



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

F – 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain

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Saint Bernadette

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“IF there are no more priests, it is the catechist who must be the good shepherd of JESUS CHRIST’s sheep !” said the catechist, Blessed Peter To Rot, when a missionary was arrested in 1942. He himself would die a martyr in 1945, at the age of 29, for having rejected polygamy. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on January 16, 1995.

Peter To Rot was born in 1916 in Rakunai, in what is now Papua New Guinea (Oceania). An island larger than France, New Guinea is surrounded by numerous archipelagos ; more than a thousand tribes speaking seven hundred different dialects live there. The region was evangelized by French and German missionaries starting in 1890. Peter To Rot’s father, To Puia, was the chief of a village. A well-respected Catholic, he himself taught his son the basics of the catechism, while his mother taught him how to pray. The village school was run by missionaries. At school, the child showed himself to be a hard worker, with a lively interest in religion. He was known for being quick to do favors for others. Very agile at climbing coconut trees, he would gladly gather coconuts for the elderly villagers. Such kindness was astonishing for the son of a chief, who could demand that others serve him. But the words of Our Lord, *It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20 :35), had touched his heart.

At school, the young Papuan was mischievous, but he was completely honest, a rare virtue among the Tolai, the ethnic group to which he belonged. In 1930, Father Laufer, who ran the parish in Rakunai, asked the child’s father if he would allow the boy to study for the priesthood. At the time, the elevation of a Papuan to the priesthood was extremely rare. To Puia responded with wisdom to the flattering proposal : “I think that the time is not ripe for one of my sons, or for another local man, to become a priest. But if you want to send him to the catechist school in Taliligap, I will agree to that.” The adolescent then left for this school where chosen young men studied to assist the missionaries, so few in a vast field for evangelization. Active and optimistic, Peter was equally cheerful going to religious services, to classes, or to manual labor (the school owed its existence largely to the agricultural work done by the students). He spurred on his classmates, who were often inclined to indolence in the scorching equatorial climate. Daily Communion, frequent Confession, and recitation of the Rosary were his strength against temp-

tations. Little by little, he corrected his mischievousness that victimized his teachers. But he remained a joyful companion, unequaled in his ability to defuse arguments with his jokes.

In 1934, having given complete satisfaction, Peter To Rot received from his bishop the catechist’s cross, and was sent back to his native village to help Father Laufer. He kept discrete watch over the Christians, encouraging the lukewarm to attend Sunday Mass, preparing sinners for a serious confession, and leading the lost sheep to the Good Shepherd’s fold. More than anything else, he loved to meet people. His zeal led him to fight the practice of sorcery, which was still deeply rooted, even among Christians.

#### **Direct witnesses**

“You, dear catechists,” said Pope John Paul II during the beatification of Peter To Rot, “are direct witnesses and irreplaceable evangelizers... the basic strength of Christian communities. 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. In the name of the whole Church I thank you for the sacred work which you are doing.”

To guide present day catechesis, in 1992 Pope John Paul II published the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC). It was intended first of all for bishops, as a “sure and authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine and particularly for preparing local catechisms” (Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*, on the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* prepared following the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, October 11, 1992). In 2005, Benedict XVI published a summary of this *Catechism* : “The *Compendium*, which I now present to the Universal Church, is a faithful and sure synthesis of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It contains, in concise form, all the essential and funda-

mental elements of the Church's faith, thus constituting, as my Predecessor had wished, a kind of *vade mecum* which allows believers and non-believers alike to behold the entire panorama of the Catholic faith" (Benedict XVI, Motu Proprio for the Approval and Publication of the *Compendium* of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, June 28, 2005). [A "vade mecum" is a book that one can easily carry around on a daily basis, to remind oneself of the main concepts of a science or art.]

The catechism is first of all an education in the faith. What does it mean in concrete terms for a person to believe in God? "It means," the *Compendium* replies, "to adhere to God Himself, entrusting oneself to Him and giving assent to all the truths which God has revealed" (no. 27). "The [Second Vatican] Council teaches that 'the obedience of faith must be given to God who reveals Himself' (*Dei Verbum*, no. 5). This brief but dense statement points to a fundamental truth of Christianity" (John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, September 14, 1998, no. 13). "Sustained by divine grace, we respond to God with the obedience of faith, which means the full surrender of ourselves to God and the acceptance of His truth insofar as it is guaranteed by the One Who is Truth itself" (*Compendium*, no. 25).

### **A precious key**

In the encyclical *Spe salvi* published November 30, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that faith is the key to eternal life. In this regard, he recalls the rite of Baptism: "I would like to begin with the classical form of the dialogue with which the rite of Baptism expressed the reception of an infant into the community of believers and the infant's rebirth in Christ. First of all the priest asked what name the parents had chosen for the child, and then he continued with the question: 'What do you ask of the Church?' Answer: 'Faith'. 'And what does faith give you?' 'Eternal life'. According to this dialogue, the parents were seeking access to the faith for their child, communion with believers, because they saw in faith the key to 'eternal life'. Today as in the past, this is what being baptized, becoming Christians, is all about: it is not just an act of socialization within the community, not simply a welcome into the Church" (no. 10).

The key to eternal life, faith is "necessary for salvation" (*Compendium*, no. 28). But when faith is authentic, it guides the way we live our lives. To the young man who asked Him about eternal life, JESUS replied: *If you would enter into life, keep the commandments*, then He added, *Come, follow Me*" (Mt. 19 :16-21). "To follow JESUS involves keeping the commandments. The law has not been abolished but man is invited to rediscover it in the Person of the divine Master Who realized it perfectly in Himself, revealed its full meaning and attested to its permanent validity" (*Compendium*, no. 434). Thanks

to the sacraments, we are able to live according to the faith: "What the symbol of faith professes, the sacraments communicate. Indeed, through them the faithful receive the grace of Christ and the gifts of the Holy Spirit which give them the capability of living a new life as children of God in Christ Whom they have received in faith" (*Compendium*, no. 357).

In 1942, Japan, in a war against the Western powers, invaded New Guinea. The Japanese had scarcely landed in Rabaul before they were imprisoning priests, monks, and nuns. Father Laufer was soon arrested. From then on, Peter To Rot endeavored to make up for the priest's absence as much as possible, baptizing newborns, assisting as a witness at weddings, and presiding over burials. Every Sunday, he led a prayer meeting in the church, during which he urged the faithful to persevere. So that they could receive the sacraments, he led them in secret to a missionary who had avoided arrest and lived in the forest. Soon, Japanese soldiers began to pillage and destroy the churches, and To Rot had to build a wooden chapel in the bush, along with underground hiding places for the furniture and sacred vessels. Because of the many spies, he typically made his visits to Christians after dark. He often went to Vunapope, a remote city where a priest gave him the Blessed Sacrament, which he could then distribute to the dying and the sick, by virtue of special permission from the bishop.

### **For God's Reign**

Peter always held a great respect for the sanctity of marriage. Married in 1936 to Paula Ia Varpit, a young woman from a neighboring village, his family was a model for others, and saved many households threatened by quarrelling or the misbehavior of one of the spouses. The Japanese encouraged the return to polygamy, which had been practiced in the country before evangelization. They hoped in this way to distance the population from "Western" influence. Out of either lustfulness or fear of reprisal, many men took a second wife. Peter To Rot was unable to remain silent in the face of this scandal. His faith and his responsibilities as a catechist forced him to speak, whatever the consequences might be. "I can never say too much to Christians about the dignity and deep meaning of the sacrament of Marriage," he declared. To his wife who feared that this determination would bring misfortune to the household, To Rot replied, "If I must die, it is good, it will be to bring God's Reign over our people."

Peter's teaching on Marriage is that of the Church, repeated in our day by the *Compendium*: "God Who is love and Who created man out of love, has called him to love. By creating man and woman He called them to an intimate communion of life and of love in marriage: *So that they are no longer two, but one flesh* (Mt. 19 :6)" (no.

337). The unity created by a husband and wife is exclusive throughout their life: “The sacrament of Matrimony establishes a perpetual and exclusive bond between the spouses. God Himself seals the consent of the spouses. Therefore, a marriage which is ratified and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved” (no. 346). This is why “[a]ccording to the original divine plan this conjugal union is indissoluble, as JESUS CHRIST affirmed: *What God has joined together, let no man put asunder* (Mk. 10:9)” (no. 338). Moreover, JESUS CHRIST gives “spouses a special grace to live out their marriage as a symbol of Christ’s love for His bride the Church: *Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the Church* (Eph. 5:25)” (no. 341).

### “Without him...”

To Metepa, an already married Catholic policeman employed by the Japanese, lusted after Ia Mentil, a Protestant’s wife. Her father and To Rot prevented him from taking her. Furious, the policeman denounced To Rot to his superior Kueka, who summoned the catechist and ordered him to desist from all pastoral activities. To Metepa, helped by another polygamist, seized Ia Mentil and beat up her husband, finally tying him to a tree, where he remained for two days. But the chief of the village, a good Christian, called for To Rot, and they managed to bring Ia Mentil to safety in Rakunai. Many Catholics were on the verge of giving way to the temptation of polygamy, but Peter, through his strong exhortations, put them back on the right path. One of them would later testify, “Without him, I would have taken a second wife. To Rot was a saint, concerned only with the salvation of souls. He had no fear whatsoever of the rich and the powerful.” “Because their lives are conformed to the Lord JESUS,” states the *Compendium*, “Christians draw others to faith in the true God, build up the Church, inform the world with the spirit of the Gospel, and hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God” (no. 433). Peter’s own brother, Tatamai, left his wife to “marry” another. Refusing to listen to To Rot’s reproaches, he denounced him to the Japanese. However, soon after, moved to repentance, he returned to ask his forgiveness. After the war, he would rebuild the church in Rakunai with his own money, as a sign of repentance for his betrayal.

No one could dissuade the catechist from continuing his apostolate. As a result, he received increasingly direct threats from some Japanese who hated Christianity, which they considered responsible for Japan’s military setbacks. Questioned by the Japanese police about his feelings toward the occupying force, To Rot replied, “The Catholic Church desires peace, but it is not her fault if you are not victorious.”—“Silence!” shouted the police officer. “We forbid all religious gatherings.”—“JESUS,” Peter calmly replied, “taught His dis-

ciples that it was better to *obey God rather than men* (Acts 5:29).” And he continued to gather Catholics every Sunday. From then on, he was spied on by traitors trying to catch him in the act of praying. One day when he was attending, in the name of the Church, two weddings, the carelessness of one of the couples exposed him. The catechist’s house was first searched. In his home, police discovered a number of religious objects and went to arrest Peter, who was in the middle of planting vegetables to give to the Japanese soldiers. Peter would later recount his interrogation in the headquarters in Vunaiara. “The police chief, Meshida, asked me: ‘Did you hold a prayer meeting yesterday?’—‘Yes.’ Then he beat me violently on the face and the back of the neck. ‘Is it true that you are against bigamy (the marriage of one man to two women)?’ When I answered ‘yes,’ I was put into prison. That, for Meshida, was my main fault.”

Peter knew that polygamy contradicted the union of husband and wife in marriage. Polygamy “directly negates the plan of God which was revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of man and woman who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive” (John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 19). “When the authorities legalized and encouraged polygamy,” said Pope John Paul II, “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. Mt. 7:13) of moral compromise. ‘I have to fulfill my duty as a Church witness to JESUS CHRIST’, he explained. Fear of suffering and death did not deter him”.

### True joy

“I know,” Peter confided to his mother, “that they will kill me. But don’t worry—I am ready to offer my life for JESUS CHRIST.”—“Yes,” affirmed Pope John Paul II, “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! ... 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). ... In God’s saving plan, suffering, more than anything else, makes present in the history of humanity the powers of the Redemption. 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” (Beatification homily).

Imprisoned in a tiny, windowless cell, Peter only went out to tend to the pigs. His mother and his wife brought him his food. One day, in the presence of their two children, his wife begged Peter to tell the Japanese that he would give up his occupation as catechist, and that he wanted to live from then on as an ordinary man in his village. She thought thus to have him freed, with the intervention of some of the village leaders. To Rot answered her gravely: “This is not your business. I must,” he added, making the sign of the Cross, “glorify the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thereby saving my people.” He then asked his wife to bring him his catechist’s cross, which he would keep with him up to the end. The same day—in June 1945—he confided to his mother: “The police told me that, this evening, a Japanese doctor will come to give me some medicine. Surprising, since I’m not sick! Go quickly back to the house and pray for me.” The next day, a policeman arrived in Rakunai and announced, “Your catechist is dead.” Overcoming his emotion, the village chief asked, “What have you done? He was still in good health.”—“He fell ill and died.”

### **The fruitfulness of one death**

Soon, Tarua, To Rot’s uncle, was sent to the prison, accompanied by Commander Meshida, to identify the body and take it away. The martyr lay curled up, his body still warm, face turned towards Heaven. He had cotton, in places red with blood, in his nose, eyes, and ears. A red scarf was wrapped around his neck; the back of his neck was swollen and bore wounds. A needle mark was clearly visible on his right arm. He had been injected with manioc (a compound containing cyanide), judging from the odor in the room. Seeing that the poison was slow in doing its work, the soldiers strangled their victim and struck him on the back of the

neck with a beam. Peter To Rot was buried in the cemetery in Rakunai, where his grave became a pilgrimage site. Far from discouraging and intimidating Christians, To Rot’s death was for all a powerful incentive. Since 1945, the village of Rakunai has given the Church no fewer than twelve priests and women religious. This spiritual fecundity was underscored by Pope John Paul II: “During times of persecution the faith of individuals and communities is *tested by fire* (I Pt. 1 :7). But Christ tells us that there is no reason to be afraid. Those persecuted for their faith will be more eloquent than ever: *It is not you who will be speaking; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you* (Mt. 10 :20). So it was for Blessed Peter To Rot. ... 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!”

Blessed Peter To Rot was chosen to be one of the patrons of World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney, Australia. During his beatification in 1995, Pope John Paul II addressed these words to youth: “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. ... Do not be afraid to commit yourselves to the task of making Christ known and loved.” “The Martyr’s example speaks also to married couples,” the Pope also stated. “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!”

The example of blessed catechist Peter To Rot encourages us to deepen our faith and live in perfect conformity with it, in keeping with Pope Benedict XVI’s requests to Christians, on May 18, 2008: “Take care of spiritual and catechetical formation, a ‘substantial’ formation that is more necessary than ever to live the Christian vocation well in today’s world. I say to adults and young people: foster a thought-out faith that can engage in profound dialogue with all, with our non-Catholic brethren, with non-Christians and with non-believers.”

*Dom Antoine Marie*  
o.s.b.

*P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it. – Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.*

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Fax: 00 33 3 80 96 25 29

– E-mail: [abbey@clairval.com](mailto:abbey@clairval.com)

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