

BLESSED PETER TO ROT (1912-1945)

Peter To Rot, the first blessed of Papua New Guinea, was an exemplary husband and father and an exceptional catechist. In 1945, he was killed by Japanese soldiers because of his courageous defense of Christian marriage.

The island of New Guinea is surrounded by numerous archipelagos and includes mountainous terrain difficult to traverse and is inhabited by thousands of diverse ethnic groups that speak about eight hundred different dialects. The missionaries brought the Gospel to the region in 1870, and in 1882 the first group of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus arrived at Matupit (now New Britain Island). To everyone's surprise, the head of the village of Rakunai, Angelo To Puia, announced that he wanted to become a Catholic along with most of the villagers. Maria Ia Tumul, Angelo's wife, gave birth to their son Peter in 1912. He was the third of their six children. Angelo To Puia made sure that all of the children were baptized, and he taught them the fundamental truths of the catechism, while Maria taught them to pray.

As a child, attending the missionary school, Peter showed himself to be an exceptional and hard-working student, particularly interested in religion. The boy had a particularly lively personality, but he was also thoughtful and helpful. Even though he was the son of a great chief and could have let others serve him, he was happy to serve others and even to climb palm trees to collect coconuts for the elderly villagers.

In 1930, the parish priest told Peter's father that his young sons might have vocations to the priesthood. To Puia, however, answered wisely, "I

don't think the time is right for one of my sons or another man from this village to become a priest. But if you want to send him to the school for catechists in Taliligap, I'll agree."

The missionary work to be done in Oceania was immense, but there were few missionaries, and for this reason the local youths were encouraged to become catechists and to work with them. Peter dedicated himself to his new life at St. Paul's College, filled with spiritual exercises, lessons, and manual work. The school had a farm that made it largely self-sufficient. Peter offered a fine example to the other students by tending attentively to the work that needed to be done on the farm. He was a "joyful companion" who often ended quarrels among his peers with his calming words. Through frequent confession, daily communion, and the rosary, he and his fellow students succeeded in combating temptation and increasing their faith, thus becoming mature Christians and "apostles."

In 1934, Peter To Rot received his catechist's cross from the bishop and was sent back to his native village to help the parish priest, Father Laufer. He taught catechism to the children of Rakunai, instructed adults in the faith, and led prayer meetings. He encouraged the people to participate in Sunday Mass, and he was a trusted counselor for sinners, helping them prepare for confession. He further committed himself to zealously fighting the practice of witchcraft that was common among many, even among some who called themselves Christians.

In 1936, Peter married Paula Ia Varpit, a young woman from a nearby village. Theirs was an exemplary Christian marriage. Peter showed great respect for his wife and prayed with her every morning and evening. He was also devoted to his children and spent a lot of time with them.

In 1942, during the Second World War, the Japanese invaded New Guinea and immediately confined all the priests and religious in concentration camps. Being a layman, Peter was able to stay in Rakunai. After this, he began to take on many new responsibilities, guiding Sunday prayers and urging the faithful to persevere, witnessing weddings, bap-

tizing newborns, and presiding at funerals. He also led the villagers into the forest, where a missionary had taken refuge after he had managed to escape the Japanese, so that everyone could receive the sacraments in secret.

Although the Japanese initially did not totally forbid Catholic worship, they soon began to loot and destroy churches. So To Rot built a wooden chapel in the bush and created underground hiding places for the sacred vessels. He continued his apostolic work with caution, visiting the Christians at night because of the numerous spies in the area. He often went to Vunapopé, a distant village, where a priest gave him the Blessed Sacrament, and with the special permission of the bishop, To Rot carried communion to the sick and the dying.

By exploiting the divisions within the population of New Guinea, the Japanese reintroduced polygamy to win support from several local leaders. They implemented a plan to counteract the “Western” influence on the native population. Out of lust or perhaps simply out of fear of reprisals, many men took a second wife.

The catechist, Peter To Rot felt that he had to speak out and would say, “I will never stop telling Christians about the dignity and great importance of the sacrament of marriage.” He even stood in opposition to his own brother Joseph, who was publicly advocating a return to the practice of polygamy. Another of his brothers, Tatamai, remarried and denounced Peter to the Japanese authorities. Peter’s wife Paula feared that her husband’s determination would endanger their family, but Peter responded, “If I have to die, that’s fine, because I will die for the kingdom of God among our people.”

Pope St. John Paul II would later teach, “The primary communion is the one that is established and develops between husband and wife. By virtue of the covenant of married life, a man and a woman ‘are no longer two but one flesh’ (Mt. 19:6; cf. Gen 2:24). Such a communion is radically contradicted by polygamy. This, in fact, directly negates the plan

of God which was revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive” (*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 19).

One day in 1945, while Peter To Rot was planting beans in a field occupied by the Japanese, he was arrested by police officers who had just searched his house and found several religious items. During the subsequent interrogation, Peter admitted that he had led a prayer meeting the day before, and the chief of police, Meshida, struck him. When he professed against bigamy, he was arrested. As he later told his family, “for Meshida, that was my principle crime.”

Peter was kept in a small, windowless cell from which he was released from time to time just to look after the pigs. His mother and his wife brought him food. Once Paula took their two children with her (she was pregnant with the third) and begged her husband to tell the Japanese that he would stop working as a catechist if they released him. “It is not your concern,” Peter said. Making the sign of the cross, he added, “I must glorify the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and thereby help my people.” He asked his wife to bring him his catechist’s cross, which he kept with him until the end. That same day he confided to his mother that the police had called a Japanese doctor who would come to give him some medicine, adding, “I’m not sick! Go home quickly and pray for me.” The next day a policeman arrived at Rakunai and announced, “Your catechist is dead.”

To Rot’s uncle, Tarua, went to the place with Meshida to identify the body. A red scarf was wrapped around the martyr’s neck, which was swollen and wounded. An injection mark was clearly visible on his right arm. Judging by the smell, the “doctor” had injected a cyanide compound. The poison had worked slowly and the soldiers had strangled and stabbed Peter in the back with a knife. Peter To Rot was buried in the Rakunai cemetery and his tomb became a place of pilgrimage. His brother Tatamai repented

and, after the war, rebuilt the church of Rakunai with his own money as an act of contrition. In the fifty years following the death of To Rot, the village of Rakunai has seen at least a dozen priests and religious come from among them for the Catholic Church.

During his pastoral visit to Oceania in 1995, Pope John Paul II beatified Peter To Rot in Port Moresby. The Pope preached, “Because the Spirit of God dwelt in him, he fearlessly proclaimed the truth about the sanctity of marriage.... 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!... Thanks to the Spirit of God that dwelt in him, he boldly proclaimed the truth about the sanctity of marriage.”

Baptised
and sent

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