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Blessed Peter To Rot



*On the 75th Anniversary
of his Martyrdom
and 25th Anniversary
of his Beatification*



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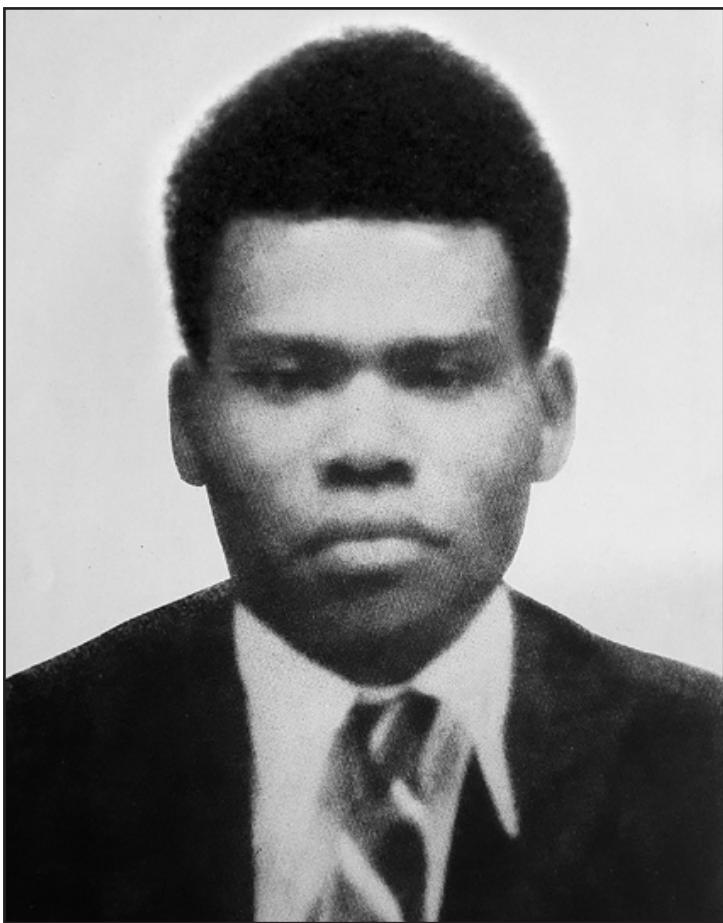
*On the 75th Anniversary of his Martyrdom
and 25th Anniversary of his Beatification*



Catholic Bishops Conference
of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

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Bishop of Vaniro

*Dedicated to all the catechists
of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands*



Blessed Peter To Rot
(1912 - 1945)

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Foreword

*by Archbishop Rochus Joseph Tatamai, MSC **

On the occasions of the 75th anniversary (1945 - 2020) of the martyrdom of Peter To Rot at the hands of the Japanese Doctor at Vunaiara Police Station, and the 25th anniversary (1995 - 2020) of his beatification, the official Church's declaration by St. Pope John Paull II of Peter To Rot as "Blessed," give us the graceful opportunity to re-visit and reflect on the many aspects and various contributing factors that interplayed in Peter To Rot's personal life and family upbringing: the Tolai culture into which he was born; the Church history with the arrival and work of the early missionaries in New Britain; the formation of the lay catechists and teachers with their

* Archbishop Rochus Tatamai is a close relative of Blessed Peter To Rot. Peter To Rot's elder brother is Joseph Tatamai, who is the Archbishop's grandfather. Joseph Tatamai is the father of Rochus Tatamai, and Archbishop took both names: his father and his grandfather's name, and thus he was baptised Rochus Joseph Tatamai. Since Blessed Peter To Rot was the younger brother of his grandfather, according to Melanesian culture and traditions, Peter To Rot is considered also his grandfather.

unique role, contribution and collaboration with the missionaries into the work of evangelization; the challenges and devastation of the Second World War in Rabaul; the imprisonment of the missionaries by the Japanese first at Vunapope then at Ramale Concentration Camp; all these factors made a significant contribution to the climate and environment in which Peter To Rot grew up and interacted with as a young Tolai man.

We firstly take note of the fact that Peter To Rot's parents, Angelo To Puia and Maria Ia Tumul, both belong to the first generation Christians and Catholics in their village at Rakunai. This fact is indeed important to properly understand and appreciate the dynamics in traditional family life and the role of the local culture, especially the unique role and engagement of the maternal uncles in the formation, instruction and initiation of young boys as regards to the relevant upbringing of the children as members in the clan. This process eventually gave way to the transition that Peter To Rot went from just another young man of his culture to being a keen altar boy, a learned student who then moved on to St Paul's Taliligap and trained as a teacher/catechist and a well-trusted collaborator and confidant of Fr. Karl Laufer, MSC, the Parish Priest at Rakunai.

When the Second World War broke out in Rabaul, in early 1942, the Japanese authorities immediate removed the missionaries from their respective parishes and bunched them altogether first at Vunapope then later to Ramale Concentration Camp. This was the occasion

that prompted Fr. Karl Laufer, MSC to delegate all the pastoral care and responsibilities to Peter To Rot as the head-catechist in the Parish at Rakunai. Peter To Rot regularly moved around the villages and neighborhoods to provide pastoral visitation, especially to the sick and the elderly, admonished the communities and gave encouragement and support to the senior catechists around the villages in Rakunai. In fact, during this period we observed Peter To Rot's initiative in creating and sustaining the Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) and the related activities, especially praying together in small groups, sharing food and caring for the sick and weak and looking after each other in their villages and dug-out tunnels.

The Japanese authorities were tolerant in the beginning, allowing people to gather in small groups for prayers and religious devotions. Thus, Peter To Rot moved freely and conducted his spiritual and religious activities amongst the communities without any hesitation. Sooner or later, the Japanese issued stricter observations of curfews to no more further public gatherings for spiritual and religious activities.

The ultimate test and challenge for Peter To Rot as a catechist came when the Japanese authorities, in view of winning local support, called together all the Chiefs or Luluais from the villages around Rakunai and declared anew that polygamy was allowed and permitted - meaning men and husbands were permitted to marry more than one wife. When Peter To Rot learnt about this new law, he insisted that this was against

Jesus Christ and his teaching. In fact, the chief or Luluai at Rakunai, Anton Tata and Joseph Tatamai, Peter To Rot's elder brother, both fell for the law on polygamy and took for themselves second wives. By local cultural practice, Peter To Rot, who was younger than both his chief Anton Tata and elder Joseph Tatamai, ought to remain silent and turn a blind eye on their choice to entertain polygamy. Instead, Peter To Rot was vocal and openly challenged both men to the extent that he even expelled his own elder brother from their family farmstead at Taogo to go away with the second wife, leaving his first wife and children with him. Joseph Tatamai lasted only a week away from his family and returned back and apologized to his younger brother Peter To Rot and his own family.

It was to such open rejection and opposition to polygamy, with the strong defense and promotion of the sacrament of Christian marriage, meaning one man united to one woman in marriage, that made Peter To Rot less popular even with his chief Anton Tata and elder brother, Joseph Tatamai. Incidentally, To Metapa, the local Japanese Police Spy, was also interested to take Ia Mentil, a married woman, to be his wife, but Peter To Rot intervened and prevented Ia Mentil, placing her under his own family protection. Peter To Rot's intervention left To Metapa a very bitter man. From that moment on, To Metapa looked for every opportunity to find fault with Peter To Rot.

The occasion arrived when Peter To Rot pre-arranged with a couple from Vunavidir to come early at dawn so he could witness and bless

their marriage at Palnalama. However, the couple came very late as the sun was already mid morning. They met To Metapa on the road and unsuspectingly disclosed to him that they were on their way to see the Catechist Peter To Rot to witness and solemnized their marriage. To Metapa urged them to go quickly for their appointment with Peter To Rot while he himself waited for their return on the roadside. On their return, To Metapa interrogated the couple to confirm if the marriage did take place and who else was present as a witness with Peter To Rot. They innocently confirmed everything as it happened and that Joseph Tatamai was the witness.

To Metapa immediately reported the matter to the Japanese Policemen Meshida and Gunto, who were in charge of Vunaiara Police Station, so that same afternoon the Japanese came and raided Peter To Rot's family farmstead at Taogo. The Japanese arrested Peter To Rot and his two brothers, Joseph Tatamai and Gabriel Telo and imprisoned them at Vunaiara Police Station.

From this moment onwards, Peter To Rot was clear and certain that he would not be released from prison because he was going there due to his work as a catechist. In fact, he reminded his two brothers that they will be released soon from prison but he is there for the reason of his work. While in prison, his mother Maria Ia Tumul and wife Paula Ia Varpit came on different occasions and tried to persuade Peter To Rot to leave prison and come home to the family. Peter To Rot's usual response to them was always his encouragement to them to go back home and to continue to pray.

Peter To Rot lived during the lockdown of the Second World War, an experience similar to that of the infant early Church as recorded in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. In fact, many of Peter To Rot's answers to the Japanese authorities when queried on his work as a catechist and resonated with those given by St. Peter before the Sanhedrin as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Peter To Rot was very clear and convinced about his pastoral duties, especially the defense of Christian marriage and promotion of family life. Hence his absolute certainty that his own human life was the ultimate gift and testimony to the Christian understanding of the sacrament of Marriage and the holiness and beauty of family life in every respect.

In the life of Peter To Rot, one encounters the various characters and roles with responsibility first in the family, then in the community, the Church and even the society of how to be a Christian with the spirituality of the laity. Peter To Rot began as a curious and adventurous child, very keen to learn facts for himself, so he never missed classes at the Parish School at Rakunai. Peter To Rot was a devoted altar boy, assisting Fr. Karl Laufer, MSC at daily Masses at the Parish at Rakunai. Peter To Rot was a catechist-student with an open mind and pleasant personality with all other students from different ethnic backgrounds. Peter To Rot was a young catechist-teacher in his Rakunai parish with an open attitude to learn more from his Parish Priest, thus commanding the respect and confidence of the senior catechists. Peter To Rot was a husband and father of his

family, dedicated to his family life and responsibilities as a catechist. Peter To Rot was a defender of the sacrament of Marriage and died a martyr for his faith and commitment to Jesus Christ and his teachings. Peter To Rot is an outstanding and distinguished Melanesian who can inspire and challenge all Melanesians and more importantly all Christians throughout the world to live a life of faithfulness to Christ and his teachings. We are all proud and thankful to St. Pope John Paul II for the beatification of Peter To Rot, Catechist and Martyr, who automatically becomes the Patron for all young people, especially the laity and catechists through the world.

✠ Rochus Joseph Tatamai
July 20, 2020

Introduction

On Tuesday 17 January 1995, more than 15 thousand people gathered at the Sir John Guise Stadium in Port Moresby. The occasion was a Holy Mass presided by Pope Saint John Paul II in which a humble Tolai catechist of 33 years of age would be declared Blessed, becoming in this way the first son of Papua New Guinea elevated to the honor of the altar. The catechist's name was Peter To Rot, and from that very moment, his name will be for ever written in the most glorious pages of the Martyrology, the book in which the Church records the names of those men and women who reached the highest degree of holiness.

Peter To Rot was a married man and a father of three children. His life, in the eyes of many, was not very different from that of his Tolai people. However, in some way it was very different, indeed. He was an outstanding man, full of virtues and an immense love for Jesus and the Catholic Church. His ministry as catechist was carried out with enormous responsibility and dedication, and his love for Our Lord present in the Eucharist is worthy to be compared with

those saints whose lives are well known to us. A man of prayer, he tenderly loved his three children and his wife Paula, with whom he prayed the rosary every night.

As a reward for his fidelity, while being still young and full of enthusiasm, Jesus offered him the most precious gift he can offer a human being: the palm of martyrdom. The good catechist was convinced that dying for the sake of Christ was not a defeat but in fact was the most important victory one could ever achieve. Indeed, martyrdom is not a failure, but a great triumph. Jesus Himself said: *“Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.”* (Jn 15:13) This faithful catechist was ready to show his *“greater love”* with the very sacrifice of his life, following the footsteps of his beloved Jesus.

This year we celebrate the 25th Anniversary of his beatification. This book was born as a small tribute that we, Catholics of Papua New Guinea, owe to our blessed catechist. He is the first among us to reach the glory of being declared “blessed,” and we can honor him by simply knowing his life and following his example. As Pope Benedict XVI said: “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*)

The book is divided into three parts. The first part contains a brief history of the evangelization in Papua New Guinea along with some remarks about Tolai’s culture. The second part is a complete biography

of Blessed Peter To Rot, in which we will find many testimonies of eye witnesses that give us a “first hand” account of his life. The last part is a short appendix with two homilies that will encourage us to follow To Rot’s steps.

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.

“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)” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 93)

Fr Tomás Ravaioli, IVE

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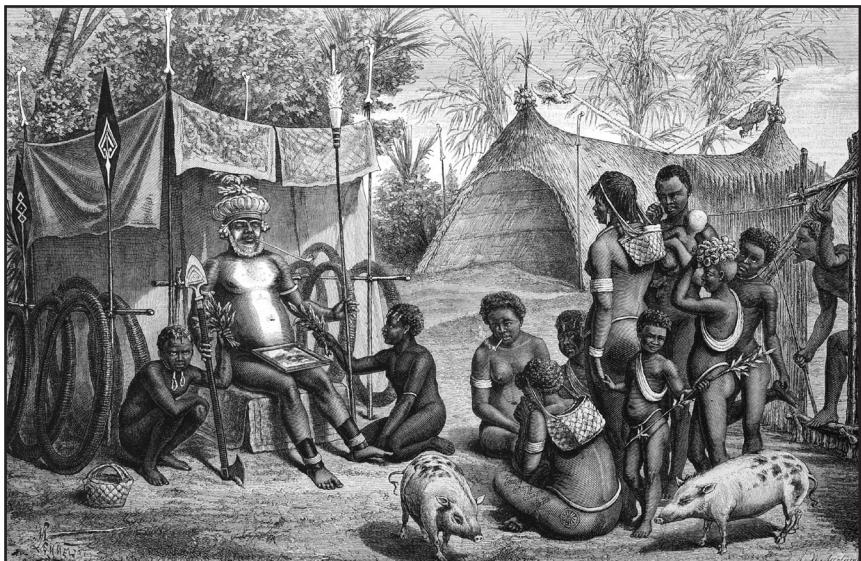
First Part

*Historical
Background*

First Part: *Historical Background*

When it comes to knowing someone's life, it is not enough to only have some knowledge regarding dates and episodes of their life, but it is also helpful to know the background and culture in which this person lived. Jesus' life, for example, is much more interesting when we know the history of Israel and how people used to live during those times. By doing so, we are able to better grasp the meaning of his teachings and the reason for his actions. The same happens with all men and women who lived before us and whose lives we want to know deeply.

For this reason, before talking about Blessed Peter To Rot's life and martyrdom, it would be useful for us to know his background. When we say "background," we mean two things: the Church's history in New Britain, and some remarks about Tolai's culture and traditions. Both things will help us to better understand his figure and realize how virtuous the catechist truly was.



"Celebration in New Britain"
Woodcut by Martin Laemmel, 1882

1 - Church History in New Britain

Catholic priests always accompanied Portuguese and Spanish ships in their trips into Melanesian waters in the opening years of the 16th century, but they were only chaplains to Catholic crews. Although they explored for the possibility of a Catholic mission in the area, there were no permanent mission stations until the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 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, brought fulfilment of the deepest longings of the heart, beyond any human expectation.” (*Ecclesia in Oceania*, 1)

It was not until 1788 that a Mission was developed in Sydney by both Catholic and Protestant missionaries. It was 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 set up the two Vicariates of Melanesia and Micronesia and entrusted them to the Society of Mary, also known as the “Marists.” They were the first Catholic missionaries to assume responsibility for the new mission field, and their generosity and courage are well known by all of us. Three years later, in 1847, under the leadership of Bishop Jean-Baptiste Epalle, they arrived off the South Solomon Islands to establish their main mission base in Melanesia. They choose Woodlark Island to be the base for the evangelization of the mainland, and they established a second base on Rooke Island, off the south coast of New Britain. This would be the starting point for the evangelization of Peter To Rot’s land.

The mission was not easy, and the courageous missionaries faced a lot of difficulties. Of the twenty missionaries sent to the area from 1847 to 1850, two bishops, fours priests and one brother died from native hatchets or tropical diseases, and six others had been totally incapacitated. For this reason, in April of 1850, the Superior General of the Marists wrote to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide requesting him to transfer the responsibility for the Vicariate of Melanesia to another missionary congregation.

Two years later, in 1852, priests of the Institute of Foreign Missions of Milan (also known as the PIME Fathers) replaced the Marists on Rooke and Woodlark Islands. Not much longer, in 1855, they also withdraw without much previous notice. Well-known and famous to us is the story of one of them, Blessed John Baptist Mazzucconi, who was unaware of the congregation's decision to leave the mission. When he returned from sick-leave to Woodlark Island, he was killed by the natives in September of the same year.

In 1875, a group of Methodist missionaries landed at Port Hunter, a trading-post in the Duke of York Islands, which lie a short distance off the Gazelle Peninsula. Their work was very successful, and within only two years, they established eleven Methodist mission stations among the Tolais.

Six years later, in 1881, Father René Lannuzel arrived on the Gazelle Peninsula and was well welcomed by the native people. He was able to set up a mission station there. Before leaving for Sydney to raise funds to continue his work, he baptised 76 children, who became the New Britain's first Catholics.

On September 2, 1881, he wrote a letter addressed to Cardinal Simeoni, Prefect of Propaganda Fidei, in which he recalls:

“Eager for the salvation of souls, I established the mission on the coast of New Britain, 40 kilometres from Port-Breton. New Britain is a very healthy and

densely populated island, with a population of about 90,000. The king received me very well and had a temporary house built for me by the people. Knowing a little English, the king and I have been able to understand each other very well. I have been given vast lands for the Mission.

(...) During my stay, 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 one God and a hell to punish the wicked and a 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 sent me their children, begging me to baptise them, and giving me leave to do whatever I thought was helpful for their salvation.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 68)

Around the same year, Pope Leo XIII requested Father Jules Chevalier, the founder of the Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to send missionaries to New Britain and take the responsibility for the vacant Vicariates of Melanesia and Micronesia.

On September 29, 1882, three Missionaries of the Sacred Heart landed in the area and took over the care of the station left during Father Lannuzel's absence to Sydney. Father Louis Navarre was the Superior of the group. This time, the generosity and good will of the missionaries was not enough, and problems continually arose among them: sickness, claiming of land rights, government restrictions of their activities, burning down the mission stations, etc. Despite all these difficulties, their work progressed favourably.

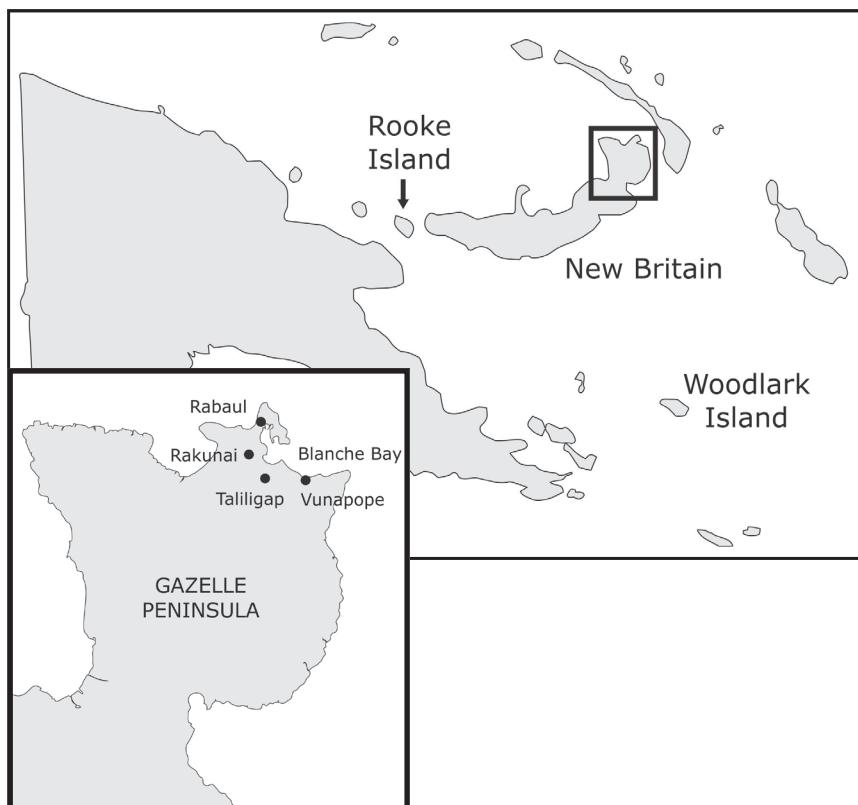
In 1887, just five years after his arrival, Father Louis Navarre sent a letter to the Prefect of Propaganda Fidei in which he gives a statistical picture of the evangelization in the whole Vicariate of Melanesia and Micronesia. These are the numbers that he sent to Rome:

“700 Catholics (100 European and 600 Native); approximately 1,500,000 pagans; 4 mission stations (2 in New Britain and 2 in New Guinea); 7 schools attended by 600 children; 9 priests, 6 sisters and 1 brother.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 79)

In other words, the missionaries were only 16, and those who had to be evangelized, millions. This draws attention to the supernatural strength of the missionaries and the generosity of God, who blessed with abundant fruits a harvest which had such few laborers.

Less than 50 years after this letter, at the beginning of 1933, Peter To Rot commenced his catechist ministry in his native village of Rakunai, and Bishop Leo Scharmach was ecclesiastical superior of the New Britain Mission. At the time, the Catholic Church had 90,000 Catholics, 670 churches, 70 priests, 40 religious brothers, 100 European sisters, 60 native religious sisters, 17,000 school children, 300 village schools, 550 catechist teachers, 1 seminary and 10 students for the priesthood.

This is how Christianity flourished in New Britain and the background from which Blessed Peter To Rot's emerged.



2 - The Work of Inculturation

A word of acknowledgment must be said here for those holy, brave and generous missionaries who, risking their lives, left everything behind for the sake of Jesus Christ. Out of love for Jesus and 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, who proclaimed: "*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 had been the first people to pronounce the name of Jesus in our country and the first to work in the beautiful field of inculturation. To them, we have a great debt of gratitude, and to them we give our most deep and sincere acknowledgment.

Jesus Alone is the Source of Eternal Salvation

Before going ahead with this short section regarding inculturation, it can be useful to recall to mind those clarifying words that Saint Peter, without any fear and filled with the Holy Spirit, said in front of the elders and scribes gathered in Jerusalem: ***“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”*** (Acts 4:12) Saint Paul adds 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) This, and no other, is the starting point from which our short reflection must start.

Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the source of eternal salvation. Jesus alone is ***“the way, the truth and the life”*** (Jn 14:6), and he does not share this privilege with anybody else. Jesus is not “one way” among others, or “one truth” among others. Not at all. He is ***“the way”*** and ***“the truth.”*** He is the only one by which we can receive salvation.

The New Testament is very clear when it comes to show Jesus as the only saviour. For example, we find that Saint Paul, addressing himself to the community of Corinth, writes: ***“Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth - as in fact there are many gods and many lords - yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”*** (1

Cor 8:5-6) Furthermore, Saint John the Apostle states: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* (Jn 3:16-17) For this reason, the universal salvific will of God is always connected to the sole mediation of Christ: *“[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all.”* (1 Tim 2:4-6)

The Church’s Magisterium, faithful to divine revelation, reasserts that Jesus Christ is the Mediator and the universal Redeemer. The thesis which denies the uniqueness and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ 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.” (*Idem*, 14)

It is very sad to notice that nowadays these eternal teachings of the Church find many opponents, including inside the Church Herself. Many Christians try to be more merciful than Jesus Himself was, and they would like salvation to be granted to everybody, no matter the god they believe, the faith they profess or the religion they follow. Some people consider the missionary work of the Church as something useless, because, according to their wrong principles, one religion is as good as another. Unfortunately for those who proclaim these things, the quoted documents of the Church strongly affirm the contrary.

This is not the place to question or discuss the eternal salvation of all those who did not know Jesus in the past, or those who do not have the possibility to know him also in our times. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is clear regarding this point and affirms: “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) And again: “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.” (*Declaration “Dominus Iesus,”* 20)

What happens with those who do not have the possibility to know the Gospel? Only God knows, and we leave the matter into his merciful hands. What we do know is that Jesus is the only saviour and that his name must be proclaimed to all nations. He Himself tells us: “***Whoever will have believed and been baptised will be saved. Yet truly, whoever will not have believed will be condemned.***” (Mk 16:16)

The Work of Inculturation

With the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church, founded by Him, be the instrument for the salvation of all humanity. This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world, but at the same time, it rules out, in a radical way, that mentality of indifferentism characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that all religions are more or less the same.

Time and again the Church, especially the Popes of last decades, has taught that the missionary character of the Church belongs to her very essence, and therefore, the Church, by her very nature,

must be missionary. Otherwise, she would not be following the desires and commands of her Divine Spouse. The Declaration “*Dominus Iesus*” says, “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. (...) 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 that came to our country knew that “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.” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, 16)

Jesus is not alien to any culture or language, to any situation or environment. The salvation he won for us in the Cross must be proclaimed to all nations at all times. Otherwise, we would not be honouring Jesus’ last command: “*Therefore, go forth and teach all nations.*” (Mt 28:19) Saint John Paul II continues: “The Gospel of 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.” (*Idem*, 17)

Let us recall what Pope Benedict XVI said to the Bishops of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Island during their *“Ad limina”* visit in 2012:

“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.”

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 inculcation 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)

To inculturate the Gospel, according to what Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI teach, does not mean to diminish the

evangelical message and demands of the faith, but rather to pass on “the eternal truths of the Gospel.” The Gospel does not have to decrease and adapt itself to the culture, but rather it has to challenge it, sometimes asking for some values and forms to change, and sometimes giving new light to those elements which are in accordance with Our Lord’s doctrine. In doing so, we should not spare efforts to elevate the culture and make it capable to receive Jesus’ teachings and demands in its fullness. Just as the Word made flesh entered history and dwelt among us, His Gospel must enter deeply into the life and culture of those who hear, listen and believe. Inculturation, the “incarnation” of the Gospel in the various cultures, affects the very way in which the Gospel is preached, understood and lived.

Inculturation and Liturgy

Before finishing this section about inculturation, a word should be said about the inculturation and the liturgy. Many times, we can have the temptation to understand the term “inculturation” as a synonym of adapting the liturgy and rites to a local custom or tradition, but it is far from that! To inculcuate the Gospel means to impregnate Jesus’ teachings to a determinate culture, purifying and enriching that culture with the message of Our Lord. In other words, we are not inculturating the Gospel only by adapting our liturgies and rites to

the customs and traditions of a certain culture. To think that we are doing a good work of inculturation only for using some local musical instruments or dances inside our liturgies is only a mockery of what inculturation really means.

It can be useful to read in its fullness a paragraph of Benedict XVI written 5 years before his election to the Pontificate:

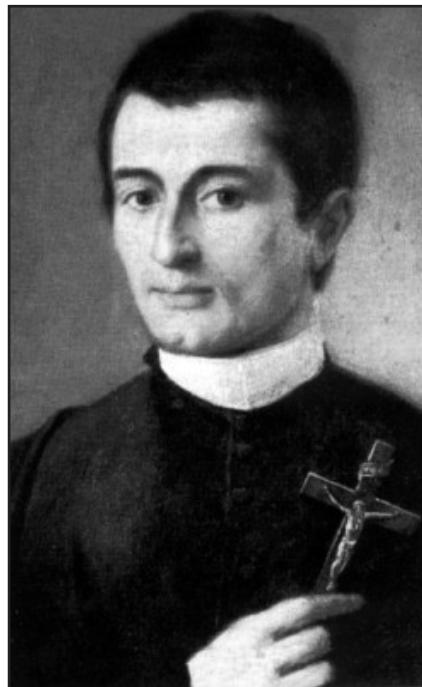
“At this point, a brief remark about the theme of liturgy and inculturation suggests itself. (...) Everywhere these days the liturgy seems to be the proving ground for experiments in inculturation. Whenever people talk about inculturation, they almost always think only of the liturgy, which then has 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.**" (JOSEPH RATZINGER, *The spirit of the liturgy*, Ignatius Press, 200-201)

According to the above text, we can only do a good work of inculturation when we dedicate ourselves fully and with generosity to pass on the message and mercy of Jesus. We inculturate the Gospel when we present Jesus' message in its fullness. We inculturate the Gospel when we, out of charity and love for the people we serve, challenge the elements of the culture that do not fit with the Catholic faith. We priests are inculturating the Gospel when we dedicate time to prepare our homilies and care for the splendour of the liturgy. We inculturate the Gospel when we dedicate time to console the sick and feed the hungry. We inculturate the Gospel when we teach in our schools and spend time with the children. We inculturate the Gospel, especially when we dedicate long hours to hear confessions and do our best to bring the people to the

Sacrament of the Eucharist. In this way, and only in this way, people will come to know Jesus.

This is what the first missionaries did in our beautiful country, and for it, we will always be in debt to them. May God allow us to be worthy followers of such a great army of missionaries.



Blessed John Baptist Mazzucconi, PIME
He was killed on September 7, 1855 in Woodlark Island

3 - Tolai's Culture

Peter To Rot was a “Tolai,” and he was proud of it. This term is nowadays used to refer to the people whose homeland lies within approximately twenty miles radius of Blanche Bay, on the Gazelle Peninsula, in New Britain. They received this name because of the words “to” and “lai,” which were a form of greeting frequently used among them. For this reason, strangers and foreigners came to designate them as “Tolais,” and that is how we still call them today.

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.

Anthropologists held that the Tolai people were very violent, and cannibalism was something common among them. We do not know

whether cannibalism had anything to do with their religious beliefs, but whatever the reason, we do know that it was a common practice. A book on Tolai's culture says: "Place names still remind us of the fact [of cannibalism]. The site of the first Mission Station of Blanche Bay is named Tavuvutavur, which means the place where the 'tavur,' a trumpet-like conch shell, is sounded to summon the people to a ritual distribution of human flesh."

Regarding their religion, Tolai people were animists and believed that the lives of the people, as well as other wordly affairs, were largely managed by spirits. Among the spirits, they used to divide them into different groups: extraterrestrial, terrestrial, and ghosts of the dead. All spirits were able to be pacified or propitiated by ritual actions, sorcery or magic. Since religion and ethics always walk together, their ethics were 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."

Regarding their education, we know that from early childhood, young Tolais were separated from parental discipline to be cared for by a maternal uncle. As preparation for life, they were made aware of a few clan laws, mainly in regard to marriage. They had to learn some simple rules of gardening and a few skills in hunting and fishing.

They had no writing nor reading abilities, and their mathematics consisted only in counting in “kurene” or half dozens, but counting only reached up to a few hundreds. Their pictorial art consisted of geometric patterns, and they practised very little carving or sculpture. They made no clothes, as they wore none. The centuries apparently saw the Tolais undisturbed, uninfluenced by the history of the world beyond the seas around New Britain.

A short and complete summary on Tolai’s beliefs and practices can be found in the letter addressed to the Holy Father asking him to considerate the request of recognition of Peter To Rot heroic virtues. In that occasion, the Postulator says, “In the last decade of the 19th century, the Tolai people 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 was the situation among the Tolai until the coming of the whiteman, the traders, the missionaries and government officials.

Although not without sacrifice and failures, the first missionaries managed to do a wonderful work of inculcation. Practices such as cannibalism, devil worship, fighting and slavery were progressively stamped out. In this way, Christianity challenged the supremacy of the ancient religion of fear and revenge. The surprising receptivity of the Tolais never ceased to amaze the early missionaries.

Rakunai, the birth place of Peter To Rot, receives its name from “Ra kunai,” which means “the field of grass.” This village held

considerable prestige among other Tolai villages because it was established in a very fertile area, and it was a known market village. It possessed considerable wealth in its copper plantations, and it also had access to the rich fishing grounds of Blanche Bay. It was situated at the meeting place of four of the Gazelle Peninsula's most important roads. Rakunai had also strong ties with other of the Tolai tribe's populous villages, such as Malagunan, Navunaram, Nodup, Volavolo, Ramaimal and Vunalaka. In times past, it was in this very place in which quarrels between Tolai clans were settled in battle.

Second Part

Peter To Rot's Life

Second Part

Peter To Rot's Life

Before we start reading the life of Peter To Rot, we should acknowledge and thank the hard work done by Father Carl Laufer, MSC. He was the parish priest of Rakunai from 1930 until 1949 and knew and loved Peter To Rot and his family. He was the one who encouraged Peter To Rot to become a catechist, as well as the one from whose hands, every day, our Blessed received the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Father Carl Laufer's was To Rot's confidant, and he knew him better than anyone else. For this reason, his name will appear many times in this book, not only because of his close relationship with To Rot, but also because he was the first person who wrote about him. He wrote three precious and priceless documents about Peter To Rot which are not only the first to be written about him but could also be the most important. They are:

1) ***A Catechist Becomes a Martyr*** (Vunapope, 1946) was written only a few months after To Rot's death. This document is alleged to

have been presented to the Allied Military War Crimes Court of Rabaul as a first report of the murder of Peter To Rot.

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) ***Rakunai Mission Station*** (Vunapope, 1952) is a document which was written for the “*Positio Super Martyrio*,” under the request of Bishop Leo Scharmach during the preliminary canonical inquiry into the case of Peter To Rot.

From these three documents and the numerous testimonies of eye witnesses, relatives and friends of Peter To Rot that appear in the “*Positio Super Martyrio*,” the author of this book wrote the following pages.

I - Birth

Peter To Rot was born, as far as we can know, in the year 1912 in Rakunai, a market village on a plateau of the Gazelle Peninsula, in New Britain, Papua New Guinea. The phrase "as far as we can know" deserves some explanation. During World War II, birth certificates and baptismal records belonging to the Rakunai Mission Station were confiscated by Japanese Military Police, never to be seen again. Also, the duplicates kept at Mission Headquarters and Government Registry Offices in the capital of New Britain, Rabaul, suffered a similar fate or were destroyed in air raids.

We should also recognize that Tolais of To Rot's time had little use for and therefore no appreciation of the value of accurate remembrance of such things as birth dates, baptisms or marriages. Consequently, we can only determine a feasibly accurate birthdate in 1912, thanks to the testimony of many relatives and classmates, although we are not sure of the exact date of his birth.

For example, a strong argument in favour of 1912 as the date of Peter To Rot's birth may be drawn from the fact that Peter To Rot's

elder sister, Theresia Ia Varpilak, was born in 1905, and that his elder brother, Joseph Tatamai, was born in 1908. We are also sure that Peter To Rot was the third child and that three more children were to follow him. Therefore, an interval of four years rather than eight between the birth of Joseph Tatamai and that of Peter To Rot seems to be a more reasonable assumption, and that leaves us with the year 1912.

Also, during the canonical inquiry for the beatification of Peter To Rot, many classmates and friends, who were born in 1912, testified that Peter To Rot had the same age of them, so we can calculate that he was also born in 1912.



Father Carl Laufer, MSC,
parish priest of Rakunai from 1930 until 1949
and Peter To Rot's friend and confidant

2 - Family

To Rot's father was Angelo To Puia, a clan leader or village chief of Rakunai. His mother was Maria Ia Tumul, who was a gentle and dedicated mother who shared her husband's prestige and the respect accorded to him. To Rot was the third of six children. The order of his siblings is as follows: Theresia Ia Varpilak, Joseph Tatamai, Peter To Rot, Gabriel Telo, Ia Mama and To Metek. Unfortunately, the youngest two died in early childhood.

Angelo To Puia, the father of the family, also deserves some lines in this book because without him, we would never celebrate Peter To Rot as "Blessed." It is not an exaggeration if we affirm that To Rot's faith and charity was a reflection of his father's faith and charity.

Father Laufer, Rakunai's parish priest during To Rot's time, said:

"In January 1930, I commenced my work at the Mission Station of Rakunai, and it was there that I became acquainted with the family of the chief To Puia. To Puia was a sterling character, the most influential personality

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, offered his personal services to the first priest and stood by him in word and deed in the difficulties which accompany all beginnings. This same loyalty was displayed towards me until his death in 1938. His wife, Ia Tumul, was a reserved and lovable little lady. At her first visit, she introduced to me her children, Tatamai, Ia Varpilak, Peter To Rot and Telo, the youngest.”

(Too much Christo, 2)

We know that To Puia received the sacrament of Baptism in 1898 and was one of the first native Catholics of this area. Father Laufer wrote: “In 1898, there was a spectacular Baptism ceremony in Malagunan. The first adults from Rakunai were received into the Church at this time and received their spiritual rebirth through the Sacrament. One of the chiefs to be baptised was To Puia, the father of To Rot.” To Puia was still chief of the village in 1930 when To Rot left home in order to become a catechist, and To Puia continued to exercise this function for around 40 more years until his death.

Those who knew To Puia affirmed that he was a very good father and an even better Catholic. Although he was a newly baptised, his faith and charity was as strong as a solid rock. He was well known for his concern for disadvantaged people, especially for orphan

children, whom he cared for in his own home. He was happy to associate with European missionaries who accepted his invitation to live in his village and build there an impressive church, school and missionary residence. His wisdom as an elder chief was always sought after by his own people as well as younger chiefs in neighbouring villages.

Angelo To Puia was a real leader. For this reason, the people followed his example and his instructions. In this way, he was able to lead his village into the reception and strong foundation of the faith. By his ever-loyal cooperation with and personal service to the missionaries, he contributed to its continued growth throughout his remaining years of life.

A priceless witness of what was said is given by his own daughter, Theresia Ia Varpilak, who testified, "My father was a clan leader. He had good contact with his children and was very concerned about their general care, advice and education. The family was a well-known Catholic family, and the children were brought up accordingly."

At this point, we should also recall what Joanne To Varto, a classmate and life-long good friend of To Rot, said, "To Puia was one of the big, important persons in the village. In local language he was a 'patuana' or 'luluai,' that is the local chief. At the time of To Rot's birth, he was also mayor of Rakunai. I knew him well. To Rot's mother was a quiet, gentle woman, committed to the education and general good of her children. They 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, the one given by Father Theler has a great value. Father Theler was parish priest of Rakunai from 1949 until 1984. He was very well informed about everything concerning Peter To Rot, and he declares, “Angelo To Puia was a respected wealthy chief and a fine character. He was doubtlessly the most influential person in the area of Navunaram and Rakunai. He was the revered protector of the indigenes.”

To Puia died shortly before December 1938. In fact, Peter To Rot’s first son was born on December 5, 1939 and was called To Puia in memory of his grandfather.

We should underline the fact that Angelo To Puia and Maria Ia Tumul were among the first adults of Rakunai to become Catholics, as stated above. This event was of personal importance for To Puia and his family and had a lot of implications of great consequence to all the Tolai people. It marked the beginning of the end of the dominance of the Methodist faith among the Tolais, as well as the end of local government discrimination against the activities and movement of Catholic missionaries. It also helped pave the way for the conversion of the Rakunai people, thanks to the activities of a convert Methodist catechist. Lastly, the Baptism of To Puia and Ia

Tumul gave rise to a tangible and spiritual involvement for many members of his clan in the foundation of the new Mission Station of Rakunai. For example, land was made available by close relatives of the chief, and under the direction of a builder Brother and the help of To Puia and the Catholics of Rakunai, a church, school and house for the missionaries was built.

In 1902, Father Joseph Meier, the parish priest of Rakunai, found that the census book contained the names of about four to five hundred Catholics. After a year of hard work, he was able to see hundreds of children attending Church services, a hundred which enrolled in his school. Thanks to the work of the missionaries, little by little, more people came to receive the sacrament of Baptism and become Catholics.

Without any hesitation, the most accredited historian and witness of all the events concerning Peter To Rot is Father Laufer. As we stated before, he was parish priest of Rakunai from 1930 until 1949, and he knew and loved both Angelo To Puia and his son Peter To Rot. He says:

“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 reach any understanding of the peculiar

attitudes of the people. (...) The natives saw that I was interested in their lifestyle, their traditions and their immediate 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; but ever to give careful consideration to other ways of thinking. I often asked the advice of Chief To Puia and other elders as to the opportuneness of the type of business I wished to conduct, and the ways and means I proposed to use to do so...

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. Illegal marriages were rectified. The birth-rate increased. The Church calendar became filled with days of celebration. The parish grew in size. Rakunai once more had a respected name in mission circles.

To Puia and his son To Rot played an active part in all the above events. I spoke with them about my plans and my

worries, over many an evening. 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 depressed. 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 about things, with someone who shares similar interests, as often as possible. This is how I could speak with To Rot, finding no barrier between us." (FATHER LAUFER, *Rakunai Mission Station. In Positio... Summ*, 123)



Bottom left: Joseph Tatamai, To Rot's elder brother
Bottom right: Theresia Ia Varpilak, To Rot's elder sister

3 - Baptism

Unfortunately, all the Baptism records of Rakunai Mission Station had been destroyed during the war, and for this reason, no certificate is available, so it is impossible for us to know the exact date in which Peter To Rot received the sacrament of Baptism. Nevertheless, we know from Father Laufer that he received Baptism soon after his birth by the hands of Father Emil Jakobi. Father Laufer says: "In 1909, Father Joseph Meier... was replaced in Rakunai by Father Emil Jakobi. As his predecessors had done, Father Jakobi found a willing helper in chief To Puia, and he baptised his third child, Peter To Rot, in 1912."

Here we should highlight something very important. Peter To Rot was a second generation Catholic because his parents were the first adults to be baptised. He did not come from a long Catholic background, and this makes all his actions more meritorious because he had to be a saint among an environment that only few years before had left paganism, which did not offer him much help. However, as we said before, To Rot was blessed with good parents, so he grew up in

the peace and harmony of a devout Catholic family. His family was closely connected with the spiritual and material origin and continuance of the mission station in his own village.

Regarding the name given to Peter To Rot by his parents, we should know that among the Tolais, family names were not inherited. For this reason, a son or a daughter could have a name which was absolutely different from his father's or mother's name. Tolai custom said that the mother's brother should suggest the name for his nephews or nieces, and so we can guess that Peter To Rot was the name given by his maternal uncle. The prefix "To" and "Ia" that we find in almost all the Tolais' names has an important meaning. "To" means "boy child," and "Ia" means "girl child."

4 - *Childhood*

As was mentioned some pages before, Peter To Rot is in great debt to his father To Puia. From his father, To Rot received his education, not only about life, but also about the faith. It was at home, not in school, where To Rot learnt the most important lessons of his life. His home education was the regular personal concern of his father.

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, did not hesitate to declare: "To Rot had been his father's favourite child because he was always obedient and ever did whatever he was asked to do by his father. 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 his father as well as to his mother. This may have been the reason for him being his father’s favourite. Probably To Puia had recognized 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 counselled him.” (FATHER THELER, *A Short Biography of Peter To Rot*. In *Positio...* *Summ*, 126)

When Peter To Rot was approximately seven years old, he was admitted to 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, this gives a highly creditable picture of the parents who sent their child regularly to school but 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,' said a former class mate. Another one told how To Rot always offered himself 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.” (FATHER THELER, *A short biography of Peter To Rot*. In *Positio... Summ*, 126)

The *Positio* includes some testimonies that also deserve to be quoted on the topic of To Rot’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, has remembered the Servant of God as one 'who never gave any trouble; he was better than his brothers, who were less obedient.' (*Positio...*, 20)

As stated by Father Theler, school attendance was not compulsory at that time, which helps us to know what kind of parents To Rot had. We should never forget that only two decades previously, they had turned from paganism to Catholicism, 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.”

Due to the desire of sparing useless information, we will not talk about the kind of education that To Rot received from his primary school in the Mission Station of Rakunai. It is enough to say that according to the documents that were preserved, we find that the curriculum, methodology and religious instruction correspond closely with the type of educational programme used in European schools of the day, along with a careful consideration given to cultural modifications.



Students and missionaries in the school
which Peter To Rot attended during his youth

5 - First Holy Communion

Regrettably, we have no official documents concerning To Rot's first Confession and first Holy Communion. As mentioned above, most of the parish records disappeared during World War II, and for this reason sometimes it is difficult to find precise and accurate details about the dates of his life. Father Theler said: "To Rot received his first Holy Communion from Father Bender," and we know that Father Bender was the parish priest of Rakunai from 1922 to 1926, which means in this period To Rot was a boy between 10 and 14 years of age.

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."

Although it is almost impossible to find out the exact date of To Rot's first Holy Communion, what we do know is that he did

it before the normal age, as a privilege granted to him by the parish priest, who was very pleased with his outstanding behaviour and devotion to the Eucharist. This is what Father Caspar of Vaninara tells in his popular biography written in 1973: "To Rot received the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion before the usual age." The "usual age" was in third grade, as it is done among us until now. So, if To Rot did it before this age, we can estimate that he received the Body and Blood of Jesus for the first time when he was 10 or 11 years old.

We cannot go forward in this biography without saying something regarding To Rot's devotion to Jesus present in the Eucharist. If we miss this point, we would also miss To Rot's biggest secret and source of strength. Although later we will talk about the love for the Eucharist he had as an adult catechist, it can be also edifying for us to know something about the tender and simple love for the Eucharist that he had as a young boy in primary school.

Father Theler tells us: "Father Ulrich, who was appointed Station Father 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 them itemized all the things that

he had done for his father and mother the day before.” (FATHER THELER, *A short biography of Peter To Rot*. In *Positio... Summ*, 126)

To Rot's classmate and friend To Burangan said: “The priest-in-charge of Rakunai in 1926 called for two boys to be regular Mass 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 Mass 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. From it, To Rot 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. Pope Benedict XVI, addressing a group of altar servers like To Rot, 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... The living God is among us and you can be close to him and help him... 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.” (POPE BENEDICT XVI, *General Audience*, August 2, 2006)

In one of his parables, Our Lord speaks of a treasure hidden in the field, and whoever finds this treasure sells all he has in order to buy that field because the hidden treasure is more valuable than anything else. The hidden treasure, the good greater than any other good, is Jesus Himself. To Rot was able to find this treasure in his most tender age, when he was still 10 or 11 years old. He was very conscious that in the sacred host, Jesus, the true treasure, is truly present and always waiting for us.

6 - Adolescence

It is far from us to write a biography of Peter To Rot trying to present him as a saint since his mother's womb. Peter To Rot, although he was an outstanding boy, was also a "normal" boy. When we say "normal," we mean that he also got involved in problems and occasionally lacked obedience, as it happens among all the adolescents of the world. However, what gives us consolation and encourages us, especially the adolescents of today, to follow his example is that among all the testimonies of his relatives and friends that have reached us, there is not a single testimony that talks about a mortal sin or a grave fault on his part. This, and only this, is outstanding nowadays and worthy to be praised!

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. 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 trifles 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.”

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.” 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

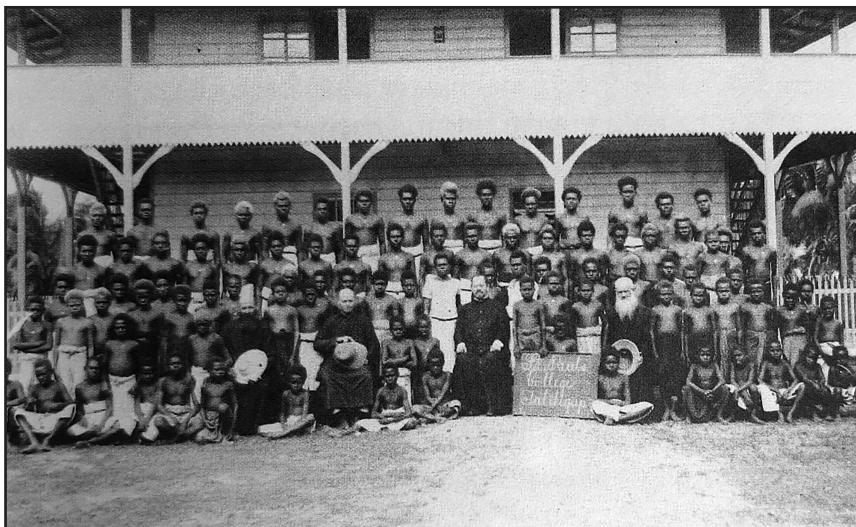
at times went to visit his uncle To Livuana. There, too, he was industrious and obedient, but his father never let him stay there for a long time and took him home as soon as possible."

Although there are not many stories of the period of his adolescence, all his relatives and friends who gave witness during the inquiry for the beatification, agreed in some important points. Young Peter To Rot was of a gentle character and easy to become friend with. He would never boast about being the son of the chief. Rather, he bore that responsibility by being an example for his friends and classmates. He learnt from his father To Puia to care for the poor and the orphan, and they would never depart from him without something to eat. When he got involved in troubles or disobediences, he would accept the correction and fulfil the penance. What is more important, he never lost the love for Jesus present in the Eucharist that he had as a little boy when he served the altar for the first times. That, and only that (and we won't get tired of repeating it!), was the secret of his holiness and the source of strength during his last trial in martyrdom.

To Rot continued to grow into a young man. Soon, the time to pay taxes for the first time arrived. Now he had the right to leave the school, but he continued with his education until he left for the Catechist School at Taliligap.

Father Laufer, who always considered To Rot to be an outstanding boy, had great expectations for him. He would have wished to see To

Rot became a priest because of his ardent love for the Eucharist, his exceptionally good behaviour and his distinguished skills for study. This was his intention when he approached To Puia to discuss the boy's future. As soon as Father Laufer talked about the possibility of To Rot becoming a priest, his father replied: "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."



Taliligap Catechetical School in To Rot's times

7 - 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, before going ahead with To Rot's formation in the Catechist School, it can be very useful to recall some teachings of the Magisterium of the Church regarding the importance and dignity of the work of a Catechist. In our country, they have been doing an incredible work since the very arrival of the first Missionaries, and without any doubt, they are priests' right hand, no matter the village. The work of a catechist is priceless in lands that suffer from a lack of priest, and even more so in lands in which the Evangelization is still in the beginning stages. For this reason, an important part of the apostolate relies on the catechist.

Catechists have a place of honour in the heart of the Church, and their work is worthy to be praised by all. They are “specialists, direct witnesses and irreplaceable evangelizers.” A paragraph of Saint John Paul II is worthy to be quoted:

“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.’

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.” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 73)

With no hesitation, Saint John Paul II affirmed also that, in mission lands, the work of Evangelization cannot be possible without the help of the Catechists:

“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!

(...) 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.” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Cathechesi Tradendae*, 66)

Saint Paul’s Catechist Training College was a Catholic training centre for catechists, which was created in 1925 by Bishop Gerhard Vesters, only 5 years before To Rot joined it. Father Lakaff recalled:

“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.". (FATHER LAKAFF, *The Catechist*. In *Positio..., Summ*, 100-102)

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 continue: "In the last eight years, 101 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, 240 students have graduated from the College and have taken up appointments." (*Idem*, 102)

The Catechist School was in a vast kunai grass acreage purchased by the Mission between the villages of Vunakanau and Nangananga,

at a convenient distance from Vunapope, the headquarters of the Catholic Mission.

As we know from documentary sources left by the first missionaries who worked in the Catechist School, 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 interestingly, to teach secular basic subjects, to keep school records, to write reports, and to be able to promote out-of-school activities. (Cfr. FATHER ANDRE NAVARRE (1836-1912), *Handbook for missionaries*, pp 75-77)

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 what his parish priest said, 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 various tours.

Thanks to To Rot's fellow catechists who gave testimony during the inquiry for the beatification, we are able to know how a 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, together with students from other schools, in the presence of the Governor of the colony, a visible display of some of their scholastic abilities. 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 welcome vacation periods for all students, at Christmas, Easter and again in August. Before the students begin the New Year, in September, 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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 103)

Unfortunately, as it happened with all the documents of that period, the College's records were destroyed or lost during World War II. However, Father Theler, who was Director of the College in To Rot's last term, was still alive at the time of the 1952 investigation and has left us his summary of To Rot's years at the College. He said:

"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 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 healthy and had a strong body. 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 recognized the expiation value of work.” (FATHER THELER, *A short biography of Peter To Rot. In Positio... Summ*, 127)

A special word must be said, once again, to To Rot's deeply love for Our Lord truly present in the Eucharist. He was convinced of Our Lord's words to his disciples when he said: “*For without me, you are able to do nothing.*” (Jn 15:5) This was the reason why during his whole life To Rot did his very best to receive Holy Communion as often as possible, and he never missed a chance to pay Our Lord a visit in the tabernacle. He knew very well that truth which Saint John Paul II would write several decades later with unforgettable words:

“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?” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 60)

Father Theler is also the one who tells us about this tender and deep love of To Rot for the Blessed Sacrament:

“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.**” (FATHER THELER, *A short biography of Peter To Rot*. In *Positio... Summ*, 127)

But, as we already said at the beginning of the book, we should never think that Peter To Rot was a man whose life was absolutely different from all the others. Although his virtue was really outstanding and everybody noticed it, he was a normal boy who enjoyed playing and joking with his fellow students. However, during the times of playing and joking, he never lost his virtue and always tried to please Jesus. We can say that he observed what Saint John Bosco used to ask from his students: "Run, play, and have all the fun you want. But, for God's sake, do not sin!" Thus, when quarrels and discussions arose among the students, To Rot was always the peace-maker:

"Certain times were allotted to sport. He 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 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,

ties 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*, 128)

Thanks to Father Theler’s account, we can discover To Rot’s application to study, his obedience, his attitude towards sport, hidden dedication to physical work and the motives behind that dedication. 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 become discouraged.

Other documentary evidence exists which describes the behaviour and character of To Rot as witnessed by his fellow students. All of them agree in praising To Rot’s strong faith and principles, his obedience, humility, loyalty and punctuality. They said that To Rot was a young boy with real leadership qualities and peace-making ability. They remembered his calm and gentle nature together with his 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 makings of an ideal catechist. I observed particularly Peter To Rot's 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. There was never any grumbling or hesitation 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 nearly a part their flesh and blood, since they determined their lifestyle.

These three years' formation were not possible in To Rot's case, for a catechist in his home village resigned, and a replacement was needed urgently. Even though he had not quite completed the prescribed period of time for a complete catechist training course, at the beginning of 1933, he left Taliligap and returned home to help the priest of Rakunai Station. 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 to help 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 he out-shone all of them very soon and became their recognized leader, even though he was 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. Very often at evening time 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 know things, but also to understand them, which is an uncommon phenomenon among natives." (*Idem*, 128)



Taliligap Catechetical school



Some of the eye witnesses giving testimony during the canonical inquiry.

First row: George To Vaninara and Simon To Palauva

Second row: John To Keleko and Rochus Tiropia

Third row: Sister Adriana Takai and Sister Monica

8 - The Catechist

The Great Dignity of a Catechist

Since this book is dedicated to catechists, before talking about To Rot's ministry as catechist, it is convenient to say something about their great dignity, which is attached to and inseparable from the mission entrusted to them by the Church. Catechists are lay people who, like everybody else, have received the call to holiness and the call to share in Jesus' work of evangelization. No baptised person has the right to ignore this mission because by the very sacrament of Baptism, we have become prophets, and a prophet is one who talks about God and on his behalf. All of us (no matter whether we are priests, religious, lay, married, single, man or woman, young or adult, etc.) have the duty and obligation to preach the name of Jesus. Catechists, however, are in some way special because they did not only receive this universal call to preach the Gospel but they also were appointed by the Church with a special mandate to do such an important job with. The Church herself trusts in them and relies on them. It is not

an exaggeration if we say that, without them, the work of evangelization in Papua New Guinea would still be at its first stages. The history of the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea gives witness to this because “from the very beginning of the Church in this vast region, lay people have contributed to her growth and mission in many different ways; and they continue to do so through their involvement in various forms of service, especially in parishes as catechists.” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, 43)

If we want to find a biblical figure with whom we can compare a catechist, we could say that Saint John the Baptist is the best example. **A catechist is, in some way, a contemporary John the Baptist among us.** There are four things about this saint that are useful for us to know his figure, and it is especially useful for catechists, who must follow his example and look at him as in a mirror.

1) John the Baptist was a friend of Jesus. Although they were relatives (because their mothers were cousins), John and Jesus were also friends. They knew each other perfectly, and they loved each other deeply. They enjoyed being together because their friendship was grounded in God. When it comes to compliments, Jesus said of John: “*Among those born of women, there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist*” (Mt 11:11), and John said of Jesus: “*He who will come after me is more powerful than me. I am not worthy to carry his*

shoes." (Mt 3:11) John and Jesus were inseparable, and they were ready to give up their life for the sake of the other. Many times in the Gospel, Jesus had to defend John against calumnies and false accusations, and many times, John also had to bear witness to Jesus.

This is what a catechist should be: a friend of Jesus. Catechists must spend time with Jesus and become what Pope Benedict XVI often called "an expert on Jesus." This is what Jesus asked from his Apostles: "*[Jesus] called to himself those whom he willed, and they came to him. And he acted so that the twelve would be with him...*" (Mk 3:13-14) Catechists, as well as the Apostles, are called to be with Jesus, to spend time with him in silent adoration, to pray to him and to learn about him. They must establish a personal relationship with him, otherwise they would be preaching about someone who they do not really know. This friendship with Jesus is how the Apostles' adventure began, and this is how every catechist's adventure should begin as well. What Pope Benedict XVI says of the Twelve can be perfectly applied to a Catechist:

"This is how the Apostles' adventure began, as an encounter of people who are open to one another. For the disciples, it was the beginning of a direct acquaintance with the Teacher, seeing where he was staying and starting to get to know him. **Indeed, they were not to proclaim an idea, but to witness to a person.**

Before being sent out to preach, they had to 'be' with Jesus (cf. Mk 3:14), establishing a personal relationship with him. On this basis, evangelization was to be no more than the proclamation of what they felt and an invitation to enter into the mystery of communion with Christ." (*General audience*, 22 March 2006)

2) John the Baptist was outstanding in virtue and holiness. The Gospels say that people were amazed in front of John because his life and virtue were absolutely extraordinary. So virtuous and holy he was, that people often thought that he was the Messiah: "*Now all were thinking about John in their hearts, and the people were supposing that perhaps he might be the Christ.*" (Lk 3:15) People from all over Israel used to come and see him because they knew he was a man of God. The Gospels tell us how people from all conditions (kings, soldiers, pharisees, etc.) used to seek his advice and follow his commands. Although his fame and reputation grew, he never lost his humility and always affirmed: "*I am not the Christ... He must increase, while I must decrease.*" (Jn 3:28.30)

This is what a catechist should be: a virtuous and holy man. Catechists should be men and women of outstanding virtue and exemplary behaviour. People in the villages should be able to look at them and say: "I have seen a man (or woman) of God." As John the Baptist was a man whose virtue shone in the eyes of all, in the same way, the catechist must out shine everyone in virtue and holiness.

Our intellectual skills are not sufficient when it comes to preaching and inviting people to conversion. Instead, they will observe our behaviour, and we will convince them not with our intellectual arguments but rather with our good example. Saint John Paul II said:

“An intellectual knowledge of Christ and his Gospel is not enough. For believing in him means following him. Therefore, we must learn from the Apostles, from the confessors of the faith, from the saints of every age who helped to spread Christ’s name and to make it loved by the witness of a life generously and joyously spent for him and for their brethren.” (*Homily*, 10 December 2000)

3) John the Baptist proclaimed without fear of loosing human respect. He was the one who proclaimed the coming of the Saviour and cried to everyone: *“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight his paths.”* (Lk 3:4) In the desert of Judea, he proclaims that the time has come for the fulfilment of the promises and that the kingdom of God is at hand. For this reason, without heed for any human respect, he cried aloud: *“Repent and believe in the Gospel.”* (Mc 1:15) John was fearless in his preaching of the Gospel and knew that we should please God rather than men. He did not hesitate to face King Herod, who

was the most powerful man in all Israel and say to him: "*It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.*" (Mk 6:18)

This is what a catechist should be: a courageous preacher of the Gospel. Catechists should be fearless like John in their preaching of the Gospel, and nothing should stop them. A good catechist will have no worry of human respect because they will always remember what Saint Peter said to the Jews who were questioning him: "*It is necessary to obey God, more so than men.*" (Acts 5:29) Again it is Saint John Paul II who exhorts us:

"Like John the Baptist, the catechist too is called to point out Jesus as the awaited Messiah, the Christ. His task is to invite people to fix their gaze on Jesus and to follow him, for Jesus alone is the Teacher, the Lord and the Saviour. Like the Precursor, it is Christ and not himself whom the catechist must emphasize. Everything must be directed to Him: to his coming, to his presence, to his mystery." (*Homily*, 10 December 2000)

4) John the Baptist was faithful until death. Finally, John was a martyr. He kept his promises and faithfulness until the end and shed his blood for Jesus and to give witness to the truth. He was well aware that the powerful king was not happy with him, but he did not withdraw from his responsibility. He continued to preach the truth,

even though he knew very well that his life was in danger. John did not care for his own life because Jesus himself had said: *“For whoever will have chosen to save his life, will lose it. But whoever will have lost his life, for my sake and for the Gospel, shall save it.”* (Mk 8:35) His martyrdom was his last and most powerful testimony and the crown of all his whole life.

This is what a catechist should be: a faithful man ready to lose his life for Jesus and the sake of Gospel. Many times, in these last decades, the recent Popes have said that in this very moment, the Church does not need teachers, but witnesses. The Church needs men and women ready to give witness with their lives and to show that Jesus is worthy of offering all the sacrifices and accepting any persecution that could happen to us. Jesus deserves our faithfulness because He Himself died for us on the cross. If the moment arrives that the very sacrifice of our life is requested, we should pray to Jesus, asking Him to strengthen us and help us to faithfully give our last testimony, as John the Baptist did. Martyrdom, which means to die for the sake of Jesus, is the greatest grace and gift that Jesus can give to a person.

There is a very important document written by Father Lakaff entitled *“The catechist”* that gives us some details about the role of catechists in New Britain during To Rot's times. It is an article that appeared in the booklet *“Pioneers of the South Seas,”* published in 1932 as an historical literary record of the Catholic presence in New Britain over fifty years. Father Lakaff was the Director of the Catechist School

of Taliligap, where To Rot lived from 1930 until 1933 when he graduated as a catechist. The document was very important for the cause of To Rot in that it outlines the essentials in Taliligap Catechist School training programmes, which significantly contributed to the spiritual formation of the Blessed.

We consider it important to quote some paragraphs of the aforementioned article:

“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 their family and religious duties, 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 villages of far 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.' (In *Positio... Summ*, 99-106)

Peter To Rot's work as catechist

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, at the beginning of 1933, Peter To Rot came back to his own village of Rakunai with the appointment of catechist, he was a young man of 21 years. People remembered him as a strong and healthy man, towards whom everybody looked with love and respect because of his duty and exemplary lifestyle and also because he was the chief's son. One of his classmates in the Primary School of Rakunai remembered: "I noted that on his return from Taliligap, he was more mature and aware of his new status, in an attitude of humble service. He was given full reverence and respect by the people."

Those who knew him well said that **he had only one ambition: to be a good catechist** among his people and to be always of service to the local church and his parish priest. It was during this same period, the thirties, that Rakunai became a respected village among the Mission circles, thanks to the good work done during the past decades by the different parish priests.

Let us now talk about some of his most admirable virtues and qualities as a catechist.

Humble and Kind

The young catechist To Rot began his ministry in Rakunai in all modesty and humility, making himself agreeable to 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, besides 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 with his parish priest, To Rot was as open as he was toward the people. He never concealed anything from him, reported him all difficulties and events and defended him openly (...) Very often at evening time 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 know things but also to understand them.” (In *Positio...*
Summ, 128)

A fellow catechist of To Rot, named 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 men discussed his ministry with this, our youngest Catechist recruit, and he gladly accepted our advice. Within a short time, to the surprise of all of us, we looked to him as our leader!” (In *Positio... Summ*, 154)

To Rot’s classmate and friend, Johannes To Varto, testified: “To Rot continued to take private lessons from the priest. Some evenings, 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 164)

Another witness, Raphael To Labit, said:

“I knew To Rot as a catechist from To Rot’s 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, as 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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 153)

Defensor of the Catholic Faith

Although he had a natural gentle temperament, To Rot never tried to please his own relatives or friends in the village, because he wanted to please Jesus alone. He always showed himself as a strong defensor of the Catholic faith, no matter what the people could think about him. Love for human respect, one of the worst enemies of our apostolates, was never found in him. Father Theler's account says: "He defended openly and on every occasion faith and Catholic morals and reprimanded when necessary. One night, he and some friends went to Vunavidir and collected the magic amulets hidden by the people. Afterwards, he reproached them strongly because of their false Christianity."

According to testimonies of the villagers, when To Rot put his finger on someone's wrong-doing, people knew that this was no ordinary condemnation but fervour for and love of a soul from a true catechist's heart. People knew that To Rot himself lived up to his teaching, and for this reason, his words had much effect and

produced much fruit. He practised what he preached and was always loyal to his faith.

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) This is what a good catechist should always do: transmit faithfully the doctrine of the Church that was received, without adding or subtracting anything of his own. This is what Saint Paul proudly did: *“I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.”* (1 Cor 11:23) Peter To Rot did not preach his own doctrine but Jesus' doctrine, as taught by the Catholic Church. We can say that he was “Christ's spokesman,” or that Christ was speaking through him. Saint John Paul II admonishes 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.” (*Catechesi tradendae*, 6)

To Rot's own blood sister, Theresia Ia Varpilak, said that as a catechist, "Peter 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."

Friend of Sinners

Although To Rot was always ready to correct when something was wrong, people also praised his love for and attention to the tepid and sinners. He hated sin but loved sinners, just like Jesus did and taught. Those who had gone astray he tried to win back by means of good counsel and kind words. He also attended to those people who had become lukewarm in attending Church activities and receiving the sacraments.

Martin To Kau, a Rakunai farmer said: "Peter To Rot contacted those who had fallen away from the Church and asked him to help them in some way. He then tried to influence them to return to the practice of their religion. He had great devotion to daily Mass and influenced some of his peers in that direction."

His students also remembered To Rot as someone who "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 always carried the Bible, which in those days was unusual.

He had an extraordinary gift of knowing when a person needed help and correctly identifying the problem.”

His friend To Varto also remembered that once he himself was straying far 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 was sent 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 had good contact with all levels of people. He defended the teachings of the Church strongly (...) Sometimes 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.’ (In *Positio...*
Summ, 10 and 164)

*Charity and Love Towards Everybody,
Especially the Sick, the Orphan and the Poor*

Regarding To Rot’s charity and love, all his relatives and friends are of the same opinion: his charity was special, a real example for everybody and impossible to forget. The testimony given by To Rot’s own brother, Joseph Tatamai, will be fully quoted, due to the

importance of the witness, who enjoyed many years living in the same house in company of the Blessed:

“He helped the priest, as he had been trained to do, and the people loved to share his ministry. He was really a very good man, was never angry, was ever calm, and ever showed compassion for underprivileged people. He made no show of arguing with people 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 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.” (In *Positio...*
Summ, 147)

A special place must be given to the testimony of the person who probably best knew To Rot, his own wife Paula Ia Varpit. She lived with To Rot from 1936 until his death in 1945, and her testimony is full of affection and devotion for her late husband. She recalled To Rot's catechist's years as follows:

“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 prayed often with the local community, often made the Stations of the Cross and encouraged others to do so, as an act of reparation for sin, and was devoted to the Rosary.

His hope gave him confidence in God’s guidance and care, especially in time 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 7)

Another 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, and along with her three sisters, she was cared for by To Rot's parents. She lived with To Rot and knew him well. Both of them kept a close relationship until the catechist's death. She said:

“I was aware of his kindness, especially to orphan 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.

The like of Peter To Rot in going after lapsed Catholics to get them back to their faith had not been seen before, always 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 20)

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 so 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 would make them go out and endeavour 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 158-159)

Again his friend To Varto recalls his beloved friend Peter To Rot’s ministry in this way:

“About the virtuous behaviour of Peter To Rot, I had noticed his daily visit to the Blessed Sacrament. He was zealous in following the directives of his parish priest concerning visits to the sick, to the people scattered around, etc. He was an example to all in his life of prayer and dedication to his ministry as a catechist. He was truly an extraordinary man.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 10)

Johan To Keleto, a friend who received religious instruction from Peter To Rot during his adolescence and kept a close relationship with him until his death, said: “I respected To Rot especially for his honesty, justice and uprightness. He gave the example of how, as children, we should behave.” In addition, To Rot’s first cousin Bernadet Ia Oget declared:

“To Rot was a man of complete dedication to his duty: performing marriages, baptising, preparing the sick for death and many other things. At one time, he kept the

Blessed Sacrament in his house for fear of desecration by the Japanese. In all this, he showed exemplary Christian virtue. He spoke with conviction, showed strong belief in his teachings and acted according to his beliefs.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 13)

And his fellow catechist Paschal To Uvae fully confirmed the experience of To Rot’s relatives and friends: “Everyone liked his style of religious instruction which was clear and always informative. His daily life reflected his teachings. When they think back on the days To Rot was alive among them, this is what people remember best of him.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 154)

Lover of the Eucharist

While going through the testimonies of the 26 witnesses that appear in the *Positio* and reading also To Rot’s contemporary writings and documentary letters of those who knew him, there is something that almost all of them recalled: **To Rot’s ardent love for the Eucharist.**

So known was To Rot’s love for Jesus in the Eucharist that this was one of the virtues that Saint John Paul II highlighted during his homily for the Beatification: **“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.” (*Homily for the Beatification of Peter To Rot*, 17 January 1995)

It was in the Eucharist where To Rot learnt how God loves us and how we also should love our neighbours. The sacrament of the Eucharist became for him that “school of love” of which Pope Benedict XVI said: “The Eucharist is the great school of love. When we participate regularly and with devotion in Holy Mass, when we spend a sustained time of 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 the 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 already said that, while being still a child, he left his parent’s home and moved to a relative’s house in order to be closer to the church because he wanted to attend daily Mass and serve the altar. His classmates of primary school recalled how To Rot was the first volunteer to serve the altar during daily Mass and how concentrated he was during the moments of prayer. This attitude did not change or disappear during the years, but it became ever greater

and more evident to others. This is exactly the behaviour that people remembered of him as a catechist. During his whole life, To Rot made the holy Mass the most important moment of the day and loved it more than anything else.

2- Daily Communion: At those times, daily communion was not as common as it is now. However, To Rot was convinced that without Jesus we can do nothing, and for this reason, he wanted to receive this sacrament every day. At the beginning, people were quite perplexed by this because it was not a common practice among them. Later on, they realized that if there is not an obstacle such as a mortal sin, it is not only not wrong but also a highly recommended practice. Daily communion is the secret that sustained the saints and gave strength to the martyrs. This is evident in To Rot.

3- Frequent Visits to the Blessed Sacrament: His frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament should be underlined. Mass and communion are things that somehow go “hand by hand.” It is quite normal that those who frequent the Holy Mass daily, also receive Holy Communion. Instead, what is not very normal among us is to find real adorers of the Blessed Sacrament. Our churches can be full of people during the Eucharistic celebration, but sadly Our Lord remains alone in the tabernacle for the rest of the day.

To Rot, as witnessed by many people, was a true adorer of Jesus really present in the Eucharist. This will and desire of adoring Our Lord in the tabernacle was a normal result of his love for the Holy Mass and the frequent reception of the Eucharist. Pope Benedict XVI beautifully explains the relation between Holy Mass and Eucharist adoration:

“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.”

(POPE BENEDICT XVI, *Angelus*, 10 June 2007)

4- Risking His Life for the Eucharist: Later on we will talk about To Rot’s ministry during World War II, and we will see how he risked his life many times for the sake of Jesus and the Eucharist. For now, it is enough to know that may times he risked his life while carrying the Blessed Sacrament, and he did not spare any sacrifice while walking for 5 to 6 hours bringing the consecrated hosts from the Central Mission Station at Vunapope to his own village as well as to the neighbouring villages. On different occasions, he hid the

Blessed Sacrament in his home for he feared a sacrilege from the Japanese. Until his last days, he brought Holy Communion to those who were sick or old, despite the prohibitions and the numerous threats he received.

* * *

These numerous virtues and beautifully pious practices that embellish To Rot's soul and are witnessed to by so many, were well summarized 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!"

9 - Marriage

In 1933, after exercising only three years of his work as catechist, Peter To Rot already had earned the love of the people in Rakunai parish and in the neighbouring villages. His parish priest really appreciated his work and entrusted to him many important matters. His fellow catechists and the local chiefs also had great esteem for him and his ministry.

On 11th November of this year, the only date in To Rot's life that can be indicated with certainty, he was married in the parish church at Rakunai. His wife was a young girl called Paula Ia Varpit who, at the time, had 16 years of age.

We are very lucky regarding To Rot's marriage because we have numerous witnesses who gave a "first hand" testimony of the occasion itself, including the preparations for it and the celebrations. Among all of them, without any doubt, the most important testimony is the one given by the bride herself, Paula Ia Varpit. In addition, the members of the family of the bridegroom and guests at the wedding ceremony remembered that occasion and shared their thoughts during the investigation for To Rot's Beatification.

Paula Ia Varpit was born in Raimamal, a village in the neighbourhood of Rakunai, on 27th June 1920. She moved to Rakunai in 1934 to live on her mother's farmstead. Since she was only 14 years of age and a baptised Catholic, she was soon enrolled in the primary school and became one of Peter To Rot's pupils. She 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 classes in To Rot's Mission School, and though later on, when the 'bride price' was paid, I became engaged to him.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 156)

Although Paula Ia Varpit was only 14 years of age, she was already of marriageable age according to Tolai's customs and practices. This fact was not lost on families who had marriageable sons, one of whom was Angelo To Puia, whose son To Rot was 23 years of age. Then, one morning, it was announced in the village the 'bride price': 50 coils of mussel shells.

At this point, a short commentary must be made in order to explain the expression “bride price.” According to Western mentality and culture, to pay for a woman is an insult and a scandal, and it is considered an enormous injustice on her behalf and a kind of slavery.

However, this is not how Tolais understood the “bride price,” and neither is it how we should understand it.

According to Tolai tradition, the bridegroom’s “mother’s brother,” a maternal uncle, had the right to initiate a proposal of marriage to the maternal uncle of the bride. The groom’s uncle began negotiations by offering a certain number of coils of mussel shells threaded onto strips of bamboo (which was the traditional Tolai form of money) to the bride’s uncle, in return for his promise that, sometime in the future, the girl would be guaranteed to marry the boy under discussion.

“Bride price” implied no insult for a woman. On the contrary, a girl would be shamed if she were not “bought.” It was out of appreciation and respect for the girl that a “price” was determined for her.

Father Laufer, who lived for several decades among the Tolais and knew very well their customs and practices, wrote in 1952:

“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. 'Bride price' is not degrading for a girl, 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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 120-121)

In other words, in Tolais' custom, the "bride price" had two aspects. The first aspect is regarding the bride's family, for whom it was only a recompense for all the things that they had done for her since her birth until the moment in which she was engaged. In their regard, it was also a kind of offering because she would not be able to help them or work for them any longer. The second aspect is regarding the girl herself, for whom the "bride price" made her feel appreciated and desired, and it was the cause of happiness 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 allow it today in so many parts of Papua New Guinea.

Going back to how marriages were arranged in Tolais' culture, as soon as marriage arrangements between the uncles were satisfactorily concluded, the future bride and bridegroom were told to await a suitable day for the village ceremonies to take place.

Theresia Ia Varpilak, To Rot's blood sister, has testified that in To Rot's and Ia Varpit's marriage, the arrangements were done not by maternal uncles (as it was done in Tolai's custom), but in the Catholic tradition, by the parents of the bride and groom. The marriage was first proposed by Peter To Rot's parents, which also stresses that the only element remaining of pagan Tolai traditional marriage, was that the initiative came from the bridegroom's family.

At this point, an objection can arise, and we can doubt whether Peter To Rot and Paula Ia Varpit were really free to receive the sacrament of marriage. Freedom on the part of the man and the woman is an absolutely necessary condition for marriage, and without it, the matrimony is invalid. Since the matrimony was arranged by third parties, we can doubt that the bride and the groom were really free to accept each other. Were they, rather, forced to do it? Well, nobody knows better how Peter To Rot's marriage came to be than his own wife, Paula Ia Varpit, who said:

“The marriage was arranged by the two families and **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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 6)

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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 15)

Also 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 19)

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 desire. They accepted each other with total freedom and happiness.

Father Theler wrote: “To Rot really meant his marriage pledge to Paula, and so did she to him. Just the same, she continued to attend the lessons of her fiance, but To Rot did not extend privilege to her at all. A day-dreaming, inattentive Paula had to go to her knees on the pavement for a while with her arms stretched out, just as the other pupils had to do.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 130)

Something very important that we should highlight is the fact that many times in Tolais’ customs before the ceremony takes place, the couples were advised to have a “trial marriage.” The young couple began to live together as though they were already man and wife and inform

their elders as to their compatibility. If things were going well, they would marry. But if things went badly, they would leave each other and try to find another partner. In To Rot's case, there was no traditional "trial marriage," because more important than being a Tolai was being Catholic. This kind of "trial marriage" is against God's teachings on Matrimony and goes against Catholic morals. Missionaries discountenanced all of these traditions except for the payment of the "bride price," which they regarded as an "engagement party," and the celebrations in the village after the Catholic rite had been concluded, the equivalent of a "wedding reception." Peter To Rot, out of love for God, refused this tradition and waited until the day of his marriage to live with his beloved wife Paula.

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 in the religious ceremony and in the celebration 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 some 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 said:

"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.' (In *Positio... Summ*, 130)

Friends and relatives agreed in giving favourable comments on To Rot's and Ia Varpit's married life together. Paula herself said, as we quoted before, that "mutual love among husband and wife was strong and constant." Their married life was absolutely normal, with a lot of love and affection, but also with minor quarrels and discussions. As noticed 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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 17)

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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 47)

Once again, those who are not familiar with Tolai's culture would consider the occasional beating of To Rot to his wife as something cruel and barbaric. Of course, we know and believe that nothing justifies violence and that there is never a reason for which a man should beat his wife, but at the same time, we should try to understand how this was seen in those times and in that place. That is the clue and the answer. If we judge this fact with a Western and modern mentality, it would sound worthy of disdain. But Tolai's culture was different than modern, Western mentality, and we should frame this event in the time and culture of To Rot.

The *Positio* tells us:

“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 loud-mouthed words 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 services.” (*Positio...* 37)

As said before, we would be amazed that To Rot beat his wife, unless we are aware of the customs of those in New Britain one hundred years ago. Paula Ia Varpit herself recalls that, after this incident, he apologised to her, and that was the exceptional thing! For a man to “humiliate” himself and apologise to his woman for beating her was something outstanding among Tolai people. As said before,

beating one's wife was considered to be a regular rebuke and it was not only justified but expected in that culture. However, for a man to give in quickly and apologise to a woman was something exceptional.

Apart from this episode, there is no doubt that To Rot's and Ia Varpit's marital life was most exemplary. All those that gave testimony during the canonical inquiry remembered this matrimony to be worthy of admiration, and the wife herself said that they lived together "peacefully and happily." On another occasion, Paula said: "On all other occasions, he had been quick to agree with my ideas. **He did everything he could for his wife.**" (In *Positio... Summ*, 156)

Something very important to underline is the fact that To Rot and Ia Varpit shared a prayer life together, were jointly concerned with the upbringing of the children, and held no secrets from one another. Paula herself gave testimony: "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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 156)

As stated above, To Rot's and Ia Varpit's family was absolutely normal, with no extraordinary phenomena or events. They shared the joys and sorrows of the other families of the village, having a normal and common life like the other villagers. They were just one family among the others, although outstanding in virtue.

Some testimonies given during the canonical inquiry should be quoted here:

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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 15)

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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 37)

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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 10)

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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 19)

Mara Ia Kot: “The marriage was a good one, with strong family life and peaceful living, despite occasional minor arguments.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 22)

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."(In *Positio... Summ*, 23)

After the Japanese invasion of 1942, as Paula Ia Vapirt herself testified, their mutual love became stronger than ever. Many daily serious problems arose, threatening To Rot's life if he continued on with his work as catechist. He always shared this with his young wife, something that was unusual in traditional Tolai custom, in which men normal did not share their personal problems with their wives. In Tolai's custom, men preferred to discuss their problems with other men, as well as women discussed their problems with other women. Instead, Peter To Rot trusted Paula and loved her deeply, and for this reason, he never wanted to hide anything from her. Paula knew all of "To Rot's secrets," such as the hiding place where she was to take the church registers of marriages, births and death. She said: "To Rot organized 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."(In *Positio... Summ*, 48)

On the final evening of his life, To Rot showed for the last time his trust in Paula Ia Varpit, when he asked her to smuggle into the prison for him his official catechist garb. By this act, ha was also gently warning her of his execution, about which he either knew or had a

very strong premonition. This strong bond of human love that existed between Peter To Rot and his wife was expressed for the last time, as the pair simply sat near one another for a long time in silence. It was broken, in the end, by To Rot, as he said simply to his wife that it was time to take the children and go home.

Paula Ia Varpit herself recalled this episode during the inquiry:

“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 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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 157)

Three children were born of Peter To Rot's marriage to Paula Ia Varpit. The first child was born on 5th December 1939. They called him To Puia, in memory of To Rot's late father To Puia. At the moment of Baptism, little To Puia was given the Christian name of Andreas. To Rot's friend and schoolmate To Burangan said: "To Rot prayed very often for his wife and his children, especially for his first-born. He carried him around, caressed him and played with him, so that little Andreas was more with his father than with his mother." (In *Positio... Summ*, 130) Andreas died of dysentery shortly after the end of the war. A second child, Rufina Ia Mama, was born in 1942. The third child, a boy whose name remains unknown, was born in 1945, shortly after To Rot's death.

To Rot's uncle Wesleyan Tarue gave this testimony: "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." (*Idem*)

During the homily for the Beatification of Peter To Rot, Saint John Paul II recalled the beautiful example of To Rot's family with Paula Ia Varpit, and put him as an example to married couples:

“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!” (*Homily for the Beatification of Peter To Rot*, 17 January 1995)



Paula Ia Varpit, To Rot’s wife and support

10 - Testing Time

When it comes to talking about the World War II, the Japanese occupation of New Britain and To Rot's work as catechist, there are three different moments that must be differentiated. The first moment is the Japanese occupation of the island in 1942, in which the Japanese army did not forbid pastoral activity, although they imprisoned all the missionaries. The second moment began in 1943, in which the army declared a partial ban on religion. The third and final moment began in 1944, when the total ban on religion was declared. We will see these three moments in this chapter.

First Moment: Japanese Occupation of New Britain

January 1942 - March 1943

The Japanese Army occupation of New Britain began on 4th January 1942 and lasted until August 1945. Naturally, it created a crucial impact and change in the lives of everybody, especially the Catholic Missionaries. The Tolai people, with whom Peter To Rot

worked as catechist, did not have better luck than the rest of the island, for they found themselves suddenly under Japanese's dominion. From this very moment, To Rot's strength of faith began to face the biggest and most dangerous trials, including the imminent threat of death.

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 because 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 stipulated that no military development or large deployment of troops or military weaponry should occur in this area.” (*Positio...* 41)

Australians taking care of the Gazelle Peninsula had very obsolete equipment to fight against the Japanese, and although they were 2,200 men, they were scattered around the island, resulting that some military posts were guarded by only half a dozen soldiers. They 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.

Just the day after the Japanese landed on the Gazelle Peninsula, they took over Vunapope. On that same day, Rakunai's beautiful church was partly destroyed, as it was suspected that an Australian soldier was hidden there. 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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 5)

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 else." (In *Positio... Summ*, 37)

During these events Father Laufer, To Rot's friend and confidant, was parish priest in Rakunai. He was allowed by the Japanese police to remain in the village, but the situation changed drastically

in October 1942, when all missionaries were ordered into strict internment at Vunapope, which was well surrounded by a perimeter of barbed wire. The people were left alone, and now was the time in which the faith of the courageous catechists should shine stronger than ever.

Since the moment in which Father Laufer left Rakunai, Peter To Rot decided that it was time for him to show his generosity and fidelity to the promise he made to God the day in which the Bishop gave him the catechist's crucifix and appointed him as catechist of Rakunai. He knew very well that the situation was dangerous and his very life was at risk, but he did not hesitate to take over the care of the station. Among the witnesses who gave their testimony during the canonical inquiry, we will find only praise and thanksgiving in regards to To Rot. All of them unanimously agreed when it came to talking about To Rot's concern for the people during this difficult period.

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 Ramale concentration camp, Peter To Rot expressed his determination to continue as head and leader of the church. He continued his pastoral activities, caring for the sick, for the children.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 5)

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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 7)

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 Rod assumed responsibilities in the parish and kept the Catholic people united. For approximately four years, he was the sole spiritual director, substituting for the internal pastor. Regularly, he assembled the children and adults for both religious and secular instructions, conducted the Sunday services, baptised infants, officiated at marriages, visited the sick and buried the dead. He recorded parish proceedings in the register and was considered the leading personality among the Catholic native population for the entire duration of the Japanese occupation." (In *Positio... Summ*, 107)

Rakunai's leader 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 15)

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, to whom he gave the sacrament of baptism. He cared for the couples, to whom he gave catechetical instruction and assisted in their marriages. He cared for his fellow catechists, to whom he visited and strengthened. He cared for the missionaries, to whom he used to bring food. Lastly, he also cared for the dead, to whom he buried in the Catholic rite. 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 been originally interned, 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. He was able to get back some of the clothing and foodstuff which he had collected, by the three Sisters from the Baining Mountains who spent several days in Vunaiara Prison on their way to Ramale Prison Camp.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 151)

As long has he had freedom, To Rot cared for everyone.

Second Moment: 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. It had been a year in which pastoral activity continued and in which people had been able to pray and receive formation from the catechists. But, by March, a change in attitude of the Japanese towards the native population, and in particular in regards to religious practice, began to appear. In consequence of various 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 in this very moment in which the situation changed drastically for the people of Papua New Guinea under the Japanese administration.

Rakunai was not an exception, for it also suffered a change in treatment from the Japanese. The tolerance towards the practice of religion by the Tolai quickly deteriorated, and the situation became even more dangerous than before. Peter To Rot and Anton Tata, who was chief of Rakunai during those years, were identified by the Japanese and summoned to Military Police Headquarters in Rabaul. To Rot was questioned about his activities as catechist and ordered to restrict his work.

We have a precious testimony of this episode 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 as 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 *Positio... Summ*, 159)

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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 151)

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, for they knew that since the very beginning, the Japanese used to look with distrust on all the church's activities and gatherings. Despite the fact, 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. Only small groups of people could gather in it, in accord with the Japanese's orders given to To Rot. 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" = from palm branches.

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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 148)

Marta Ia Kot, Anton Tata's wife, also said:

“The people were very frightened and did not dare to disobey the orders of the Japanese. My husband was the go-between the people and the military police and 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 organized small groups of people in various places and prayed with them.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 22)

This situation lasted from March 1943 until March 1944, in which the situation changed once again, and a total ban on religion was imposed.

Third Moment: Total Ban on Religion

March 1944 - May 1945

By this time the war was definitely turned against the Japanese, and their army had been driven out of southern New Britain. They held only the Gazelle Peninsula, which was subjected to routine bombing and cut off from supplies brought by both sea and air.

Since the Japanese's situation worsened and the end of the war was at hand, they decided to harden their relation with the natives, and the Tolai people suffered even greater. The partial prohibition of religious activities was, at this time, replaced by a total prohibition, which was made official when chiefs, as well as Catholic and Methodist catechists, were summoned to police headquarters in Ramata. The catechists were questioned about their religious activities, and the police told them that all practices of religion were, from that time on, absolutely forbidden. Although in the previous years they tolerated the catechist's work, they would not tolerate it any longer. To Rot tried to explain that their church service did not have anything to do with the war. On the contrary, religion strengthened them to endure the war and also taught them obedience to the Japanese. The police official bellowed at him to shut his mouth. Church services were and would remain strictly forbidden. From this very moment, 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 slowing up a victorious end to the war for them. The Japanese believed that because the native people practised their religion so conscientiously, God was seeing fit no longer to favour the Japanese.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 155)

To Rot went home, knowing that he could not pay heed to the prohibition. He told his people: **“They want to take away prayer from us, but I shall do my work.”**

From this moment, Peter To Rot was absolutely alone. Before, during the Japanese occupation, he had lost the priests and missionaries. Later, during the partial ban, he had lost many fellow catechists who were scared of conducting religious activities. Now, with this last ban, he 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 emergency 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 113)

With this last ban, To Rot had only two possibilities in front of him: he could rather leave the people alone to live and die without sacraments, or he could risk his life for the sake of Jesus and with prudence and wisdom, continue with his catechist’s ministry. Thanks be to God, he choose the second option.

Peter To Rot’s Apostolate During the Total Ban of Religion

After the last meeting with the Japanese police, Peter To Rot decided to act with the utmost prudence, 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 Celebes soldier-convicts was sentenced to labour; among them was a group of Catholics. To them To Rot proved a friend and gathered fruits to still their hunger. The other catechists of the station were spurred on by his heroic example and acted according to his wise direction.”

(In *Positio... Summ*, 113)

Also Father Theler praised To Rot with these words:

“Now the faith of the courageous, uncompromising catechist showed up 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, baptized, and officiated at weddings. Later, when travelling became more difficult, he sent the catechists short written counsels and words of advice.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 131)

During this period of total ban, To Rot divided the people into three prayer districts, so that there were never too many of them

together in one place, and he visited these groups whenever possible. He also told the people to pray quietly, and that, on the occasion of someone's death, prayers should not be said at the graveside but that he would come and pray at night in the home of the deceased person, the day before the burial.

He admonished the people to be prudent. "Do pray every day, but only in the morning and in dugouts," he used to tell them. He had in mind the air-raids when saying this, as he did not want to endanger others, especially those of his fellow countrymen who were spying for the Japanese.

All the witnesses that gave their testimony during the canonical inquiry agreed in saying that To Rot did not give up his catechist's ministry, despite the prohibition and threats. He was much more prudent and smart 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 said: "Peter To Rot continued his catechist's work right to the end." Margareta Ia Kalan 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." Joanne to Varto 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: 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 of To Rot had a great meaning: he declared to be ready to take the consequences of his adherence to this faith, even though it meant imprisonment. And the imprisonment we are talking about did not mean only deprivation of liberty, but also cruel punishment, and probably even death. There had been Tolais executed in his own district for smaller offences than a deliberate disobedience to a police order. A witness recalled: "The Japanese were cruel to the people. Killings were not unknown, for no apparent reasons, as for a simple refusal to obey. (...) Some were killed for stealing foodstuffs from the Japanese." (In *Positio... Summ*, 39)

Also To Rot's fellow catechist Raphael To Labit said that once the police told him: "If you do not cease your religious activities, you will go to prison, and then you will have your head cut off." (In *Positio... Summ*, 154)

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

"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 baptized, assisted at marriages and led people in prayer." (*Homily for the Beatification of Peter To Rot*, 17 January 1995)

Peter To Rot was realistic, and knew that, if he continued with this ministry, he could expect the worst fate: prison and punishment in the hands of the cruel Japanese, and eventually he could also have his head cut off.



Above: Rufina Ia Mama, To Rot's last daughter
Below: Two sisters in the prison camp of Vunapope



11 - Fighting for the Sanctity of Wedlock

This chapter will be divided into two parts. The first is a short history of how the issue of polygamy appeared in New Britain and Peter To Rot's reaction against this. The second is the well-known story of To Rot and To Metapa, the young policeman who wanted to marry a second wife and tried his best to destroy To Rot but putting him to death.

1- The Polygamy Issue: June 1944

By June 1944, the fate of the war was almost determined, and the Japanese knew that defeat was inevitable. Trying to go over this adverse moment in the best possible way, they called a special meeting of the village chiefs in order to gain their favour and keep their cooperation. "As a result of the discussion that ensued as to what recompense would be acceptable to the chiefs for their cooperation, it was decided that traditional Tolai polygamy, outlawed by the Christian Churches and previous Governments, would be legalized for all who

would prove themselves friends of the Japanese.” (*Positio*, 49) By doing this, the Japanese Military Police not only legalized polygamy, but they also made it a punishable offence for anyone to object to this anti-Christian legislation.

Paula Ia Varpit, To Rot’s wife and confidant, knew about this meeting, and she left this testimony: “He told me that the chiefs had had a meeting at which it had been decided to legalise polygamy. He often spoke against this and warned against its consequences.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 156)

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

“To Lapar, the chief of Nangnagunan village, had 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, for this favour, they would be more prepared to cooperate with the Japanese.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 153)

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."

(In *Positio... Summ*, 166)

Unfortunately, the Japanese idea proved attractive to most of the chiefs, as the number of wives a man could claim as his own, in times past, had indicated his degree of wealth and social position in Tolai society.

If the total ban of religious activities was already something bad for To Rot's ministry, this new situation was, without a doubt, worst. The Catholic faith was once again under attack, and one of the most precious treasures of Catholicism, the sanctity of Marriage, was at risk.

The attitude of the courageous catechist To Rot regarding this infamous law was entirely predictable: he denounced polygamy openly. He used every means to try to persuade Catholics and help them to avoid such a practice. He knew that this action could mean imprisonment and death, but he could not stay silent in front of this great danger. He knew that the love of spouses requires exclusivity by its very nature, for the unity and indissolubility of the spouses' community of persons, which embraces their entire life, truly makes 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)

At this point, Peter To Rot was ready to fight with all his strength and if necessary, to pay his last homage to God with the sacrifice of his very life. He did not fear joining the same fate of the great “marriage martyrs,” such as Saint John the Baptist, Saint John Fisher and Saint Thomas More, among others. These saints gave us an amazing testimony and wrote, with their lives, beautiful and unforgettable pages in the history of the Church. Saint John the Baptist did not fear when he had to face the powerful King Herod. Both Saint John Fisher and Saint Thomas More did not hesitate to tell King Henry VIII that it was not allowed for him to divorce his wife and marry a new one.

Something interesting to highlight is the fact that Peter To Rot defended the unity and indissolubility of Matrimony at all costs, including among the inner circle of his family. His own brother,

Joseph Tatamai, was among the first who wanted to take a second wife, but To Rot did not spare him a strong correction. Tatamai, as many witnesses recalled, became weak and secretly went to the harlot Ia Tia. To Rot was not influenced by the tie of closest kinship, but he opposed his elder brother in a clear and decisive way, even more vigorously than the others who were not related to him. He did not allow Tatamai to make Ia Tia his second wife or to take her to the family's farm, where To Rot and his two brothers were living, although Tatamai was the elder brother. When Tatamai insisted, To Rot sent both of them away.

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 farm if he was prepared to be unfaithful to God's law and although married, to appear publicly in company of another woman." (In *Positio... Summ*, 153)

Also To Rot's wife, Paula Ia Varpit, gave testimony about this incident as follows:

"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.**'" (In *Positio... Summ*, 156)

In the beginning, they stayed near Vunavuvur but later moved to another place. Tatamai could feel his brother's reproaches even when far away from him. He did not resist too long. After some time, Ia Tia was sent away, and he returned to his legitimate wife.

Many witnesses believed that Tatamai went to complain to a young Methodist policeman called To Metapa, who also wanted to take a second wife but was opposed by To Rot's teachings. To Metapa hated To Rot, and Tatamai gave him the the perfect excuse against To Rot: disobedience against the Japanese. In the eyes of many, Tatamai was To Rot's betrayer, for he put To Rot into the hands of a policeman thirsty of revenge.

2- The Catechist and the Policeman: April - June 1945

Due to To Rot's preaching and insistence in observing God's law and respecting the sanctity of wedlock, 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 Rakunai Police District.

To Metapa was a young policeman native of Nodup, and a Wesleyan. He was the first to try to contract a double marriage by trying to take the validly married Catholic woman Ia Mentil from her husband. Ia Mentil's uncle was opposed to this, and To Rot succeeded in making the attempt fail definitely.

To Rot managed to bring the Catholic woman to Rakunai, and in the presence of the chief of the village, he persuaded her to be true to God's commandments and not to leave her legitimate husband. She decided to come back to her legitimate home and husband, thwarting all To Metapa's plans and desires. The catechist also offered refuge for her and her sister in Rakunai, which was willingly accepted.

To Metapa, as expected, became furious at seeing his plans destroyed by To Rot, so he tried his best to destroy everyone who had prevented his adultery. First, he arrested the legitimate husband of Ia Mentil and tied him to a tree for three days. However, it was not enough for the young policeman to punish the woman's husband, for his real enemy was the catechist. From that very moment, To Metapa did not stop until he could find something against Peter To Rot and bring him to prison.

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 to wife the already married, Ia Mentil.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 153)

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.**” (In *Positio... Summ*, 15)

In a short time, To Metapa became the most dangerous enemy of Peter To Rot. However, he was not the only one. Many adulterers, including his own brother, Tatamai, were really angry with him. To Metapa was, however, the most dangerous because he was the most powerful and the only one who had the means of getting rid of the catechist. He could use against To Rot not only the force of the law, but also his friendship with the Japanese officer Meshida.

The ideal occasion for To Metapa took place in the early hours of a Sunday morning, in which To Rot presided some marriages in a hidden place. One couple, careless of the precautions recommended by the catechist, was intercepted by To Metapa while he was on patrol. The policeman asked them what were they doing, and they told him everything, including the full details of the ceremony. Now,

To Metapa found the excuse he was longing for and reported this to the Police chief, Meshida, who immediately initiated proceedings to have Peter To Rot and his two brothers arrested the next day.

Two "first hand" testimonies deserve to be quoted fully. The first one, given by catechist Emil To Iura, who was one of the witnesses of the wedding. The second one is given by To Rot's brother, Joseph Tatamai, who was present at the wedding ceremony and arrested together with the catechist.

Catechist Emil To Iura recalled the episode as follows:

"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.'" (In *Positio... Summ*, 167)

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 Vunavidir who were married, To Metin and Ia Maul. The witnesses were the catechist To Iura and myself. The policeman, To Metapa, a Wesleyan 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)

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

"At the time, he 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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 157)

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.

Tarua, 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 church services and the marriage stories. He had been quite alone; nobody helped him. When the interview was over, To Rot was locked in a tiny room in the dugout." (In *Positio... Summ*, 137)

Although To Rot was charged with breaking the law forbidding public prayer meetings and religious activities, this was no more than an excuse to prevent his interference with the polygamy issue. To Metapa and Meshida did not really care about the weddings or the prayer services conducted at night. What they really cared about was To Rot's doctrine against polygamy. They knew that many people, including the chiefs, were in a situation in which they did not know

who to obey: the Japanese or the catechist. On one side, the Japanese allowed and promoted polygamy, which many saw as good, unfortunately including many Catholics. On the other hand, Peter To Rot was a tireless apostle and felt obliged by his conscience to say: **“You are not allowed to do this.”**

To Metapa's pride was hurt, and he wanted revenge. The catechist had ruined his plans; he would not be able to have what he desired. His dream of having Ia Mentil as a new wife was over, and it was the catechist's fault. He was determined that polygamy must continue, no matter the cost. He would not allow that catechist to spoil his plans once again. For To Metapa, the real problem that had to be solved was To Rot. The catechist should die, so that polygamy could advance. This was precisely the reason why To Rot was already sentenced to death before even being arrested.

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

“When the authorities legalized 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." (*Homily for the Beatification of Peter To Rot*, 17 January 1995)

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 quite difficult to estimate a precise chronology of all of these events. However, all the witnesses agreed in saying that To Rot received two 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 moments 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.



General Hitoshi Imamura arrived in Rabaul in December 1942, to take command of the Japanese South Pacific Area and the Seventeenth Army. He was promoted to full general in 1943. After the war, he was tried for war crimes and was imprisoned at Sugamo between 1946 and 1954.

12 - A Catechist in Prison

Although we do not know the exact date in which Peter To Rot was put into prison, we do know that it was around April or June 1945. Unfortunately, we do not have much information regarding his detention in the prison camp because not many people were allowed to interact with him. Only his old mother and young wife could visit him regularly, along with a few exceptions that received a special permission from the police to visit him.

Peter To Rot was kept in the Vunaiara prison camp. There, serious cases were kept in a barred dugout, while minor cases enjoyed some freedom of movement around the camp. The prison building, in which the prisoners lived, was a bush hut built on poles in a narrow valley and could house about six to eight men. A second hut, built with an earthen floor, served as a kitchen. Most of the time the prisoners lived in the open, as Tolai people usually did. The hut was their dormitory, and when the weather was bad, their shelter. There was also a short tunnel dug into the side of the hill which was used for interrogations, but it also had

a door which could be used for solitary confinement or left open to serve as a shelter.

During his first day of imprisonment, To Rot was put into a small room in the underground shelter and left alone there all day. After, he was allowed to come out.

A fellow prisoner called To Romano was there, and he left his 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.” (In *Positio...*
Summ, 29)

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.”** (In *Positio... Summ*, 171)

Many times To Rot was put into solitary confinement and during the whole period of his detention, was treated with less mercy than the others prisoners. He was kept in the barred part of the prison, reserved for serious cases and separated from the others, along with his visitors being restricted. His own sister, Theresia Ia Varpilak, said that on one occasion, To Rot exclaimed: “They are going to put me in the hole, again, tonight.”

To Rot's brother, Tatamai, testified that after their arrest, they were first put together, but after some time, To Rot was made cook for the prisoners, which meant staying within the confines of the camp, while the others were allowed to go out and work in the gardens.

As for the length of time that To Rot was detained in prison, we unfortunately have no precise knowledge. The only thing known for certain is that while his brothers Tatamai and Telo were sentenced for one month imprisonment, To Rot was sentenced to two months. Tatamai himself declared: “Telo was soon released because of his poor health, and I also was discharged when my month's sentence expired. To Rot completed his two month's sentence, but was not released.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 149)

During his two month's detention, Peter To Rot was allowed to receive regular visits from his old mother, Maria Ia Tumil, from his

wife, Paula Ia Varpit, his children, and his sister, Theresia Ia Varpilak. They used to cook and bring him food every day.

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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 152)

She added:

“To Rot showed no signs of fear. He always lived and identified himself as a catechist. While in prison, he admonished his visitors to pray for him, and frequently he prayed the rosary, alone and with others.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 5)

Paula Ia Varpit said:

“Myself and Peter To Rot’s mother were allowed to visit him in prison every day. He asked me to bring him food, and I did it. 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 7)

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 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.”(In *Positio... Summ*, 157)

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

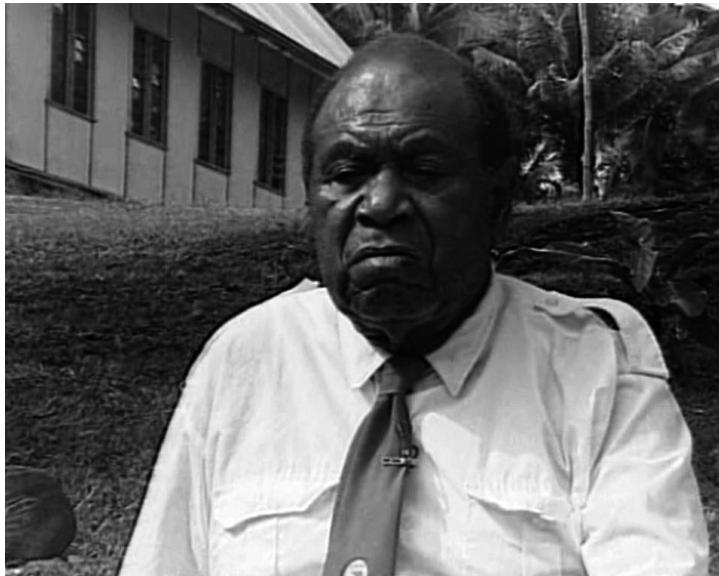
“I visited Peter To Rot many times in prison, when I went along with my aunt, Maria Ia Tumul, To Rot’s mother, who took food for him. I remember that Maria Ia Tumul was always sad when leaving To Rot and had the impression that he would die. Peter To Rot seemed to be calm and peaceful and told his visitors: ‘**Don’t worry for me. I die for my faith. You go home and pray for me.**’”

(In *Positio... Summ*, 13)

As far as we know, besides the above persons, only three others had the possibility of visiting To Rot in prison: Margareta Ia Kaian and Adriana Ia Katal, who used to live with To Rot’s family in Rakunai, and Eleazar Tarue, his uncle. Tarue left us a beautiful account:

“During one of my visits to the prison, To Rot told me of the court proceedings: **‘Firstly, I was charged with holding religious assemblies, when, to do so, was forbidden. Then, I was charged with interference in their plans to promote polygamous marriages. My brother told how I had opposed his marriage to Ia Tia, and the charge in relation to polygamy carried more weight than the first.’**” (In *Positio... Summ*, 169)

While reading all these testimonies, it is important to notice how To Rot was fully aware of two things. **First, he knew that he would die, and he willingly accepted this. Second, he knew that he would die because of his faith.** Once again, we should recall that the real cause of To Rot's death was his strong faith and his courageous opposition to polygamy, defending the Catholic doctrine about Marriage.



Arap To Binabak, a fellow prisoner of To Rot. He was an eye witness of To Rot's murder and gave us priceless information about the last hours and death of the catechist.

He declared: "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. (...) I felt strongly that Peter To Rot had died for his faith."

13 - Peter To Rot's Murder

From the moment Peter To Rot was arrested, he knew that he would die. Although many people tried to intercede on his behalf, the Japanese police had no mercy towards the catechist and all efforts against them were in vain. In fact, since the very first day in prison, To Rot was treated with much more severity than the others prisoners. When his two months sentence were finished, he was not granted freedom, but he unjustly continued in prison. This kind of treatment from the Japanese and the hatred of To Metapa was a sign that only To Rot could see and understand. Perhaps this was the reason why he was so convinced about his fate. In the last chapter, we have seen 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,”** etc., were common to hear from him during his imprisonment.

The Date

It is the catechist's wife, Paula Ia Varpit, who gave us the most precise date concerning To Rot's death. She said that the news of his death arrived on a Saturday morning, and she declared to have seen him in prison the day before, which lead us to affirm that To Rot's death took place some Friday of July. In the canonical inquiry we can read:

“*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.” (*Positio*, 56)

As happened with To Rot’s date of birth and Baptism, there are no official records remaining about his death. This is in part because the Japanese destroyed many documents before the end of the war, especially those referring to deaths in prison that could be used to incriminate them. On the other hand, it is also due to the complete disregard of the Tolai people for the value of precise dates and chronology. As a result, although it’s a pity to ignore the

precise date, “July 1945” has been accepted as the official date of To Rot’s martyrdom.

The Final Hours

As stated before, To Rot knew that he would die soon, but he did not know exactly when. Suspicions arose in his mind when the Japanese officer Gunto told the prisoner To Romano that a doctor would have to come to give the prisoner To Rot some medicine because of his sickness. This occurred two days before the catechist’s last Friday. Seeing that To Rot was not sick at all, he immediately understood that the nonexistent sickness was only an excuse to justify the doctor’s visit.

The relatives who visited To Rot in those two days gave witness of To Rot’s premonition in this matter. To Rot’s brother, Tatamai, said:

“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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 149)

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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 152)

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 the 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.**" (In *Positio... Summ*, 7)

The day before To Rot was killed, 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 160)

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.’**” (In *Positio... Summ*, 16)

Another visitor who was allowed to visit the catechist during his stay in prison was a religious sister named Adriana Ia Katai. As mentioned before, she’s a distant relative of Peter To Rot, and being orphaned, she was looked after by his parents. She had the chance to visit To Rot the day before his death, and this is how she remembered that moment:

“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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 23)

Among all the witnesses, when it comes to To Rot’s last hours, there are two that deserve a special place: To Romano and Arap To Binabak. Both of them were also prisoners along with the catechist and were involved in the crucial events which marked To Rot’s last two days in prison. We only know how To Rot was murdered because of their account.

To Romano was asked to give testimony in two different moments: in 1952, soon after To Rot’s death and again, thirty years later, during the canonical inquiry. Both accounts are worthy to be read. Although there are some minor differences in them, the substance remains identical.

In 1952, he wrote:

“To Rot caught a slight cold, 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." (In *Positio... Summ*, 171)

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 next 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."

(In *Positio... Summ*, 29-30)

Arap To Binabak was 15 years younger than To Rot. Although he belonged to another religion, they had a friendly relationship. During the different investigations, he gave his testimony twice, and both testimonies will be quoted.

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 Vunaiara.

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, 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 *Positio... Summ*, 172-173)

In 1987, he left us this testimony:

“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, although 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.” (In *Positio... Summ*, 25-26)

When Meshida, 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’ has been very ill and has died. Tell chief Tata and his relatives to come here and take him away.”

The Catechist is Dead

When Tata received the news, he blew his horn to give the warning to his people. Some people went straight to the prison, and they found

the corpse still on the veranda. They noticed the cotton-wool in his ears and nostrils, along with some foamy phlegm that came out of the corners of his mouth. There was a needle prick next to the big vein of the left upper-arm, and his throat was discoloured and swollen.

They brought the corpse to Tarue's farm. It was still warm and the limbs not yet rigid. Many people came to see what had happened. No one believed that he was sick, but all of them exclaimed: "To Rot has been murdered."

Let us read some of the testimonies:

Tarue: "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 talk, To Rot died for his knowledge and for his religion.'"

To Burangan: "The red ban about his forehead and the cotton-wool was taken away, and foamy, fetid phlegm came out of this orifices. We washed the corpse. I knew 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: "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: “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: “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 Vunaiara. 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 was evil-smelling, 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. According to native custom the body was elevated so that people could see To Rot. While a coffin was being made for him, the people came to view the corpse, to weep and to pray."

(In *Positio... Summ*, 157)

The Funeral

To Rot's funeral and burial were carried out without much solemnity. Everybody was afraid of the Japanese, and nobody wanted to have any problem with the police. The order that forbade prayer gatherings was still in place, and a funeral was a perfect occasion for the police to bring more people to prison.

Some people wanted to bury To Rot next to his father, To Puia. Chief Anton Tata was against 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 at Vunapalabarip, the burying place of his family. Later on, everybody agreed in saying that To Rot should be buried in a small cemetery near the church, which Father Laufer had arranged some years before, according to Catholic tradition.

In that cemetery, there was a spot of honour under a great crucifix that Father Laufer wanted to be buried himself when his time came. Although everybody loved their parish priest, they were well-aware that To Rot was a martyr, and they decided, instead, to bury To Rot in that special place.

Police boys carried the body to To Rot's homestead. Two Japanese and some spies mingled with the people. To Rot's wife and mother stayed at the farm, as Paula was close to give birth to her third child.

Once the coffin was ready, they carried the body to the churchyard. Many people followed. The funeral was held in silence because everybody knew that some spies were among them, so they did not want to pray in out loud. In the evening, they met again at Taogo, where they followed Tolai's traditions in honour of the martyr.

No voices where heard that night at the Taogo farm. Everybody was silent and afraid.

* * *

At this point, although very briefly and out of context, a word of acknowledgment and thanksgiving must be given for the young widow, Paula Ia Varpit. When her husband died, she was a young woman of 25 years with three children. According to the testimonies of many witnesses and of Paula herself, she was To Rot's confidant and support. Without her generosity, we probably would not have Peter To Rot in our Martyrology today.

Only once in her life did she try to persuade To Rot to abandon his work as catechist because she was aware of the dangers that it involved. The only time she did this was on the very day of her husband's death. Until that last day, she never complained or put an obstacle to her husband's ministry.

During the second examination, at the request of Promotor of Justice, this short and beautiful dialogue took place:

“Promotor: 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, I did ask Peter To Rot to discontinue his pastoral work only once. This was on the day of his death, when I visited him for the last time in prison. Before I never asked Peter To Rot to stop his pastoral work because his strong insistence on a deep faith and strength of purpose in his work made me sure that he would refuse to consider requests of this kind.

Promotor: What was Peter To Rot's reply to your suggestion?

Paula Ia Varpit: Peter To Rot's reply to my plea was: '**You don't stop me from doing my work. It is God's work.**'"
(In *Positio... Summ*, 48)

14 - Is Peter To Rot a True Martyr?

“Is Peter To Rot a true martyr?” Although the answer can seem obvious to us, it is a crucial point in the canonization process of a saint and must be thoroughly proved. In other words: did Peter To Rot die because of his faith, or did he die because of his lack of obedience to Japanese authorities and laws? The correct answer to this question is essential and decisive in To Rot’s case. If he died because of his faith and willingly accepted death, then he is a true martyr and should be honoured as such. However, if he died only out of disobedience to the Japanese authorities, then he could be remembered as a good catechist and a loving husband but not as a martyr.

We will divide this chapter in two parts. In the first part, we will see what the Catholic Church teaches about martyrdom. In the second part, we will demonstrate that Peter To Rot was a true martyr because he fulfilled all the requirements of martyrdom.

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 at least we can see some notions and concepts that will aid us to better understand this delicate matter and to answer any objection that could appear.

Martyrdom in the Church

The word "martyrdom" comes from the Greek word μάρτυς (*martyys* or *martus*), 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. (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: "*Wherefore, of these men who have accompanied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus came in and went out among us... one of these must be made witness with us of 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 nowadays this word is exclusively related with someone who shed their blood for Christ, this is not how it was understood at the beginning. A “martyr” was simply a “witness to the truth,” with no necessary reference to the shedding of blood. However, there was a problem: the same word “martyr” was applied to those who shed their blood for Christ, and also for those who, without shedding their blood, were courageous witnesses of the Catholic faith. During first ages of the Church, a distinction among these two groups of people was made only by degrees. And so we find that in the second century, the word “confessor” began to be used to refer to those witnesses who did not shed their blood for Christ, and the word “martyr” came to be exclusively applied to those who had died for the faith.

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 called *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione* (*On the Beatification of the Servants of God and Canonization 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 underline the distinction made by the Pope between being killed for the faith and being killed for a virtue connected to the faith. Sometimes we find martyrs who were killed simply because their persecutors hated the Catholic faith, like in the ancient persecutions under the Roman Empire or recently during many communist regimes. Many times, however we find martyrs that were killed not directly due to their faith but because of another Christian virtue, such as charity, chastity, obedience, etc. These are also considered martyrs in the complete sense of the term because the virtue which they defended was deeply rooted in their Catholic faith and Gospel teaching.

Let us see some recent and familiar examples of this distinction in order to better understand. One could ask: is Saint Maria Goretti a martyr? An objection could be raised that the man who killed her did not kill her directly because of her faith but because of her purity. This is true. However, since purity, for which she died, is a Christian

virtue, she is a true martyr. Let us see another example: is Saint Maximilian Kolbe a martyr? Here, we can also object that he was killed not because of his faith but because of his charity towards a fellow prisoner. This is also true, but since charity is a Christian virtue, for which he died, he is also a true martyr.

Although these two saints were killed not for their faith but for a related Christian virtue, their death constitutes a true martyrdom. In few words, according to Pope Benedict XIV's definition, a martyr is not only a person who died for their faith but also those who die for any other virtue related to it.

The Three Essential Elements for Martyrdom

More recently, on 24 April 2006, Pope Benedict XVI wrote a Letter to the members of the 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 Pope Benedict XVI decided to underline them once again because of their great importance.

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. Without these three elements joined together, there is no real martyrdom. The Pope said:

“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. **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 study the 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.

The Foundation of Martyrdom

Martyrdom is founded on the death of Jesus and on his supreme sacrifice of love consummated on the Cross, by which we have life. Christ is the suffering servant mentioned 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 all of his blood, even until the last drop, in the sacrifice of Calvary. The army of thousands of martyrs that come after him are only repeating this supreme sacrifice with the strength that Jesus himself gives to them.

Jesus urges his disciples, each one of us, to take up his or her cross every day and follow Him on the path of total love of God. He said: "*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 in order to bring new life. Jesus Himself "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." (BENEDICT XVI, 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.

Pope Benedict XVI, in one of his beautiful audiences, said:

"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 calmness 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. 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." (BENEDICT XVI, *Audience*, 11 August 2010)

Although we may not be called to martyrdom, none of us are excluded from the divine call to holiness, to attain the high standard of Christian living, which entails taking up our cross daily.

Peter To Rot Fulfilled the Three Essential Elements of Martyrdom

We said above that martyrdom has three essential elements that must converge: **1) Death of the victim; 2) Acceptance by the victim; 3) Hatred of the faith by the persecutor.** Let us see briefly how Peter To Rot fulfilled these three requirements and the reason why Saint John Paul II decided to include his name in the Martyrology 25 years ago today.

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.

It was clear for everyone since the very day it happened that Peter To Rot had been murdered. We have already read the testimonies of the eye witnesses that declared that two policeman, Meshida and Gunto, were responsible for the execution of the catechist, aided by a Japanese doctor whose name is unknown to us. The details of the events were already described in chapter 13, so we will only briefly review them, without many details.

We have a priceless **eye witness** named 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 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.**”

Anton Tata 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.”

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.”

Also To Rot’s brother, Tatamai said: “The centre of **the throat was crushed flat and was swollen.**”

All these testimonies are enough to prove that Peter To Rot was

violently killed, and his death was not due to natural causes, as the Japanese reported to the people of Rakunai.

2- Acceptance by the Victim

The second element we must consider is the willing acceptance of death by the victim. In other words: did Peter To Rot accepted death willingly or, rather, was he simply forced to undergo it?

In the previous chapter, many testimonies were quoted that showed how Peter To Rot was not only aware of his imminent death, but also willingly accepted it for the sake of his faith. Let us see once again some of these testimonies:

Tatamai, the catechist's brother, said: "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.'**"

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

His sister Theresia Ia Varpilak recalled: "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 To Rot's wife, Paula Ia Varpit, added:

“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.”

To Bernardet Ia Olgeta added: “Peter To Rot seemed to be calm and peaceful and told his visitors: **‘Don’t be worry for me. I die for my faith. You go home and pray for me.’”**

Anton Tata gave what is probably the most beautiful account:

“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.’”**

While reading all these account, there can be no serious doubts about To Rot's acceptance of death. He not only was ready for it, but gladly gave up his life for God's sake.

3- Hatred of the Faith by the Persecutor

The third and final element that we must consider is whether To Rot was killed on account of his faith, or if he was killed for some other reason. As said before, if there is no hatred of the faith (*odium fidei*) by the persecutor, there is no martyrdom.

Did the Japanese kill To Rot because of his Catholic faith? The answer to this question is “Yes.” To Rot died because he was Catholic and therefore defended the supreme virtue of unity and indissolubility of Marriage.

We have already seen that the real problem between To Rot and the Japanese was not his disobedience regarding the ban of religious activities, but rather his strong opposition the polygamy law.

Since the very moment in which the law that allowed polygamy was declared, To Rot denounced this practice openly, using every means to try to persuade Catholics from following it.

In the previous chapters, we have also seen how the native policeman To Metapa sought to destroy To Rot because the good catechist was able to stop him to contracting a double marriage and taking the married Catholic woman Ia Mentil from her husband. To Rot succeeded in making the attempt fail definitely, by advising the woman to come back to her legitimate husband. From that moment, To Metapa hated To Rot’s opposition to polygamy and wanted revenge. In the eyes of the policeman, the catechist had to die so

that polygamy can be freely installed. That was the real and only reason why To Rot was already sentenced to death before even arriving to prison.

The Japanese never admitted this. Instead, they told the people of Rakunai that the catechist was put in prison because of his disobedience of the religious ban. However, we know this was not true because the Japanese policeman Meshida himself once declared: **“To Rot is a very bad man. He is preventing people, who want to do so, from having more than one wife.”**

Again, we quote the words of the catechist himself to his brother Tatamai, in which we can see that he knew perfectly well the reason he was in prison and the cause of his imminent death: **“I am here because of those who break their marriage vows. (...) That's it. I shall die.”**

To Rot's strong defence of the Catholic value of the indissolubility of marriage against the infamous practice of polygamy is exactly what Saint John Paul II highlighted during the homily of his beatification: **“When the authorities legalized and encouraged polygamy, Blessed Peter knew it to be against Christian principles and firmly denounced this practice.”**

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.

Third Part

Appendix

Third Part: *Appendix*

As an appendix to this book, we would like to share two homilies. The first homily was given by Pope Saint John Paul II during the beatification of Peter To Rot. The second homily belongs to Pope Benedict XVI, in which he offers a reflection on the martyrs of the 20th century.

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HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

Sir John Guise Stadium, Port Moresby

Tuesday, 17 January 1995

Ol brata na susa bilong mi, Tenkyu tru long bikpela welkam yupela i givim long mi hastede long ples balus. 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 moa yet.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“Rejoice... insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings” (1Pt. 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*” (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 baptized, assisted at marriages and led people in prayer.

When the authorities legalized 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”* (1Pt. 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”* (1Pt.

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 laif 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.

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of Saint Bartholomew on Tiber Island in Rome

Sunday, 27 April 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We may see our meeting in the ancient Basilica of St Bartholomew on Tiber Island as a pilgrimage in memory of the martyrs of the 20th century, countless men and women, known and unknown, who shed their blood for the Lord in the 1900s. It is a pilgrimage guided by the Word of God which, like a lamp to our feet, a light on our way (cf. Ps 119[118]:105), brightens the life of every believer with its light. This church was especially designated by my beloved Predecessor John Paul II as a place for the memorial of the 20th century martyrs and entrusted by him to the Community of Sant'Egidio, which this year is thanking the Lord for the 40th anniversary of its foundation.

I greet with affection the Cardinals and Bishops who have wished to take part in this liturgy. I greet Prof. Andrea Riccardi, Founder of the Sant'Egidio Community, and I thank him for his words; I greet Prof. Marco Impagliazzo, President of the Community, the Chaplain, Mons. Matteo Zuppi, as well as Bishop Vincenzo Paglia of Terni-Narni-Amelia.

In this place full of memories let us ask ourselves: why did these martyr brothers and sisters of ours not seek to save the irreplaceable good of life at all costs? Why did they continue to serve the Church

in spite of grave threats and intimidation? In this Basilica where the relics of the Apostle Bartholomew are preserved and the mortal remains of St Adalbert venerated, we hear the resonance of the eloquent witness of those who, not only in the 1900s but from the very beginning of the Church, putting love into practice, offered their lives to Christ in martyrdom.

In the icon set above the main altar, which portrays some of these witnesses of faith, the words of the Book of Revelation stand out: *“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation”* (Rv 7:13). The old man who asks who the people dressed in white are and where they came from is told: *“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”* (Rv 7:14). At first it appears a strange answer. However, in the coded language of the Seer of Patmos it contains a precise reference to the clear flame of love that impelled Christ to pour out his blood for us. By virtue of that blood, we have been purified. Sustained by that flame, the martyrs too poured out their blood and were purified in love: in the love of Christ who made them capable of sacrificing themselves for love in their turn.

Jesus said: *“Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”* (Jn 15:13). Every witness of faith lives this “greater love” and, after the example of the Divine Teacher, is ready to sacrifice his life for the Kingdom. In this way we become friends of Christ; thus, we are conformed to him, accepting the extreme sacrifice without limiting the gift of love and the service of faith.

Stopping by the six altars that commemorate the Christians who fell under the totalitarian violence of Communism, Nazism, those killed in America, Asia and Oceania, in Spain and Mexico, in Africa, we retrace in spirit numerous sorrowful events of the past century. So many fell while they were carrying out the evangelizing mission of the Church: their blood mingled with that of the indigenous Christians to which they had transmitted the faith.

Others, often in a minority condition, were killed in hatred of the faith. Lastly, many sacrificed themselves, undaunted by threats and dangers, in order not to abandon the needy, the poor or the faithful entrusted to them. They were Bishops, priests, men and women religious and faithful lay people. How many they are! At the Ecumenical Jubilee Commemoration for the new martyrs celebrated at the Colosseum on 7 May 2000, the Servant of God John Paul II said that these brothers and sisters of ours in the faith stand as a vast panorama of Christian humanity in the 20th century, a panorama of the Gospel of the Beatitudes, lived even to the shedding of blood. And he was in the habit of repeating that Christ's witness to the point of bloodshed speaks with a stronger voice than the divisions of the past.

It is true: it seems as though violence, totalitarianism, persecution and blind brutality got the upper hand, silencing the voices of the witnesses to the faith who humanly speaking appeared to be defeated by history. But the Risen Jesus illuminates their testimony

and thus we understand the meaning of martyrdom. Tertullian says of this: “Plures efficimur quoties metimur a vobis: sanguis martyrum semen christianorum - Our numbers increase every time we are cut down by you: the blood of martyrs is the seed of [new] Christians” (Apol. 50, 13).

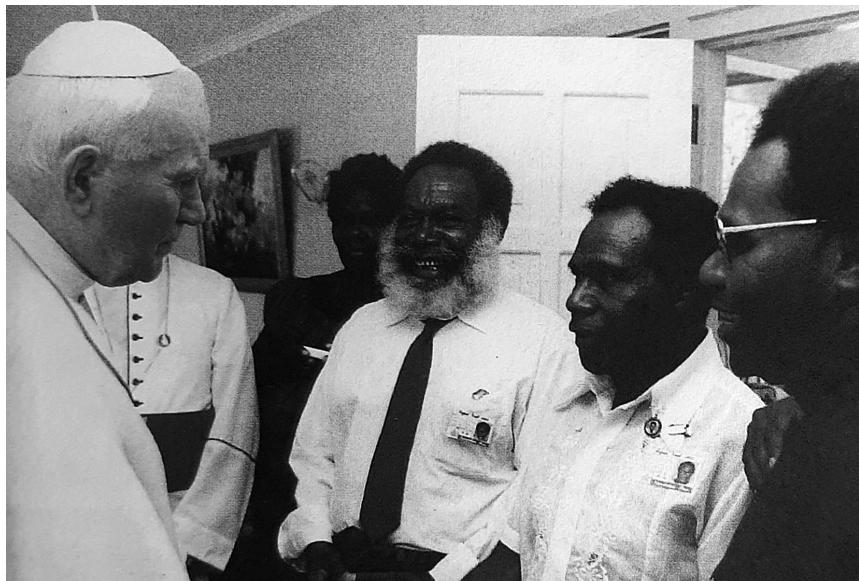
A force that the world does not know is active in defeat, in the humiliation of those who suffer for the Gospel: *“for when I am weak”*, the Apostle Paul exclaims, *“then I am strong”* (2 Cor 12:10). It is the power of love, defenseless and victorious even in apparent defeat. It is the force that challenges and triumphs over death.

This 21st century also opened under the banner of martyrdom. When Christians are truly the leaven, light and salt of the earth, they too become the object of persecution, as was Jesus; like him they are “a sign of contradiction”. Fraternal life in common and the love, faith and decisions in favour of the lowliest and poorest that mark the existence of the Christian community sometimes give rise to violent aversion. 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!

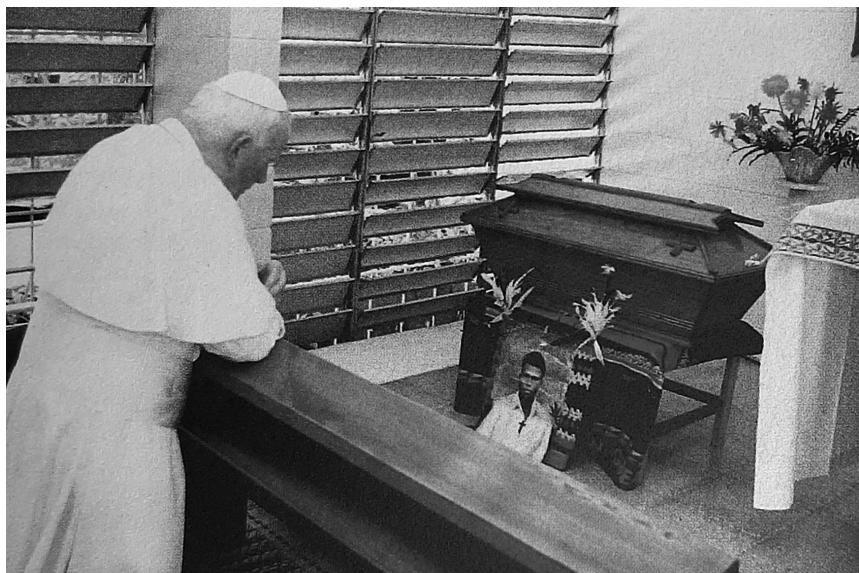
And in this ancient Basilica, thanks to the care of the Sant’Egidio Community, the memory of so many witnesses to the faith who died in recent times is preserved and venerated. Dear friends of the Community of Sant’Egidio, looking at these heroes of the faith, may you too strive to imitate their courage and perseverance in serving the

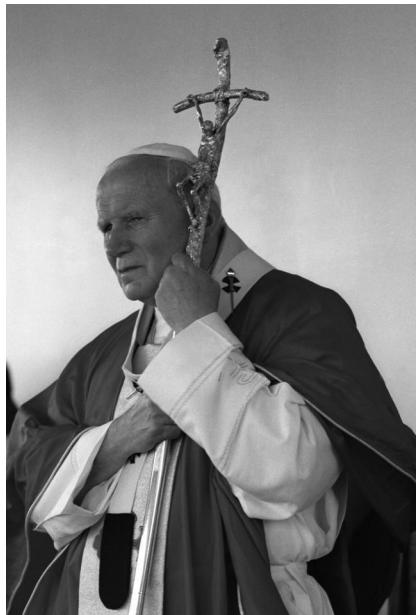
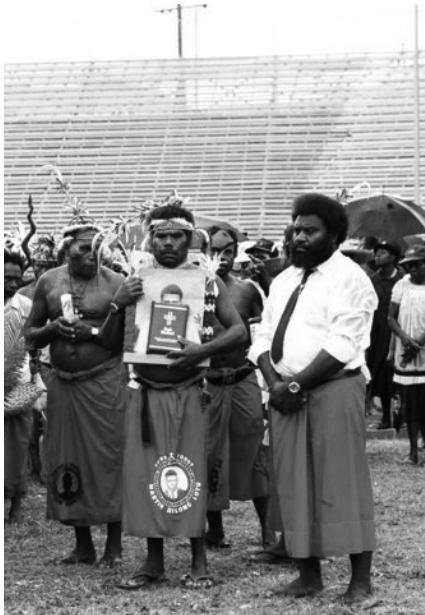
Gospel, especially among the poorest. Be builders of peace and reconciliation among those who are enemies or who fight one another. Nourish your faith by listening to and meditating on the Word of God, daily prayer and active participation in Holy Mass. Authentic friendship with Christ will be the basis of your mutual love. Sustained by his Spirit you will be able to help build a more fraternal world. May the Blessed Virgin, Queen of Martyrs, sustain you and help you to be genuine witnesses of Christ.

Amen.



Above: Pope Saint John Paul II with relatives of Blessed Peter To Rot
Below: Praying in front of the mortal remains of the blessed catechist





Holy Mass for the Beatification of Peter To Rot



