow him. Even To Rot's own chief, Tata, successor to the old To Puia, fell into severe temptation. He set his eyes on Ia Varvai. Fortunately, there was another man who was quicker and, without much ado, took Ia Varvai to live with him.

It was doubtlessly a very hard time for To Rot, but he did not give up. He, the only pastor available there because of the parish priest's internment, felt obliged by his conscience to say: "You are not allowed to do this." And say it he did. (*A Short Biography...*, 22-23)

Regarding the brothels established by the Japanese, Monsignor Scharmach writes:

The Japanese nurses we respected greatly. They had an elegant uniform and, in the hospital, dressed in white. From what we saw they were a hard-working lot. (...) The Japanese nurses however should not be confused with the other "ladies" of a different profession and destination.

We called them *Geishas*, but that title was a bit above their rank. Concerning these poor creatures, an officer told me: "We despise them but we use them." There were several thousand of them near Rabaul and Kokopo. When the Americans started bombing in earnest, the Japanese army decided to repatriate them. It was too late. Their ship was bombed, it sunk and all of them perished. (*This Crowd...*, 107)

We cannot know precisely how many brothels were established in Rabaul, but Monsignor Scharmach speaks of "several thousand" Japanese women who practiced prostitution. And to these "several thousand" Japanese women, we must add several thousand local women. We know —because people still remember it to this day, even though there are no records— that many young Tolai women were also forced into prostitution. And here, once again, To Rot intervenes. When the Japanese recruited young Tolai women and forced them into prostitution, they always sought single young women with no commitments to any other man. The good catechist, concerned about the young women of his village and the neighbouring villages, had a

brilliant idea: he collected money to pay the “bride price” for many young women. In this way, each young woman for whom To Rot had paid became, from that moment on, a woman already “engaged” to the catechist, and therefore the Japanese had to respect her and could not force her to do anything against her will.

2- The Catechist and the Policeman

April - June 1945

Due to To Rot’s preaching and insistence on observing God’s law and respecting the sanctity of marriage, he not only earned the enmity of the native policeman To Metapa but also the hatred of the Japanese police officer, Meshida, who was in charge of the Rakunai district police. At that time, the local police cooperated with the Japanese police, so To Metapa was under the command of a Japanese police officer.

To Metapa was a young Methodist police officer native to Nodup. The catechist and the policeman already knew each other. To Rot knew that To Metapa was a libertine, and that he also hated the Catholic Church, missionaries, and catechists. And To Metapa knew that To Rot would not abandon his ministry, and would continue to be an obstacle for all those who wanted to take a second wife.

To Metapa was one of the first to try to take a second wife, and he did everything possible to make Ia Mentil, a legitimately married Catholic woman, leave her rightful husband. However, To Rot would ruin his plans, causing the policeman’s attempt to fail definitively. One day, the good catechist managed to contact the woman and took her to Rakunai. There, in the presence of the village leader, he convinced her to remain faithful to God’s commandments and not abandon her husband. She listened to the catechist’s advice and decided to return to her home and her legitimate husband, thwarting all of To Metapa’s plans and desires. To Rot even offered refuge for her and her sister in Rakunai, which was gladly accepted.

Father Theler recalls:

When To Metapa wanted Ia Mentil, the young Catholic wife of To Vinau for his second wife, her uncle Palangia was furious about To Metapa's insolence. Despite being Methodist he intervened and impeded the treating of his young niece in such a way. (...) To Metapa was very angry about this intervention. He reported it to the Japanese official and had Ia Mentil's uncle and her legitimate husband brought before him, to have them punished because of their denial to hand over Ia Mentil. He arrested To Vinau and tied him to a tree for two days.

As soon as To Rot heard of this, he had the threatened Catholic woman come to Rakunai. In the presence of the chief Tata he persuaded her to be true to God's commandments and not to leave her legitimate husband. The Chief and catechist offered her and her sister, Ia Ursula, refuge in Rakunai, so as to be safe from the Methodist police man, To Metapa. Ia Mentil accepted the offer. It is understandable, therefore, that To Metapa was furious at seeing his plans thwarted by To Rot, and that from then on, he awaited an occasion to take revenge. (*A Short Biography...*, 24)

Catechist Raphael To Labit said:

This was a difficult time for To Rot. **He virtually stood all alone in his fight against immorality** and acquired the enmity of all those keen to break up marriages. Then, he heard that the young policeman, To Metapa, had taken the already married, Ia Mentil as his wife.

Anton Tata testified:

Peter To Rot actively opposed the Japanese suggestion of polygamy. To Metapa, a man from Matupit working in Navunaram, near Rakunai, became angry with Peter To Rot because he opposed his marriage to Ia Mentil, who was already married in the Church. To Metapa was a Methodist; Ia Mentil was a Catholic and a distant relative of Peter To Rot. Because of this, To Metapa set out to destroy Peter To Rot.

To Metapa was not the only enemy the catechist had made, as many adulterers, including his own brother Tatamai, were furious with him. However, To Metapa was the most dangerous of all. He was the only one who had the means to finally get rid of the catechist. He was a man who did not hesitate to resort to physical punishment on his own accord, but he could also accuse To Rot to the Japanese police. Moreover, he had the friendship of Meshida, the Japanese officer famous for his lack of scruples and his great disdain for the natives.

The ideal opportunity for To Metapa arose on a Sunday morning, when To Rot officiated some marriages in a hidden place. A couple, disregarding the precautions recommended by the catechist, was intercepted on the road by To Metapa while he was watching the place. The policeman asked them what they were doing so early, and they told him absolutely everything, including all the details of the ceremony. To Metapa had found the excuse he had been longing for and he communicated it to the police chief, Meshida, who immediately gave the order for Peter To Rot and his two brothers to be arrested the next day.

The catechist's young wife, Paula Ia Varpit, was present when the police came to To Rot's home searching for him. She said:

At the time, he [To Rot] was working on his Taogo farm to provide food for prisoners of the Japanese. Meshida came with the young native policeman, To Metapa, and searched

the house. They searched his dug-out and then searched the homes of the three brothers. They emptied chests and suitcases. They destroyed To Rot's books, his Bible, catechism, hymn book, baptism and marriage lists and his crucifix.

There are two "first-hand" testimonies that deserve to be transcribed in their entirety. The first is from the catechist Emil To Iura, who was one of the witnesses of that wedding. The second, from Joseph Tatamai, brother of Peter To Rot, who was also present at the ceremony, and was arrested along with his catechist brother.

Speaking about the wedding, To Iura said that, on that particular morning, he had been talking with the bridegroom To Metin, and they both had arrived somewhat late at To Rot's underground shelter. As a matter of fact, they had arrived at Taogo farm only after the other two marriage ceremonies had been completed. To Rot rebuked him for being late, but nevertheless had gone ahead with the third ceremony. I had not seen the policeman, To Metapa, but several other wedding guests had met him on their way to the wedding, and he had asked them: "Where are you going?" They had replied: "We are going to see To Rot and be present at some weddings."

To Rot's brother, Tatamai, gave still more details of this:

On Sundays, To Rot had begun officiating at marriages again. They were celebrated in an underground shelter on the Taogo farm. The couples were, To Lauren - Ia Praide, and To Ruga - Ia Teret. Witnesses were To Kabang - Ia Vavina, and To Malila - Ia Tili. There was also a third couple from Vunadidir who were married, To Metin and Ia Maul. The witnesses were the catechist To Iura and myself. The policeman, To Metapa,

a Wesleyan [i.e. Methodist] from Nodup, met the wedding party on the road, and after questioning, he discovered that weddings were about to take place. He reported To Rot to Meshida, who was the Japanese in charge of Navunaram police station. The next morning, Meshida sent to Inui, son of To Mano of Navunaram, to the farm which belonged to the three brothers: To Rot, Tatamai and Telo, to fetch me, the eldest. The farm was called Taogo.

Meshida asked me: "Is it true that the catechist has been performing religious ceremonies?" I answered: "Yes." Meshida hit me across the head with a stick for my part in such ceremonies. "Didn't you know that the catechist was banned from such acts?" asked Meshida. I replied again: "Yes." I was sentenced to one month's imprisonment. Shortly afterwards, Meshida went to the farm and searched the house. He came back in the afternoon with To Rot. I was present at the beginning of the hearing but was sent back to work before it concluded and so missed hearing some of what was said.

Meshida asked To Rot: "Did you perform a religious ceremony yesterday?" To Rot answered: "Yes." "Don't you know that such acts are forbidden?" And when To Rot answered "Yes," Meshida hit him across the head with a stick, and he continued to beat him with it from his ribs up to his neck. To Rot was sentenced to two months in prison.

Meshida then sent for the youngest brother, Telo. He had him tied up to a papaya tree and then beaten unconscious. He was sent to prison too. The reason given was that a cheque book had been found in his suitcase during the search of the house. That evening To Rot said to me: **"It is bad when one is killed by bombs or machine gun bullets, but it is good to die for one's faith. You get a great reward in heaven."** (In *Positio... Summ*, 148-149)

Father Laufer adds:

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 Metapa did likewise, using a sharp-edged bamboo. (*Too Much Christo*, 11)

After this event, the verdict given by Meshida to To Rot was two months in prison. Father Theler, in his short biography of Peter To Rot, gave still more information:

Was To Rot also questioned in relation to his attitude towards adulterers? His brother Tatamai doesn't know anything about that; he says he was sent away to work before the interview was over.

Tarue, To Rot's uncle and chief of Navunaram, states that To Rot himself told him at the prison how things went at the interview: **“First, I was charged with celebrating church services. The second charge was my attitude towards adulterers. My brother Tatamai has declared that I forbade him to live with Ia Tia. And this second charge bolstered the first one.”** Tarue even asserts that To Rot could have been set free if charged with church services only, but as things were, Meshida wanted to befriend his helpers.

Later, at the prison, To Rot also told his wife that a Japanese spy said that Meshida had summoned Tatamai and Tata and had interrogated them about marriage matters. He himself also was interrogated by Meshida about the church services and the marriages. He had been quite alone; nobody helped him. When the interview was over, To Rot was locked in a tiny room in the dugout. (*A Short Biography...*, 35)

Although the police accused To Rot of breaking the law by holding prayer meetings and religious services, this was merely an excuse to prevent him from continuing to interfere in the matter of polygamy. To Metapa and Meshida were not interested in the weddings or prayer meetings that took place at night in the shelters. The only thing they really wanted was for To Rot not to continue being an obstacle for those who wished to take a second wife. The fame that To Rot had acquired during those years was so great that even the village leaders did not know whom to obey. On one hand, the Japanese allowed and promoted polygamy, which many leaders saw as a good thing. Unfortunately, many Catholics were also in favour of this old practice. On the other hand, Peter To Rot was a tireless apostle, and his moral authority was so great that even the village leaders did not want to do anything that displeased him. They also knew that the good catechist would scold them if they ever did.

To Metapa's pride was wounded, and he wanted revenge. The catechist had ruined his plans, and he could no longer obtain what he desired. His dream of taking Ia Mentil as a second wife was over, and it was the catechist's fault. However, he was determined to continue fighting for polygamy to continue, no matter the cost. And he had resolved not to allow the catechist to ruin his plans again. For To Metapa, the only problem was To Rot. And he knew that To Rot wouldn't stay quiet. Therefore, the only solution was to kill him and silence him for ever. Only then could the men take new wives with complete freedom and without anyone condemning them. And this is the true reason why To Rot was already condemned even before he was arrested.

Saint John Paul II said during To Rot's beatification:

When the authorities legalised and encouraged polygamy, Blessed Peter knew it to be against Christian principles and firmly denounced this practice. Because the Spirit of God dwelt in him, he fearlessly proclaimed the truth about the

sanctity of marriage. He refused to take the “easy way” of moral compromise. “I have to fulfil my duty as a Church witness to Jesus Christ,” he explained. Fear of suffering and death did not deter him. During his final imprisonment Peter To Rot was serene, even joyful. He told people that he was ready to die for the faith and for his people.

3- A Short Chronology of the Above Events

At the beginning of the book, we said that Tolai people did not put much value on paying attention to specific dates and chronologies. Their usual disinterest in dates makes it difficult to estimate a precise chronology of all of these events. However, all the witnesses agreed in saying that To Rot received three official warnings from the Japanese before he was finally arrested. These took place in the last two months of To Rot’s life, although we cannot know exactly the dates.

According to the witnesses, there were three specific episodes in To Rot’s relation with the Japanese police:

1) The first time he was summoned by the Japanese to the police station at Ramata, he was warned not to give religious instructions. On this occasion, To Rot was even detained for some days and made to dig tunnels for the Japanese. When he returned home, he continued his catechist ministry.

2) The second time he was summoned again for an interview, he was ordered, once again, to cease any religious activity. Once more, he was allowed to go free, and once more, he continued his catechist ministry.

3) The third and last time took place between April and June 1945. On this occasion, To Rot was questioned by the Japanese officer Meshida, who sentenced him to two months imprisonment.

14- A CATECHIST IN PRISON

Although we do not know the exact date when Peter To Rot was imprisoned, we do know that it was around April or June 1945. Unfortunately, we don't have much information about his detention and life in the prisoner camp, because it was practically forbidden to interact with him. Only his elderly mother and his young wife could visit him regularly, along with a few other people who on exceptional occasions received special permission from the police.

Peter To Rot was detained in the Vunaiara prisoner camp. There, the serious cases were locked up in a shelter with bars, while the minor cases enjoyed some freedom of movement around the camp. Let's not think that it was a prison like the ones we know today. The prison was located in the middle of the jungle, in a narrow valley, and to this day, the place is quite difficult to access. And it consisted of some improvised huts made from jungle materials. The first hut could accommodate between six and eight men. A second hut, built with a dirt floor, served as a kitchen. Most of the time, the prisoners lived outdoors, as the Tolai usually do. The hut was their bedroom, and when the weather was bad, their refuge. There was also a smaller tunnel dug into the hillside that was used for interrogations. On other occasions, this small tunnel was used for strict confinement or as a refuge.

During his first day of imprisonment, To Rot was placed in a small room in the underground shelter, and they left him there all day. A fellow inmate, named To Romano, left this testimony about To Rot's first days in prison:

I was arrested two months or so before Peter To Rot. When To Rot came, I was cooking for the Japanese and other prisoners. I first saw Peter To Rot on his return from the garden. I tried to talk to him, but I feared to interrupt what seemed to be his continual prayer. I asked the native policeman To Metapa why Peter To Rot was in prison, and he told me that it was because he had been leading prayer meetings and performing marriages. He had been twice warned and arrested after the third offence. I was convinced that To Rot would die because of these activities which were considered serious offences. The only Japanese name that I remember is Gunto, who was the officer in charge of the area.

To Romano's account continues, and he recalled very well the moment in which Peter To Rot told him: **"Oh, well, they are going to kill me because of my religion."**

Many times To Rot was placed in solitary confinement and, throughout his detention, he was treated with less mercy than the other prisoners. They kept him in the barred section of the prison, reserved for more serious cases. He was separated from the other prisoners, and his visits were also restricted. His own sister, Theresia Ia Varpilak, said that on one occasion, To Rot exclaimed: "They're going to put me in the hole again tonight."

To Rot's brother, Tatamai, stated that they were together in the days following the arrest. However, a short time later, To Rot was appointed as the prisoners' cook, which forced him to remain within the confines of the camp, while the others were allowed to go out and work in the gardens.

As for how much time To Rot was detained in prison, unfortunately, we do not have precise information. The only thing that is known for certain is that while his brothers Tatamai and Telo were sentenced to one month in prison, To Rot was sentenced to two months. Tatamai

himself recalls: “Telo was released soon due to his poor health, and I was also discharged when my one-month sentence expired.” To Rot completed his two-month sentence, but he was not released. Father Laufer, on the other hand, in a letter written in 1952, states that it was only six weeks.

During his two-month detention, Peter To Rot was allowed to receive periodic visits from his elderly mother Maria Ia Tumul, his wife Paula Ia Varpit, his children, and his sister Theresia Ia Varpilak. Whenever they visited him they usually cooked and brought food for him.

To Rot’s sister Theresia Ia Varpilak said:

After his arrest, myself, To Rot’s mother, Ia Tumul, and my sister in law, Ia Varpit, used to visit the three brothers in prison. On one occasion, I met up with them gathered around a fire, shivering with cold. I started to cry, and To Rot turned to me and said: **“Stop crying. Pray. I’m here for a good cause. I’m quite happy about it, for I am here on account of my faith.”** To his mother he said: “Perhaps they will soon send for you three, too, and then we’ll all be here in prison together!”

(...) As soon as he was imprisoned, To Rot told me not to frequent public prayer meetings. The family should pray in private.

She added:

To Rot showed no signs of fear. He always lived and identified himself as a catechist. While in prison, he asked his visitors to pray for him, and he prayed the rosary frequently, alone or with others.

Paula Ia Varpit said:

Peter To Rot's mother and I were allowed to visit him in prison every day. He asked me to bring him food, which I did. My last visit was on the morning of the day he was killed. **He was aware of the danger and expected to be killed, but showed no sign of fear.**

Again, To Rot's wife expounds:

Two days before his death, I paid my husband one of my regular visits. He asked me to bring him a razor, a laplap and his catechist's crucifix, which he had hidden in a suitcase containing song-sheets. I arrived at the prison the next day, earlier than usual, bringing with me the things he had asked for. I also took our two children with me. I also cooked for him, a chicken with some yams. To Rot appeared to have lost his appetite, and I was feeling somewhat uneasy, as he had not explained why he wanted the things he had asked her to bring from home. Expressing my fears, I begged To Rot to give up the catechist's way of life, and to take up, instead, a quiet, withdrawn style of living. To Rot had replied: **"Don't you worry about that. It is my duty to die for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and for my people."** Then he made the sign of the cross. He showed no sign of fear or grief. We sat together for a long time, and then To Rot urged me to take the children home.

Another who received police permission to visit Peter To Rot was Bernadet Ia Oget, his cousin, who said:

I visited Peter To Rot many times in prison, because I went along with my aunt, Maria Ia Tumul, To Rot's mother, who

took food for him. I remember that Maria Ia Tumul was always sad when leaving To Rot and had the impression that he would die. Peter To Rot seemed to be calm and peaceful and told his visitors: **“Don’t worry for me. I die for my faith. You go home and pray for me.”**

According to the available information, we know that in addition to the people we have just mentioned, three others had the opportunity to visit To Rot in prison: Margareta Ia Kalan and Adriana Ia Katai, who lived with To Rot’s family in Rakunai, and Eleazar Tarue, one of the catechist’s uncles. Tarue states:

During one of my visits to the prison, To Rot spoke to me about the judicial proceedings: **“First, I was charged with celebrating church services. The second charge was my attitude towards adulterers. My brother Tatamai has declared that I forbade him to live with Ia Tia. And this second charge bolstered the first one.”**

Finally, let’s read what Father Laufer wrote. It is a biography written in German in 1952, but unknown until recently. It was found in 2024, in the archives of the Diocese of Rabaul. The title of the brief biography is *Good and Faithful Servant*. And towards the end, it says the following:

Of the two months of imprisonment they imposed on him, To Rot lived only six weeks. (...) To Rot himself seems to have received indications that left him with no doubt about his impending end. To Chief Tate Tarue, who lived near the police station, he openly said that he was sure he would not leave the prison alive. When he learned that To Vue, the chief of Vunalaka, wanted to make another attempt to free him, he advised him not to do so with these words: **“Anyway, it**

doesn't make sense; I am not aware of having committed any crime, and if I have to die, I will die for my faith and for my vocation as a catechist." All of this shows that death did not come as a surprise to him and that he willingly and with great submission offered the sacrifice of his life to God.

When reading all these testimonies, it is interesting to note how To Rot was perfectly aware of two things. The first, he knew he would die, and he accepted it willingly. The second, he knew he would die for his faith, for his defence of marriage, and his opposition to polygamy. The Japanese police and the native policeman To Metapa were not really interested in the prayer meetings, the visits to the sick, or the religious instruction that the catechist gave to the children. The only crime they really wanted to punish was his defence of marriage and his opposition to polygamy.



Road to the prison and place of martyrdom of Saint Peter To Rot



Peter To Rot was kept here in many occasions



Above: Place of martyrdom in the 1980s
Below: Present day



15- PETER TO ROT'S MURDER

From the moment To Rot was arrested for the last time, he was convinced he would die in prison. Despite many people trying to intercede on his behalf, the Japanese police showed no mercy to the catechist, and all efforts were in vain. In fact, from his first day in prison, To Rot was always treated with greater harshness and severity than the rest of the prisoners. And when the two-month sentence that had been imposed on him was up, he was not granted freedom. On the contrary, he continued unjustly in prison without any kind of explanation. This kind of treatment by the Japanese and To Metapa was an a signal that To Rot could understand very well. In the last chapter, we saw that many times To Rot spoke about his own death, somehow knowing that it was closer than everybody else thought. Expressions like: **"I die for my faith," "It is my duty to die for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and for my people," "I am here on account of my faith," "They are going to kill me because of my religion," "If I have to die, I will die for my faith and for my vocation as a catechist,"** etc., were common to hear from him during his imprisonment.

1- The Final Hours

As we have said before, To Rot knew he would die in prison and that he would die soon, although he could not know exactly when. Suspicions arose in his mind when the Japanese officer Gunto told

another prisoner, To Romano that a doctor needed to come to give some medication to the prisoner To Rot due to his illness. This happened two days before the catechist's last Friday, the day on which he died. Seeing that To Rot was not sick at all, To Romano immediately understood that the non-existent illness was just an excuse to justify the doctor's visit.

The relatives who visited To Rot during those last two days testify to the catechist's accurate suspicions. His brother Tatamai remembers:

On what was to be their last visit, To Rot said to his mother: **"The police have told me that they are waiting for the Japanese doctor, who is going to give me some medicine; I suspect that this is a lie because I am not really sick. I don't know what this means."** He did not eat much of the food they had brought him that day, unlike on previous occasions. He then asked his wife and sister to pray for him.

To Rot's sister, Theresia Ia Varpilak, said:

As my mother was going home to the Taogo farm, after the last visit she was to make to the prison, she told me that To Rot had said: **"They are going to put me in the hole, again, tonight."** He meant the underground cell into which the Japanese had put him on a previous occasion.

Also the young widow, Paula Ia Varpit, although without many details, recalled the feeling of uneasiness which came over her in her last visit to his husband. He had asked her to bring him his catechist's crucifix, and they sat together for a long time in silence, after which To Rot urged her to take the children home. She also added: **"He was aware of danger and expected to be killed, but showed no sign of fear."**

The day before To Rot was killed, the chief Anton Tata had the chance to see him for the last time. He is the one who heard from To

Rot's lips the most clear and beautiful statement of the catechist. In 1952 he wrote:

Later on, in prison, I had a man to man talk with To Rot who said: **"I am here because of those who break their marriage vows, and because of those who do not want to see God's work go forward. That's it. I shall die. You go back to care for the people."** I said that he should try to bribe the police for his freedom. He replied: **"Put that out of your mind. They have already condemned me to death."**

More than thirty years later, in 1987, he recalled once again this episode and added some more interesting details:

I visited Peter To Rot many times during his imprisonment, the last time the day of his death. I tried to obtain the release of Peter To Rot from the Japanese military heads, Gunto and Meshida. They refused, saying: "He's a good man, let him stay there." This answer gave me a strong feeling of impending danger for Peter To Rot, because I sensed in it a double meaning. But To Rot never showed any sign of fear. He said to me: **"Don't worry. I am a catechist and I am only doing my duty. I'll stay here."**

Sister Adriana Ia Katai, a relative of To Rot, also had the opportunity to visit the catechist. Sister Adriana had been orphaned while still very young, and To Rot's parents had adopted her. She had the opportunity to visit To Rot the day before his death, and this is how she remembers it:

On the day before his death, I saw Peter To Rot in prison, where I had gone alone to tell him that I had carried out his order to hide the church books, baptismal registers and other

materials. He told me that some doctors would come to see him soon; he did not know why, as he was not sick. **He told me to go home and pray for him. He sounded happy and at peace.**

At sunset, Meshida ordered that all prisoners without exception, along with all the native policemen, should head to a specific place in the jungle, where they were to spend the night playing in the heavy rain. Everyone was astonished by that incomprehensible order, but they obeyed. After more than an hour, they were called back, but they were not allowed to enter their usual rooms. Instead, they were ordered to lie down and rest in an earthen shelter. Everyone had a vague suspicion that something was wrong.

When it comes to the last hours of Peter To Rot, there are two testimonies that deserve a special place: To Romano and To Binabak. Both were imprisoned with Peter To Rot, and they were involved in the crucial events that marked the last two days of To Rot in prison. In fact, it is thanks to the testimony of these two witnesses that we know how the catechist died.

To Romano testified on two occasions. The first was in 1952, relatively shortly after To Rot's death. The second, on the other hand, was thirty-five years later, during the investigation conducted in 1987. While we can find some differences between the two accounts, they are minor differences due to the more than thirty years that passed between one statement and the other. Let's read what he said on those occasions.

In 1952, he said:

To Rot caught a slight cold, he was up and about as normal, but was allowed to stay at chief Tarue's home which was just next to the prison. I told the police about To Rot's cold, and Meshida said that a Japanese doctor would come to give To Rot some medicine.

That night, two Japanese doctors came. I saw them because I was cook for the Japanese. After dark, all the prisoners and the native police were sent off to To Mano's farm to play and make a lot of noise in the moonlight. But I went back to Vuniara, to have a wash. I saw To Rot lying in his hut and called to him, "Wake up!" As To Rot did not move, I thought that To Rot must be in a deep sleep, and I moved on.

After I had had a wash, I went back to To Rot and tried to wake him. To my horror, I discovered that To Rot was dead. I saw cotton wool in To Rot's ears and nostrils. My first thought was that To Rot had been given poison.

Then, in 1987, he declared:

The Japanese officer, Gunto, told me that a doctor would come in two days' time to give Peter To Rot medicine because he was sick. I did not believe the reason. Two days later Gunto again told me the same thing and in the evening told me to go and bring Peter To Rot to the place where he was. This was changed, and Arap To Binabak got To Rot, while I went with a message to the native policeman to take the prisoners away to a further place. I went to this place with the other prisoners.

About midnight I returned to the camp. In the darkness I was aware of Peter To Rot, but thought he was sleeping. I had a wash, then rejoined the other prisoners. When I returned, I called Peter To Rot, but when there was no answer I saw that To Rot was dead. Later, Arap To Binabak told me what he had seen.

When the Japanese came, I went again to the place where Peter To Rot's body was and feigned surprise. I called out loudly to the Japanese that Peter To Rot was dead. They came to the place and also pretended surprise. I noted that To Rot's

ears and nostrils were stuffed with some material or cotton wool. Gunto had the body moved on to a board and sent the native policeman to tell Anton Tata and others that Peter To Rot was dead. There was an immediate and general feeling that Peter To Rot had died for his beliefs.

Arap To Binabak was fifteen years younger than To Rot. He wasn't Catholic, but that didn't stop him from being great friends with the catechist. Moreover, he deeply admired To Rot and the integrity with which the catechist lived what he preached. He also testified in 1952 and in 1987.

In 1952, he declared:

On the day of his death, To Rot was cook as usual. In the evening all the prisoners and the native police were sent away from the prison, while all the Japanese stayed at Vunaiaara.

To Varmari, who had been working in a potato field at Tavulie, came back later and looked for something to eat. (...) To Varmari and I sneaked back to the prison, because we were hungry. We found To Rot in the same position as he would be seen the next morning. We both tried to wake him. There was cotton-wool in his ears and nose. To Rot was clothed in one loin-cloth [laplap], while another loin-cloth covered his body.

In the meantime, To Romano arrived; each warned the other to be quiet, lest somebody found them there. Then we went to sleep. Next morning there was a roll call for everybody within the prison confines: work party, prisoners, collaborators, police, everybody without exception. To Varmari and I went straight off to work. We were too afraid to say anything.

I went over to their prison quarters to light a fire and start cooking. Some of the Japanese collaborators came to the fire

and saw To Rot lying there dead. The collaborators reported what they had seen to the Japanese, and these came and started to ask questions. They appeared to be very surprised.

(...) To Varmari and I were still afraid to talk but were convinced that To Rot had been murdered. To Varmari said that he had witnessed other Japanese executions but never such a secret one.

I recalled that To Rot had told me, earlier on, that a Japanese doctor was supposed to be coming to give him some medicine. To Rot expressed his disbelief, saying: **“What kind of medicine do they want to give me?”** To Rot was, in fact, not sick but just not quite his usual healthy self. Doctors had never come to see prisoners before this.

In 1987, he left us this testimony given before the Promotor of Justice:

Promotor of Justice: Did you ask Peter To Rot why he was in prison?

Arap To Binabak: There was no need for that; it was common knowledge that Peter To Rot had been arrested because of his religious activities. He made it clear that he knew why they were going to kill him, but did not show any sign of fear.

All the prisoners except Peter To Rot, who had a cold, and myself, were sent to a place some distance from the camp to amuse themselves, even though it was raining. When I was sent to bring To Rot across to the sleeping place for medical treatment, I could not help thinking that he really did not look sick. This order was given by Meshida. From where Peter To Rot and I waited, we could see the preparation for To Rot's “treatment.” We talked quietly and Peter To Rot wondered what kind of injection they would give him.

When Meshida came for Peter To Rot, he sent me away. I went up to a small rise nearby, from where I could see what was going on down below. The doctor gave Peter To Rot an injection and a drink of something, and told him to lie down. His ears and nostrils were stuffed. After a while, Peter To Rot seemed to struggle and want to vomit. The doctor covered his mouth and held him, and after a while, he was still. When I saw that Peter To Rot was dead, I ran to where my friends were with the other prisoners and quietly told them what had happened. Around midnight the three of us went back to the camp and saw the body. There were no Japanese there then. (...) When the other prisoners returned to the camp, they were very surprised to find Peter To Rot dead. The Japanese also pretended surprise when they returned. (...) I felt strongly that Peter To Rot had died for his faith.

We don't know what kind of substance they administered to To Rot to kill him. During the investigation conducted for the beatification, the then postulator tried to find out what substance had been injected into the catechist, but all his efforts were in vain, as the few people who could answer his question refused to testify. Still, we know that the most popular poison in the Japanese military context of Rabaul was potassium cyanide, because it had a long shelf life in the area's humid climate, and it was also easy to transport in the form of pills or small crystals. In the post-war war crimes trials, it was documented that Japanese doctors injected cyanide into prisoners under the pretence that it was a vaccine or vitamin serum. Unlike other poisons that cause prolonged agony, cyanide works by blocking the body's ability to use oxygen at the cellular level. It is known that Japanese doctors in Rabaul used intravenous injections for an even quicker death. If cyanide is injected into the bloodstream, the effects are accelerated and very rapid: dizziness, nausea, vomiting, intense headache, heart palpitations, convulsions,

difficulty breathing, and when breathing finally stops, the heart ceases to beat.

Another possibility is that they injected him with phenol or chloral hydrate, which were common disinfectants sometimes used in executions during wartime due to their corrosive and lethal nature when injected directly into the bloodstream. During World War II, these substances were easily available in field hospitals like those in Rabaul, because they were necessary for sanitation and sedation. In the medical environment of that time, phenol was a potent antiseptic and disinfectant. However, when it was used for executions, it was chosen for its accessibility and efficiency. When injected directly into the bloodstream or the heart, phenol causes an immediate circulatory collapse: it essentially “cooks” the proteins in the blood and heart muscle upon contact. Death usually occurs within seconds or minutes due to total cardiac arrest or central nervous system collapse.

Why did the military doctors in Rabaul execute in this manner? Under the guise of a medical injection, the victim did not expect the attack. In a hospital setting and with the excuse of an illness, as in the case of To Rot, the speed of the injection prevented the prisoner from screaming or struggling, which allowed the executioners to maintain the appearance of normalcy in front of the other prisoners or the staff who were unaware of the executions. Therefore, even though we are not certain about the substance used to murder the catechist, the description of the symptoms provided by the witnesses seems to match one of the two mentioned above. There are also testimonies that claim that prisoners were not only executed with potassium cyanide or phenol, but also with air injections.

When To Metapa, the infamous native policeman whose lust was the cause of To Rot's martyrdom, went to the place where the body was lying, he covered it with a cloth and said to a prisoner: “He, the ‘mission boy’ was very ill and has died. Tell chief Tata and his relatives to come here and take him away.”

2- The Date

Just like with most of the other important dates in To Rot's life, we must also lament the lack of records or documents here. And just as we cannot definitively establish the date of his birth or baptism, we also cannot definitively establish the exact date of his death, although we know it took place in the month of July. On one hand, we must not forget that, as the war was coming to an end, the Japanese destroyed all documents that could in any way incriminate them in the future. On the other hand, the case of Peter To Rot was of little importance to the Japanese, so they wouldn't have much interest in recording the events either. And on top of this, we must add the lack of interest of the Tolai when it comes to remembering precise dates.

However, we have enough elements to indicate four possible dates. And it is the catechist's wife, Paula Ia Varpit, who helps us do so. She remembers visiting her husband on a Friday and finding out about his death the next morning. And his fellow prisoners remember that the death took place at night, before it was bedtime. Thus, the catechist died on the night of a Friday in July 1945. The *Positio* says:

"July 1945" was the date which the Rakunai people carved on the cross with which they marked the grave of their beloved catechist. However, neither Paula Ia Varpit, nor anybody else among the witnesses has been able to indicate which Friday of the month of July 1945 was the day of the Servant of God's death. And there were four Fridays in the month of July that year: 6, 13, 20 and 27.

During the 1987 investigation, the wife was specifically asked: *"Do you remember exactly when Peter To Rot was murdered?"* Paula Ia Varpit replied: *"The witness does not remember this date."*

As a result of the concrete difficulties in establishing an exact date for the death of the Servant of God, "A Friday in

July 1945” has been generally accepted by the Catholics of the Archdiocese of Rabaul as the official date of his martyrdom.

Nowadays, July 7 is accepted as the date of his martyrdom, although there is no certainty to confirm it. Moreover, July 7, 1945, was a Saturday, and that seems to contradict the testimony of the catechist's wife, who remembers that he was alive on a Friday, and the next morning he was dead. And that date also seems to contradict the testimony of To Rot's fellow prisoners, who claim he died on a Friday night. In any case, the Church established his liturgical memorial on July 7th. Thus says the Roman Martyrology:

July 7: At the village of Rakunai on the island of New Britain in Melanesia, Saint Peter To Rot, martyr, who, as father of family and catechist, was arrested during the Second World War because he had persevered in his ministry, and thus suffered martyrdom with a lethal venom injection (1945).

3- The Catechist is Dead

When Anton Tata, the village leader, received the news of the catechist's death, he sounded his horn to let his people know. Some people went directly to the prison and found the corpse still in the gallery. They noticed the cotton in his ears and nostrils, along with the foamy sputum oozing from the corners of his mouth. There was a needle prick next to the large vein on the upper part of the left arm, and his throat was discoloured and swollen.

They took the body to Tarue's estate. It was still warm, and the limbs were not yet stiff. Many people gathered to see what had happened. No one believed the official version of his illness, but everyone said: “To Rot has been murdered.”

Let's read some eyewitness testimonies:

Tarue, To Rot's uncle: “The corpse was still warm and the limbs

were flexible. We noticed this when we were washing the body. In doing so, I noticed the puncture of the syringe on the left upper-arm, next to the vein. I whispered to those present: ‘Don’t say anything. To Rot died for his knowledge and for his religion.’”

To Burangan, To Rot’s friend: “When the red band about his forehead and the cotton-wool were taken away, a foamy, fetid phlegm came out of this orifices. We washed the corpse. I had known To Rot since we were children. He was of a robust nature and never ill. Seeing the corpse, I did not think for a moment that he had died of a disease. My first thought was: murdered.”

Anton Tata, chief of the village: “We found the corpse at Tarue’s farm, with the face towards the sky, the hands clasped together over the heart, one leg bent rigidly. Nose and ears were clogged with cotton-wool. There was foam coming from his mouth, but it was quite different from that seen with other corpses. It smelled strongly of some vile medicine. When they were washing the body, I noticed the dark, discoloured mark on the throat and on the left upper-arm next to the thick vein, the puncture of an injection needle. We communicated with one another by way of signs and looks. Everybody knew at once that this was murder.”

Tatamai, To Rot’s brother: “When they removed the cotton-wool from the ears and the nostrils, white foam and medicine smelling like the leaves of the mango tree came out of these orifices. The centre of the throat was crushed flat and was swollen. Everybody saw and knew that this was caused by a truncheon that had hit the throat. For fear of the police, those present only whispered softly to each other: ‘To Rot was murdered.’”

To Varto, To Rot’s friend: “We all stood around the corpse. A kind of juice, like candle wax, oozed out of his mouth, nose and ears. (...) When we were still standing around the corpse, the Wesleyan chief Tarue first looked cautiously around and said to those present: ‘To Rot was killed because of his knowledge’ and after an interval, he added softly: ‘and for his religion.’ I was amazed to hear a Wesleyan talking that way.”

A place of honour must be given to the testimony of the young and brave widow, Paula To Varpit. In 1952 she declared:

When I was told next morning [after the last visit to prison] —it was a Saturday— that To Rot was dead, everyone ran over to Vunaiaara. I stayed with my mother-in-law at the Taogo farm, as I was heavily pregnant with my third child. I burst into tears. Finally they brought home To Rot's body. Around his head was a red cloth. White foam was coming out of his mouth and nose. The foam smelt foul, so I put a handkerchief over my mouth. I was surprised to see that his neck was so swollen. At the back of his head I noticed two deep cuts which were still bleeding.

4- The Funeral

The funeral and burial of To Rot were carried out without much solemnity. Everyone feared the Japanese, and no one wanted to have any kind of trouble with the police. The order prohibiting prayer meetings was still in effect, and a funeral was a perfect occasion for the police to take more people to prison.

Some people wanted to bury To Rot next to his father, To Puia. The leader Anton Tata opposed this idea because, according to the deep matriarchy present in Tolai tradition, To Rot did not belong to his father's family, but to his mother's. To Puia was buried in Vunapalabarip, the place of his family. Later, everyone agreed that To Rot should be buried in the small cemetery near the church, which Father Laufer had arranged a few years earlier, according to Catholic tradition.

In that cemetery, there was an honoured place under a large crucifix. It was the place where Father Laufer himself wanted to be buried when his time came. Although everyone loved their parish priest, they knew very well that To Rot was a martyr and decided, instead, to bury

To Rot in that special place. And knowing the parish priest, they also knew that he would understand and accept the decision.

The police took the body from the Tarue's estate to the To Rot's estate. Two Japanese and some spies mingled with the crowd. To Rot's wife and mother stayed at Tarue's estate, as Paula was about to give birth to her third child.

According to native custom, To Rot's body had to be elevated so that people could see it. The news of the catechist's death spread quickly through all the villages, so much so that many people came to see the body, to cry and to pray. Hours later, the body was taken to the courtyard of what had been the village church, now completely in ruins. Many people followed the procession. The funeral was held in silence because everyone knew there were some spies among them, so they didn't want to pray out loud. At night, they reunited at Taogo's estate, where they followed the Tolai traditions in honour of the deceased. And in this case, in honour of a martyr.

No voices were heard on the Taogo estate throughout the night. Everyone was silent, praying and afraid.

5- The Young Widowed Wife

At this point, it is necessary to dedicate a few words of recognition and gratitude to the young widow, Paula Ia Varpit. When her husband died, Paula was only twenty-five years old with two children, and was pregnant with her third. According to the testimonies of Paula herself and those who knew her, she was the confidante and support of the catechist. Without Paula's generosity and dedication, the name of Peter To Rot would probably not be found in the martyrology.

Only once did she try to persuade her husband to abandon the ministry of catechist, because she was aware of the dangers to which he was exposing himself. And she did it on the very day of her husband's martyrdom, just a few hours before. Until that day, she had never complained or put obstacles in her husband's ministry.

During the second canonical investigation that was carried out for the beatification cause of To Rot, this brief and beautiful dialogue took place:

Promotor of Justice: In your previous testimony, you said that you asked Peter To Rot to stop or discontinue his pastoral work only once. Are you sure about this, or were there other occasions in which you suggested or asked Peter To Rot the giving up of his religious activity?

Paula Ia Varpit: Yes, only once did I ask Peter To Rot to discontinue his pastoral work. This was on the day of his death, when I visited him for the last time in prison. Never before had I asked Peter To Rot to stop his pastoral work because his strong insistence and his deep faith and strength of purpose in his work made me sure that he would refuse to consider requests of this kind.

Promotor of Justice: What was Peter To Rot's reply to your suggestion?

Paula Ia Varpit: Peter To Rot's reply to my plea was: **“Don't stop me from doing my work. It is God's work.”**

We also allow ourselves to add an article that appeared in the Papuan newspaper Post-Courier on Friday, January 25, 1985. It is an interview with Paula Ia Varpit, which, to the best of our knowledge, is the only one she ever gave in her life. The names appearing in the article do not match the originals, because Paula Ia Varpit is called “IaPaula” (written as one word), To Rot is called “ToRot”, and the same goes for other names. And the dates don't match either, because the article states that Paula saw her husband for the last time on a Monday and found out about her husband's death on a Tuesday, when she had previously declared that she had seen him for the last time on a Friday and learned of his death the next day, Saturday morning. But we transcribe it exactly as it was published, without corrections.

“MY PETER IS WITH GOD IN HEAVEN”

“Peter ToRot is in a place with God... a place where he always wanted to be.” His wife, IaPaula, believes that. She said it. And, so apparently do others who have organised the investigation to find out how ToRot can become a Catholic saint.

To be sure, the move to make ToRot a saint will take a long time: twenty-five to “hundreds of years,” according to Catholics. And that is if Church authorities decide that ToRot does have a case for sainthood.

Whatever the case, I decided to visit ToRot’s widow to find out how ToRot died.

IaPaula, 64, is blind and lives with her daughter IaMama in Vunabaur village in the North Coast area of the Gazelle Peninsula.

I found her “feeling” her way out of her daughter’s house with her walking stick. She was alone in the village and although blind, she told me she could still cook her own food, stroll down to the beach, only a few metres from the house, and move herself around her daughter’s house.

“I can still work in the garden,” she said. “The problem is telling banana tree from unwanted shrubs when it comes to clearing bush,” Paula said with a grin on her face. Her teeth showed the stain of endless betelnut chewing, and on her left ear was a stub of tobacco which she had put out to talk to me.

This is her story: “My husband was killed by the Japanese at Rakunai village many years ago after being tortured for several days along with some priests, brothers and sisters. They were taken captive when Peter and I were still at school at ‘*lukbuk*’ (reading) classes. At first they took us all away to Taogo village where they held most of the women and

children. The men, including the priests, brothers and sisters, were blindfolded and taken to Vanuiara where the Japanese had a jail for their prisoners. I was afraid and I kept telling my two children, IaCecilia and IaMama that their father would soon be released. But this was not to be. The day after we last visited him, he was killed.” [IaCecilia was a niece, not a daughter]

IaPaula was stopping every now and then to clear her throat. Almost forty years had rolled by, but sorrow, that human thing, was still showing as IaPaula ToRot recalled the last days of her husband on the piece of earth called Vunaiaara: “I last saw my husband on a Monday. He asked me to bring his *laplap*, a razor blade, his crucifix, and his priest’s clothes [must be catechist’s clothes]. I tried to ask him what was happenind and he held me close to him and quietly said that he just wanted to be with God in jail because he had missed his congregation for nearly six months. I knew from the tears in his eyes that the worse was yet to come. On the night after my visit I had a bad dream. I saw my husband in clean white robes singing with a group of sweet looking children. I wanted to talk to him but the singing was so loud he could not hear me calling. He turned and saw me just as they were disappearing into the clouds, but as we both reached out to touch each other, he disappeared.

“In the early hours of the morning of Tuesday, as I lay thinking about the dream, I heard an old man shouting that my husband had been killed. This time it was not a dream. It was the bad news about ToRot and a group of other workers being killed by the Japanese. I thought about my dream and I realised I would never be with my husband again. ToRot is now in heaven with God...”

IaPaula paused for a long time and continued: “The Japanese brought my husband’s body in the morning and

told me he had died after being sick, but I knew they were lying. I saw him the day before and he was like any other young man who was well. The Japanese tied a red ribbon around my husband's head and tried to stop me from crying but I did not listen to them. I held my husband's body and cried. He was dead.

“ToRot's mother IaTumul came with the other villagers and we stayed at our place for the whole day wondering why ToRot's life had to be taken away like this. ToRot stayed with us for a short time while and the following day he was buried. And all these days I have prayed to God to keep ToRot for me in Heaven. Although he has been dead these many years, he still visits me at night to talk to me and tell me that one day we will be together again.”

Weekend Magazine

My Peter is with God in Heaven

"PETER ToROT is in heaven with God... a place where he always wanted to be."

His wife, IaPaula, believes that. She said it. And, so apparently do others who have organized the investigation to determine whether ToROT can become a Catholic saint.

To be sure, the move to make ToROT a Catholic saint will take a long time — 25 to "hundreds of

years", according to Catholics.

And that is if church authorities decide that ToROT does have a case for sainthood.

Whatever the case, I decided to visit ToROT's widow to find out how ToROT died.

IaPaula, now 44, is blind and lives with her daughter IaMama at Vunahau village in the North Coast area of the Oahe Peninsula.

I found her "beting" her way out of her daughter's house with her walking stick.

She was alone in the village and although she was blind, she told me she could still cook her own food, stroll down to the beach, only a few metres from the house, and move herself around her daughter's house.

"I can still work in the garden," she said.

"The problem is telling his lapia, a rice blade, his crucifix, and his priest's clothes."

"I tried to ask him what was happening and he held me close to him and quietly said that he just wanted to be with God in jail be-

cause he had missed his congregation for nearly six months."

"I knew from the tears in his eyes that the worse was yet to come."

"On the night after my visit I had a bad dream."

"I saw my husband in a white robe singing with a group of recent-looking children."

"I wanted to talk to him but the singing was so loud he could not hear me calling."

"He turned and saw me just as they were disappearing into the clouds but as we both reached out to touch each other, he disappeared."

"In the early hours of the morning of Tuesday, as I lay thinking about the dream, I heard an old man shouting that my husband had been killed."

"This time it was not a dream."

● ToROT's widow, IaPaula talking to our Rabaul man Walter Davies. With them are two of IaPaula's young friends.

"It was the bad news about ToROT and a group of other workers being killed by the Japanese."

"I thought about my dream and I realized I would never be with my husband again."

"ToROT is now in heaven with God."

IaPaula passed for a long time and continued.

"The Japanese brought my husband's body in the morning and told me he had died after being sick — but I knew they were lying."

"I saw him the day before and he was like any other young man who was well."

...WITH SWEET CHILDREN

left ear was a stub of tobacco which he had put out to talk to me.

"This is her story."

"My husband was killed by the Japanese at Rakau village many years ago after being tortured for several days along with some priests, brothers and sisters."

"They were taken captive when Peter and I were still at school, doing our 'tik-tuk' reading classes."

"At first they took us all away to Taogo village where they held most of the women and children."

"The men, including the priests, brothers and sisters, were blindfolded and taken to Yumukia where the Japanese had a jail for their prisoners."

"I was afraid and I kept telling my two children, IaMama and IaMama that their father would soon be released."

cause he had missed his congregation for nearly six months."

"I knew from the tears in his eyes that the worse was yet to come."

"On the night after my visit I had a bad dream."

"I saw my husband in a white robe singing with a group of recent-looking children."

"I wanted to talk to him but the singing was so loud he could not hear me calling."

"He turned and saw me just as they were disappearing into the clouds but as we both reached out to touch each other, he disappeared."

"In the early hours of the morning of Tuesday, as I lay thinking about the dream, I heard an old man shouting that my husband had been killed."

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"I held my husband's body and cried. He was dead."

"ToROT's mother IaMama came with the other villagers and we stayed at our place for the whole day wondering why ToROT's life had to be taken away like this."

"ToROT stayed with us for a short while and the following day he was buried."

"And all these years I have prayed to God to keep ToROT for me in Heaven."

"Although he has been dead these many years, he still visits me at night to talk to me and tell me that one day we will be together again."

"This time it was not a dream."



● IaPAULA sitting at ToROT's grave back in 1982 with a picture of ToROT.

Two weeks ago at the quiet seaside Catholic station of Vunahau, near Rakau, the Catholic Church officially opened an investigation into the life and death of ToROT, Catholic martyr Peter ToROT.

The purpose is to promote ToROT's cause so he can become a saint of the Catholic Church.

Then, though is Peter ToROT.

Peter ToROT was a catechist from Rakau village near Nawaena about 16 kilometres from Rakau up Rakau Road from the shores of Rakau's Singuwa Bay.

He became a martyr of the Church when he was killed in 1983 by Japanese occupation forces during World War II.

ToROT, then 34, had challenged the authority of the Japanese.

First he refused to give orders to stop his catechist work.

Then he urged people in his village and the village nearby not to marry more than one wife though the Japanese had officially encouraged polygamy.

The result: ToROT was harassed and killed at a place called Vunahau in Nawaena village, a walk of minutes from ToROT's Rakau village.

ToROT is married today by his widow, IaPaula, his only remaining child, IaMama, and IaMama's four children.

The other ToROT children — Andrea and IaMama — have died.

This week our man in Rabaul, WALTER DAVIES, visited IaPaula for a talk and filed this report.

● ToROT

● IaPAULA

● ToROT

● IaPAULA

● ToROT

● IaPAULA

● ToROT

● IaPAULA

● ToROT

● IaPAULA

● ToROT

● IaPAULA

● ToROT

● IaPAULA

● ToROT

● IaPAULA



Above: Bishop Scharmach visiting the tomb of Peter To Rot in the 1950s, shortly after his martyrdom.

Below: The tomb of Peter To Rot in 1982, during the centenary celebration of the arrival of the first missionaries. From left to right: Rufina la Mama (daughter of the saint), a child, Paula la Varpit (wife), Rochus Tatamai (great-nephew), and Sister Adriana.

6- Exhumation of the Body and Current Location

The body of To Rot rested in the cemetery of his village from Saturday night or Sunday morning after his death, until Friday, December 9, 1994. A year earlier, on April 2, 1993, Saint John Paul II had signed the decree recognising the martyrdom of the catechist, and therefore the beatification was imminent. It was necessary to find a date for the ceremony. Since the bishops of Papua New Guinea wanted the beatification to take place in the martyr's homeland, it was necessary to wait almost two years for the Pope's busy schedule to find a few free days to come here. The chosen date was January 17, 1995. And so, a month earlier, on December 9, 1994, it was decided to exhume the body of the catechist so that his mortal remains could be displayed during the beatification and venerated in the sanctuary that was practically ready and would be consecrated on July 7 of that same year, when the liturgical memory of the martyr would be celebrated for the first time.

On Friday, December 9, then, at 8 in the morning, the exhumation took place. And the official report says this:

OFFICIAL REPORT ON THE EXHUMATION OF THE RELICS OF THE VENERABLE PETRO TO ROT

December 13, 1994

The following people met on 9, December on the cemetery of Rakunai: His Grace Archbishop Karl Hesse, MSC. The Rev. Father Joseph Linnenbaum, MSC, and Father Thomas Tukaliu, MSC, as witnesses. The Rev. Father Alois Escher as the promoter of justice. Dr. John Maku and Dr. Victor Golpak as medical experts. Police Commander Lidorius Baki Gari and his team for law and order. John To Kele and Salome Ia Bata, relatives of Petro To Rot, as witnesses of his actual burial.

Other people from the extended relationship of Petro To Rot were present to do the exhumation: Michael Kavanamur, Gabriel Telo, Alfons Mati, Peter To Rot, Francis Turugane, and Johannes To Matin.

I, Father Karl Heinz Hoppe, MSC, asked the two witnesses of the actual burial of Petro To Rot about the event in 1945. They said, that they had been present and been involved in the burial, which was done under Japanese supervision. Peter To Rot was buried in his everyday dress. Nothing had been put with him into the grave, except —they thought— his catechist's cross. (NB: this proved to be not his cross, but his rosary.) [See *Addition* after the text]

At 8 am Rev. Father Thomas Tukaliu said a prayer to Mary, the Queen of Martyrs. After this the group of relatives started digging under the direction of Mr. John To Kele. He was very much convinced that the cement frame around the grave and the cross made out of cement were indicating the original place of Petro To Rot's burial. The cement frame and the cross were carefully taken away. Then the exhumation team started digging a hole, which was 240 cm long and 200 cm wide. They dug through about 70 cm normal garden soil and then through a reddish layer, about 30 cm thick. Underneath now was a grey sandy soil, about 30 cm thick.

Mr. John To Kele told his group now to dig on both sides in the hole and leave the middle part untouched, till it was standing out about 40 cm high. Only then they would carefully dig the middle part. They repeated the procedure till the sides of the hole were 190 cm deep and the middle about 170 cm deep. The sand became still looser and very soon a piece of the skull became visible. It was 9:10 am.

The whole skeleton was laying right under the cement frame. All parts of the skeleton were in their original places.

The excavation team carefully collected the bones in plastic bags and treated the skull with special care.

The exhumation was completed at 9:30 am.

The relics were locked in an iron-box and handed over to the Archbishop, who took them to Vunapope. He put the relics into a safe place.

The medical experts Dr. John Maku and Dr. Victor Golpak will clean them.

[Signature]

Father Karl Heinz Hoppe, MSC

The report we just read included an attached note, on a separate page, written by the same priest who prepared the report, and it added the following:

**AN ADDITION ON THE REPORT
OF PETRO TO ROT'S EXHUMATION**

When the skeleton of Petro To Rot was taken out of the grave, the belt-buckle was found also. When sorting out the bones of the skeleton, it proved to be true, what the witnesses of his actual burial had said: "We think that To Rot was carrying his catechists' cross when we buried him." The cross was found in a lump of ground.

[Signature]

Father Karl Heinz Hoppe, MSC

In December 2024, I was contacted by Police Commander Lidorius Baki Gari, who supervised the exhumation, and he sent me the following document via email:

This a personal experience of what I have seen, heard, touched, people I talked to, during the exhumation of the remains of

Blessed Peter ToRot. My full name is Gari Liborius Baki, and at the time of this occasion, I was a police officer assigned to Rabaul deployed for the Twin Volcanic Eruption in 1994. I was the Ground Commander of all the Police Mobile Squads deployed for this disaster operation in East New Britain.

(...) I recieved a radio call from Mr. John Toguata who was the Regional Police Commander, and the overall Commander of the Police Operations for the disaster. He advised that there will be some activity to be carried out at the Catholic Church Rakunai cemetery. He further directed that I take some policemen with me to go to Rakunai to provide security at scene. Unaware of what this occasion was, I took some policemen and we drove to Rakunai.

On arrival at Rakunai cemetery, the first thing I noted was the presence of Archbishop Karl Hesse, the Archbishop of Rabaul, and a few other priests. I greeted Bishop Karl, and was informed that on that day the remains of Blessed Peter To Rot would be exhumed from the cemetery. I further noted that there was an elderly woman and a man who I later knew as the relatives of Blessed Peter To Rot.

The cemetery was fully covered with volcanic ashes which was in thick layers. Due to this, it took a while for us to try and establish the actual location of the grave. Despite the thickness of the ashes, the lady clearly marked out on the ground the location of the grave and gave us full assurance that this where the grave was. Having done that, Bishop Karl gave his approval to begin the excavation and so we did. The first layer of soil on the grave was the layer of volcanic ashes, which we have to dig out in order to get to the actual grave. When all the layers of volcanic ash had been removed, we saw the actual markings of Blessed Peter To Rot's grave. The two relatives again confirmed that this was the grave of Blessed Peter To Rot, so we continued the excavation. I

recalled that there were four types of soil composition we had to dig through. The first is the volcanic ashes, and the second was normal black soil that we had to dig fairly deep down, until we reach the third layer of brown soil, but much softer the further we dug down.

On reaching the 4th layer of soil, I noted that soil texture and colour changed to look pumas grey white and it was very, very soft, we had to be careful and cautious. Bishop Karl advised us to use our hands only to further dig down as the soil was very soft.

A little further down the soil was a complete white like sand and there exposed, was the remains of Blessed Peter To Rot. For me this was an unforgettable experience considering the fact that he had been buried for almost 50 years. I saw the remains of blessed Peter ToRot, with all his bones still practically intact form his head to his toe, laying visibly clear.

If I recall rightly, I saw the remnants of his belt buckles laying around his abdominal area, I noted all his bones were intact, and none of his bones missing or like in most normal deaths absorbed into the ground. His complete skeleton was still together, but in a very brownish color, his small cross on his left shoulder and remains of his rosary in right hand.

As an experienced police officer, I was totally amazed with what I have seen which is very unusual and uncommon. But my faith as a Catholic has given me the strength to know and profess that what I have seen was very real and is undisputedly of a very holy man.

Before concluding the story of the exhumation, I want to share something that archbishop Karl Hesse personally told me at the beginning of 2022. He was not only present at the exhumation, but he also oversaw the final stage of the process for the beatification of the holy catechist. He was the archbishop of Rabaul from 1990 to 2011,

and then continued living in a small house of the archdiocese until his death. For a long time now, I have been travel to Rabaul at least once or twice a year, and it was always a great pleasure to be with him and listen to him. We had a great friendship, and despite the distance between Goroka (where I live) and Rabaul, we frequently spoke on the phone. He trusted me a lot. Before his death, for example, he gave me the hard drive from his computer so I could make a copy and keep it with me, because he feared that after his death someone would lose it or delete it, losing very valuable information. I still keep that copy. He also gave me permission to review all the files and to use any information I needed for my work as vice-postulator of the canonisation cause. The material is invaluable. When he died, on May 14, 2023, I was asked to write the homily for his funeral and the eulogy to be read at the cemetery, which I did with great pleasure. Since I couldn't travel for the funeral, both texts were read by the current archbishop.

In one of our many conversations, when I asked him about the exhumation of To Rot, in addition to showing me and giving me the photos, he told me something very interesting. The exhumation was not as simple or as peaceful as we could have imagined. On the contrary. Days before the exhumation, when the people of the village heard about what they would do with the catechist's body, there was a great uproar, the people were completely opposed to the exhumation of To Rot's body. The people were furious, and they even threatened the archbishop on several occasions. This explains why many police officers were present when the exhumation took place.

Why were people furious? It turns out that in ancient times, before the arrival of the first missionaries, the Tolai had the custom of digging up the dead and taking their bones to their homes. They believed that if the deceased had been a good person or a person with many possessions, then the bones would bring some kind of good luck to whoever possessed them. If the deceased, on the other hand, had been a bad person, then they believed that by unearthing the

body and stealing the bones, they could prevent the deceased from resting in the afterlife and so they would ultimately achieve revenge. In short: whether good or bad, the bones were unearthed and stolen, either to receive some kind of good luck or to take revenge. And the missionaries, upon seeing this practice, began to explain to the people that it was a pagan and superstitious practice, that had nothing to do with the teachings of the Church, and they forbade them from continuing to do it. And it turns out that now it was the very archbishop who wanted to dig up the dead body in front of everyone to take the bones! And the people, with a lot of common sense, told to him: "You, the missionaries, for many years forbade us from exhuming the dead, and called us 'pagans' and 'superstitious' for wanting to do so. And now you do it? No way! The bones of To Rot are going nowhere!"

Several meetings were held in the village to resolve the conflict, but the people and To Rot's family could not come to an agreement. Some understood what the archbishop wanted to do, and they agreed that To Rot's remains should rest in the sanctuary, in plain view, to be venerated. Others, on the other hand, were adamantly opposed and insisted that To Rot should not be disturbed and should rest in the same grave where he was buried in 1945. In the end, to find a solution, they decided that it would be To Rot's only living daughter, Rufina Ia Mama, who would have the final word and resolve the conflict. And Rufina said: "Let's do what the archbishop says." And thanks to her, the exhumation could take place.

When the archbishop finished telling me this story, he looked at me with an ironic smile and said: "The people were right... It is our fault, the missionaries, for not having taught them the catechism well. Many times we prohibit certain practices, accusing them of paganism and superstition, but we do not explain to them why we prohibit them."





December 9, 1994, the day of the exhumation of the body



APPENDIX 1

MESHIDA AND GUNTO CONDEMNED TO PRISON

Surrender of Japan

Following the announcement of Japan's general and unconditional surrender made by Emperor Hirohito on August 15, 1945, Japanese forces in remote areas began to surrender at local levels over the following weeks. The Japanese surrender in Rabaul took place on September 6, 1945, aboard the British aircraft carrier HMS Glory, anchored off the coast of Rabaul. It was one of the most important ceremonies in the South Pacific at the end of World War II, because Rabaul had been the main Japanese base in the region since 1942. And it was also a curious event because, unlike other fronts, the Japanese in New Britain were never defeated in combat. They were simply isolated by the Allies' strategy. We must remember that Rabaul was Japan's most powerful base in the South Pacific, with approximately one hundred thousand Japanese (the number varies according to sources, some mention ninety thousand and others even one hundred thirty thousand. This number includes army soldiers, navy sailors, and civilians). Attacking it directly would have cost tens of thousands of Allied lives. The Allies then captured the surrounding islands, cut off all supply routes, and left Rabaul surrounded and completely isolated. And as if that weren't enough, they had previously carried out a large

number of air raids, destroying the vast majority of Japanese ships and planes, which would have been useful for escape at the end of the war. The Japanese, then, were left isolated and abandoned, and had no choice but to surrender to the Allies.

On the Japanese side, the signatories of the surrender were Lieutenant General Hitoshi Imamura and Vice Admiral Kusaka. On the Allied side, it was Lieutenant General Vernon Sturdee, commander of the First Australian Army, who accepted the surrender.

The Japanese delegates arrived by boat at the British aircraft carrier, and about a thousand English and Australian officers, sailors, and marines witnessed the historic event. Imamura placed his sword on the surrender table and signed the document, which covered the capitulation of all Japanese forces in New Britain, New Ireland, New Guinea, Bougainville, the Solomon Islands, and other minor areas.

After the surrender, General Imamura was prosecuted for war crimes committed by his troops, especially against prisoners of war. He was sentenced to ten years in prison. While serving part of his sentence in Japan, he learned that his former subordinates were still imprisoned in miserable conditions on Manus Island, about six hundred kilometres from Rabaul. Imamura voluntarily requested to be sent there to serve the rest of his sentence with them, sharing their hardships. He was there until his release in 1954. In total, he served approximately 8 years in actual prison, from 1946 to 1954.

War Crimes Trials

From December 1945 to August 1947, the Australian army conducted 188 war crimes trials in Rabaul. These trials were conducted in three phases: from December 11, 1945, to July 31, 1946; from December 6, 1946, to January 23, 1947; and from March 19, 1947, to August 6, 1947.

The Rabaul trials constituted almost two-thirds of all the proceedings undertaken by Australian Military Courts in their series of post-

war trials against lower-ranking Japanese war criminals. The crimes judged in Rabaul included: severe mistreatment, torture and murder of prisoners of war, illegal executions of Allied prisoners, torture of civilians, rapes and abuses, inhumane forced labour, deliberate negligence causing massive deaths from hunger and diseases, and other offences. When judging the Japanese, Australia also applied the principle of “command responsibility,” by which a superior could be considered guilty if he had been culpably negligent and did not prevent or punish the crimes of his subordinates.

Many defendants were identified by survivors, who paraded in front of rows of Japanese prisoners to point out the culprits. Thus, for example, Meshida was identified thanks to civilians he had tortured, who managed to recognise him among the prisoners.

In total, during these 188 trials, around 390 Japanese defendants were judged. Of these 390, 266 were convicted and 124 acquitted. The sentences included 84 death penalties, of which 81 were carried out in Rabaul itself by hanging and another 3 by firing squad. Most of the Australian executions of Japanese war criminals were carried out in Rabaul. Additionally, there were 8 life sentences and many lesser sentences.

Meshida and Gunto

As far as we know, no special trial was held for the murder of Peter To Rot. What we do know for certain is that in March 1988, the then postulator of the cause made a diplomatic approach to the Japanese government through the Embassy of Japan to the Holy See. The postulator of the cause submitted an official request, backed by a letter from the then Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Under the promise that “any information received will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and will not be used in any way that could be embarrassing to the Japanese government or against any individual,” the postulant politely requested an official response

to what were merely certain routine enquiries of historical research. Thus, he simply asked if the Japanese military police, Meshida and Gunto, who served in Rabaul during World War II, were still alive and, if so, if it would be possible for him to interview them. He was also interested in knowing if the records of the war crimes trials of Japanese prisoners of war from World War II were available to the public in Japan, and if it was possible to obtain photocopies of them. Finally, he requested details about the nature of the lethal chemical used in the event that a military execution was carried out by injection.

The petitioner's request, however, was not met with any written communication from the Japanese embassy and, after twelve months of patient waiting, he was verbally informed that the Japanese government was not in a position to answer any of the questions he had presented.

After a long investigation, a letter from the officer in charge of the Australian National Archives informed the persistent postulant that neither in the computers of the Australian National Archives, nor in the Australian Defence Department, nor in the Australian Army were there any records of the case, let alone the transcript of the statements of the two Japanese involved in To Rot's death.

Shortly before the beatification, the then postulator of the cause stated that, despite not having access to the trial records, he learned that Meshida and Gunto had confessed their guilt in the death of To Rot. Although at first both had denied any responsibility in the murder, they eventually accepted the accusation and admitted that they had killed him for "*too much Christo*," that is, for being a Christian. Unfortunately, despite having found transcripts of another trial held for Meshida, we have not been able to find the records in which to read this confession. Perhaps it was a comment made in an informal and unofficial context, and therefore it was not recorded.

More than forty years have passed since the then postulator did everything possible to find the trial transcripts, without any luck. Nowadays, much of the records and transcripts of the trials conducted

at the end of the war are scanned and available for anyone to consult online. Even so, we have not been able to find the trial in which the martyrdom of To Rot is mentioned. Maybe there wasn't even a trial for that. In fact, in the trial records in which Meshida is tried and sentenced, he is judged solely for having tortured two civilians, and nothing more. And immediately after the trial, the sentence appears, so it seems that he was not judged for any other crime.

These records and documents are located at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The file AWM54 1010/3/55 contains the transcript of the accusations made against Meshida, and the title of the folder is as follows: «AWM54 1010/3/55 - War Crimes and Trials - Transcripts of Evidence: Acusado Sargento Mayor Machide - acusado de tortura al Civil R78». Although the folder's title mentions "Machide" instead of "Meshida," we know it refers to the same person. In fact, throughout the entire transcript, he is referred to as "Machida." And it is normal for it to be so, because it is a transcription of a Japanese name that should only be taken as an approximate clue, given that the accused Japanese have been identified by people who know their names only by having heard them. Thanks to this file, we can know his full name: Machida Yoshinori, and he belonged to the sixth corp of the military police. We, however, will continue to call him "Meshida."

The folder with the trial transcript contains sixteen typewritten pages, with accusations from two civilians who, during the identification round of the accused, identified Meshida as the perpetrator of torture and mistreatment. At the end of the accusations, Meshida was given the opportunity to defend himself, and he responded to each of the accusations. The trial began on Monday, May 13, 1946, and ended the next day, May 14, at 4:20 pm. Meshida was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

About Gunto, on the other hand, we only know that he received the same sentence as Meshida, but we were unable to find the records of his trial.

When we found out that Peter To Rot would be canonised in October 2025 in Rome, we began preparing the celebrations in Rakunai, which would take place in December of that same year. We thought it might be a good opportunity to invite the grandchildren of Meshida and Gunto, and have them meet the grandchildren of Peter To Rot, thus being able to heal old wounds that, surprisingly, continue to bleed eighty years later. I presented the idea to To Rot's family, and they all thought it was excellent, even saying they had been waiting for that moment for a long time. They kept repeating, "If it weren't for them [Meshida and Gunto], we wouldn't have the first Papuan saint today. We don't want to fight with them. On the contrary. We want to thank them, because thanks to their grandparents, today our grandfather Peter To Rot is a saint." And I can confirm that they said it sincerely, and they truly desired that meeting. Thanks to a mutual acquaintance, we finally managed to contact a grandson of Meshida, who respectfully apologised and made it clear that he had no interest whatsoever in participating in the activities or maintaining any kind of contact with us. Needless to say, we have respected that decision, and we never insisted again.

AWM -54

AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES
ACCESS STATUS

OPEN

WAR OF 1939-45	
Description / Title:	
P.O.W. / H.H.Q.	
Date:	10/10/3/55
Index:	
A.W.M. File:	2217/1/1

Transcript of Evidence - Accused Sgt; Major
Meshida - Charged with torture of Cambians
R. 78

NO.	NAME	RANK	UNIT	SENTENCE	DATE OF SENTENCE
	KUGE Kazuyoshi	P.O. 2	20 Naval Def Corps	10 yrs imp	15/2/46
	KUROKAWA Eizo	P.O. 1	20 Naval Def Corps	15 yrs imp	18/2/46
	KUWABARA Masuji	P.O. 1	20 Naval Def Corps	10 yrs imp	14/2/46
2010	KUZE Yasuta	Sgt	5 Spec Land Serv Coy	1 yr imp	17/5/46
2017	KAMIMURA Seichi	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	10 yrs imp	9/1/46
	KAIKOKU Shigemori	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	15 yrs imp	31/1/46
748	KANOSHIGE Masakichi (Masuyoshi or Shokishi)	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	10 yrs imp	8/12/45
	KANESHIKE Yoshio	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	12 yrs imp	14/1/46
	KASAHARA Eiiji	Pte	Kanto Force Borneo	7 yrs imp	31/1/46
	KATO Sadao	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	15 yrs imp	31/1/46
	KAWAMURA Katsuo	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	10 yrs imp	31/1/46
	KAWAMURA Toruyoshi	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	10 yrs imp	8/12/45
	KIMURA Seiji	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	15 yrs imp	31/1/46
	KIYOKAWA Tomio (HAGATA Tomio)	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	15 yrs imp	31/1/46
	KIYOSE Norihiko	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	10 yrs imp	31/1/46
	KIYOSHIMA Tadao	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	15 yrs imp	30/1/46
	KOBAYASHI Shizuo	Civ	Borneo PW Camp	10 yrs imp	9/1/46
	KOBAYASHI Tetsuo	Pte	Borneo PW Camp	12 yrs imp	23/7/46
2017	MACHIDA Yoshinori	S/M	6 M.P.	10 yrs imp	14/5/46
	MARDA Yukio	P.O. 1	20 Naval Def Corps	6 yrs imp	15/2/46
768	MASEKAWA Harukichi	L/Cpl	20 Fuel Supply Unit	10 yrs imp	6/12/45
	MANABE Sadao	C.P.O.	20 Naval Def Corps	2 yrs imp	15/2/46
	MATSUDA Masuo	C.P.O.	20 Naval Def Corps	15 yrs imp	15/2/46
2671	MATSUMOTO Torataro	W.O.	6 M.P.	10 yrs imp	12/12/45
	MATSUTATA Katsushi	S/M	Borneo PW Camp	7 yrs imp	31/1/46
2750	MAYAMA Mitsuichi	Cpl	20 Spec Sea Serv Coy	7 yrs imp	23/7/46
				6 mos imp	12/7/46
2201	MIYAGAWA Kazuo	S/M	16 Spec Sea Serv Coy	15 yrs imp	23/3/46
1932	MIYATA Masanori	S/M	5 M.P.	5 yrs imp	29/4/46
783	MIZUTA Ryuichi	Capt	25 Ind Mixed Regt	10 yrs imp	27/5/46
2749	MORTSAKI Takeichi	Cpl	20 Spec Sea Serv Coy	2 yrs imp	9/7/46
				5 yrs imp	16/7/46
				7 yrs imp	23/7/46

Above: Meshida's sentenced to ten years in prison
Below: Japanese soldiers in a lineup in Rabaul



APPENDIX 2

FIRST JOURNAL ARTICLE ABOUT PETER TO ROT

As far as we have been able to ascertain, the text we reproduce below is the first journalistic article in which Peter To Rot is mentioned, and his deep faith and heroism are exalted. It was written by Mons. Vesters, MSC, apostolic vicar emeritus of Rabaul at the time, and published in the Australian newspaper *The Advocate* on January 16, 1946. It is moving to read what is said about the liturgical services held on Sundays in the absence of priests.

The account of To Rot's martyrdom differs slightly in details from what we know, but those differences do not affect the story of the brave catechist at all.

HEROIC CATHOLIC NATIVES KEPT THE FAITH

One of the most inspiring things of the war has been the admirable example which the Catholic natives of the missions have given of their sound Catholic life. In the following article his Lordship Bishop Vesters, MSC, OBE, retired Vicar-Apostolic of Rabaul, describes further instances of heroic and apostolic zeal.

By Bishop Vesters, MSC

I have received a great number of letters from missionaries of the Pacific —says Bishop Vesters—, and they all convey two definite items of information: first the utter destruction wrought on the mission buildings with a tragic loss of precious lives, and secondly, the remarkable faithfulness of the Catholic natives, particularly of the catechists or native teachers, as also of the seminarians.

The missionaries do not speak of themselves, but we well know from other sources how courageously they weathered the storm. Not one left his post, though they were offered rescue, and knew that to stay meant unspeakable hardships and often death. They frequently intervened for their charges and always in favour of religion. They also offered food and shelter to hounded Australian soldiers and civilians in the name of Christian charity. There are numerous incredible stories of heroic assistance and apostolic zeal which we cannot relate here. Suffice it to mention just a few examples from New Britain, where the Sacred Heart Fathers have their mission field.

Catechists Instructed

In anticipation of a Japanese invasion, the Fathers had carefully instructed their catechists to continue their

catechism lessons, to visit and console the sick and the dying, reciting with them, or for them, the Act of Contrition, inviting relatives and friends to join them, etc. Further, to assist officially, as provided in such cases in Canon Law, the marriage of couples, after having duly ascertained the free will, etc., of the parties and explained to them the regulations of the Church. And also to baptise newly-born babies and to keep faithfully the registers and the census of the Catholics in their respective districts.

When the Fathers were released from internment, they found all the books in perfect order and could take up the work where the catechists had left it.

Many of the catechists were insulted and beaten for their fidelity to their duties. Others were thrown in gaol compounds and submitted to torture. When finally released, sick and bruised, they returned enthusiastically to their task, continually tracked and under constant menace.

Heroic Native

In Rakunai village, the catechist To Rot refused to let his people dance on an Advent Sunday, as the Japanese had ordered, saying that Advent was a time of strict penance. The Japanese threatened him with prison, but To Rot simply replied: "All right; you can gaol me, but in Advent the Catholics will not dance."

Some time later To Rot's own brother sent away his wife and took another. To Rot assembled the chiefs and declared that, if his brother would not let the girl alone, he must stay away from the Catholic village. The men brought a complaint before the Japanese officer and To Rot was called into court. He was thereafter beaten and thrown into a dark cave, where he stayed for many days. One afternoon a Japanese doctor visited him, informing him that he had

to give him an injection, and that on this very evening at 6 o'clock his sufferings would end. To Rot protested, but in vain. After he had received the injection, he knelt down and prayed. Then he folded his blanket neatly, took into his hands the small crucifix he always wore around his neck and lay quietly down on the ground. At 6 o'clock a police boy came in and found him dead. The Rakunai people buried him in the village cemetery at the foot of the big cross. Even today, when the name of To Rot is mentioned, the people start crying.

Other catechists were imprisoned for months. Several were decapitated for helping Australian soldiers.

Thus, the catechists had maintained the connection between religion and the people during all those dreadful years, and when the released priests could visit their flock again, there were scenes of wild enthusiasm.

Faithful Never Failed

One Father wrote that during his absence his faithful had never failed to come together every evening for night prayers and on the morning of Sundays and first Fridays. Their church had been wrecked but they had built chapels at convenient places, where the catechists assembled their flock and presided over religious service. The natives said alternately the prayers of the Holy Mass, the catechist reading the Epistle and the Gospel. Then they sang a hymn to the Sacred Heart of Our Lady. When they came to the moment when the Consecration should have taken place, all bowed their heads and wept silently because their Lord could not now come upon the altar and into their hearts. After a little while they continued their prayers until the Holy Communion, pausing again for a few minutes and then giving thanks, etc., after their spiritual Communion.

The catechist then gave a short sermon and useful advice for the coming week.

Thus they kept the faith and their fervour. There have been very few irregular marriages, and the women strongly defended their honour.

The native seminarians, numbering twenty-one, from three different vicariates, continued their studies as best they could. They helped the missionaries materially by saving as much food and furniture as they could. They sneaked into the camps of the military prisoners at the risk of their life to bring them some comfort. They penetrated through the Japanese lines and hitchhiked as far as Jacquinot Bay, to inform the Australian troops of the whereabouts of the missionaries, that they would not be needlessly bombed. They worked very hard in the gardens to raise some fresh food for the missionaries, and toiled during three days and nights to build a large dug-out against bombing.

In the same manner the native Sisters of Mary Immaculate [the FMI sisters, the congregation of native sisters mentioned previously] spent themselves in the service of religion and of the missionaries, with complete disregard of their own life or comfort, bearing insults and torture with amazing fortitude. And when, at the height of the danger, they were advised by the priests to seek safety in the bush, they answered: "We are not afraid to die, provided we can stay near you and obtain the consolations of religion." The ordinary natives themselves did the impossible to procure food and other commodities for the missionaries, at the risk often of their life, generally with the result of being captured by the enemy and seeing their goods confiscated.

My dear friends, I could go on indefinitely telling about the heroic deeds of the missionaries and the faithful, but this

may suffice to show you that your generosity towards the destroyed missions is not spoilt upon them but indeed well deserved. And they will express their deep gratitude by giving their benefactors a large share in their labours and prayers.

THIRD PART

THE PATH TO THE ALTARS

1- IS PETER TO ROT A TRUE MARTYR?

Is Peter To Rot really a martyr? Although the answer to this question may seem evident to us, it is nevertheless a crucial point in any beatification cause, and it must be demonstrated with arguments. In other words: Did Peter To Rot die for his faith, or did he die instead for having disobeyed the Japanese authorities? The answer to this question is crucial in the case of Peter To Rot. If we assert that he died for his faith and voluntarily accepted death, then he is a true martyr, and should be honoured as such. However, if the cause of his death was disobedience to the Japanese authorities, then we could remember him as a good catechist and a loving father and husband, but not as a martyr.

We will divide this last chapter of the book into two parts. In the first part, we will briefly review the Church's teaching on martyrdom. In the second, however, we will demonstrate that Peter To Rot met the requirements that the Church demands for it to be properly considered martyrdom.

1- What is Martyrdom?

Before studying To Rot's case, it is useful for us to recall the teachings of the Church in regard to martyrdom. Of course, we do not intend to write a "Treatise on martyrdom," but rather review some notions and concepts that will aid us to better understand this delicate matter and to answer any objection that could appear.

THE TERM "MARTYR" IN THE CHURCH

The word "martyrdom" comes from the Greek word μάρτυς, which simply means "witness." A martyr, as the Greek word tells us, is a witness who testifies to a fact of which he has knowledge from personal observation. In other words, it is someone who testifies to the truth.

It is in this sense that the term first appears in Christian literature. The Apostles were "witnesses" of all they had observed in the public life of Christ as well as of all they had learned from His teaching. The Lord Himself said: "You will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the *very* ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). Saint Peter, in his address to the Apostles and disciples relating to the election of Judas' successor, employs the term with this meaning: *"Therefore, it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us... **become with us a witness to his resurrection**"* (Acts 1:22). In his first public discourse, the chief of the Apostles speaks of himself and his companions as "**witnesses**" who saw the risen Christ. Subsequently, after the miraculous escape of the Apostles from prison, when brought a second time before the tribunal, Peter alludes to the twelve as "**witnesses**" to Christ. (Acts 5:29 sqq.) In his First Epistle, Saint Peter also refers to himself as a "**witness of the sufferings of Christ.**" (1 Peter 5:1)

Although today the term "martyr" is reserved exclusively for those who shed their blood for Christ, that was not how it was understood at the beginning. A "martyr" was simply a "witness" to the truth, without any necessary reference to the shedding of blood. However, this created a problem: the same word "martyr" was applied to those who shed their blood for Christ, and also to those who, without shedding their blood, were brave witnesses of the Catholic faith. During the early periods of the Church, a distinction gradually began to be made between these two groups of people. And so, we find that in the 2nd century, the word "confessor" began to be used to refer to

those who, although they had given testimony and were witnesses (= martyrs), had not, however, shed their blood for Christ. And at the same time, the word “martyr” began to be used exclusively for those who had borne witness with their blood.

THE FOUNDATION OF MARTYRDOM

Martyrdom finds its foundation in the death of Christ and in His supreme sacrifice of love consummated on the cross, through which we have life. Christ is the suffering servant spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, who gave himself as a ransom for many. He is the first martyr and true example, because he is the one who shed his blood in the sacrifice of Calvary. And the army of millions of martyrs who follow him do nothing but repeat this supreme sacrifice with the strength they receive from Christ himself.

Christ urges his disciples, each one of us, to take up their cross each day and follow him along the path of total love for God. He told us: *“He who does not take his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.”* (Mt 10:38-39) This is the meaning of the parable of the grain of wheat that dies to give new life, and whose best and most perfect example took place just under two thousand years ago at the top of Calvary.

Pope Benedict XVI said:

He himself [Christ] is the grain of wheat which came from God, the divine grain that lets itself fall to the ground, that lets itself sink, be broken down in death and precisely by so doing germinates and can thus bear fruit in the immensity of the world. (*Message*, 14 March 2010)

The martyr follows the Lord to the very end, freely accepting death for the salvation of the world in a supreme test of love and faith.

Again, Pope Benedict XVI, teaches us:

Once again, where does the strength to face martyrdom come from? From deep and intimate union with Christ, because martyrdom and the vocation to martyrdom are not the result of human effort but the response to a project and call of God, they are a gift of his grace that enables a person, out of love, to give his life for Christ and for the Church, hence for the world. If we read the lives of the Martyrs we are amazed at their serenity and courage in confronting suffering and death: God's power is fully expressed in weakness, in the poverty of those who entrust themselves to him and place their hope in him alone (c.f 2 Cor 12:9). Yet it is important to stress that God's grace does not suppress or suffocate the freedom of those who face martyrdom; on the contrary it enriches and exalts them. The Martyr is an exceedingly free person, free as regards power, as regards the world; a free person who in a single, definitive act gives God his whole life, and in a supreme act of faith, hope and charity abandons himself into the hands of his Creator and Redeemer; he gives up his life in order to be associated totally with the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. In a word, martyrdom is a great act of love in response to God's immense love. (*Audience*, 11 August 2010)

Although martyrdom is a grace reserved for a few and perhaps not all of us are called to shed blood, nothing prevents us from this "deep and intimate union with Christ" that the Pope speaks of. After all, we are all called to respond generously "to God's immense love." And that is, ultimately, the secret of holiness.

MARTYRDOM IN THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH

Pope Benedict XIV, whose pontificate lasted in between 1740 and 1758, was considered “the master” of the Causes of Saints, for he gave us the traditional definition and principles about martyrdom. In a classical document —written before becoming Pope— called *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione* (*On the Beatification of the Servants of God and Canonisation of the Blessed*), he stated the principles that must be followed in the study of a case of martyrdom. This document, although written more than 250 years ago, is still the law observed by the Church. The Pope declared that **Martyrdom means undergoing death for the faith, or for any Christian virtue which is related to it.**

It is important to highlight the distinction made by Benedict XIV between dying for the faith and dying for a Christian virtue that is related to it. Sometimes we find examples of martyrs who shed their blood because their persecutors hated the faith, as during the persecutions of the early centuries, or even in our days, during pagan and anti-Christian regimes. Other times, however, we find martyrs who have shed their blood not out of direct hatred towards the faith they professed, but towards some other Christian virtue. And so we find thousands of martyrs who have shed their blood defending virtues such as purity, obedience, charity, etc. These people are also considered martyrs in the strict sense of the term, because the virtue for which they died was deeply related to the faith they professed and the evangelical teachings.

Let's look at some recent and familiar examples to better understand what we have just said. Someone might object that Saint Maria Goretti is not strictly a martyr, because her attacker was as Christian and baptised as she was, and he did not kill her for her faith, but for her purity. And this is true, but the purity for which Maria Goretti shed her blood is a Christian virtue that was deeply and inseparably united with the faith she professed. And thus, by defending her purity, Maria

Goretti bore witness to her faith. It could also be objected that Saint Maximilian Kolbe is not precisely a martyr, because he was not directly killed because of his faith, but for the charity he showed towards a fellow prisoner. And this is also true, but the charity for which Maximilian Kolbe accepted death is also a Christian virtue inseparable from his faith. And he, by bearing witness to charity, was also bearing witness to his faith. Therefore, although these two saints were not killed out of direct hatred towards the faith, they were nevertheless killed out of hatred towards Christian virtues inseparable from the faith. And according to Benedict XIV's definition of martyrdom, a martyr is not only one who dies out of direct and explicit hatred towards the faith, but also one who dies defending a Christian virtue related and inseparable from it.

THE THREE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR MARTYRDOM

More recently, on 24 April 2006, Pope Benedict XVI wrote a letter to the members of the then Congregation for the Causes of Saints, in which he recalled the Catholic doctrine on martyrdom, highlighting the **three essential elements for martyrdom**. These elements were familiar to all Catholics since the time of Benedict XIV, but because of their great importance, Pope Benedict XVI decided to underline them once again.

These three essential elements of martyrdom are: 1) Death of the victim; 2) Acceptance by the victim; 3) Hatred of the faith by the persecutor. In a martyrdom, properly speaking, we must find these three elements in a united form. If even one of these is absent, there is no real and proper martyrdom. Pope Benedict XVI recalled:

The martyrs of the past and those of our time gave and give life (*effusio sanguinis*) freely and consciously in a supreme act of love, witnessing to their faithfulness to Christ, to the Gospel and to the Church. If the motive that impels them

to martyrdom remains unchanged, since Christ is their source and their model, then what has changed are the cultural contexts of martyrdom and the strategies “*ex parte persecutoris*” (*from the part of the persecutor*) that more and more seldom explicitly show their aversion to the Christian faith or to a form of conduct connected with the Christian virtues, but simulate different reasons, for example, of a political or social nature.

It is of course necessary to find irrefutable proof of readiness for martyrdom, such as the outpouring of blood and of its acceptance by the victim. It is likewise necessary, directly or indirectly but always in a morally certain way, to ascertain the “*odium fidei*” (*hatred of the faith*) of the persecutor. If this element is lacking there would be no true martyrdom according to the perennial theological and juridical doctrine of the Church. The concept of “martyrdom” as applied to the Saints and Blessed martyrs should be understood in conformity with Benedict XIV’s teaching, as “*voluntaria mortis perpessio sive tolerantia propter Fidem Christi, vel alium virtutis actum in Deum relatum*” (voluntary suffering of death or its acceptance due to faith in Christ, or another act of virtue referred to God). **This is the constant teaching of the Church.** (*Letter to the participants of the Plenary Session of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints*)

Following this “constant teaching of the Church,” when it comes to the study of a case of a supposed martyr, it is absolutely necessary to investigate whether these three essential elements were present at the moment of the alleged martyrdom. As said above, if there was no death, no acceptance, or no hatred, there is no true martyrdom. We must not forget that if one of these elements is absent, we have no true martyrdom

2- Peter To Rot and the Three Essential Elements of Martyrdom

Let us see briefly how Peter To Rot fulfilled these three requirements, in such a way that the Church saw fit to add his name to the glorious army of martyrs.

1- DEATH OF THE VICTIM

This is the first element: we should be certain that the martyr was killed. In other words, that his death did not follow any natural cause.

In the case of To Rot, from the very beginning, no one had any doubt that he had been murdered. We have already read the testimonies of the eyewitnesses who declared that two policemen, Meshida and Gunto, were responsible for the execution of the catechist, aided by a Japanese doctor whose name we do not know. The details of the events have already been described previously, so we will only review them briefly, without too much detail.

We have a priceless **eye witness** named Arap To Binabak, who declared to have been able to see To Rot's execution, and he gave the details of the event:

When Meshida came to look for Peter To Rot, he sent me away. I went up to a small rise nearby, from where I could see what was going on down below. **The doctor gave Peter To Rot an injection and a drink of something, and told him to lie down.** His ears and nostrils were stuffed. After a while, Peter To Rot seemed to struggle and want to vomit. The doctor covered his mouth and held him, and after a while he was still.

We have the obvious fact of the **injection**, mentioned by many witnesses, due to the puncture that was found during the washing of

the corpse. Anton Tata declared:

When they were washing the body, I noticed the dark, discoloured mark on the throat, and on the left upper-arm next to thick vein, **the puncture of an injection needle.**

In addition, the testimonies of those who saw the **stuffed cotton-wool and the vomiting**, which demonstrate that his death was not caused by a “minor illness” —as the Japanese said—, but by a lethal poison given to him. To Rot’s fellow prisoner To Romano said:

I went back to To Rot and tried to wake him. To my horror, I discovered that To Rot was dead. **I saw cotton wool in To Rot’s ears and nostrils.** My first thought was that To Rot had been poisoned.

Anton Tata, chief of the village, said:

There was foam coming from his mouth, but it was quite different from that seen with other corpses. It smelled strongly of some vile medicine.

And Paula Ia Varpit, wife of the catechist:

White foam was coming out of his mouth and nose. The foam was foul smelling, so I put a handkerchief over my mouth.

We also have evidence of **signs of violence** on To Rot’s body, which indicate how he was treated in his last hours. Witnesses could see “holes” and cuts, along with a discoloured and swollen throat. To Rot’s wife testified:

I was surprised to see that **his neck was so swollen**. At the back of his head I noticed **two deep cuts** which were still bleeding.

To Rot's brother, Tatamai said:

The centre of **the throat was crushed flat and was swollen**. Everyone saw and knew that this was caused by a baton they had hit him in the throat with.

These testimonies are sufficient to prove that To Rot suffered a violent death, and his death was not the result of natural causes, as the Japanese wanted the people of Rakunai to believe.

2- ACCEPTANCE BY THE VICTIM

The second element we must consider is the acceptance of death by the victim. Did To Rot accept death as a sacrifice offered to Christ, or was he instead forced or compelled to endure it?

In the previous chapter, we read many testimonies that assure us that To Rot was not only convinced that he would be killed, but also that he was willing to offer his life as a sacrifice to God. To Rot expressed his suspicions about the intentions of the Japanese many time, and somehow he knew he would not leave the prison alive. Let's briefly review some of those testimonies:

To Rot's wife, Paula Ia Varpit, recalled:

Expressing my fears, I begged To Rot to give up the Catechist's way of life and to take up, instead, a quiet, withdrawn style of living. To Rot had replied: **"Don't you worry about that. It is my duty to die for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and for my people."** Then he made the sign of the cross. He showed no sign of fear or grief.

Joseph Tatamai, the catechist's brother, said:

To Rot told me: **"It is bad when one is killed by bombs or machine gun bullets, but it is good to die for one's faith. You get a great reward in heaven."**

His sister, Theresia Ia Varpilak, recalled when she visited her two brothers in prison:

On one occasion I met up with them gathered around a fire, shivering with cold. I started to cry, and To Rot turned to me and said: **"Stop crying. Pray. I'm here for a good cause. I'm quite happy about it, for I am here on account of my faith."**

Also, his prison mate, To Romano, remembers that To Rot told him:

"Oh, well, they are going to kill me because of my religion."

To Bernardet Ia Olgeta added:

I visited To Rot Many times while he was in prison. (...) To Rot seemed to be calm and at peace and always told his visitors: **"Don't be worry for me. I die for my faith. You go home and pray for me."**

And it is Anton Tata, the village leader, who offers you what is probably the clearest and most uplifting testimony:

Later on, in prison, I had a man to man talk with To Rot who said: **"I am here because of those who break their**

marriage vows, and because of those who do not want to see God's work go forward. That's it. I shall die. You go back and care for the people." I said that he should try to bribe the police for his freedom. He replied: **"Put that out of your mind. They have already condemned me to death."**

All these testimonies dispel any doubt about To Rot's acceptance of offering his life as a witness of Christ and the Gospel. Not only did he know they would kill him and was prepared for it, but he accepted it willingly out of love for God.

3- HATRED OF THE FAITH BY THE PERSECUTOR

The third and final element that we must consider are the motives for which To Rot died. It is necessary to ascertain that the catechist whether To Rot was killed because his persecutor hated the christian faith, (*odium fidei*), or if he was killed for some other reason.

Was To Rot's faith the cause of his death? The answer to this question is affirmative, as it has been proven that the catechist died for his faith and for defending Christian values such as the unity and indissolubility of marriage, among others.

In the previous chapters, we have already discussed that the true cause of To Rot's imprisonment and death was his defence of the family and marriage. It is true that To Rot had disobeyed the orders of the Japanese who prohibited him from doing apostolate work, but this was not the cause of his martyrdom. The Japanese and those who wished to return to polygamy were not concerned whether the catechist visited the sick or taught catechism lessons to the children. The only thing that mattered to them was that the catechist stop speaking out against polygamy and stop helping women remain faithful to their marital vows. We know that from the moment the law allowing polygamy was enacted, To Rot was its greatest opponent, and he denounced this practice using all the means at his disposal.

We have also talked about the native policeman, To Metapa. He sought by all means to destroy To Rot, because the catechist had thwarted his attempt to take Ia Mentil as a second wife, helping her to return to her legitimate husband. To Metapa could not bear the humiliation, and from that moment on, he began to do everything possible to imprison To Rot and avenge the offence. The policeman knew that To Rot was an obstacle to the free practice of polygamy, and so it was necessary to get rid of the catechist.

The Japanese never acknowledged that this was the cause of To Rot's death, and even tried to convince the people of Rakunai that To Rot was imprisoned for disobeying the authorities' prohibitions. We know it's not true, because even the Japanese policeman Meshida acknowledged: **"To Rot is a very bad man. He is preventing people, who want to do so, from having more than one wife."**

Let us read, one last time, the words of the catechist himself to Anton Tata the day before his martyrdom. In this, we can see that the catechist knew and accepted that the defence of Christian Matrimony was the one and only cause of his death. Anton Tata tells us:

Later on, in prison, I had a man to man talk with To Rot who said: **"I am here because of those who break their marriage vows, and because of those who do not want to see God's work go forward. That's it. I shall die. You go back and care for the people."**

And it was this vigorous defence of the Christian value of the indissolubility of marriage against the infamous practice of polygamy that John Paul II highlighted during the homily for the beatification of the catechist:

When the authorities legalised and encouraged polygamy, Blessed Peter knew it to be against Christian principles and

firmly denounced this practice. Because the Spirit of God dwelt in him, he fearlessly proclaimed the truth about the sanctity of marriage. He refused to take the “easy way” of moral compromise. “I have to fulfil my duty as a Church witness to Jesus Christ,” he explained. Fear of suffering and death did not deter him. During his final imprisonment Peter To Rot was serene, even joyful. He told people that he was ready to die for the faith and for his people.

With all these testimonies, we can be sure that the good catechist died because of his faith. Disobedience, holding religious gatherings, aiding in marriages, etc., were only excuses to justify the real reason behind To Rot’s imprisonment and death. He was killed because he defended true Christian Marriage against polygamy. This was exactly the same reason Saint John the Baptist was killed almost two thousand years before him.

2- THE ITINERARY OF THE CAUSE OF CANONISATION: 1945-2025

When Peter To Rot was murdered, the faithful of Rakunai wrote the following phrase on the cross marking his burial place: “To Rot. Martyr of the faith.” The good catechist was always considered a martyr by the people of his village and by those who knew him, and his tomb quickly became a place of pilgrimage. Everyone was convinced that he had shed his blood for Christ, and for that reason, his fame began to spread and reach ever more distant places. The apostolic vicar of Rabaul during To Rot’s time dedicated some pages of his book on the war to highlight the figure of the catechist, and the story of the martyrdom began to be known outside of Papua New Guinea, in countries such as Australia, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy, and many others.

Therefore, when the prudent time requested by the Church before initiating preliminary investigations for a canonisation cause had barely ended, the apostolic vicar of Rabaul decided to listen to the petitions of the religious and laypeople who asked him to do so.

1- In View of the Beatification

On January 11, 1952, less than seven years after the death of the catechist, the apostolic vicar of Rabaul, Leo Scharmach, MSC, motivated by the growing fame of martyrdom and the devotion of the faithful, decided to form a commission of three priests for a

preliminary investigation into the life and circumstances of Peter To Rot's death.

Although the investigation began with much enthusiasm and dedication, soon after, a series of problems within the martyr's family caused the main promoters of the cause to lose their initial enthusiasm. They thought that those family issues were an impediment and an obstacle to the cause, and therefore decided to wait until they were resolved. Despite the desire and motivation shown at the beginning by Monsignor Scharmach, the cause was practically abandoned for the next thirty years. In 1983, the then archbishop of Rabaul seriously reconsidered the cause of Peter To Rot, both due to the continued unrestrained and widespread fame of martyrdom, and the growing number of petitions in that regard from groups of the faithful.

The archbishop, also MSC like all his predecessors, entrusted the cause to the general postulator of that congregation, Father Lucio De Stefano, MSC. The choice of an MSC as the promoter of the cause made a lot of sense, not only because the archbishop belonged to that congregation, but especially because Peter To Rot is considered a spiritual child and a fruit of the MSC: it was the MSC's who evangelised his area, who baptised both him and his parents, who educated him and gave him the sacraments daily, and who trained him to be a catechist. Peter To Rot, without a doubt, is the fruit of the tireless and exemplary work of the MSC.

The diocesan investigation began in 1987 and concluded in 1989 under the then Archbishop of Rabaul. The legal validity of the acts was recognised by decree on June 2, 1989.

Once the *Positio super martyrio* (the exhaustive and structured documentation that the postulator presents to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints) was completed, a meeting of the special Congress of theological consultants took place on June 26, 1992, which issued a unanimously positive judgement. The ordinary session of cardinals and bishops, held on December 1, 1992, also confirmed in the death of Peter To Rot, all the elements of martyrdom. On April 2, 1993,

in the presence of Pope Saint John Paul II, the corresponding Decree *super Martyrio* was promulgated.

The beatification ceremony took place on January 17, 1995, at the Sir John Guise Stadium in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, during the second and final visit of Saint John Paul II to this country.

2- In View of the Canonisation

Since the beatification of Peter To Rot, devotion to the catechist has only increased, and his figure has also become popular outside of Papua New Guinea. The signs attributed to his intercession began to multiply, and chapels, oratories, schools, youth centers, etc., placed under his patronage, continued to emerge. More than ever, Rakunai became a pilgrimage destination, and the relics of the blessed continued to be requested from various parts of the world.

In the year 2020, when the 75th anniversary of the martyrdom and the 25th anniversary of the beatification were being celebrated, the Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands commissioned me (Father Tomás Ravaioli, IVE), to investigate the status of the cause. After a long exchange of letters and meetings with the general postulator of the MSC and members of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, it was concluded that the cause was somewhat abandoned, and it was decided to resume the work with a view to a possible canonisation. The *sine qua non* condition for canonisation was —as we know— irrefutable evidence of a miracle attributed to the intercession of the blessed.

After several years of collecting hundreds of testimonies of apparent miracles (that, until the Church defines them as such, they are called “signs”) attributed to the intercession of To Rot, it was, however, practically impossible to “prove” them according to the demands and requirements that the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints uses for these cases. And although the number of signs attributed to the

intercession of the catechist multiplied, the difficulty continued, and it did not seem like it would be resolved. I have travelled all over the country, interviewed hundreds of people, and have seen many apparent miracles attributed to the intercession of To Rot, but we had absolutely no written documentation of those stories and those healings. On more than one occasion, I have found myself in situations where the entire village assured me they had witnessed some apparent miracle, but that unanimous testimony is not enough, nor is it suitable for a potential canonisation. I have heard incredible stories, and I have been able to speak with those who received those graces, and all of them attributed the favour received to the intercession of To Rot. And we are not talking about small things: I interviewed a blind person who regained their sight through the intercession of To Rot, and absolutely everyone in the village assured me that this person was blind and that overnight he began to see again. The same happened with a child who “woke up” from a vegetative state of five or six years immediately after his parents asked To Rot for a favour, and that child is now perfectly fine, cured, and several years have passed. And here too, there were hundreds of people from the village who knew the child, his parents, his family, and attested to the healing. I have met a paraplegic who walked again, and once again the entire village assured me they knew the person, and the healing is evident. I was able to speak with a local priest who had cancer and was hospitalised in an Australian hospital. The doctors had already informed the bishop that the priest would not survive the night, and yet the next day he walked out of the hospital completely healed, the cancer had disappeared without leaving any trace. And I could continue multiplying stories in which, honestly, I had no doubt of being in the presence of true miracles. Even so, the evidence we had to “prove” or “demonstrate” these apparent miracles was zero. What to do, then? The only thing we could do was present the difficulties to and ask for help from the only person in the world capable of helping us in this case: the Holy Father.

On January 18, 2024, the bishops of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands sent a letter to His Holiness Pope Francis requesting the canonisation of the blessed, and imploring him to dispense with the study of a presumed miracle, convinced that this would allow for the first time a faithful from Papua New Guinea to be declared a saint. The bishops wrote:

The great difficulty we find in his possible canonisation is the impossibility of proving the supposed miracles attributed to his intercession. The culture of Papua New Guinea is strictly oral. Therefore, it is very difficult for people to write and document the graces and supposed miracles attributed to the intercession of our blessed one. This makes it difficult to advance the cause. Therefore, the future canonisation of Peter To Rot is practically a utopia for us.

With these words, the bishops perfectly summarised the two major obstacles that existed for the eventual canonisation of Blessed Peter To Rot: the impossibility of proving the miracles, and the lack of a record where all the testimonies of graces and favours received through the intercession of the blessed could be documented. How can it be scientifically proven that someone has been healed if in Papua New Guinea there are practically no hospitals, no doctors, or professionals who can examine the patient and document the studies and investigations? Moreover, it is important to remember that the culture of Papua New Guinea is strictly oral, and the literacy rate in this country is the lowest in the entire Pacific region. According to recent anthropological studies, there are 820 local languages, and very few people are capable of writing a well-articulated text in English. For this reason, asking people to write about the graces and favours received through the intercession of the blessed was asking them for something that was absolutely beyond their reach and capabilities.

On March 22 of that same year, the bishops' plea found a benevolent reception from Pope Francis, and on April 10, the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints informed us that it was necessary to appoint a postulator, a vice-postulator, and an actor of the cause to enter the final stage of the cause and prepare the *Positio super canonizatione*. The actor of the cause was the Archdiocese of Rabaul, the postulator in Rome was Father Fernando Clemente Santos, MSC, and the vice-postulator in Papua New Guinea was Father Tomás Ravaioli, IVE.

The postulancy prepared a special *Positio super canonizatione* to illustrate the reasons supporting the desire for the canonisation of Blessed Peter To Rot. From the *Positio*, for example, the uninterrupted devotion of the people of Papua New Guinea towards the then-blessed, the great number of signs attributed to his intercession, as well as his example for the modern world, having sacrificed his life in defence of marriage and family, stand out.

The cardinals and bishops of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, gathered in an ordinary session on March 4, 2025, examining the *Positio super canonizatione*, expressed their positive opinion. And subsequently, on March 28, 2025, Pope Francis approved the votes of that ordinary session and decided to submit the canonisation of Blessed Peter To Rot to the next consistory. The consistory was presided over by Pope Leo XIV on June 13, 2025, at 9 am, and it was announced there that Blessed Peter To Rot would be canonised on October 19 of that same year.

The newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* on that day published the following:

The Office of Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff reports that this morning, at 9.00, in the Consistory Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Leo XIV presided over the celebration of Terce and the Ordinary Public Consistory for the Canonization of the Blesseds: Ignatius Choukrallah Maloyan, Armenian Catholic

Archbishop of Mardin, martyr; Peter To Rot, layperson and catechist, martyr; Vincenza Maria Poloni, founder of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Verona; María del Monte Carmelo Rendiles Martínez, founder of the Congregation of the Servants of Jesus; Maria Troncatti, professed religious sister of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros, lay faithful; Pier Giorgio Frassati, lay faithful of the Third Order of Saint Dominic; Bartolo Longo, lay faithful.

During the Consistory, the Pope authorised a decree that Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati and Blessed Carlo Acutis be inscribed in the Book of Saints on Sunday, 7 September 2025, and the others on Sunday, 19 October 2025.

Pope Francis' visit to Papua New Guinea. September 2024





Consistory of June 13, 2025



3- BEATIFICATION: TUESDAY, 17 JANUARY 1995

The beatification was scheduled to be celebrated in Rabaul, the birthplace of Peter To Rot. However, the eruption of the Tavurvur volcano changed the plans. On September 19, 1994, Tavurvur and another volcano erupted simultaneously, and the city of Rabaul was covered by 20-100 cm of ash. In some areas closer to the volcanoes, even one or two meters of ash and pumice were recorded. A large part of Rabaul was left destroyed or uninhabitable: public buildings, houses, the airport, hotels, the port, and the infrastructure collapsed. The city, known as the “pearl of the Pacific” for being an important commercial and administrative center, had to be almost completely evacuated, marking the end of Rabaul as a prosperous provincial capital. Since then, the city has partially moved to Kokopo, about thirty kilometres from Rabaul, where Vunapope is located. Because of the eruptions, the beatification had to be moved to Port Moresby, the capital of the country.

Pope John Paul II arrived in Port Moresby on Monday, January 16, at 5:15 pm. The next day, Tuesday the 17th, the Holy Father left the nunciature at 8 in the morning heading to the Sir John Guise Stadium, where the solemn beatification would take place. He arrived at 8:15, greeted the pilgrims from the papamobile, and at 8:45 the celebration began.

Below we reproduce the homily of the Holy Mass and the main journalistic articles that appeared in the local media about this historic

event. When reproducing the articles, we transcribe them exactly as they appeared in the newspapers, preserving the inaccuracies in names, dates, places, and even in the Tok Pisin (the language of Papua New Guinea). In some cases, even, the articles assert things that even contradict what we know about To Rot.

1- Homily of the Holy Father

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

Sir John Guise Stadium, Port Moresby
Tuesday, January 17, 1995

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“Rejoice... insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings.” (1 Pt 4:13)

1. Today, the People of God in Papua New Guinea repeat these words of the Apostle Peter with fervent hearts. You rejoice because the Universal Church recognizes that your fellow countryman, Peter To Rot, shared Christ’s sufferings to the point of martyrdom and has been found worthy of being numbered among the Blessed.

With the joy which this occasion brings, I greet the People of God in Papua New Guinea. I thank Archbishop Kurongku and the whole Archdiocese of Port Moresby for the warm welcome given to me. Archbishop Hesse and the Catholic community of Rabaul would have liked this Beatification to be held in the place where Blessed Peter To Rot lived and was martyred. With love and solidarity, my thoughts turn to all the inhabitants of New Britain —those present here and the great majority unable to attend— who have been affected by the recent volcanic eruption. I gladly greet all my Brother Bishops, all the priests, Religious and laity of this land and of the Solomon Islands, and those who have come from other Islands of the vast Pacific, and from

Australia and New Zealand. I extend my hand in friendship to our Brothers and Sisters of other Christian Churches and ecclesial communities. I thank all the civil authorities for their presence at this solemn ceremony.

The first Blessed from Papua New Guinea begins a new epoch in the history of the People of God in this country. Martyrdom has always been a part of the pilgrimage of the People of God through history. In the Old Testament Reading of this Mass, the Second Book of Maccabees tells the story of Eleazar's unflinching fidelity to the holy law of God, his readiness to accept death rather than compromise with evil. Faced with the supreme test, he says: *"Although I could have escaped death, I am not only enduring terrible pain in my body from this scourging, but also suffering it with joy in my soul because of my devotion to God."* (Mk 6:30)

Likewise in the New Covenant. Beginning with the deacon Stephen (cf. Acts 7:54-60) and the Apostle James (Ibid. 12:1-2), the New Testament records that a *"great cloud of witnesses"* (cf. Heb 12:1) gave their lives in order to profess their faith in Christ and their uncompromising love for him. And down the centuries, glorious pages of the Church's Martyrology have been written in every generation. The sons and daughters of many Churches in Asia are inscribed in "the archives of truth written in letters of blood." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2474) I myself have had the grace of canonizing the Korean and Vietnamese Martyrs. We can also recall Saint Paul Miki and his Companions, martyred in Japan; Lorenzo Ruiz, the first saint of the Philippines; and Saint Peter Chanel who suffered a martyr's death in the Islands of the Pacific.

Throughout this century the *"faithful witnesses"* have been present in great numbers (Cf. John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 37). The wars, concentration camps

and intolerance of our own time have yielded a rich harvest of martyrs in many parts of the world! Also in Papua New Guinea where there were many Christians belonging to the various Churches and ecclesial communities who gave the supreme witness. Today your fellow countryman, Peter To Rot, an honoured son of the Tolai people, a catechist from New Britain, has been listed among them. The Church everywhere sings praise to God for this new gift.

2. The sufferings caused by the recent tragic eruption have drawn the Christian community of New Britain closer to the Martyr Peter To Rot. In God's saving plan, "suffering, more than anything else, makes present in the history of humanity the powers of the Redemption." (John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 27) Just as the Lord Jesus saved his people by loving them "to the end" (Jn 13:1), "even to death on a cross" (cf. Phil 2:8), so also he continues to invite each disciple to suffer for the Kingdom of God. When united with the redemptive Passion of Christ, human suffering becomes an instrument of spiritual maturity and a magnificent school of evangelical love.

3. Blessed Peter understood the value of suffering. Inspired by his faith in Christ, he was a devoted husband, a loving father and a dedicated catechist known for his kindness, gentleness and compassion. Daily Mass and Holy Communion, and frequent visits to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, sustained him, gave him wisdom to counsel the disheartened, and courage to persevere until death. In order to be an effective evangelizer, Peter To Rot studied hard and sought advice from wise and holy "big men." Most of all he prayed — for himself, for his family, for his people, for the Church. His witness to the Gospel inspired others, in very difficult situations, because he lived his Christian life so purely and joyfully. Without being aware of it, he was preparing throughout his life for his greatest offering: by

dying daily to himself, he walked with his Lord on the road which leads to Calvary (cf. Mt 10:38-39).

4. During times of persecution the faith of individuals and communities is “*tested by fire*.” (1 Pt 1:7) But Christ tells us that there is no reason to be afraid. Those persecuted for their faith will be more eloquent than ever: “*it is not you who will be speaking; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you*.” (Mt 10:20) So it was for Blessed Peter To Rot. When the village of Rakunai was occupied during the Second World War and after the heroic missionary priests were imprisoned, he assumed responsibility for the spiritual life of the villagers. Not only did he continue to instruct the faithful and visit the sick, he also baptised, assisted at marriages and led people in prayer.

When the authorities legalised and encouraged polygamy, Blessed Peter knew it to be against Christian principles and firmly denounced this practice. Because the Spirit of God dwelt in him, he fearlessly proclaimed the truth about the sanctity of marriage. He refused to take the “*easy way*” (cf. *ibid* 7:13) of moral compromise. “I have to fulfil my duty as a Church witness to Jesus Christ”, he explained. Fear of suffering and death did not deter him. During his final imprisonment Peter To Rot was serene, even joyful. He told people that he was ready to die for the faith and for his people.

5. On the day of his death, Blessed Peter asked his wife to bring him his catechist’s crucifix. It accompanied him to the end. Condemned without trial, he suffered his martyrdom calmly. Following in the footsteps of his Master, the “*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (Jn 1:29), he too was “*led like a lamb to the slaughter*.” (cf. Is 53:7). And yet this “grain of wheat” which fell silently into the earth (cf. Jn 12: 24) has produced a harvest of blessings for the Church in Papua New Guinea!

Yes, the wisdom of the Gospel tells us that eternal life comes through death, and true joy through suffering. In order to understand this we must judge by God's standards and not by man's (cf. Mt 16:23)! This morning's Reading from the First Letter of Peter says: "*Happy are you when you are insulted for the sake of Christ, for then God's Spirit... has come to rest on you.*" (1 Pt 4:14). These words apply to Peter To Rot. They describe the particular "blessedness" of those "*from every tribe and tongue and people and nation*" (Rev 5:9) who suffer martyrdom in every age of the Church. In God's eyes, those persecuted for their fidelity to the Gospel are truly blessed, for their "*reward is great in heaven.*" (Mt 5:12)

6. I am particularly happy that there are many catechists here from all over Papua New Guinea. You, dear catechists, are "direct witnesses and irreplaceable evangelizers... the basic strength of Christian communities." (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 73) From the beginning, the work of lay catechists in Papua New Guinea has made "an outstanding and indispensable contribution to the spread of the faith and of the Church." (*Ad Gentes*, 17) In the name of the whole Church I thank you for the sacred work which you are doing. May God reward and bless each one of you.

The Martyr's example speaks also to married couples. Blessed Peter To Rot had the highest esteem for marriage and, even in the face of great personal danger and opposition, he defended the Church's teaching on the unity of marriage and the need for mutual fidelity. He treated his wife Paula with deep respect and prayed with her morning and evening. For his children he had the utmost affection and spent as much time with them as he could. If families are good, your villages will be peaceful and good. Hold on to the traditions that defend and strengthen family life!

7. A special greeting to the many young people who are here. Blessed Peter is a model for you too. He shows you not to be concerned only about yourselves but to put yourselves generously at the service of others. As citizens, you should feel the need to work to improve your country, and to ensure that society develops in honesty and justice, harmony and solidarity. As followers of Christ guided by the truths of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church, build on the solid rock of faith and do your duty with love. Do not be afraid to commit yourselves to the task of making Christ known and loved, especially among the many people of your own age, who make up the largest part of the population.

8. For the Church in Papua New Guinea the Beatification of Peter To Rot opens a new period of Christian maturity. In the history of the local Church in any country, the first native-born martyr always marks a new beginning. For this reason, as Pastor of the universal Church, I have fervently desired to share this great joy with you and join you in giving thanks to God for the first Blessed of Papua New Guinea.

To the intercession of the new Blessed I wish to commend with special affection the people of Bougainville, who for six years have been suffering the tragic consequences of violence, war and destruction. I extend a special word of encouragement to Bishop Gregory Singkai and the Church in Bougainville, who are bearing a heavy physical and spiritual burden. I earnestly appeal to all sides in this dispute to negotiate a settlement in a spirit of goodwill and constructive openness. I pray that the discussions which have recently been initiated will soon lead to a just and lasting peace, with respect for the legitimate aspirations and rights of all concerned. May reconciliation and harmony once more prevail, so that the reconstruction which all yearn for can begin.

To the people of New Britain, the fellow countrymen of Blessed Peter To Rot, Martyr-catechist of Rakunai, I repeat the words of the Letter of Peter: *“Rejoice... insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings.”* (1 Pt 4:13) Your recent tragedy has made you like your Martyr, different in the kind of suffering you have had to undergo, but like him configured to the Passion and Death of the Lord. The crucified Jesus is the sign of God’s unfailing love for every one of his children, for each and every one of you.

Pidgin: Mi laik bai yupela i tingim Peter To Rot oltaim. Yupela i mas tingting oltaim long bilip bilong em; yupela i mas tingting oltaim long famili laip bilong em; yupela i mas tingting oltaim long wok bilong em. Bikos Peter To Rot i soim rot long yumi. Em i soim rot long yumi olgeta, tasol moa yet long ol famili bilong Papua Niugini na long ol yut na long ol manmeri ol i autim tok bilong God long ol pipel.

Yupela amamas! Olgeta wari bilong yupela i ken tanim i go kamap amamas gen. Amen.

(I want you to remember Peter To Rot always. You must think always of his faith; you must think always of his life in the family; you must think always of his work as a catechist. Because Peter To Rot shows us the way. He shows the way to all of us, but especially to the families here in Papua New Guinea and to the youth and to all those men and women who preach the word of God to the people.

Rejoice! May your sadness be turned into joy! Amen.)

My brothers and sisters from Papua New Guinea, from the Solomon Islands, I share deeply with you in this beatification. The first Beatus from your country, from your people, from your Church. My congratulations to each and everyone of you, to the Bishops, to the priests, missionaries, catechists, to all the catechists, a great feast of all the catechists everywhere in the world, your families... And God bless you and your

families and your catechists and all of you, everyone of you, the Church and the society.

Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ! Thank you very much!

2- Impact in the Local Media

The National Newspaper, January 18, 1995

POPE BEATIFIES TOROT

Port Moresby - Pope John Paul II yesterday beatified Papua New Guinea and Oceania's first indigenous person, Peter ToRot, at a mass drenched in ceremony and a heavy downpour.

Fewer people attended than expected because of the rain, televised coverage of the event and the public holiday in the capital. Even then, there were about ten thousand people who braved the downpour, some turning up at the Sir John Guise Stadium as early as 4 am.

Not particularly troubled by the weather, the seventy-four years old Holy Father, seen for the first time since arrival in his red robe, his mitre and shepherd's staff in hand, circled the stadium in the popemobile waving to the cheering crowd.

The Pope surprised people again with his energy and conducted Holy Mass in a firm voice.

He was met on arrival by several traditional dance groups whom he commended later in Pidgin. "Ol brata na susa. Tenkyu tru long bikpela welkam yupela i givim mi aste long ples balus na nau. Mi lukim bilas bilong ol manmeri ol i welkamim mi, na bel bilong mi i kirap tru. Bilas bilong yupela ol pipel bilong Papua Niugini i nais moa yet." (My dear brothers and sisters, thank you for the big welcome that you gave me. I saw the colourful decorations of the people and I was very impressed. Your traditional decorations here in Papua New Guinea are very very nice.)

He later gave permission for a feast day for July 7 each year to be celebrated as Blessed ToRot's day.

ToRot, who he said shared Jesus Christ's suffering to the point of martyrdom, was officially recognised and went down in the books of the Universal Catholic Church as among the truly chosen ones and numbered among the Blessed who are now in heaven.

He performed the ritual of beatification to officially proclaim the late Tolai catechist who was killed by the Japanese in 1945, just before World War II ended, for his beliefs in Christ and the Church. The ceremony started with a plea from Archbishop of Rabaul Karl Hesse to the Holy Spirit in front of the pontiff and a parade of colourfully-attired bishops.

"Holy Father, I, the Archbishop of Rabaul, humbly request your Holiness that the Venerable Servant of God, Peter ToRot, Catechist and Martyr, be proclaimed Blessed," petitioned Archbishop Hesse. That was followed by a short biography of ToRot read in English, Pidgin and Motu.

The Holy Father replied: "Accepting the wished of our brother Karl Hesse, Archbishop of Rabaul, his brother bishops and many of the faithful and having received the favourable responses of the Congregation for the Cause of the Saints, we declare with our Apostolic Authority that the venerable servant of God, Peter ToRot, be named Blessed in posterity and give permission for his feast day to be celebrated on the 7th July annually in places according to the norms established by law."

The relics of ToRot were carried in procession to the altar by a Tolai dance group including daughter Rufina to the accompaniment of hymns attributed to him and the relic was blessed by the Pontiff.

Bishop Hesse then thanked his Holiness and said: "Most

Holy Father, I, the Archbishop of Rabaul join with my brother bishops and the faithful of PNG in giving heartfelt thanks to your Holiness for granting the title of Blessed to the Venerable Servant of God, Peter ToRot.”

After the liturgy and the procesion of a Bible carried by a deacon accompanied by traditional dancers to the pontiff, he kissed it and then delivered the homily.

He reiterated that he would have loved to have had the ceremony in Rabaul but extended his warm greetings to everybody. He said the first blessed PNG subject begins a new epoch in the history of the people of God in this country and that the volcanic eruption in Rabaul had brought the people closer to ToRot.

The crowd roared into applause when he said: “Mi laikim yupela i mas tingim Peter ToRot olgeta taim. Yupela i mas tingting oltaim long laip bilong em, family laip bilong em na wok bilong em. Bikos ToRot i soim rot long yumi. Em i soim rot long yumi olgeta, tasol moa yet long ol famili bilong Papua New Guinea. Yupela amamas! Olgeta wari bilong yupela i ken tanim kamap amamas gen. (I want you to remember Peter ToRot always. You must think always of his faith, his family life, his work as a catechist. Because ToRot shows us the way. He shows the way to all of us, especially the families in Papua New Guinea, the youth and everybody who preach the word of God. Rejoice! May your soul rest in peace!)

People also had the opportunity to pay their last respects to ToRot and perform the Eucharist. About 100 priests then served the holy communion among the crowd.

The National Newspaper, January 18, 1995

PROUD AND JOYFUL DAY FOR TOROT'S DAUGHTER

Port Moresby - Seated quietly beside the small coffin bearing the remains of martyr Peter ToRot during the beatification ceremony yesterday was Rufina Ia Mama, the new Blessed's only surviving child.

Rufina, the second of ToRot's three children, was the happiest person yesterday. "I am very, very happy today because my father has been recognised by the Catholic Church for the work that he did which cost him his life," she said. "He has been blessed a martyr, and that gives me pride and joy."

Then looking around the Sir John Guise Stadium as a steady heavy drizzle fell, she added: "I am also very happy and pleased with the big number of the people who turned up despite the heavy rain."

She said it was an honour for her to have met the Pope personally since the pontiff's arrival on

Monday. "I am especially thankful to Pope John Paul II, who left his home many miles away to come here to bless the bones of my father."

Asked about her father, Rufina said that she was very small when he died and did not know much about him. However, she spoke of him with great admiration. "My mother told me about him, about the way he went about doing his work and about the way he wanted my mother to raise us if anything was to happen to him," she said. She added that her father, according to her mother, was a good husband and a good family man.

Pope John Paul said at the beatification yesterday that the Tolai martyr was a model for married couples in having the "highest esteem for marriage."

Thousands braved the rain yesterday to attend mass at the stadium where her father was beatified.

Asked how she felt about the ceremony being held here and not at his home village of Rakunai as originally planned, she said the change did not matter her. "When they changed the venue, I just listened to them and came to Port Moresby where we have witnessed the blessing by the Pope."

Meanwhile, the people in Rabaul will still celebrate the blessing of Peter ToRot in their own way when Rufina and the delegates returned with the bones to Rabaul.

According to Rufina, there will be a procession from Tokua airport when they arrive at Rakunai village where the celebrations will be held. "We will then celebrate this day with the many Catholic people in Rabaul who could not attend today's event," she said.

Post-Courier Newspaper, January 18, 1995

MARTYR TOROT PROCLAIMED THE BLESSED NEW ERA OF CHRISTIANITY DAWNS: POPE

A New era of Christianity has opened in PNG with the beatification of the country's first Saint, the Blessed Peter ToRot.

Pope John Paul II said this before more than twenty-five thousand people who braved the heavy rains and gathered at the Sir John Guise Stadium for the event.

The crowd began gathering as early as 5 am yesterday despite the city's wet weather which started earlier in the morning.

Peter ToRot of Rakunai, near Rabaul in the East New Britain Province, a catechist and martyr of the Second World War was proclaimed Blessed by Pope John Paul II at a Holy Mass.

This event was in the first place planned for Rakunai, near Rabaul where the Peter ToRot memorial Church is built. But due to the volcanic eruption in September last year, all plans were moved to Port Moresby. The remains of the martyr were then exhumed and brought here for his beatification.

He will now be known as the Blessed Peter ToRot. At the Holy Mass amid the pouring rain, Pope John Paul II said in the history of the local Church in any country, the first native-born martyr always marks the new beginning. "For this reason, as the Pastor of the Universal Church, I have fervently desired to share this followers to have no fear of persecution, in such great joy with you and join you in giving thanks to God for the first Blessed of Papua New Guinea," the Pope said.

Peter ToRot was killed by the Japanese during the second world war because he continued in serving the people in the Church.

Yesterday's Holy Mass began with the gathering of the public dancers, VIP's, diplomats and many others whose small tasks were required at the event or people who just wanted to have a glimpse of the Holy Father.

There were children dressed in pale yellow outfits who lined up around the stadium and waved to the leader of the Roman Catholic Church as he was driven around once in the popemobile. There were also colorfully dressed dancers from the mekeo area of the Central Province and others beating away their kundu drums. People chanted: "Welcome Pope John Paul II to Papua New Guinea, we love you."

After that the pontiff went to the sacristy and later began the Holy Mass. The rite of the beatification was done in the first half of the Holy Mass.

Archbishop of Rabaul, the most Reverend Karl Hesse humbly requested his Holiness that the Venerable Servant

of God, Peter ToRot, a catechist and martyr be proclaimed Blessed. After a short biography of the Blessed Peter ToRot which was read in English, Pidgin and Motu, the Holy Fath declared the martyr Blessed Peter ToRot.

The relics of the newly proclaimed Blessed Peter ToRot were then carried in a procession before the altar by a group of dancers from Rabaul.

After the Holy Mass people young nuns in brown were allowed for an hour to come before Blessed Peter ToRot's remains for short prayer sessions.

During the mass, held in the open, Pope John Paul also called on the many young people of the country to affirm the Blessed Peter ToRot as a model for them too.

He told them that as citizens, they should work for the development of justice, harmony and solidarity.

The Pope told the youth, as followers of Christ, they should be guided by the truths of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. He told them not to be afraid of the commitment to make Christ known and loved especially among their peers.

Pope John Paul also said he was particularly happy at the presence of many Catechists at the Holy Mass from all over the country. He told the Catechists were the direct witnesses and irreplaceable evangelisers... the basic strenght of the Christian communities. The Pope said: "From the beginning, the work of lay catechists in Papua New Guinea has made an outstanding and indispensable contribution the spread of the faith and of the Church. In the name of the Church, I thank you for the sacred work which you are doing. May God reward and bless each one of you."

The pontiff moving and standing with the support of his cane called for peace on Bougainville. "I earnestly appeal to all sides in this dispute to negotiate a settlement in a spirit of goodwill and constructive openness."

Post-Courier Newspaper, January 18, 1995

A SPECIAL REASON FOR JOY

The vice-chairman of the Peter ToRot Committee in Rabaul, Mr. John Milton, was among four hundred to five hundred people from Rakunai village present at the beatification of Peter ToRot in Port Moresby yesterday. He was carrying a poster of the late Peter ToRot when he danced among the Tolai dancers.

For him, ten years of work had come to fruition. The Peter ToRot Committee was formed in 1984, and had done extensive research from which the life story of Peter ToRot was written, leading to his beatification.

"This is the moment I have been waiting for," Mr. Milton said. "Our work has been fulfilled. The Lord has heard our prayer - that this man be made the Blessed."

Mr. Milton said he was only a very small boy when Peter ToRot was martyred. However, the life Peter ToRot lived had impressed him for a very long time. He said it had been Peter ToRot who baptised him, and so he thought he should do something for Peter ToRot. "If he baptised me and planted Christianity in me, I couldn't stand aside and do nothing," he said.

He added that Peter ToRot was a man who taught people Christian values that they follow. "Blessed ToRot is no longer only for the Tolais," Mr. Milton said. "He is for everyone. He is not for only Catholics, but for all denominations." He added: "I'm very proud. I'm very happy."

Mr. Milton told the Post Courier that the bones of the martyr would be flown back to Tokua Airport tomorrow. He said the people of East New Britain were waiting there to celebrate in their own way their happiness for one of them to be proclaimed Blessed.

The celebration will include traditional dancing and choir singing. On Sunday, a big open mass will be held at the Cathedral in Vunapope before the bones are put in the church.

Post-Courier Newspaper, January 18, 1995

TEARS AND PRIDE FOR MARTYR'S DAUGHTER

"It is an honor to be a daughter of Papua New Guinea's first blessed, Peter ToRot." Rufina Ia Mama was very tearful with gladness her father yesterday as she sat throughout the beatification ceremony which proclaimed her father the blessed.

Overcome with emotion she could only say: "It's a joy to have my father proclaimed the blessed. This is a great joy not only for Rabaul, but also for Papua New Guinea."

She said her father was not only recognised for his commitment to his work, but from now on he will be like other saints whom one can pray through. She said she had hope that the beatifying of her father has give some new hope to the people in Rabaul. Things should also be different because there would be from now on a grave of a blessed where they can go to pray. She said the mud on the grave can also be used for healing.

Rufina is the only surviving child of Peter ToRot.



POPE BLESSES A MARTYR

Paul 2 takes another step to creating a PNG sainthood

path was steps of 'martyr'

Martyr ToRot proclaimed the Blessed

New era of Christianity dawns: Pope

John Paul II has proclaimed a new era of Christianity with the beatification of a PNG martyr, a move that is seen as a significant step towards the creation of a sainthood in the country.

The Pope, who is the first to have beatified a person from PNG, said that the martyr, a young man who was killed during the civil war, was a true witness to the faith.

The beatification ceremony took place in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, and was attended by a large number of bishops and clergy members from around the world.

The Pope's decision to beatify the martyr is seen as a sign of the Church's growing influence in PNG and its commitment to the faith of the people.

Faithful brave bad weather

by John

A group of about 100 people gathered in the rain to witness the beatification ceremony. The weather was not ideal, but the faithful were determined to be present for this historic event.

Post-Courier TRADE DIRECTORY

Pope cites influx of religious groups

The Pope has cited the influx of religious groups as a reason for the beatification ceremony. He said that the Church is facing a new challenge in the modern world, and that it must embrace the faith of all people.

Proud and joyful day for ToRot's daughter

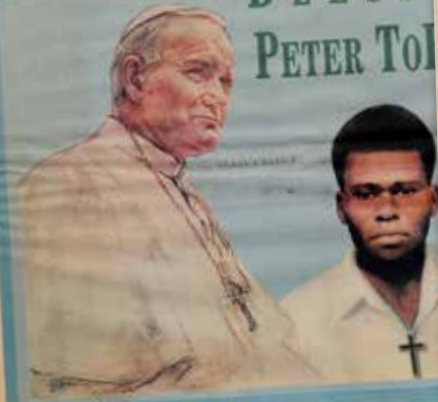


The daughter of the martyr, who was beatified, is seen in the photograph. She is surrounded by family and friends, and she appears to be in a state of joy and pride.

Papal Visit 1995

For The Beatification

BLESS PETER TOROT



JANUARY 16, 17 & 18

THE NAT



Pope beatifies ToRot

10,000 have done up in witness solemn ceremony



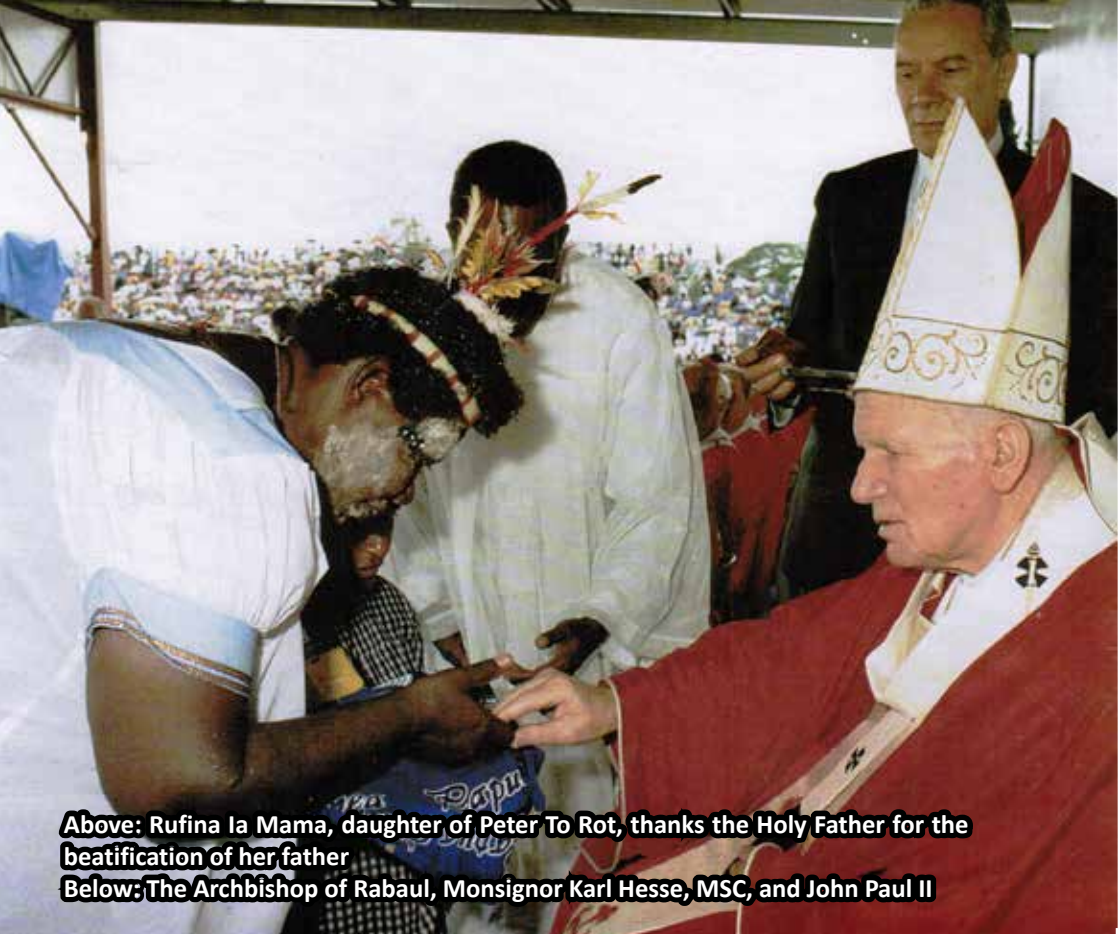
The ceremony was a significant event, with thousands of people gathered to witness the beatification of Peter Torot. The Pope's presence at the ceremony was a major highlight.

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Above: Rufina Ia Mama, daughter of Peter To Rot, thanks the Holy Father for the beatification of her father
Below: The Archbishop of Rabaul, Monsignor Karl Hesse, MSC, and John Paul II











Rufina la Mama and other relatives of Peter To Rot visit the Holy Father at the nunciature in Port Moresby



4- CANONISATION: SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2025

The day before the canonisation, on the morning of Saturday, October 18, the rehearsals for the canonisation ceremony took place. The Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff had asked us to choose four Papua New Guineans to take part in the celebration: two of them to bring wine to the Holy Father during the offertory, one to place incense before the relics of the new saints, and the last to read a prayer intention in pidgin. The chosen ones were: Peter and Henry Senat, grandsons of Peter To Rot; Sister Celine Tirupia, OLSH, great-niece of Peter To Rot; and Sister Mary Mystical Rose, SSVM, a Papuan sister from Vanimu. In addition to the four Papuans chosen to participate in the celebration, the postulator and the vice-postulator also attended the rehearsal.

In the evening, however, a solemn vigil was held in honour of the one who in just a few hours would be canonised. The chosen place for the vigil was the Church of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in Piazza Navona. That church was chosen because it belongs to the MSC, of whom To Rot is a spiritual child, and because from that very church the first MSC missionaries who evangelised Papua New Guinea set out. The vigil was presided over by Father Mario Abzalón Alvarado Tovar, MSC, Superior General of the congregation. During the celebration, texts from the Holy Scriptures, the life of Peter To Rot, songs, and intentions were interspersed.

The next day, Sunday, October 19, World Mission Day, St. Peter's Square became a sea of faithful to witness one of the most emotional moments of the Jubilee Year: the canonisation of seven new saints, including Peter To Rot, the first saint from Papua New Guinea.

Estimates from Italian authorities and Vatican media said that seventy thousand people were present in the square, with tens of thousands more following the ceremony through giant screens on the adjacent streets and live broadcasts around the world followed by hundreds of thousands of faithful.

Before the celebration of the Holy Mass, the Superior General of the MSC, the postulator, and the vice-postulator of the cause for the canonisation of Peter To Rot had the opportunity to greet the Holy Father and thank him for having “given” us our first saint.

Pope Leo XIV presided over the solemn Mass at 10:30 am, elevating seven blessed to the altars: the Armenian martyr Ignatius Choukrallah Maloyan, our catechist Peter To Rot, the religious sisters Vincenza Maria Poloni, Maria del Monte Carmelo Rendiles Martínez, and Maria Troncatti, and the laypeople Bartolo Longo and José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros. When the pontiff proclaimed the canonisation formula in Latin, a roar of applause and hallelujahs erupted in the square.

The next day, Monday, October 20, many of the thousands of pilgrims who travelled to Rome for the canonisations were able to attend an audience with the Holy Father in the Paul VI Hall.

Finally, to conclude the activities and celebrations in Rome, the first Holy Mass in honour of Saint Peter To Rot was celebrated on the same day, in the same church where the vigil took place. The celebration was presided over by Cardinal John Ribat, MSC, and the homily was given by Archbishop Rochus Tatamai, MSC.

1- Homily of the Holy Father and Address During the Audience for Pilgrims Gathered for the Canonisations

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER LEO XIV

St Peter's Square
Sunday, October 19, 2025

Dear brothers and sisters,

Let us begin our reflection with the question that concludes the Gospel just proclaimed: “*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*” (Lk 18:8) This question reveals to us what is most precious in the Lord's eyes: faith, namely, the bond of love between God and man. Today we have before us seven witnesses, the new Saints, who, with God's grace, kept the lamp of faith burning. Indeed, they themselves became lamps capable of spreading the light of Christ.

When we consider the great material, cultural, scientific and artistic treasures, faith shines not because these goods are to be undervalued, but because without faith they lose their meaning. Our relationship with God is of the utmost importance because at the beginning of time he created all things out of nothing and, at the end of time, he will save mortal beings from nothingness. A world without faith, then, would be populated by children living without a Father, that is, by creatures without salvation.

For this reason, Jesus, the Son of God made man, asks about faith: if it disappeared from the world, what would happen? Heaven and earth would remain as before, but there would no longer be hope in our hearts; everyone's freedom would be defeated by death; our desire for life would fade into nothingness. Without faith in God, we cannot hope for salvation. Jesus' question can disturb us, but only if we forget

that it is Jesus himself who poses it. The Lord's words, in fact, are always the "Gospel," the joyful proclamation of salvation. This salvation is the gift of eternal life that we receive from the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Dear friends, this is precisely why Christ speaks to his disciples of the "*need to pray always, and not to lose heart.*" (Lk 18:1) Just as we never grow weary of breathing, so let us never grow weary of praying! Just as breathing sustains the life of the body, so prayer sustains the life of the soul: faith, in fact, is expressed in prayer, and authentic prayer lives on faith.

Jesus shows us this connection with a parable: a judge remains deaf to the pressing requests of a widow, whose perseverance finally leads him to act. At a glance, such tenacity becomes for us a beautiful example of hope, especially in times of trial and tribulation. Nevertheless, the woman's perseverance and the judge, who acts reluctantly, set the stage for a provocative question from Jesus: Will not God, the good Father, "*grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?*" (Lk 18:7)

Let us allow these words to resonate in our hearts: the Lord is asking us whether we believe that God is a just judge towards all. The Son asks us if we believe that the Father always wants our good and the salvation of every person. In this regard, two temptations test our faith: the first draws strength from the scandal of evil, leading us to think that God does not hear the cries of the oppressed and has no pity for the innocent who suffer. The second temptation is the claim that God must act as we want him to: prayer then gives way to a command to God, to teach him how to be just and effective.

Jesus, the perfect witness of filial trust, frees us from both temptations. He is the innocent one who, especially during

his Passion, prays thus: “*Father, your will be done.*” (cf. Lk 22:42) The Master gives us these same words in the Our Father. Let us remember that whatever happens to us, Jesus entrusted himself as Son to the Father. We are, therefore, brothers and sisters in his name, so we can proclaim: “*It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God, through Christ our Lord.*” (Eucharistic Prayer II, Preface)

The Church’s prayer reminds us that God grants justice to all, giving his life for all. Thus, when we cry out to the Lord, “Where are you?,” let us transform this invocation into a prayer, and then we will recognize that God is present where the innocent suffer. The cross of Christ reveals God’s justice, and God’s justice is forgiveness. He sees evil and redeems it by taking it upon himself. When we are “crucified” by pain and violence, by hatred and war, Christ is already there, on the cross for us and with us. There is no cry that God does not console; there is no tear that is far from his heart. The Lord listens to us, embraces us as we are, and transforms us as he is. Those who reject God’s mercy, however, remain incapable of mercy towards their neighbor. Those who do not welcome peace as a gift will not know how to give peace.

Dear friends, we now understand that Jesus’ questions are a powerful invitation to hope and action: when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith in God’s providence? Indeed, it is this faith that sustains our commitment to justice, precisely because we believe that God saves the world out of love, freeing us from fatalism. When we hear the cries of those in difficulty, let us ask ourselves, are we witnesses to the Father’s love, as Christ was to all? He is the humble one who calls the arrogant to conversion, the just one who makes us just. We

see all this in the lives of the new Saints: they are not heroes or champions of some ideal, but authentic men and women.

These faithful friends of Christ are martyrs for their faith, like Bishop Ignazio Choukrallah Maloyan and catechist Peter To Rot; they are evangelizers and missionaries, like Sister Maria Troncatti; they are charismatic founders, like Sister Vincenza Maria Poloni and Sister Maria del Monte Carmelo Rendiles Martínez; with their hearts burning with devotion, they are benefactors of humanity, like Bartolo Longo and José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros. May their intercession assist us in our trials and their example inspire us in our shared vocation to holiness. As we journey towards this goal, let us pray without ceasing, and continue in what we have learned and firmly believe (cf. 2 Tim 3:14). Faith on earth thus sustains the hope for heaven.

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO PILGRIMS
WHO HAVE COME TO ROME
FOR THE CANONISATIONS ON SUNDAY**

Audience Hall
Monday, October 20, 2025

[We transcribe only what refers to Peter To Rot]

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Peace be with you!

Dear brothers and sisters,

I am pleased to meet you in the wake of the canonization of seven new saints to whom you are, for various reasons, very attached. I greet each one of you, especially the cardinals, bishops, religious superiors and civil authorities present here. The joyful and solemn event we celebrated yesterday reminds us that the communion of the Church involves all the faithful, in space and time, in every language and culture,

uniting us as the people of God, the body of Christ and the living temple of the Holy Spirit.

The men and women we proclaimed saints yesterday are for all of us shining signs of hope, because they offered their lives in love for Christ and their brothers and sisters.

(...) We can see the deep faith of the people of Papua New Guinea reflected in Saint Peter To Rot, who offers us an inspiring example of steadfastness and fortitude in preaching the truths of the Gospel when confronted by difficulties and challenges, even threats to our lives. Although he was an ordinary catechist, he showed extraordinary courage by risking his life to carry out his apostolate in secret, because his pastoral work was prohibited by the occupying forces during the Second World War. At the same time, when these authorities permitted the practice of polygamy, Saint Peter To Rot firmly defended the sanctity of marriage and even confronted some powerful people. Let us listen to his words in the face of hostility, "This is a very bad time for us and we are all afraid. But God our Father is with us and looking after us. We must pray and ask him to stay with us always." Dear brothers and sisters, may the example of Saint Peter To Rot encourage us to defend the truths of the faith, even at the cost of personal sacrifice, and to rely always on God in our trials.

(...) Dear pilgrims, I hope you return to your homes with hearts full of gratitude and with an ardent desire to imitate the new saints. May their intercession accompany you and their example inspire you. With affection, I impart my apostolic blessing to you all.

Vigil, October 18, 2025



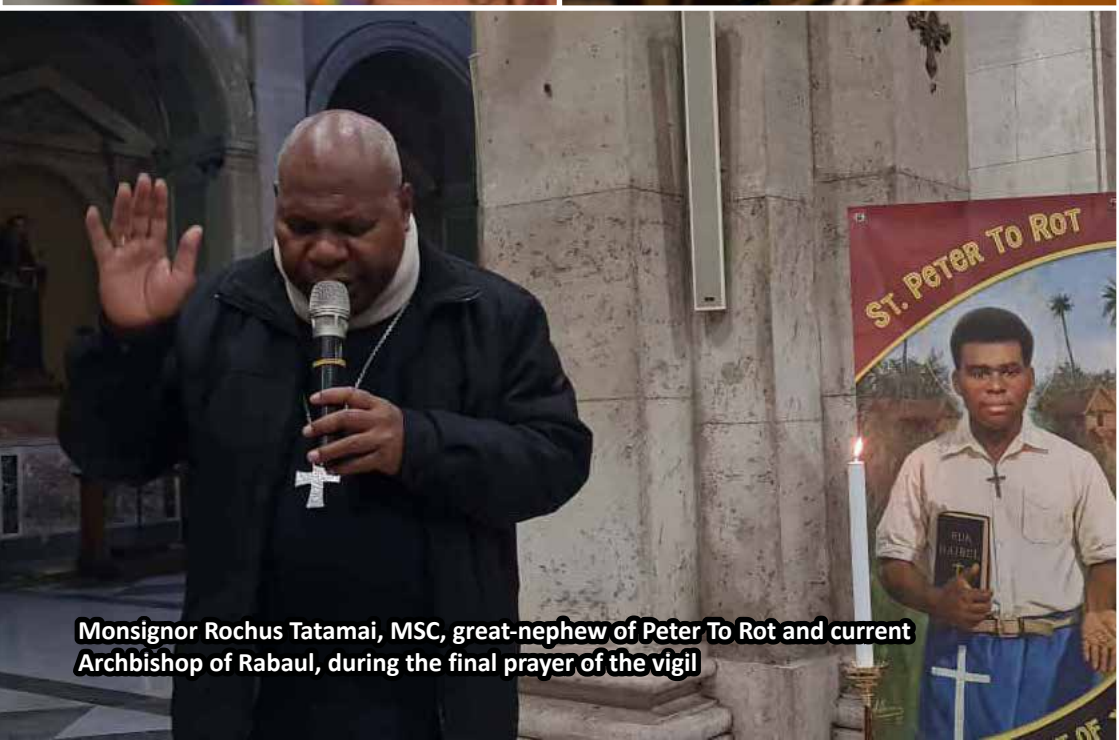
Bishops of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands before the vigil



The postulator and vice-postulator present a relic of Peter To Rot to the Superior General of the MSC







Monsignor Rochus Tatamai, MSC, great-nephew of Peter To Rot and current Archbishop of Rabaul, during the final prayer of the vigil

Saturday 18 October. Reharsal for the Holy Mass. Henry and Peter (grandsons of the saint) and sister Celine (great-niece)















Above: Peter, the saint's grandson, offers incense during the canonisation Mass
Below: Henry and sister Mary Mystical Rose, SSVM, present the offerings to the Holy Father



2- News Articles Prior to the Canonisation

The National Newspaper, October 3, 2025

THE CANONISATION OF PETER TO ROT AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR PAPUA NEW GUINEA

By Father Tomás Ravaioli, IVE
Vice-Postulator of the Cause of Canonisation

That Papua New Guinea is a young nation is no secret to anyone: just a few days ago, on September 16, our nation turned only fifty years old. And, providentially, this same year this young nation will have its first saint. I use the word “providentially” because those things that for us may seem like “coincidences” are not so for God: “*You have ordered all things by measure, number, and weight*” (Wis 11:20) says the Bible, and nothing escapes his infinite wisdom. If God wanted to give us our first saint in the very same year that our nation turns fifty, there is a reason for it.

What is the relevance of this canonisation for our nation? We could list many facts and benefits that this canonisation brings to our country, but let us limit ourselves to the most important ones:

1) St Peter To Rot Teaches Us That God Must Have Absolute Primacy

In recent months there have been great debates in our country about whether or not it was convenient to declare Papua New Guinea a Christian nation. The discussions have been endless. And in the end, what truly makes our nation Christian is not a political declaration or a nice document signed by members of Parliament, but the consistency of life of its citizens: if we are Christians, we must behave as

such. It is an inconsistency (and I would even dare say a blasphemy) to call oneself “Christian” and then forget the commandments that teach us not to steal, not to lie, not to kill, etc. To Rot, instead, teaches us to be consistent with our faith and to put God as the true priority in our lives, even if that costs us our lives.

In the Acts of the Apostles we are told that the Jews, led by the High Priest and the Sanhedrin, wanted to stop the preaching of the apostles, and strongly ordered them not to speak anymore about the Lord Jesus. And it was Peter who, speaking on behalf of all the apostles, answered without fear: “*We must obey God rather than men.*” (Acts 5:29) Nineteen hundred years later, in another corner of the world, another man named Peter would say similar words: “They have taken away our priests, but they cannot forbid us to be Catholics and to live and die as such. I’m your catechist, and I will do my duty even if it costs me my life.” Yes, to obey God rather than men, and to place God’s law as a priority in our lives, is part of the Christian life: whoever does not put God as a priority is not truly Christian. Jesus taught us in word and deed that it is necessary to be faithful until the end, until the last day of our lives, and only then will we obtain the eternal reward. In a world in which many call themselves “Christians” but live like true pagans without law, the life of To Rot teaches us that God must come first and above all. He used to repeat this phrase: “God’s work is all and everything.” And while in prison, he said: “I have to fulfil my duty as a Church witness to Jesus Christ.” And also: “Oh, well, they are going to kill me because of my religion.” Reading these words, it is impossible not to recall those addressed by Our Lord to the Church of Smyrna: “*Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and for ten days you*

will have affliction. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Rev 2:10)

2) St Peter To Rot Teaches Us That Holiness is Possible in Any State of Life

I think this is a very important point: To Rot shows us that everyone, no matter the state of life in which we find ourselves, can attain holiness. Holiness is not a luxury reserved for a few, but a necessity for all members of the Church. Everyone, absolutely everyone, is called to be holy. *“But as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”* (1 Pet 1:15-16) Sometimes, when we think of the saints, it may seem that holiness is an almost unattainable ideal for us. The vast majority of saints whose feasts we celebrate in the liturgy were people who did great things and great deeds for God: they were great Doctors of the Church, or Popes, or martyrs, or missionaries in distant lands, or kings... and sometimes it is difficult to imitate them, because we are far from being any of those. However, To Rot shows us that we can be saints in any situation in which we find ourselves. He was neither a priest, nor a missionary, nor a king, nor a Doctor of the Church, nor any such thing: he was an ordinary man, married, father of three children, who lived in a humble *haus morota* with his young wife Paula.

And yet, though “ordinary,” Peter was extraordinary. He was extraordinary for his faith, for the consistency of his life, and for his strength in facing difficulties for the love of Christ. The day before To Rot was killed, chief Anton Tata had the chance to see him for the last time. Later, he wrote: “Later on, in prison, I had a man-to-man talk with To Rot who said: ‘I am here because of those who break their marriage vows, and because of those who do not want to see God’s

work go forward. That's it. I shall die. You go back to care for the people.' I said that he should try to bribe the police for his freedom. He replied: 'Put that out of your mind. They have already condemned me to death.'"

3) Lastly, St Peter To Rot Encourages Us in Our Difficulties

It is well known that, despite having celebrated fifty years as a country, Papua New Guinea is still very behind when it comes to health, education, infrastructure, and other basic needs. I live in Goroka, and just recently, during the weekend of the Goroka Show when the city was full of tourists, Goroka experienced all kinds of hardships. These are hardships we live with daily: practically no running water, constant power outages (sometimes up to four in a day!), telephone lines (despite high rates) never working, etc., the hospital had no medicines, and going out to celebrate on the streets was dangerous and inadvisable. Meanwhile, we saw on TV how in Port Moresby shows were being held that must have cost millions of kina. A real pity: while some were dancing in Port Moresby, people were thirsty and without power and medicine in Goroka. And this is just one example. We know how much our people suffer in the most remote villages or in the bush. Basic needs are not met, and our children, youth, and elderly live as best they can, trying to survive in the most dignified way possible. What does this have to do with Peter To Rot? It has to do with the fact that Peter To Rot was one of us: he also knew injustice, corruption, hunger, thirst, and the lack of basic services. And yet, with his strength of spirit and his spiritual fortitude, he was able to overcome it all. Let us remember that he was unjustly imprisoned, and his Japanese guards treated him in the worst possible way. Let us remember that To Rot spent days without food in prison,

and was severely beaten by the wardens. Let us remember that he too was a victim of lies, injustice, and corruption. That is why his example encourages us in our own struggles and in our own moments of difficulty and discouragement.

Let us end this article with the testimony of his wife, Paula Ia Varpit: “Two days before his death, I paid my husband one of my regular visits. He asked me to bring him a razor, a loin-cloth and his catechist’s crucifix, which he had hidden in a suitcase containing song-sheets. I arrived at the prison on the next day, earlier than usual, bringing with me the things he had asked for. I brought my two children with me. I also cooked for him, a chicken with some yams. To Rot appeared to have lost his appetite, and I was feeling somewhat uneasy, as he had not explained why he wanted the things he had asked her to bring from home. Expressing my fears, I begged To Rot to give up the catechist’s way of life, and to take up, instead, a quiet, withdrawn style of living. To Rot had replied: ‘Don’t you worry about that. It is my duty to die for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and for my people.’ Then he made the sign of the cross. He showed no sign of fear or grief. We sat together for a long time, and then To Rot urged me to take the children home.”

This was the last meeting between Peter and Paula. A few hours later, the good catechist would shed his blood out of love for Christ, watering our land forever.

St Peter To Rot, first saint born of this land, pray for us.

Mondo e Missione (Italy), October 15, 2025

PETER TO ROT, THE FIRST SAINT OF THE PACIFIC

He will be canonised on Sunday, October 19, along with six other blessed. “We are celebrating the martyr, the catechist,

the layman, the husband and father of a family, killed with a lethal injection at the significant and symbolic age of thirty-three,” says Father Giorgio Licini, PIME missionary, who for many years served as secretary of the Episcopal Conference of Papua New Guinea.

Along with six other blessed, the layman Peter To Rot, the first saint native to the Pacific, will be canonised on Sunday, October 19. It will be a moment of great joy for the Church in Papua New Guinea, to which the parish of Rakunai and the diocese of Rabaul (on the island of East New Britain) now belong, where Peter was born and where he was killed in 1945 during the Japanese occupation.

“It is truly a great gift that Pope Francis gave us shortly before his death, by promulgating the Decree of Canonization of Blessed Peter To Rot,” recalls with emotion the [vice] postulator Father Tomás Ravaoli, IVE. “Although it was something we had been waiting for and working and praying toward for many years, it is truly a great gift, because Blessed Peter To Rot is the first son of Papua New Guinea who will be raised to the honor of the altars.”

But who is Peter To Rot? Born in the small village of Rakunai in 1912, at just eighteen he entered the catechist school and took on that role at only twenty-one years old. He quickly earned the affection and respect of everyone in Rakunai and the surrounding villages. On November 11, 1936, he received the sacrament of marriage in the parish church of Rakunai with Paula Ia Varpit. They had three children.

“In 1942 —Father Ravaoli reconstructs—, when the Japanese invaded part of present-day Papua New Guinea, one of their first acts was to imprison all foreign missionaries. With the absence of priests (since there was still no local clergy), thousands of faithful were left without pastors to guide them and without anyone to safeguard their faith. In that crucial

moment, the young catechist, who was only thirty at the time, rose up as a giant of faith, taking on the responsibility of keeping the hope and faith of his people alive.”

Not only that, he openly denounced polygamy as an unacceptable practice for Christians and used every means at his disposal to persuade Catholics to resist it. “He knew that maintaining that position could mean arrest or death, but he could not remain silent.”

Indeed, Peter To Rot was threatened and arrested on several occasions, the last in April or June 1945. “He was convinced he would die in prison —Father Ravaioli continues—. The day before he was killed, one of the village leaders had the opportunity to see him for the last time. He told him: ‘I am here for those who break their marriage vows, and for those who do not want to see God’s work go forward. Enough. I must die. You go back and take care of the people. They have already sentenced me to death.’” On the night of July 7, 1945, two Japanese doctors went to the catechist in his cell and gave him a lethal injection.

“His activism,” comments Father Giorgio Licini, PIME missionary who for many years was secretary of the Episcopal Conference of Papua New Guinea, “had irritated not only the occupiers, who had to keep the natives in check while Allied troops drew ever closer, but also his own countrymen, who were trying to get by as best they could and certainly did not get angry when the Japanese reintroduced the right to polygamy, opposed by the missionaries and the previous Australian colonial administration. Peter To Rot came into conflict with his own blood brothers.”

Archbishop Rochus Tatamai, the first indigenous archbishop of Rabaul, recalls that it was his own maternal grandfather, later repentant, along with the tribal chief, who handed him over to the Japanese.

His canonization —following Pope Francis’s visit in September 2024— represents one of the most beautiful and significant events for the Church in Papua New Guinea.

Father Licini says: “We are celebrating the martyr, the catechist, the layman, the father of a family, killed with a lethal injection at the significant and symbolic age of thirty-three, betrayed by his own for the thirty pieces of silver of polygamy and put to death by the occupiers to get rid of an agitator and a competitor, an alternative way of life to the moral and spiritual death of conquest and war. Could there perhaps be a better likeness to the death of Christ for the first saint of the Pacific?”

Not only that: “At the same time —says the missionary—, the great spiritual opportunity of the canonization will be reflection on the deep and unconfessed causes of his end: not only (and perhaps not so much) that of polygamy and Christian or pagan sexual morality, but the rooted and ancestral boredom of witchcraft, duplicity, envy, and jealousy. Things that continue to kill in the Tolai villages and all around Rabaul, despite the deep and widespread presence of Christian Churches. In other words: will it be another plastic saint, who smiles and does not move, with triduum and novenas that do not change the widespread mentality, or the spasm of death in the face of the Judases and executioners of then and today?”

Vatican News (Rome), October 17, 2025

A SAINT TO BE FOR A NATION: PETER TO ROT'S WITNESS SHAPES PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Pope St. John Paul II declared Peter To Rot Blessed, in 1995, as the first Martyr of Papua New Guinea, as a new figure of holiness is a layman a husband, father, teacher, and catechist. Pope Francis approved his canonization on March 31, 2025, and he will be canonised on 19 October 2025 by Pope Leo XIV and be formally recognised as the first saint from Papua New Guinea, and six other Blesseds from other countries.

Archbishop Rochus Tatamai, Archbishop of Rabaul, told Vatican News that “Peter To Rot’s story is not just my family’s story; it belongs to the whole of Papua New Guinea. He stood firm in faith at a time when our people were under immense pressure. His witness, simple but profound, he refused to abandon God, his family, or his community and continues to inspire us.”

Rekindling of the Faith

In a separate interview with Vatican News, Father Tomás Ravaoli, IVE, vice-postulator of the Cause of Canonization, attested that “people are excited with the canonization of Peter To Rot not only an exterior preparation, but an interior one. Everybody is praying through his intercession, and at the end of the Mass, many people come for confession. His canonization has brought renewal in the Church of Papua New Guinea.”

“Our Melanesian brother showed that holiness is possible in ordinary family life. He lived the Gospel as a lay person, and that makes his example accessible to the majority of our people.”

“Rakunai is where he grew up and was formed, a place forms you to be who you are, because of the context of the surroundings and the faith formation,” according to Sr. Daisy Lisania, MSC, Secretary of the SOCOM social communication of the Catholic Bishops’s Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, who visited Rakunai Village, where Peter To Rot was born. She adds, “In the Shrine of Blessed Peter To Rot lie his remains, well kept in a wooden box. The atmosphere is quiet and peaceful, and there are children who visit the sacred place from the nearby school during their break to pray always.”

Peter To Rot’s father was the head of the community, one of the first to be baptised in his village, and he donated the land for the construction of the church, the school, and the mission house.

His generosity and witness of faith had an impact on his people, leading to a radical transformation, replacing constant fighting, and witchcraft with a more cohesive, peaceful society whose life began to revolve around the school, the medical clinic, and the Church. What is still called “the mission” today.

Catechists Model

Archbishop Tatamai echoes these sentiments. “To Rot’s legacy is visible in the life of the Church in Rakunai and across the nation. Pilgrims visit his grave, families gather for prayer inspired by his witness, and catechists see in him the model of their vocation.”

He quietly but courageously continued to teach catechism, organize prayer, and defend the dignity of marriage, which led to his martyrdom through execution by Japanese soldiers in 1945 during World War II.

“He was not a priest, or a bishop —Archbishop Tatamai articulates—. He was a layman, a father, a husband. That

is why his life resonates so deeply. People see in him the possibility of holiness in everyday life.”

Father Ravaioli reiterates Pope Francis’ words, “this is the saint the Church needs in these times.”

Peter To Rots’ life bridges local culture and universal faith as a catechist. Peter To Rot’s faith was closely linked to his sincere friendship with the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. This relationship was based on missionary work that today is described as a “shared mission.” It was a collaborative effort between religious men and women and the laity of Christian communities.

To Rot’s Canonization

“The event of canonization will be far more than a Church celebration —Archbishop Tatamai said—. It will be a blessing for the whole country, reminding us that society itself depends on the strength of families, it’s a gift to our country as a national revolutionary that calls us to holiness that begins in the family and extends to the whole society.”

“He was known for humility, service to the poor, devotion to prayer, and respect for elders. He challenges every one of us to live lives of service and generosity, To Rot’s story offers practical guidance,” he explained.

His canonization is a symbol of hope and resilience for Papua New Guinea.

To Rot is a Guide

The Archbishop sees this national inspiration as a mission for the present generation. “Blessed Peter To Rot is not a hero of the past —he insists—. He is a guide for today. His courage calls us to integrity in leadership, honesty in society, and responsibility in family life. When our people look to him, they see what it means to live faith authentically in Papua New Guinea.”

He highlights his relevance for the youth. “Young people need role models who are close to their reality. Peter To Rot shows them that holiness is not distant. It can be lived in family, in school and daily struggles. That is why his story continues to inspire new generations.”

The Portrait

Father Tomás Ravaioli commented, “Some people don’t know the face of Peter To Rot. There is only one photograph, and it is not widely known. For the canonization, we wanted a new portrait of him. I commissioned the Spanish artist Raúl Berzosa; I love his art because it invites to pray. He has this gift that his artworks are a way to unite yourself with God.”

In this portrait, he has the Holy Bible in his right hand, his wedding rings in his left, and on his neck, the catechist’s cross. The three symbols mark the new official portrait of Peter To Rot. The wedding rings symbolize his commitment to protecting Catholic marriage, defending the sacramental union between man and woman. The Bible he holds emphasizes To Rot’s devotion to the Word of God, nourished daily by Sacred Scripture and the Eucharist; he drew strength from these sources to face persecution. The catechist’s cross, on his neck and is placed in the center of his chest, is the symbol of his unwavering faith. This image will be hung on the façade of St. Peter’s Basilica on the day of the canonization.

3- News Articles After the Canonisation

L'Osservatore Romano (Rome), October 20, 2025

NOT HEROES OR CHAMPIONS OF SOME IDEAL BUT FAITHFUL FRIENDS OF CHRIST

ON WORLD MISSION DAY,
LEO XIV PROCLAIMED SEVEN NEW SAINTS

“The new Saints of today were not heroes or champions of some ideal, but authentic men and women,” who “kept the lamp of faith burning, indeed, they became themselves lamps capable of spreading the light of Christ.” This is the spiritual profile sketched by Leo XIV speaking of the seven blessed canonised in St. Peter’s Square yesterday morning, 19 October, XXIX Sunday of Ordinary Time. On the occasion of World Mission Day, the Pope presided over the Eucharistic Celebration and the canonisation rite of the Armenian bishop Ignatius Maloyan, the catechist of Papua New Guinea Peter To Rot, the religious women Vincenza Maria Poloni, Maria Troncatti, and María Carmen Rendiles Martínez, the doctor José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros — the latter two from Venezuela — and the apostle of the rosary Bartolo Longo.

In the presence of seventy thousand faithful who have peacefully invaded the square up to Via della Conciliazione, the Pontiff assured that “when we are crucified by pain and violence, by hatred and war, Christ is already there, on the cross for us and with us.” The Lord listens to us, embraces us as we are, to transform us”, while “those who do not accept peace as a gift” from God “will not be able to give peace.” This morning, the Bishop of Rome met in the Paul VI Hall with the pilgrims gathered for the canonisation and in the afternoon he went to Castel Gandolfo, from where he will return tomorrow evening.

L'Osservatore Romano (Rome), October 20, 2025

TWO MARTYRS, THREE NUNS, THE DOCTOR OF THE POOR, AND THE APOSTLE OF THE ROSARY

Two “martyrs for their faith,” the Armenian Archbishop Ignatius Choukrallah Maloyan and the Papuan catechist Peter To Rot; an evangeliser and missionary, Sister Maria Troncatti, an Italian Salesian who dedicated herself to the indigenous peoples of Ecuador; two other “charismatic founders,” the Italian Sister Vincenza Maria Poloni, of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Verona, and the Venezuelan Sister Carmen Rendiles Martínez, of the Congregation of the Servants of Jesus; and finally two “benefactors of humanity” with a “heart burning with devotion,” the Italian Bartolo Longo and the Venezuelan José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros, laypeople who dedicated their lives to the marginalised. They are the seven new saints proclaimed by Leo XIV yesterday, October 19, during the Mass presided over on the steps of the Vatican basilica. Their gazes, depicted in the tapestries hanging from the central facade, were directed towards St. Peter’s Square in celebration, overflowing with the faithful who had come from all over the world. They rejoiced, in the warm October sun of Rome, from behind the visors of their caps, in a colourful expanse of banners and flags, especially from Venezuela.

Leaning against the right semicircle of the Berninian colonnade, the “Cristo Morado,” an image depicting Jesus crucified on a brick wall, a sign of hope for having withstood the earthquakes that devastated Lima in 1655 and 1687.

Seventy thousand people attended the liturgy on the 29th Sunday of Ordinary Time, at the beginning of which Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, Prefect of the Dicastery for the

Causes of Saints, accompanied by the postulators, made a request to the Pope to inscribe the names of the seven blessed in the Book of Saints. On the altar, their relics—including the Rule written by Mother Poloni—accompanied by the image of the Mother of Good Counsel, particularly dear to the Augustinian religious.

A brief presentation of the biographies of the seven and the Litanies preceded the Latin formula of canonisation. The rite then concluded with the offering of incense for the veneration of the relics, the singing of the Alleluia, and the thanksgiving—in Latin—by Cardinal Semeraro and the postulators to the Pontiff, with the prefect's request to “arrange for the drafting of the apostolic letters regarding the canonisation that has taken place.”

At the Liturgy of the Word, the readings were proclaimed in Spanish for the first (Ex 17:8-13) and in Italian for the second (2 Tim 3:14-4:2). The Psalm was 120 (*“My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth”*) and the Gospel, first in Latin and then in Greek, was that of Luke (18:1-8), with the parable of the unjust judge and the persevering widow.

During the prayer of the faithful in five languages related to the lives of the new saints—Armenian, English, Arabic, Portuguese, and Tok Pisin, the creole spoken in Papua New Guinea—particular intentions were raised for the Church, for the rulers and peoples of the earth, “that they may not make unjust and oppressive choices and promote peace and the good of all”; for persecuted Christians, “that they may be strong and perseverant in tribulation and that their sacrifice may contribute to the salvation of humanity”; for the poor, the sick, and the suffering, and for the young people in vocational discernment.

After communion, the Pope led the recitation of the Angelus, and then imparted the final blessing.

Together with Leo XIV, the Mass was concelebrated, directed by Archbishop Diego Ravelli, master of pontifical liturgical celebrations, and numerous cardinals—including Dean Giovanni Battista Re, Vice-Dean Leonardo Sandri, and Secretary of State Pietro Parolin—bishops, and priests.

At the moment of consecration, the Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians, Raphaël Bedros XXI Minassian, and the Papuan Cardinal John Ribat, Archbishop of Port Moresby, ascended to the altar. the archbishops Raúl Biord Castillo, Salesian, ordinary of Caracas, and Tommaso Caputo, prelate of Pompeii; the bishops Domenico Pompili, of Verona, Lisandro Alirio Rivas Durán, Consolata missionary, ordinary of San Cristóbal de Venezuela, and Néstor Montesdeoca Becerra, also a Salesian, apostolic vicar of Méndez in Ecuador.

The ceremony was attended by the official delegations of the Italian and Lebanese republics, led respectively by Presidents Sergio Mattarella, accompanied by the President of the Chamber of Deputies Lorenzo Fontana, and Joseph Aoun; of Armenia, headed by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan; and of Venezuela, with the Vice President for Science and Technology Gabriela Jiménez. Before the celebration began, Leo XIV received the heads of delegation in the Chapel of Piety.

Together with the Diplomatic Corps were the archbishops Edgar Peña Parra, substitute for General Affairs, and Paul Richard Gallagher, secretary for Relations with States and International Organisations, and the head of Protocol, Monsignor Javier Domingo Fernández González.

Among those present were the family members of Peter To Rot with numerous Papuan faithful in traditional attire, and Juwa Juank Kankua Bosco, miraculously healed through the intercession of Sister Maria Troncatti, who arrived from Ecuador.

At the end of the celebration, after removing the liturgical vestments, Leo XIV took a long tour in the popemobile

through the wards, stopping the vehicle in front of the “Cristo Morado,” then continued to Via della Conciliazione.

The National Newspaper (Papua New Guinea), October 20, 2025

**OUR FIRST SAINT.
PETER TOROT CANONISED IN MASS AT VATICAN**

Archbishop of Port Moresby Sir John Cardinal Ribat has described the sainthood of Peter ToRot as a national celebration that will draw the attention of the world to Papua New Guinea.

“Blessed Peter ToRot, a lay catechist who died for his faith, will be declared a saint of the universal Church,” he said. “The canonisation is a spiritual milestone for PNG, the Pacific, and the world. It reveals the maturity of our Christian faith and affirms the universality of the Catholic church. His life reminds us that holiness is not reserved for the extraordinary, it can be lived each day in our families, workplaces and communities.”

Prime Minister James Marape described the canonisation as “a historic moment of pride, faith and inspiration for Papua New Guinea and our people.”

“(ToRot) reminds us that faithfulness is the duty of every Christian, that holiness is not reserved for a few, but is within reach of every man and woman who lives with courage, compassion and conviction.”

Marape said that ToRot’s martyrdom during World War II continued to resonate deeply with the moral fabric of the nation.

“His refusal to compromise his faith, his defence of marriage and family, and his courage to serve others despite persecution represent the very best of who we are as Papua New Guineans – a people of faith, family and freedom.”

Late Pope St John Paul II declared Peter ToRot Blessed, in 1995, as the first martyr of PNG.

Pope Leo XIV, when celebrating Mass with the canonisation of ToRot and seven other saints yesterday at St Peter Square in Vatican City, said: “Without faith in God we cannot hope for salvation. Just as we never grow weary of breathing, so let us never grow weary of praying, just as breathing sustains the life of the body, so prayer sustains the life of the soul. Faith in fact is expressed in prayer. And authentic prayers lives on faith.”

Pope Francis approved his canonisation on March 31, 2025, and his final blessing was received yesterday by Pope Leo XIV at the St Peter’s Square in Rome.

Catholic Bishops Conference PNG and SI general-secretary Fr Lawrence Arockiaraj, said that apart from a delegation of 17 bishops from PNG, and Fr Lawrence Arockiaraj and Fr Tomás Ravaioli, and with pilgrims from PNG, other countries witnessed the event.

The Post-Courier (Papua New Guinea), October 20, 2025

THANKSGIVING CELEBRATION HELD FOR SAINT PETER TOROT IN RAKUNAI

The Rabaul Archdiocese today held a thanksgiving celebration for the canonization of Saint Peter ToRot.

The celebration began today at 9 am at St Augustine Parish, Rakunai, the home village of the newly declared Saint. The celebration started with the Holy Eucharist, led by Bishop Valentine Gryk, SVD, of the Goroka Diocese as the main celebrant.

According to Parish Priest and Rabaul Deanery Dean, Fr Peter Posa, the event was a continuation from last night’s

program, when more than a thousand Christians gathered at Rakunai to watch the live telecast of the canonization ceremony from Rome.

He said that today's Thanksgiving Mass brought together parishioners from Kokopo, Rabaul, and Pomio Deaneries, as well as pilgrims from Kavieng and Bougainville Archdioceses. "We didn't expect it would be this big in terms of turnout because it was initially intended to be a small celebration to mark the day, while the three-day celebration will take place in December," Fr Posa said.

Among those who attended was Margaret Raka, a parishioner from Kavieng Lorengau Archdiocese, who said it was an emotional moment for her family. "I grew up hearing about Peter ToRot from my grandparents. To see him declared a saint in my lifetime is something I'll never forget," she said.

Joseph Wating, a youth leader from Rabaul, said the celebration brought unity and pride to the people. "Everyone came together as one family of faith. It shows how much Saint Peter ToRot means to us as Papua New Guineans," he said. "We've grown up hearing stories of ToRot, but to live to see this day is an honor, and to have an indigenous Saint from our country is something I am so proud of," he said.

A pilgrim from Bougainville, Lucy Nahan, described the day as a sign of hope. "Saint Peter ToRot's story inspires us to stand firm in faith, especially in our marriage life, even when it's difficult. His sainthood reminds us that holiness is possible for all," she said. "As a woman leader and an advocate of Christian marriage life, I took it upon myself to get some members of my women's group here to celebrate this moment with everyone because ToRot was a saint who was very vocal on good marriage life and died for it," Lucy said.

The thanksgiving concluded with choir performances and presentations from various parish groups in the afternoon.

4- The Official Portrait of the New Saint, the Reliquaries, and the Commemorative Medals

THE OFFICIAL PORTRAIT OF THE NEW SAINT

It is tradition that during canonisations, a huge tapestry is unfurled on the facade of St. Peter's Basilica with the portrait or image of the new saint. In the past, the image was usually covered at the beginning of the ceremony, and a veil was removed to show the world the face of the new saint as soon as the Pope finished pronouncing the canonisation formula. That unveiling of the portrait was the most awaited moment and the climax of the ceremony. The image was surrounded by nymphs or angels, in clear Baroque style, symbolising her triumphant entry into heaven. Currently, however, the image is already uncovered from the beginning of the ceremony.

Originally, they were enormous paintings hand-painted by renowned artists. They were extremely heavy and expensive. They also used to use more durable fabrics, so they could withstand the wind or rain on the facade of the basilica. Nowadays, technology allows us to choose any image we want, and the tapestries are printed digitally in just a few minutes. The size can vary, but they usually measure more than four meters high and three meters wide.

In our case, we decided to entrust the creation of the new image for the canonisation to the Málaga artist Raúl Berzosa Fernández. His works are admirable in that, one does not stop only to admire the technique, they also have the particularity of elevating the soul to God, to prayer, and to contemplation. And it is precisely for this reason that we thought of him: we wanted the new portrait of To Rot to be not just a beautiful painting, but above all to invite prayer. Moreover—in parentheses—, the artist and I share a long-standing

personal friendship, and many times in the past we had talked about how nice it would be for him to create a painting for Papua New Guinea, but for one reason or another, we never managed to make it happen. The canonisation of To Rot was undoubtedly the perfect occasion for the dream to come true.

On his website, we read: “Berzosa has created numerous paintings on various themes, but sacred art is the backbone of his painting; his projects are found in countries such as the United States, Italy, Guatemala, Colombia, Argentina, Portugal, Mexico, Great Britain, and even the Vatican State, for which he has completed numerous commissions. (...) Additionally, he was appointed Honorary Academician of the Pontifical and Insigne Academy of Virtuosos at the Pantheon in Rome.” He has created paintings for Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, Cardinal Sarah and Cardinal Burke, among others.

The portrait was unveiled on September 1, and on the 5th of the same month, Agenzia Fides published the following article:

**WEDDING RINGS, BIBLE, AND A CROSS:
THE TAPESTRY FOR THE CANONIZATION
OF PETER TO ROT DEPICTS THE STORY
OF PAPUA’S FIRST SAINT**

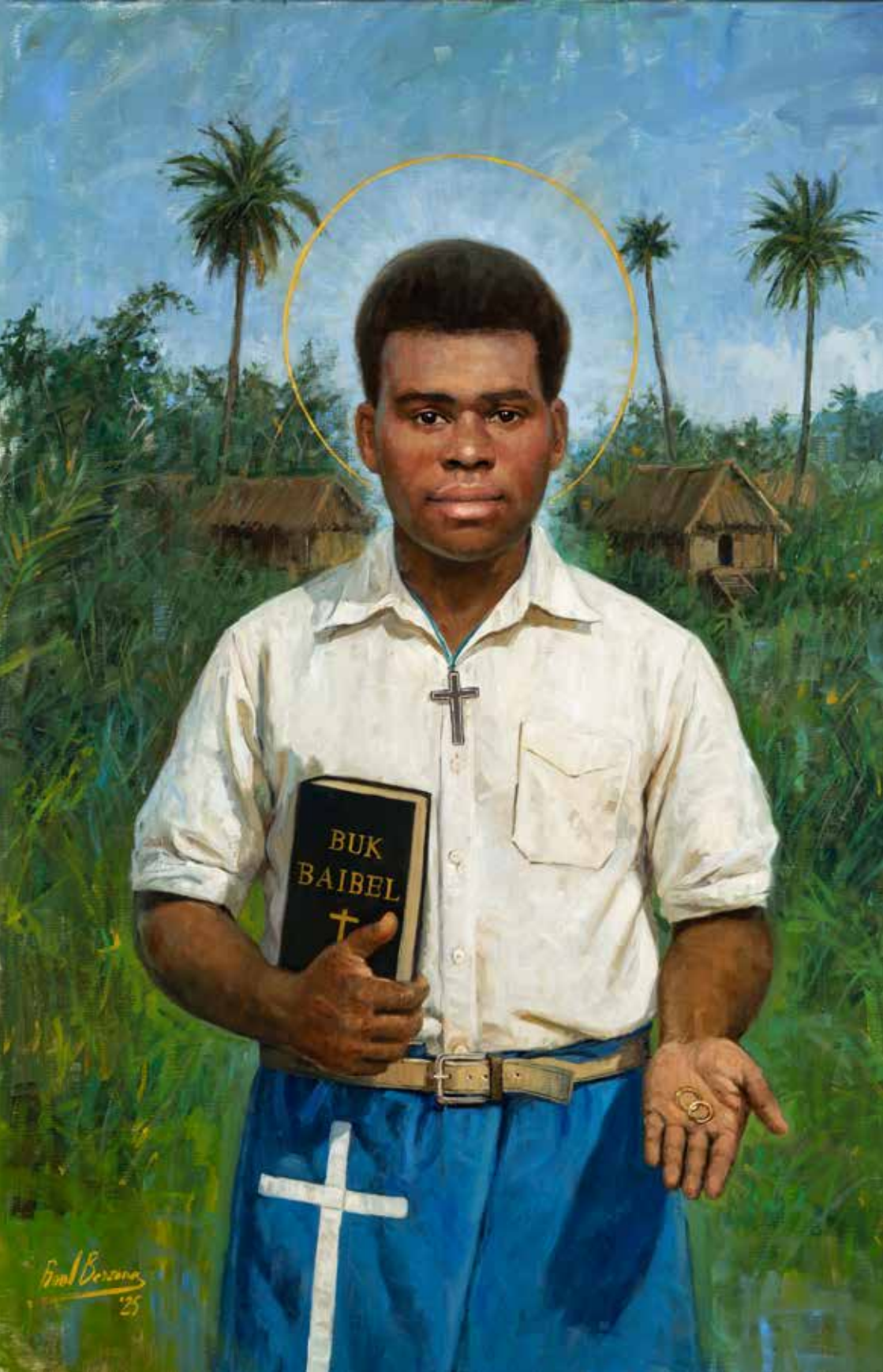
Port Moresby (Agenzia Fides) - In his right hand, the Holy Bible, in his left, wedding rings. Around his neck, the catechist’s cross. These three symbols mark the new official portrait of Peter To Rot, Papua New Guinea’s first saint, who will be canonised by Pope Leo XIV in St. Peter’s Square on Sunday, October 19. The image, which will soon be transformed into a tapestry and hung on the façade of St. Peter’s Basilica on the day of the canonization, was created by the Spanish painter Raúl Berzosa Fernández and commissioned by Father Tomás Ravaoli, missionary of the Institute of the Incarnate Word (IVE) and vice-postulator of the Cause of Canonization. It was presented to the Papuan faithful in recent days.

The portrait, explains the Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, "is a faithful representation of the young catechist." It is based "on the only known photograph of To Rot" and brings together in a single image the story of the catechist and martyr. A catechist who, as Father Ravaoli told Fides, "is a compass to guide one's life" in these times "when marriage and the family are under multiple attacks and suffer all kinds of distortions."

The wedding rings in his left hand symbolize his commitment to protecting Catholic marriage: To Rot was arrested and subsequently martyred for speaking out against polygamy and defending the sacramental union between man and woman. The Bible he holds in his right hand underscores To Rot's devotion to the Word of God: nourished daily by Sacred Scripture and the Eucharist, he drew strength from these sources to face persecution.

The catechist's cross, which he wears around his neck and is placed in the center of his chest, is the symbol of his unwavering faith. During the war, many catechists hid these crosses for fear of reprisals from the Japanese who occupied the island. To Rot, on the other hand, wore it with pride and asked that the crucifix be brought to him from his house before his execution. His parting words to his wife, Paula, were: "Bring me the catechist's crucifix that we have at home."

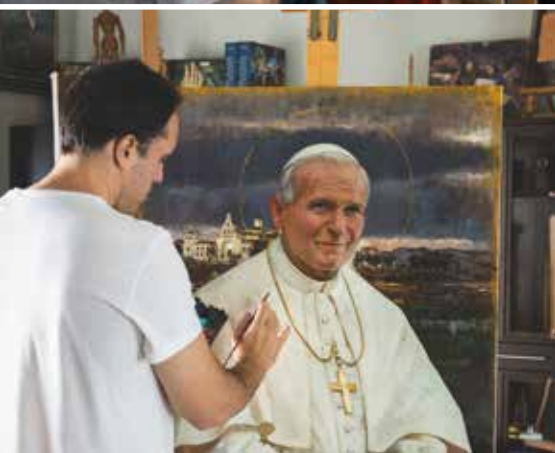
The decision to commission Raúl Berzosa Fernández, contemporary master of realism, to create the saint's portrait was not only due to his reputation, according to the Bishops' Conference: The artist is "known worldwide for his religious works that adorn churches on every continent. With his reputation for vibrant naturalism and deeply spiritual compositions, Berzosa pays tribute to To Rot's love for Christ in his latest work."



Errol Bersana
'25



The artist in his studio in Malaga, Spain



THE RELIQUARY USED DURING THE CANONISATION

Just as it is traditional for tapestries with the faces of the new saints to be displayed during canonisations, it is also traditional for a relic of the newly canonised saint to be presented to the Holy Father during the celebration. The relic is usually carried in procession to the altar, where the Holy Father receives and kisses it as a gesture of veneration. But this was not the case in the canonisation of Peter To Rot, because the new saints were seven, and when planning the celebration, it did not seem appropriate to have seven different processions, each carrying the relics of each one of them. The ceremony would have dragged on unnecessarily. Therefore, the relics were placed beside the altar before the celebration began. And during the offertory, one of Peter To Rot's three grandsons, Peter Senat, offered incense, which he placed at the foot of the table where the relics of the new saints were located.

We entrusted the creation of the reliquary to the Ascione Brothers, descendants of a prestigious Neapolitan house specialising in sacred art. The company, founded in 1855 in Torre del Greco, has remained in the same family for over 170 years, establishing itself as a global emblem of Neapolitan artisanal tradition. The reliquary has been entirely handcrafted using silver, brass, marble, and glass, incorporating a figure of Saint Peter To Rot carved by hand in *Cassia madagascarensis* mother-of-pearl and situated at the base of the object.

The preparation of the relic and its placement inside the reliquary, on the other hand, was the work of Mr. Antonino Cottone, a famous Sicilian reliquiarist (one who oversees preparation and conservation of relics) who specialises in preparing the relics of saints for many religious congregations. Among other works, for example, he created the pectoral cross of Pope Leo XIV. Thus stated Zenit on July 14, 2025: "On May 8, during his election in the conclave, the newly elected Pope Leo XIV —formerly Cardinal Robert Prevost— first displayed a pectoral cross of great symbolic value. This cross, donated

by the *Circolo di San Pietro* and redesigned by Antonino Cottone, houses bone fragments of four bishops and a special relic of his namesake, Saint Leo the Great.”

In addition to preparing the reliquary for the canonisation, Mr. Antonino was asked to make two more, smaller ones: one for the Apostolic Nunciature in Papua New Guinea, and the other for Bishop Valentine Gryk, SVD, of the Diocese of Goroka. Finally, he made three, and he gave the third one to the vice-postulator of the cause as a token of friendship.

The reliquary used during the canonisation has been brought to Papua New Guinea, and it is currently in the cathedral of Rabaul, in Vunapope. To the Holy Father, on the other hand, we have given a similar one, a little smaller.





Above: Antonino Cottone and Giuseppe Ascione
Below: Reliquary for the nunciature and for the dioceses of Papua New Guinea



THE COMMEMORATIVE MEDAL

To conclude, let's say something about the commemorative medals of the canonisation that were distributed in Rome and Papua New Guinea. Although it is not as deeply rooted a tradition as preparing the tapestry for the canonisation or presenting the relic during the ceremony, it is quite normal for the canonisation cause's postulation to produce commemorative medals to remember the event.

For the occasion, we commissioned the production of the medals to the Tuscan company Picchiani & Barlacchi. Founded in 1902 in Florence, it remains to this day one of the most important companies in the production of medals, metal objects, and high-quality commemorative items.

They made medals five centimetres in diameter, minted in gilt patinated bronze. The main face of the medal is engraved with an image of Saint Peter To Rot, with his catechist's cross. In the background, typical palm trees of his area and a bird of paradise, the most famous bird of Papua New Guinea, which is the national symbol, can be seen. And it reads: "*Sollemnis Canonizatio. Petrus To Rot*" (Solemn Canonisation. Peter To Rot). On the opposite side of the medal, however, is the coat of arms of Pope Leo XIV and the date of the canonisation: "*Leo XIV Pontifex Maximus. XIX-Oct-MMXXV*" (Leo XIV, Supreme Pontiff, October 19, 2025).

5- The Collect Prayer of the Holy Mass and the Second Reading of the Office of Readings

The texts for the collect prayer of the Holy Mass and the second reading of the Office of Readings were proposed on April 22, 1994, by the then Archbishop of Rabaul, Karl Hesse, MSC, to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. And the decree with the approval and confirmation of the same was signed by Cardinal Antonio María Javierre, SDB, Prefect of that Congregation, on July 13 of the same year.

Canonisations do not usually change the collect prayers of the Holy Mass that were used to commemorate the memory of those who until that moment were blessed. In the case of To Rot, then, we will continue using the same prayer we have been using since 1995, simply replacing the word “Blessed” with “Saint.”

The second reading of the Office of Readings is paragraph 33 of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, concerning the apostolate of the laity.

Collect (official text approved by the Holy See)

Almighty, ever living God,
you adorn the Church with the glorious life of the martyrs.
As we celebrate the martyrdom of Saint Peter To Rot,
Grant that his steadfastness in faith
be a constant source of strength for us
when suffering comes our way.
Through Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Collect (literal translation from the original Latin text)

Oh God,
that you do not cease to illuminate your pilgrim Church on earth
with the glorious passion of the martyrs,
grant us, we beseech you,
that through the example and intercession of Saint Peter To Rot,
we may live strong in the confession of faith
and be supported in adversities.
Through Our Lord Jesus Christ.



Actual size of the commemorative medal



Prot. 99/94L

RABAULENSIS

Instante Exaltatione Dominis Carolo Basso, Archiepiscopo
Rabaulensi, litteris die 22 aprilis 1994 datis, vigore facultatum huius
Congregationis a Summo Pontifice IOHANNI PAULO II tributarum, totidem
sententiam collectas Reges latinos, Gallos et anglicos eorumdem alique fratres
Reges Italici et anglicos eorumdem latinos Libanenses in
honorem Beati Petri To Rot, martyris, prout existat in adiecto exemplari,
libenter promissum sua confirmatione.

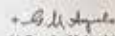
In textis impensis sententia fiat de approbatione sua confirmatione
ab Apostolica Sede canonica. Eandem vero textus impensis duo exemplaria
ad hanc Congregationem transmittantur.

Imperio conceditur ut, eorumdem obitus Beatitudinis Venerabilis
Petri To Rot, singulis celebrationibus in honorem aucti Beati dicitur Romanis
eiusdem Urbem lateri auctoritate a Beatitudine peragi valeant, licet
"formas de celebrationibus in honorem aliorum Beati congruo tempore
post Beatitudinem" exequantur.

Contrariis quibuscumque minime obstantibus.

Ex auctoritate Congregationis de Cultu Divino et Discipline
Sacramentorum, die 13 Iulii 1994.


(Antonio M. Card. Jorjano)
Praefatus


(+ Gerardo M. Aguelo)
Archiepiscopus a Secretis

Prot. 99/94L

RABAULENSIS

Textus eorumdem collectas

Reges latinos, Gallos et anglicos

eorumdem

alique textus latinos aliorum

Libanenses

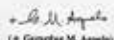
Reges latinos et anglicos eorumdem

in honorem Beati Petri To Rot,

martyris

Prohibetur sua confirmatione
die 13 Iulii 1994.

Ex auctoritate Congregationis.


(+ Gerardo M. Aguelo)
Archiepiscopus a Secretis

COLLECTA

Deus, qui Ecclesiam tuam peregrinantem in terris
gloriosam martyrum passionis illustrare non desinas,
concede, quesumus,
ut Beati Petri exemplo et intercessionem,
fortes in fidei confessione vivere
et in adversitatibus adiuvari valeamus.

Ter Dominus.

O Dio, tu continui a far risplendere
la tua Chiesa pellegrina sulla terra
nel martirio glorioso dei suoi figli.
Concedi a noi, sull'esempio e per l'intercessione
del Beato Pietro To Rot,
di vivere forti nella fede
e di sperare nella tua misericordia.
Per il nostro Signore.

Almighty, ever-living God,
you adorn the Church with the glorious life of the
Martyrs.
As we celebrate the martyrdom of Peter To Rot,
grant that his steadfastness in faith be constant
source of strength
for us when suffering comes our way.
We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

(3) Text of the second reading for the Office

from the Synoptic Constitution "Iona Section" of the Vatican Council II. (N. 3).
The apostolate of the laity.

Gathered together in the People of God and established in the one Body of Christ
under one head, the laity - no matter who they are - have, as living members, the vo-
cation of applying to the building up of the Church and to its continual sanctifi-
cation all the powers which they have received from the goodness of the Creator and
from the grace of the Redeemer.

The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church.
Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord
himself. Moreover, by the sacraments, and especially by the Eucharist, that love of
God and man which is the soul of the apostolate is communicated and nourished. The
laity, however, are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and
fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she
can become the salt of the earth (2). Thus, every lay person, through those gifts
given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of
the Church itself "according to the measure of Christ's bestowal" (Eph. 4/7).

Beside this apostolate which belongs to absolutely every Christian, the laity
can be called in different ways to more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of
the hierarchy. (3) Like those men and women who helped the apostle Paul in the Go-
spel, laboring much in the Lord (cf. Phil. 4/3; Rom. 16/3 ff.). They have, moreover,
the capacity of being appointed by the hierarchy to some ecclesiastical offices with
a view to a spiritual end.

All the laity, then, have the exalted duty of working for the ever greater spread
of the divine plan of salvation to all men, of every epoch and all over the earth.
Therefore every way be clear for them to share diligently in the salvific work of
the Church according to their ability and the needs of the times.

2 See Pius XI, Litt. Encycl. Quadragesimo anno, 15 May 1921; AAS 23 (1921) p. 521 s.
Pius XII, Alloc. In quibusdam annis, 18 Oct. 1951; AAS 43 (1951) p. 790 s.

3 See Pius XII, Alloc. Haec sunt sancti domini, 3 Oct. 1957; AAS 49 (1957) p. 307.

5- OFFICIAL CELEBRATIONS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: OCTOBER AND DECEMBER 2025

While a Thanksgiving Mass would be held in Port Moresby upon returning from Rome, it was necessary to organise large celebrations in Rabaul and Rakunai, the land of To Rot. October did not seem to be the best month to hold those celebrations because we wanted as many people as possible to participate, and during October, children and young people are busy with school, and we could not ask them to miss classes for one or two weeks. So, it seemed best to wait until the school holidays, which begin in early December. The official celebrations in Rabaul and Rakunai, therefore, had to wait a bit, and they finally took place from December 11 to 14.

1- Thanksgiving Mass in Port Moresby: 26 October 2025

A few days after the canonisation in Rome, most of the bishops and pilgrims from Papua New Guinea had already returned to the country. Therefore, taking advantage of the fact that many bishops had just returned from Rome and had not yet travelled to their respective dioceses, Sunday, October 26, was chosen to celebrate a Thanksgiving Mass in Port Moresby. The ceremony was presided over by Cardinal John Ribat, MSC, and the Bishop of Wewak, Josef Roszynski, SVD, delivered a magnificent homily.

Thus, the news was reported by the Communications Office of the Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands on October 28, 2025.

**PNG CATHOLICS CELEBRATE THANKSGIVING MASS
IN HONOR OF THE CANONIZATION
OF SAINT PETER TO ROT**

Port Moresby - Hundreds of Catholics from all over Port Moresby, and some who flew in from other provinces, gathered at the Sir Hubert Murray Stadium last Sunday, the 26th of October to celebrate the Thanksgiving Mass for Saint Peter To Rot, the country's own son and first indigenous Saint.

It was a historic and emotional day, marking 30 years since Peter To Rot was declared "Blessed" by Pope John Paul II in 1995. Now, 13 years later, Pope Leo XIV has officially declared him a Saint, not only for Papua New Guinea but for the whole Catholic Church around the world.

The main celebrant of the Thanksgiving Mass was His Eminence Sir John Cardinal Ribat, M.S.C., with Archbishop Josef Roszyński, S.V.D., of the Wewak Diocese delivering the homily. It was a great moment in the nation's Catholic history.

Along with the main celebrant were other Bishops, Archbishops, and Priests like the Bishop of Bougainville, Most Reverend Bishop Dariusz Kaluza, M.S.F., General Secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands (CBCPNGSI), Father Lawrence Arickiaraj. The Apostolic Nuncio to PNG and the Solomon Islands, His Excellency Archbishop Maurizio Bravi, and others who were also there to celebrate this historic moment in the catholic church.

The choir was led by Mr. Gideon Giyovadulu, with the choir group composed of Catholic faithfuls from different parishes in Port Moresby.

During his homily, Archbishop Roszyński reflected on his personal memories of the 1995 beatification of Peter To Rot.

“It was 30 years ago when I came to Port Moresby as a young missionary to witness the visit of Pope John Paul II,” he recalled. “I remember the ceremony well. The smile of the Pope, the colorful congregation, the rain, the beautiful singing, and the joy of the people. I remember the Tolai carrying the casket with the remains of St. Peter To Rot and Rufina IaMama, his daughter, walking behind.”

He shared how the beatification, which was originally planned to be held in Rabaul, was moved to Port Moresby due to the volcanic eruption at the time.

“When I look at it now,” Archbishop Roszyński said, “I believe it was by the finger of God. It was meant to happen here in Port Moresby so that the whole nation would understand and accept Peter To Rot as the Blessed Martyr for all Papua New Guinea, not just for the Tolai people.”

The Archbishop then spoke of the recent canonization in Rome, calling it a moment of pride and faith for the Pacific region.

“Today, we gather here because the Pope has now declared Peter To Rot not only as Blessed for the people of Papua New Guinea, but as a Saint for the whole world. He is the light that rises from the Pacific. The first and only Saint of our islands.”

He also recalled the words of Saint John Paul II during the beatification:

“Peter To Rot’s life is a beacon shining bright, a signal fire leading you to hold up the noble ideals which inspired him: faith in God, love of family, service of labor, and courageous faith in the face of trials.”

For many, it was not just a religious event, but a moment of unity and pride, a reminder that holiness can rise from their own land, through one of their own.

The same communications office published the following:

**HIS EMINENCE SIR JOHN CARDINAL RIBAT MSC
HIGHLIGHTS FAITH AND NATIONHOOD AT
THANKSGIVING MASS FOR SAINT PETER TO ROT**

Port Moresby, October 26, 2025 - The Catholic community in Papua New Guinea gathered in thanksgiving for the Canonisation of Saint Peter To Rot. His Eminence Sir John Cardinal Ribat delivered a heartfelt message during the Thanksgiving Mass, reflecting on the journey of the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

His Eminence reminded the faithful that the presence of the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea goes back to 1844 with the arrival of the early missionaries. “The Church today has a population of approximately 2.5 million Catholic Christians from our 2024 statistics,” he said.

The Catholic Church has been a major health service provider and an important part of the nation’s growth. “Papua New Guinea has grown with the Church,” he said. “The Church has already recognised, blessing us with a Cardinal in 2016, and on 19th October 2025, the Catholic Church has blessed us with the Canonisation of our first ever Saint, Saint Peter To Rot. We are to celebrate and give thanks to God for the many blessings.”

Cardinal Ribat also spoke about the visit of Pope Francis and the Canonisation of Saint Peter To Rot, saying it offers a renewed appreciation of the contribution of the laity in the Church. “This Thanksgiving is to thank God for the gift of Saint Peter To Rot to us. It is also a Thanksgiving for us as a country, for we have achieved a milestone of 50 years of nationhood as churches in the Archdiocese and Diocese of Port Moresby continue to celebrate our Jubilee as Church with the theme, ‘Pilgrims of Hope: Journey from Darkness to Light. Light of Christ Jesus’ (Jn 8:12).”

He gave a special mention to the many lay Catholic men and women, especially catechists, who have faithfully served the Church over the years. “Many of you today are actively serving in ministry for over twenty years, some forty years and beyond,” he said. “The Church depends on you. You keep the Church alive in parishes, schools, rural missions, and communities. Thank you for your services.”

Cardinal Ribat told everyone that Peter To Rot himself was a catechist. “He lived, worked, and died as a catechist,” he said. “The Universal Church acknowledged his courageous work and beatified him Blessed in 1995 by Pope Saint John Paul the Second. And only this month, October 2025, Pope Leo XIV canonised him as a Saint.”

The Thanksgiving Mass brings deep joy and gratitude to the Catholic faithful of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. We must give thanks to God for the many blessings bestowed upon the Church, the nation, and the people through the life and witness of Saint Peter To Rot.

The Post-Courier Newspaper published the following:

PORT MORESBY ARCHDIOCESE CELEBRATES FIRST PNG SAINT WITH THANKSGIVING MASS

The Port Moresby Archdiocese erupted in celebration today with a special Thanksgiving Mass to honor the elevation of Peter ToRot to sainthood, the first saint from Papua New Guinea. Organised by the Catholic Professionals, the joyous event marks the culmination of years of devoted prayer and perseverance by countless Catholic laymen and women. The Archdiocese rejoices, recognizing this moment as a direct answer to their long-standing prayers.

Peter ToRot, a dedicated catechist from Rakunai in East New Britain (ENB), became a martyr for his faith. Despite

warnings from the Japanese forces during World War II to cease his ministry, ToRot bravely refused to stop serving his community. He was subsequently killed while imprisoned for upholding his Christianvocation.

His unwavering commitment, which led to his martyrdom, is the foundation of his canonization.





2- Celebrations in Rabaul and Rakunai: December 11-14, 2025

Without a doubt, these celebrations were one of the highlights of all the events surrounding the canonisation of Peter To Rot. After all, it was in that land where the new saint was born, sanctified, and shed his blood. Moreover, the Tolai are “his” people in a special way. And it wasn’t fair to leave them empty-handed, without any kind of celebration. We must remember that the beatification in 1995 was scheduled to be held in Rabaul, but the volcanic eruption forced a change of plans, and it was moved to the capital. The canonisation, for obvious reasons, could not take place in the village of the martyr catechist, and it was held in Rome. That’s why there was a widespread desire to be able to do something truly great and important in the land of the saint.

On Thursday the 11th, the celebrations officially began with the celebration of the Holy Mass at the cathedral of Rabaul, in Vunapope. The principal celebrant was the Apostolic Nuncio to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, Archbishop Maurizio Bravi. The Holy Mass began at 4:30 pm, followed by an hour of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and then dinner.

On Friday the 12th, the activities took place in Rakunai, the village of Peter To Rot. The principal celebrant was the emeritus archbishop of Rabaul, Francesco Panfilo, SDB. At the end of the Holy Mass, archbishop Rochus Tatamai, MSC, (great-nephew of To Rot and from the same village) gave a keynote address on the life of Peter To Rot and life in the village of Rakunai. Following this the bishop of Bougainville, Dariusz Kaluza, MSF, did the same, speaking about the universal call to holiness. During the day, the thousands of pilgrims took the opportunity to visit the saint’s village, pray in the chapel that houses his relics, visit the cemetery where he was buried, and learn about the most significant places in To Rot’s life. In the afternoon, before dinner, there was an hour of adoration to the Blessed Sacrament.

On Saturday the 13th, the activities returned to Vunapope. The Holy Mass was presided over by the archbishop of Rabaul, Rochus Tatamai, MSC, and at the end, a new cycle of two keynote addresses took place. The first was given by Father Tomás Ravaoli, IVE, vice-postulator of the canonisation cause, who spoke about the spirituality of Saint Peter To Rot and the main means we should use to achieve holiness. Immediately after, the bishop of Mendi, Donald Lippert, OFM Cap, spoke about marriage and family in God's plan. Just like the previous days, to conclude the day there was an hour of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Finally, on Sunday the 14th, the closing ceremony took place at the Takubar Sports Field. The Holy Mass was presided over by Cardinal John Ribat, MSC, and was followed by several speeches from politicians and local influential figures.

The following article was written by Sr. Daisy Anne Lisania Augustine MSC, from the Communications Office of the Episcopal Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands a few days before the event:

RABAUL PREPARES FOR HISTORIC SAINTHOOD CELEBRATION OF ST. PETER TOROT

The Archdiocese of Rabaul will host one of the most significant religious events in the history of the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands: The Sainthood Celebration of St. Peter ToRot, from December 11th to 14th, 2025. The four-day celebration brings together bishops, clergy, pilgrims, and international delegates as the Church honours its first recognised Saint, St. Peter ToRot—Lei Man, Catechist na Martir (1912–1945).

Anchored in the theme drawn from 1 Peter 1:15, “*Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do,*” the celebration coincides with the Catholic Church’s Jubilee Year of Hope

2025, inviting all the faithful to journey together in renewal, unity, and holiness.

A National and Regional Gathering of Faith

The program is a coordinated effort for the Archdioceses and Dioceses of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, as well as for the Pomio, Kokopo, and Rabaul Deaneries of the Archdiocese of Rabaul.

According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference, the four-day encounter aims to renew the faith of all participants and reawaken the Spirit received in Baptism, strengthening the mission of the Church to be "salt of the earth and light of the world" while building a more synodal Church.

Event Program Highlights

Day 1: Thursday, 11 December 2025: Arrival, Welcome Ceremonies & Opening Mass.

The celebration opens with the arrival of official delegates from Rome at Tokua Airport, accompanied by provincial protocol and cultural performances. A formal welcome lunch brings together representatives from participating dioceses nationwide.

At 4:30 pm, His Excellency Maurizio Bravi, Apostolic Nuncio to PNG/SI, will preside over the Opening Eucharistic Celebration, followed by a solemn Blessed Sacrament Procession and Adoration. Pilgrims will then be transported to their host accommodations.

Day 2: Friday, 12 December 2025: Mass, Workshops & Pilgrimage in Rakunai.

Pilgrims gather in Rakunai, the birthplace of St. Peter ToRot, beginning the day with Morning Prayer and Holy Mass celebrated by Archbishop Emeritus Francesco Panfilo SDB.

The day includes two major workshops:

Workshop 1: Archbishop Rochus Tatamai, MSC

Workshop 2: Bishop Dariusz Kaluza, MSF

Participants will then visit historical sites significant to St. Peter ToRot's life, followed by another evening procession and Adoration.

Day 3: Saturday, 13 December 2025: Teachings, Mass, and Spiritual Reflections.

The third day begins at Vunapope with Morning Prayer and Holy Mass led by Archbishop Rochus J. Tatamai MSC.

Three workshops highlight the afternoon sessions:

Workshop 3: Father Tomas Ravaioli, IVE

Workshop 4: Bishop Donald Lippert, OFM Cap

Workshop 5: Bishop Francis Meli [This workshop was cancelled]

The day concludes with a Eucharistic procession, Adoration, and the return of pilgrims to their accommodation.

Day 4: Sunday, 14 December 2025: Grand Celebration at Takubar Sports Field.

The final day is expected to draw one of the largest Catholic gatherings in the country. Gates at Takubar Sports Field will open at 4:00 am, with thousands of pilgrims moving in before the 6:30 am cutoff.

Highlights include:

Closing Eucharistic Celebration (8:30–10:00 am) Presided over by His Eminence Sir John Cardinal Ribat, MSC, DD, this Mass marks the pinnacle of the national celebration.

Official Speeches and Gift Presentations (10:00–11:30 am)
Speakers include: Bishop Otto Separy, President of CBC PNG/SI, Hon. Michael Marum, Governor of East New Britain, Archbishop Rochus Tatamai MSC, who will present gifts to: Delegates from Rome, Apostolic Nuncio Maurizio Bravi, His Eminence Cardinal John Ribat

A Vatican representative will also offer an official response message.

The celebration concludes with lunch and additional activities under the “Special Program.”

A Celebration of Faith, Unity, and Hope

The Archdiocese of Rabaul emphasizes that the Sainthood Celebration of St. Peter ToRot is not only a moment of honor for the nation but a spiritual call to deepen faith and witness Christian values with renewed conviction. As pilgrims, clergy, and international delegates gather, the Church prays that the example of St. Peter ToRot continues to inspire generations to live with courage, integrity, and hope.

At the end of the first day of activities, the Bishops Conference published the following news on its website:

A CALL TO HOLINESS ROOTED IN BAPTISM: APOSTOLIC NUNCIO HIGHLIGHTS THE LIFE AND WITNESS OF SAINT PETER TOROT

Vunapope, East New Britain - Thursday, December 11, 2025 - The four-day celebrations in honour of Saint Peter ToRot began solemnly and prayerfully with the Opening Eucharistic Celebration at the Sacred Heart Cathedral, Vunapope, where more than two thousand Catholic faithful from dioceses across Papua New Guinea gathered in faith, unity, and thanksgiving.

His Excellency Archbishop Maurizio Bravi, Apostolic Nuncio to Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, delivers the Homily during the Opening Eucharist in Sacred Heart Cathedral Vunapope.

Presiding at the Eucharist and preaching the homily was His Excellency Archbishop Maurizio Bravi, Apostolic Nuncio to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. In a deeply inspiring and catechetical homily, Archbishop

Bravi presented Saint Peter ToRot not only as a national hero of faith, but as a universal model of Christian holiness rooted in baptism, family life, the Eucharist, and courageous witness.

Addressing Archbishop Rochus Tatamai MSC, Cardinal Sir John Ribat MSC, the assembled bishops, clergy, religious, civil authorities, and the faithful, the Apostolic Nuncio reminded the congregation that moments such as this — when the Church formally recognises the holiness of one of her sons— are moments of profound grace.

“In the life of the Church —Archbishop Bravi said— there are moments of great significance. Among these is the recognition of the holiness of the life of the baptised person.” He recalled that it was through the supreme apostolic authority of the Popes —Saint John Paul II in 1995 and Pope Leo XIV on 19 October this year— that Peter ToRot was first declared Blessed and now proclaimed a Saint.

A Saint Because He Was Holy

Archbishop Bravi emphasised that Peter ToRot did not become a saint simply because he died a martyr. Rather, “Peter ToRot is a martyr of Christ because he was a saint.” His martyrdom, he explained, was the final seal of a life already lived entirely in holiness.

Though his earthly life lasted only thirty-three years, the Apostolic Nuncio noted that it was a life shaped daily by a conscious and constant response to God’s call. Peter ToRot’s final act of witness was heroic, but it flowed naturally from a lifetime of fidelity to Christ.

Four Milestones on the Path to Holiness

In a structured and pastoral reflection, Archbishop Bravi outlined four key milestones that marked Peter ToRot’s

journey to holiness: milestones that also speak powerfully to Christians today.

The first was his family. Born in 1912 in Rakunai to Angelo ToPuia and Maria Ia Tumul, Peter learned the faith first and foremost at home. His parents, among the early converts of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in 1898, passed on a deep Catholic faith that shaped his entire life. “It was at home —the Nuncio stressed— not in school, where he learned the most important lessons of his life.”

The second milestone was his devotion to the Eucharist. From his First Holy Communion, Peter developed a tender, simple, and profound love for the Eucharist, attending Mass daily and serving at the altar. So strong was this devotion that he sought permission to live near the church in order to remain close to the source of his strength. Archbishop Bravi described the Eucharist as “Peter ToRot’s biggest secret.”

The third milestone was his formation and service as a catechist. Enrolled at St Paul’s College in Taliligap at the age of 18, Peter ToRot dedicated the rest of his life to teaching the faith he had first received. “As he learned the faith —the Nuncio said— he became a teacher of the faith,” embodying the mission of the lay catechist in the life of the Church.

The fourth milestone was his married life. Married to Paula Ia Varpit in 1936, Peter lived marriage as a true Christian vocation. The Apostolic Nuncio highlighted their shared prayer life, mutual respect, openness, and joint responsibility in raising their children, presenting their marriage as a powerful witness to the sanctity of family life.

Faithful Unto Death

The homily culminated in the account of Peter ToRot’s final witness during the Japanese occupation, when he courageously opposed the introduction of polygamy, recognising it as

contrary to the Gospel and Church teaching. Arrested in 1945 and later murdered by lethal injection, Peter ToRot gave his life rather than compromise his faith.

Recalling Peter's final words: "I must fulfil my duty as a witness in the Church of Jesus Christ," Archbishop Bravi described him as "a witness of holiness in life, a martyr in death."

A Challenge to Every Baptised Person

While encouraging admiration for Saint Peter ToRot, the Apostolic Nuncio challenged the faithful to go further. "Is admiration enough?" he asked. Drawing a direct connection between Peter's life and the lives of all Christians, he urged the faithful to examine how they live their baptism, how they nurture their faith, and how they build their families.

"Admiring this young man —he said— is an opportunity to renew ourselves in Christian faith, to correct what is contrary to the Gospel, and to straighten out those situations unworthy of a baptised person."

The homily concluded with a united invocation, as the entire congregation called upon the intercession of the new saint: "Saint Peter ToRot, pray for us."

The Opening Eucharist set a profound spiritual tone for the four-day celebrations, inviting the Church in Papua New Guinea —and beyond— to walk anew on the path of holiness, inspired by the life and witness of her first canonised saint.

And Agenzia Fides:

**THE NATION GATHERS AROUND ST. PETER TO ROT.
CARDINAL RIBAT:
“A GIFT FOR THE CHURCH AND FOR THE WORLD”**

Rabaul (Agenzia Fides) - More than two thousand pilgrims participated in the thanksgiving celebrations in honor of Saint Peter To Rot, catechist and martyr canonised on October 19 in St. Peter's Basilica by Pope Leo XIV. From December 11 to 14, the Catholic bishops of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands gathered in Rabaul, along with thousands of faithful from across the country, to visit the saint's birthplace and celebrate a solemn Mass, presided over by Cardinal John Ribat, who reiterated that To Rot is “a gift for the Church in Papua New Guinea and for the whole world.” Contacted by Fides, the Cardinal declared: “We experienced the canonization of To Rot with joy and as a moment of abundant blessing, which our saint bestows today upon the people of Papua New Guinea.” “His presence—he added—represents for us the witness of being part of a history of holiness that permeates our land and the entire world. Now we too are a grain of sand in the history of holiness and salvation that the Lord is writing.”

The Cardinal observed that faith in Papua, and therefore the path of Saint Peter To Rot, “is the fruit of the work of the missionaries who have led us to Jesus Christ,” recalling that the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) arrived in Rabaul in 1882, when Father Jules Chevalier, founder of the congregation, accepted Pope Leo XIII's invitation to evangelize territories such as Melanesia and Micronesia.

“Now, more than a hundred years later—he noted—, another Pope Leo, in perfect continuity, has recognised one of our saints: for us in Papua New Guinea, this is a historic

milestone that tells us that God has done great things for us. We feel encouraged and blessed.” Saint Peter To Rot, Cardinal Ribat added, “reminds us that faith is lived in the family: he was a father and, as a catechist, he understood God’s command to remain faithful to the Lord and to keep the family and the community united during a difficult time in the Pacific.” “His story speaks to families today, in our context: let God be a part of your life. Even though the world changes, God’s truth for us remains the same: his love and his salvation.”

The Cardinal concluded: “To Rot was faithful to the end, a credible and authentic witness.” Thanks to him and his legacy, the Church in Papua New Guinea is alive and flourishing today: with some 2.5 million Catholics, our community is fully committed to social work in the fields of education and health, thus contributing to the human, moral, social, and spiritual growth and development of the nation.





















6- PLACES OF PILGRIMAGE

Throughout this book, we have mentioned various places related to the life of Saint Peter To Rot. Next, then, we present a brief guide to the most important sites for those who have the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to the island of New Britain.

1- In Rakunai

THE SHRINE OF SAINT PETER TO ROT

The shrine of Saint Peter To Rot also known as the Saint Peter To Rot Memorial Church (mistakenly called a “basilica”) is located in Rakunai, the village where Saint Peter To Rot was born, lived, and was buried. Without a doubt, this sanctuary is the main pilgrimage site because the mortal remains of the saint are found here. Its history dates back to the original church of the village, built with branches and jungle materials around 1898. The land on which the sanctuary stands was donated to the missionaries by Angelo To Puia, father of Peter To Rot. Prior to the war, there was a smaller church that To Rot helped maintain. The construction of the sanctuary began in 1993, when To Rot’s martyrdom was officially recognised, meaning that his forthcoming beatification was assured. It was officially consecrated and inaugurated by the then Archbishop of Rabaul, Karl Hesse, MSC, on July 7, 1995, the day on which the liturgical memorial of the martyr, beatified a

few months earlier on January 17 of that same year, was celebrated for the first time.

We reproduce below two articles that appeared in the Post-Courier newspaper of Papua New Guinea on July 14, 1995, written by Father Theo Aerts, MSC. Father Theo was a Belgian missionary who dedicated much of his life to work in Papua New Guinea. He arrived in the country in 1969, and in addition to an enormous pastoral work, he was a professor for many years at the Bomana seminary in Port Moresby. He is also the author of two major works: *The Martyrs of Papua New Guinea: 333 Missionary Lives Lost During World War II* (1994), and *Christianity in Melanesia* (1998). He died on April 21, 2014, at the age of 82.

CHURCH OF THE MARTYR

By Father Theo Aerts, MSC

Last Friday a Catholic church was officially opened at Rakunai in East New Britain, to be a lasting memorial to Blessed Peter ToRot, beatified in January this year by Pope John Paul 2 on his second official visit to Papua New Guinea.

The new Rakunai church was designed by Mr. Steve Joyce, who began its construction in September 1992. It has a Sepik style bell tower 20 metres high, and the main church can easily accommodate up to 1,500 people.

Mr. Joyce, a New Zealander, came to Rabaul in 1991 to work as a lay missionary, qualified in water plants. He turned architect and at one stage had up to 36 projects on his plate. Rakunai was his first church construction, but others followed, for example at the Rapolo Major Seminary, and at the regional headquarters of a religious society at Vunapope.

An attempt has been made at Rakunai to include local cultural features, both from the past and from newer times. Besides the unadorned Sepik steeple above the main entrance,

there are the three typical turrets (or “hats”) on the roof, recalling traditional Tolai constructions. Tower and turrets are of stainless steel, precluding the future repairs which one day will be necessary for the rest of the rather complicated roof construction, made of galvanised paneldeck.

The building has a recurring octagonal motif, derived from local roundhouses and found here in the building’s ends, the shape of the memorial chapel, and in some internal features such as the base of the concrete altar and the stand for the Readings. Newer influence is visible in the wrought iron screen wall, with various motifs from nature (by Mr. Werner Ahrens), and the outline designs for fourteen Stations of the Cross made by Mr. Tom Deko of the Creative Arts Faculty of the University of PNG in Port Moresby.

As to modern art, six big paintings by Tomas Pasemo, once a student at the National Arts School, adorn the two inside chapels. The baptismal chapel has three representations of the baptismal waters according to the Old Testament (the Crossing of the Red Sea), the New Testament (Jesus’s Baptism in the River Jordan), and in the life work of Blessed Peter (the administration of the Sacrament). The Blessed Sacrament Chapel’s three paintings follow the same logic, but now referring to the Eucharist. Thus, Blessed ToRot is shown giving Holy Communion to a bedridden Tolai man.

Then there are the window decorations of the Memorial Chapel proper — four glass paintings by Australian artist Steven Moore, from Sydney. The designs give a short story of Blessed ToRot’s life. They include his training years at the catechists’ school at Taliligap, his teaching ministry even under the Japanese air raids, his assistance to local marriages (with a spy in the background), and finally his martyr’s death by injection of poison.

The Memorial Chapel proper will be blessed and dedicated on Sunday.

MOVING A MARTYR

By Father Theo Aerts, MSC

Six months after the beatification by Pope John Paul II of the Blessed Peter ToRot, the remains of the Tolai catechist martyred during World War II will finally find a permanent home in a newly dedicated church.

The church is in the parish of Rakunai, close to the still existing older church, the sisters convent and the community school, not far from the place where Blessed ToRot was formerly buried.

Celebrations began on Wednesday last week in the places remembered for Peter's catechist activities — at Pai na Lama [Palnalama], where there had been the wartime chapel, and at Taugo [Taogo], where Peter had his own house and where he hid the church's records in a tunnel dug in the side of a hill.

After another day of getting ready for the coming three days of festivities, there was the so-called "translation of the body" on Friday, July 7, the day now marked for all future memorial days in honor of the first Blessed of Papua New Guinea.

After the human remains of Peter ToRot had been taken around the various parishes in the Gazelle Peninsula, they began their last journey in front of the immense Vunapope church, accompanied by a motorcade of about thirty vehicles. From Vunapope the procession went to the village of Rakunai, about twenty km further inland, along the Burman Road close to the Teachers Training College of Vunakanau and the police station of Tomaringa.

The service in the church was presided over by the Archbishop of Rabaul, Karl Hesse. The Apostolic Nuncio

to Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, Archbishop Raymundo Moliner Ingles, assisted and gave the main homily. He made the point repeatedly that not only bishops and religious were called to sainthood, but every lay person as well. They might not have to follow Peter in his martyrdom, but his holy life should also be their goal and aim.

There were nine more bishops or their delegates present, together with about 50 concelebrating priests.

One of the VIP's for the occasion was Father Lucio De Stefano, MSC, who had come from Italy, and was the man who in Rome closely monitored the whole process of the beatification. Also from Europe came the German MSC Provincial, Father Schuette, whose confreres were so intimately linked with Blessed ToRot's life.

Besides several local politicians and community leaders, other guests of honor were the United Church bishop of the New Guinea Islands, Rev. Nason Waisale, the New Zealand architect and his wife, and the builders of the church, including Mr. Mike Roberts, Mr. Werner Ahrens and Mr. Kurt Jagersberger. They all first attended the church function, and later assisted at a series of speeches and choir performances.

After these, a drama (or concert) was performed, retracing the life and death of the heroic catechist and martyr.

Saturday was set aside to celebrate the values of Christian family life, so clearly demonstrated in Blessed Peter's life story. Mass was said in Tok Pisin by the Apostolic Nuncio, and the homily given by Bishop Paul Marx, of Kerema. The preacher underlined how the catechist stood firm against enemies from inside and outside who urged him to take a second wife and to approve of divorce, and so on. He showed how these enemies are still with us today, even when the United Nations declared 1994 "The Year of the Family", but then try

to promote attitudes and actions which are far removed from the Christian ideals.

The whole afternoon was spent in traditional dancing, with groups from Port Moresby, West New Britain, and especially the Gazelle Peninsula. Some rare dances were shown, including the famous Bainings fire dance by people from Kamanacham village.

The last day of the three-day celebration was Sunday, when the regular Sunday service was devoted to youth with Bishop Lucas Matlatarea from Bereina presiding the Eucharist and giving the sermon.

Once again there was perfect polyphonic Tolai music, including songs by a group from Kerevat Corrective Institution. After the service in the church there were performances by youth choirs and string bands.

The concluding service was held about 4.30pm, with the final “translation of Blessed To Rot’s relics to the Memorial Chapel.” Father Lucio De Stefano underlined at that occasion that in the catholic view, the “earthly remains” of Blessed Peter were just that, and not any miraculous substance. The beatification did not make them any different, he said, and these relics would remain so till the Last Day, when all believers would be glorified by the grace of God.

For the next step towards making Blessed Peter ToRot a saint via the process of canonisation, Rome will require a “sign from heaven,” such as a fully attested healing miracle or a special spiritual gift, attributed to him.

Approximate coordinates to find the site on online maps: -4.27443,
152.12591

The shrine of Saint Peter To Rot



THE MEMORIAL CHAPEL OF THE REMAINS

This small chapel is located behind the main church and houses the urn containing the saint's mortal remains. The urn is a simple wooden box placed under the altar and protected by a glass, on a base of white and beige tiles with diamond patterns.

The remains are kept in this smaller chapel for two main reasons. First of all, it is a much smaller and quieter place than the sanctuary, creating an atmosphere of prayer and meditation that the sanctuary does not offer. Secondly, when designing this small chapel, security was taken into account, because while the sanctuary is always open to the faithful, the chapel, on the other hand, is guarded, and to enter, it is necessary to do so during the designated hours or to find one of the people responsible. Given that it houses such important and valuable relics, it is logical to want to minimise all risks.

It is a place of silent prayer, and it deserves to be visited to dedicate some time to meditation. The children from the school next door go during recess to pray, and large groups of pilgrims visit this chapel as the central place and highlight of the pilgrimage.

Inside the chapel, there are four stained glass windows created by the Australian artist Robert Moore, which depict in images the most important events in the life of the martyred catechist: his training at the catechist school in Taliligap, his tireless apostolate among the people of the villages, his generous assistance as a witness in clandestine marriages, and, finally, his martyrdom by lethal injection.

THE CEMETERY

The Rakunai cemetery was established by Father Carl Laufer, MSC, parish priest of Rakunai during the time of Peter To Rot. It is located less than three hundred meters from the sanctuary. The cemetery has an altar that the then parish priest ordered to be built beneath a large crucifix, indicating the place where he himself wished to be buried:

next to the altar and under the cross. However, upon learning of To Rot's death, the people of Rakunai decided that the remains of the martyr catechist should rest in that place of honour. At that moment, Father Carl was imprisoned and could not be consulted. Even so, knowing the good heart of their parish priest and the deep friendship and esteem he felt for To Rot, they judged that he would gladly accept giving up that privileged place to his friend.

Chapel with the relics of the saint









SAINT PETER TOROT

7
JULY
1945

THE CAVES AND THE SO CALLED “WATER OF TO ROT”

Rakunai is located in a mountainous area, and this naturally favoured the formation of numerous caves in the mountains. Access to the caves is not a simple matter, it involves walking through the jungle, and the natural difficulties of the terrain means that not everyone can achieve it. During the war, the local inhabitants used these caves to hide from the Japanese and take refuge during the bombings. And these caves also became meeting and gathering places for the young martyr catechist with the faithful who needed any kind of help, whether spiritual or material. It should be remembered that all the priests and missionaries were imprisoned, and therefore To Rot was the only one who practiced the apostolate among the faithful. And to do so, he had to work clandestinely, hidden in these caves, to avoid being discovered by the Japanese, who had prohibited all religious activity. Unfortunately, he also had to hide from some of his own neighbours, as many were willing to report the good catechist to the Japanese authorities in exchange for favours.

Nowadays, these caves are considered pilgrimage sites, and all pilgrims wish to visit them, often making great sacrifices and using great physical efforts to reach them. Among all the caves, there is one that stands out especially as the favourite of the pilgrims: the one where the saint had reserved and hidden the Blessed Sacrament. It is a cave with a double entrance, which includes a small natural grotto where the catechist kept the ciborium with the consecrated hosts.

When we talk about the “water of To Rot,” we are referring to a spring located inside a deep cave, again, in the jungle. This cave was another place where the catechist used to hide to teach catechism and carry out his apostolic work. For example, there he prepared couples for the sacrament of marriage. Over time, the cave became very abandoned and forgotten for years, and no one remembered or visited it. Until an FMI Sister (the congregation of native nuns we mentioned earlier) reported having a dream in which Peter To

Rot indicated the location of the cave and told her that, to prove the story was true, she would find water at the end of it. The sister followed Peter To Rot's instructions and, indeed, not only found the cave but also discovered a spring of water inside it, a spring which continues to flow to this day. Although this story cannot be verified in an official documented way, there is no reason to doubt the honesty of the Sister. On the contrary, the discovery of the forgotten cave and the presence of water support her testimony. As a result, pilgrims who visit Rakunai often go to this cave, collect water from the spring, and take it to their villages to give it to those suffering from illnesses.

TAOGO

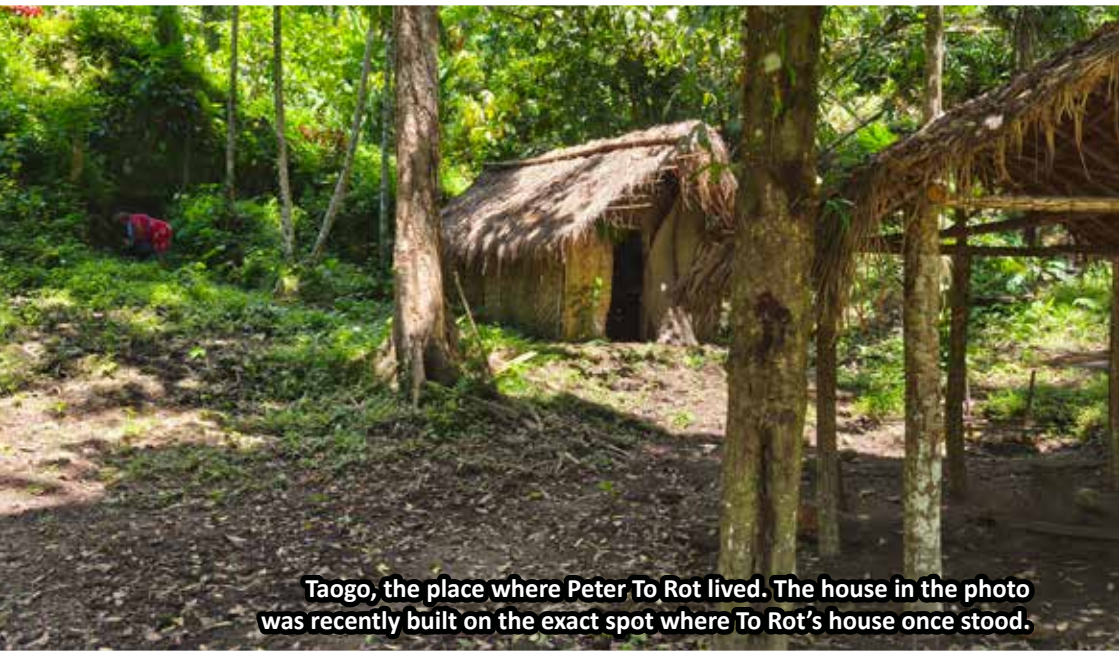
Taogo is the area in Rakunai where Peter To Rot's family owned their farm. It is also located in the jungle, about a half-hour walk from the shrine. For the canonisation, an altar has been built so that visiting priests can celebrate Holy Mass. A house has also been built using materials from the jungle on the exact spot where Peter To Rot's house once stood, so that pilgrims can imagine what life was like in the village and what kind of dwelling the martyred catechist lived in.

A few meters from the catechist's house is one of the many tunnels where he secretly carried out his ministry. This tunnel, however, is special: here he hid the Blessed Sacrament.

PALNALAMA

This is the place in the jungle where To Rot built a small chapel after the Japanese destroyed the main church of Rakunai. His brother Tatamai remembers it this way: "One day he urged the people to build a church. We did as he asked, and the church was built. When the house of prayer was finished, we had a celebration. The children began their education there. When a couple wished to get married, they told To Rot so that he could obtain the required permission.

When he had done this, he performed the church ceremony.” A cousin of the saint said: “Sometimes [To Rot] he would bring consecrated hosts from the central mission station at Vunapope, which was a five to six hours walk away, and then he would call the people together in the church at Palnalama to receive Holy Communion.” A few months before the canonisation, an altar was built so that the pilgrim priests could celebrate the Holy Mass.



Taogo, the place where Peter To Rot lived. The house in the photo was recently built on the exact spot where To Rot's house once stood.



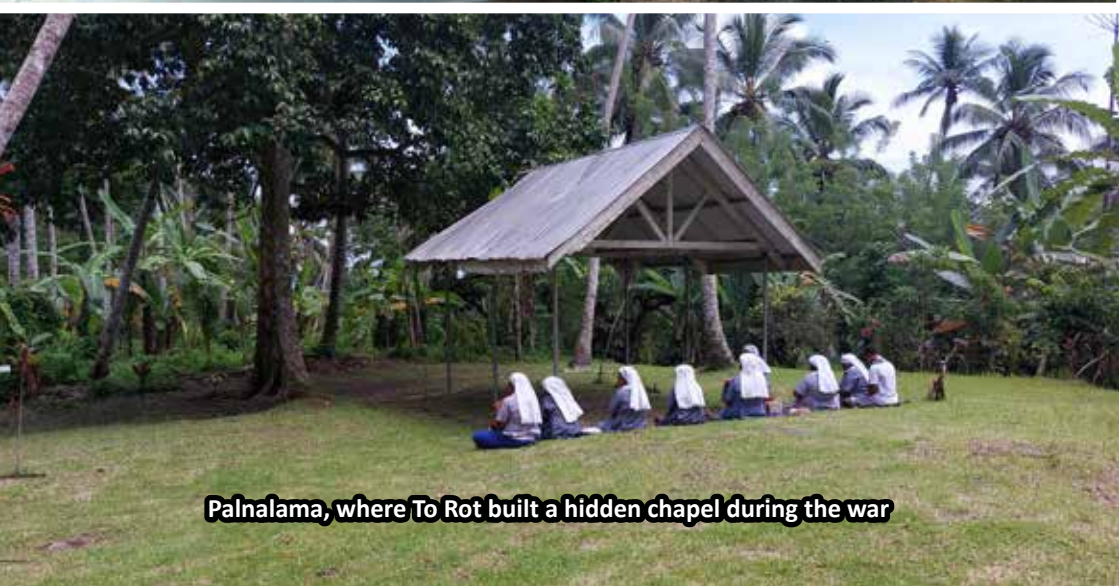
Caves where To Rot taught catechism clandestinely and hid the Blessed Sacrament



"The water of To Rot." Spring inside a cave where Peter To Rot taught catechism.



Entrance to the cave



Palnalama, where To Rot built a hidden chapel during the war

2- Outside Rakunai

VUNAPOPE

Vunapope is the historical and spiritual heart of Catholicism in Papua New Guinea, especially in the New Britain region. It is a large Catholic missionary complex located near Kokopo, about thirty kilometres south of Rabaul. It is the main center of the Archdiocese of Rabaul and in much of the country it is considered the “cradle of evangelisation”.

A bit of history: the original name of the place was Mioko or Kininigunan. In 1895, Bishop Louis André Couppé, MSC, renamed it Vunapope (in Tolai: *vuna* = place or house; and *Pope* = Pope), as a tribute to Pope Leo XIII who supported the missions and entrusted the MSC with the evangelisation of the area.

Under Louis Couppé (apostolic vicar from 1889 to 1923), an ambitious plan was developed: to transform the Tolai into an autonomous Christian community, with education, agriculture, and the training of local leaders. And to achieve this, they built schools (elementary, vocational, and for catechists), trade workshops (carpentry, mechanics, etc.), model farms (for copra [dried coconut meat], coconuts, and self-sufficiency), homes for boys and girls, and a great etcetera. Vunapope was, literally, a self-sufficient city.

In the German colonial era (up to 1914), there were dozens of MSC priests, brothers, European and local sisters (including the native FMI sisters, founded by Couppé himself in Vunapope).

During World War II, the area was occupied by the Japanese and Vunapope served as a base, but it resisted and survived.

Here you will find the Sacred Heart Cathedral. The current building is modern because the previous one was destroyed by the Allies in one of the many bombings. The old building was truly majestic. The current one, on the other hand, has a tropical design: it is shaped like a sea snail, with a high ceiling for ventilation, a structure resistant

to volcanoes and ash, and elements such as stained glass windows, a central altar, and spacious areas for Tolai liturgical dances.

Currently, Vunapope is a huge complex: it houses the cathedral, the archdiocesan offices, several convents, schools, a hospital, a house for priests, a cemetery, a bookshop, a radio station, sports fields, and a center for meetings of priests and laypeople.

If Rabaul is more of an urban and historical war center, Vunapope is the Tolai Catholic soul: this is where it all began. It is much more than a church. It is a complete mission city, with more than one hundred and thirty years of history.

Approximate coordinates to find the site on online maps: -4.34409, 152.27741

RABAU

In Rabaul, one will find the Co-Cathedral of Saint Francis Xavier. It is one of the most important churches in the province of East New Britain. It is located in the Kuragaga area, in Rabaul town, on Malaguna Road. Why is it called a “Co-Cathedral”? Because it was the cathedral of the archdiocese until 1994, when a volcanic eruption destroyed the city of Rabaul, and it was decided to move the cathedral to Vunapope, where it is currently located.

The Archdiocese of Rabaul, then, has two episcopal sees: the main cathedral is the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Vunapope, and the Co-Cathedral is Saint Francis Xavier.

It is located about thirty kilometres from Vunapope, and it takes just under an hour to get there by vehicle because the road is not in good condition. From Rakunai it is even closer: just about twelve kilometres, and approximately twenty or thirty minutes by vehicle.

The original church was built around 1927. During World War II, Rabaul was heavily bombed by the Allies, and the original cathedral was destroyed. The current one was rebuilt and dedicated in 1965. It is very easy to visit, as it is located in the city center, and near

other tourist spots such as the market, Tavurvur volcano, and the Japanese tunnels.

The architecture is quite simple and functional, typical of many churches rebuilt in the Pacific after World War II. It is not a grandiose building, but rather, it meets the practical needs of the area: tropical climate, limited resources, and post-war reconstruction.

Approximate coordinates to find the site on online maps: -4.19823, 152.17557

RAMALE

We have already talked about this place in the chapter titled “Imprisonment of the Missionaries.” In a straight line, it is twenty-three kilometres from Rakunai and six kilometres from Vunapope.

Unlike Vunaiara, which was a detention site for locals (such as Peter To Rot and other Catholic Tolai), Ramale was the main Japanese detention camp for European and Western civilians during the Japanese occupation. During the war, about three hundred people from seventeen different nationalities were imprisoned: missionaries (many German, Australian, etc. Catholics), plantation owners, mixed families (descendants from the German colonial era in New Guinea), traders, and other civilians who were not soldiers. Even children.

The Japanese took them to this valley in June 1944. At first, they were imprisoned in Vunapope, but due to the bombings, the Japanese decided that it was best to send the foreigners to Ramale. There they were kept in a dense jungle valley under very harsh conditions: hunger, diseases like malaria or dysentery, forced labour, and isolation. They survived thanks to some local help from the Tolai and other people who managed to secretly bring in food or medicine.

The then Archbishop of Rabaul wrote the following: “According to statistics still in my possession, the average number of sicknesses per day during the fifteen months in Ramale was 23.6. That aggregate includes malarial cases confined to the bed. If all other afflictions such

as digestive troubles and tropical ulcers were counted too the average would go up to 92.9 per day. The first two months and the last six months were the worst.”

Nowadays, Ramale is a normal village, known for its coconut plantations. And the place can be visited without any problem. From the road, to access the prison and the caves where the missionaries were located, it is necessary to walk for half an hour or forty minutes, descending a fairly steep hill. Without a doubt, it is worth dedicating two or three hours to visit the place. And when visiting it, it is necessary to keep in mind that fifty-eight missionaries died there: twenty-three priests, seventeen brothers, nine European sisters, and nine native sisters. Of the fifty-eight missionaries who lost their lives, twenty-one were murdered by the Japanese, while the rest died from tropical diseases or malnutrition. It is therefore a place of prayer and reflection.

Approximate coordinates to find the site on online maps: -4.393947, 152.297295

VUNAIARA (OR NAVUNARAM)

This is the place where Peter To Rot was imprisoned and where he died. Today, there is a monument in memory of him and the other prisoners. As the crow flies, it is only a kilometre from Rakunai, which explains why some relatives of To Rot could visit him almost daily.

There, a Japanese concentration camp or prison operated (known as *Vunaiara Concentration Camp*, *Vunaiara Police Concentration Camp*, or *Vunaiara Japanese Police Station*), which were actually caves and tunnels used as cells. You should not imagine the To Rot prison as a jail like the ones we know today, made of cement and with steel bars, but rather as a place in the middle of the jungle, where prisoners lived in tunnels, caves, or small rooms made with jungle materials. Life in that place was, without a doubt, inhumane. However, the fact that they were surrounded by jungle allowed the prisoners to have their

own gardens and enjoy a sort of outdoor life. This place is considered a historical site associated with World War II.

Approximate coordinates to find the place from which to start walking: -4.284774, 152.125162

TALILIGAP

Located about eight kilometres from Rakunai and fifteen from Vunapope, Taliligap is the place where the *Saint Paul's Catechist Training College* was located, the training college which Peter To Rot attended from 1930 to 1933. From the very first day, according to his parish priest, To Rot felt at home. This school was established in 1925 by the then archbishop of Rabaul, Gerhard Vesters, MSC. We have talked about this place and the life of the students in the chapter titled “Catechist Training.”

Currently, there is practically nothing to see, everything was destroyed. The only thing that has remained are some cement foundations by the roadside, where the school is believed to have been located.

Approximate coordinates to find the site on online maps: -4.32286, 152.16699

MATUPIT

Finally —although it is not strictly related to Saint Peter To Rot—, it would not be just to end this book without mentioning the village of Matupit, which was the first to receive the Good News of the Gospel. It was here that on the 29th of September 1882 the first three catholic missionaries, of whom we spoke at the start of this book, disembarked. It had taken them three months to arrive from Europe. Although the first Catholic missionaries arrived at Matupit, due to the strong and well-established Methodist influence, as well as some accidental fires of their original huts, they did not stay there permanently.

Although today on the 29th of September we celebrate the feast day of the Holy Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, we know that before the liturgical reform, this day was reserved for the Archangel Michael alone, while Gabriel had his feast in March and Raphael in October. And so it was that St Michael the Archangel became the patron of Papua New Guinea, and his feast is celebrated as a solemnity every 29th of September.

Currently in Matupit there is a church dedicated to St Michael the Archangel which can be visited throughout the year.

Vunapope



Cemetery for religious and missionaries in Vunapope



Co-Cathedral of Rabaul



Walking to the place of martyrdom





Place of martyrdom



Ramale





To summarise, if a pilgrim wishes to visit the most important and significant places in the life of Saint Peter To Rot, the advice we give is as follows:

- One-day pilgrimage: Rakunai and Vunapope.
- Two-day pilgrimage: Rakunai and Rabaul on the first day, Vunapope and Ramale the next day.
- Pilgrimage of three or more days: three days are sufficient to visit all the places mentioned above. The order of priority would be as follows: Rakunai, Vunapope, Rabaul, Ramale, Vunaiaara (with the previous warnings), Matupit and Taliligap.

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