

Bl. Peter To Rot – Defender of Matrimony

by [Michael J. Miller](#) on May 31, 2011 in [Featured](#), [Marriage](#)

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One of the patron saints of World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney, Australia, was Blessed Peter To Rot, a native son of Papua New Guinea. A second-generation Catholic during the evangelization of his Southern Pacific island in the early twentieth century, he was an exemplary husband, father and catechist. In 1945 he suffered martyrdom at the hands of Japanese soldiers for his courageous defense of Christian marriage.

New Guinea in Oceania, an island larger than France, is surrounded by many archipelagos that are inhabited by more than a thousand tribes speaking hundreds of different dialects. Method missionaries brought the Gospel to the region in the 1870's. In 1882 the first group of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus arrived in Matupit (today New Britain). To everyone's surprise, the chief of the village of Rakunai, Angelo To Puia, announced that he and most of the villagers wanted to become Catholic.

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 them were baptized, and he himself taught them the basic truths of the catechism, while Maria taught them to pray.

Even as a child in the missionary school, Peter was a hard-working, exceptional student, who took a great interest in religion. The boy had a mischievous streak, yet was considerate and helpful: he used to climb the palm trees to gather coconuts for elderly villagers, even though as the son of a big chief he could have let others serve him.

In 1930 the parish priest told Peter's father that the youth might have a vocation to the priesthood. To Puia sagely replied, "I think that the time is not ripe for one of my sons or another man from here to become a priest. But if you want to send him to the school for catechists in Taliligap, I agree."

The mission field in Oceania was immense but the missionaries were few, and so young men were trained as catechists to work with them. Peter threw himself cheerfully into his new daily routine at St. Paul's College: spiritual exercises, classes and manual labor. The school had a farm that made it largely self-supporting. When the tropical sun was blazing and some of the students preferred to take it easy, Peter by his example and urging convinced them to get down to work. He was a "joyful companion" who often put an end to quarrels with his good-natured joking. He soon learned to refrain from humor at the expense of the instructors. Through frequent confession, daily communion and the Rosary he and his fellow students fought temptations, increased their faith and became mature, apostolic Christian men.

In 1934 Peter To Rot received from the bishop his catechist's cross and was sent back to his native village to help the pastor, Fr. Laufer. He taught catechism to the children of Rakunai, instructed adults in the faith and led prayer meetings. He encouraged attendance at Sunday Mass, counseled sinners and helped them prepare for confession. He zealously combated sorcery, which was practiced by many of the people, even some who were nominally Christian.



In 1936 Peter To Rot married Paula Ia Varpit, a young woman from a neighboring village. Theirs was a model Christian marriage. He showed great respect for his wife and prayed with her every morning and evening. He was very devoted to his children and spent as much time with them as possible.

In 1942, during World War II, the Japanese invaded New Guinea and immediately put all the priests and religious into concentration camps. Being a layman, Peter was able to remain in Rakunai. He took on many new responsibilities, leading Sunday prayer and exhorting the faithful to persevere, witnessing marriages, baptizing newborns, presiding at funerals. One missionary who had escaped arrest lived in the forest; Peter brought villagers to him in secret so that they could receive the sacraments.

Although the Japanese did not outlaw all Catholic practices at first, they soon began to pillage and destroy the churches. To Rot had to build a wooden chapel in the bush and devise underground hiding places for the sacred vessels. He carried on his apostolic work cautiously, visiting Christians at night because of the many spies. He often traveled to Vunapopé, a distant village, where a priest gave him the Blessed Sacrament. By special permission of the bishop To Rot brought communion to the sick and dying.

Exploiting divisions among the people in New Guinea, the Japanese reintroduced polygamy to win over the support of several local chiefs. They planned thereby to counteract "Western" influence on the native population. Because of sensuality or fear of reprisals, many men took a second wife.

By virtue of the covenant of married life, the man and woman 'are no longer two but one flesh' and they are called to grow continually in their communion through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving.... 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 — John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (The Christian Family in the Modern World), paragraph 19.]

The catechist Peter To Rot was obliged to speak up. "I will never say enough to the Christians about the dignity and the great importance of the sacrament of marriage," he declared. He even took a stand against his own brother Joseph,

who was publicly advocating a return to the practice of polygamy. Another brother, Tatamai, remarried and denounced Peter to the Japanese authorities. Paula feared that her husband's determination would result in harm to their family, but Peter replied, "If I must die, that is good, because I will die for the reign of God over our people."

A married Catholic man, To Metepa, who worked for the Japanese as a policeman, coveted Ia Mentil, the wife of a Protestant. The woman's father and To Rot prevented him from taking her. Furious, the policeman denounced To Rot to his superior, who summoned the catechist and forbade him to do any more pastoral work. To Metepa and an accomplice abducted Ia Mentil and mistreated her husband, leaving him tied to a tree for two days. The village chief, a good Christian, called for To Rot, and they managed to bring Ia Mentil to safety in Rakunai. As a villager later testified, "Without him, I would have taken a second wife. To Rot was a saint, concerned only about the salvation of souls. He had no fear of the rich and the powerful."

As a catechist, Peter To Rot had the duty of explaining the Ninth Commandment and Christ's words about "what God has joined" to people who had grown up in the culture that allowed polygamy. As a diligent reader of the Bible he was aware of the bitterness and rivalry between Abraham's wife Sarah and the slave-girl Hagar, who was also the concubine of the Old Testament patriarch (Genesis 16). Peter loved his wife and children, and so he must have been troubled by the story of Michal, the daughter of Saul and one of King David's many wives, who despised and rebuked her husband for dancing enthusiastically before the Ark of the Covenant as it was brought in procession into the city; in response, David vowed that Michal would remain childless forever after (2 Samuel 6: 14-23).

Peter regularly recited a form of the Divine Office and so he knew that King David had composed Psalm 51 after taking Bathsheba and ensuring that her husband Uriah would die on the battlefield. The penitential psalm demonstrates that David's contrition was heart-felt; nevertheless the prophet Nathan assured the king that from that day on the sword would never depart from the royal house.

One day in 1945, as Peter to Rot was planting beans in a field commandeered by the Japanese, he was arrested by policemen who had just ransacked his house and found several religious articles. During the subsequent interrogation he admitted that he had led a prayer meeting the day before, and the police chief, Meshida, struck him in the face. But when he acknowledged that he was opposed to bigamy he was imprisoned. As he told his family later, "For Meshida, that was my main offense."

Peter was held in a tiny, windowless cell and was released only to tend the pigs. His mother and his wife brought him food. Once Paula brought their two children along (she was pregnant with the third) and implored her husband to tell the Japanese that he would stop working as a catechist if they would release him. "That is not your business," he said. Making the sign of the cross, he added, "I must glorify the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and thus help my people." He asked his wife to bring his catechist's cross, which he then kept with him to the end.

That same day he confided to his mother that the police had mentioned a Japanese doctor who would come to give him medicine. "I'm not sick! Go home quickly and pray for me." The next day a policeman arrived in Rakunai and announced, "Your catechist is dead."

To Rot's uncle Tarua went with Meshida to identify and claim the body. A red scarf was wrapped around the martyr's neck, which was swollen and wounded. The site of an injection was clearly visible on his right arm. Judging by the odor, the "doctor" had injected a cyanide compound. The poison worked slowly, however, and soldiers strangled the victim and struck him on the back of the neck with a beam.

Peter To Rot was buried in the cemetery of Rakunai. His tomb became a place of pilgrimage. His brother Tatamai repented and, after the war, rebuilt the church in Rakunai with his own money as an act of reparation. In the fifty years after To Rot's death, the village of Rakunai produced a dozen priests and religious for the Catholic Church.

During his pastoral visit to Oceania in 1995, Pope John Paul II beatified Peter To Rot in Port Moresby. Monsignor Ferdinand Holböck relates:

For seven long months it had not rained in the southeast of Papua New Guinea. When the Pope arrived on January 17, 1995, the floodgates of heaven were opened, pouring down the long-awaited rain. The people immediately nicknamed John Paul II "Piri-Piri-Man" (rainmaker). Despite the torrential rainfall, a colorful liturgy was celebrated, in which the Pope raised the first blessed of the land ... to the honors of the altar. Among the approximately fifteen thousand faithful at the John Guise Stadium in Port Moresby, the one surviving daughter of the new blessed was also present.

In his homily, Pope John Paul described the death of Blessed Peter To Rot as follows: "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', he too was 'led like a lamb to the slaughter'. And yet this 'grain of wheat' which fell silently into the earth has produced a harvest of blessings for the Church in Papua New Guinea!"

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