

# SAINT PETER ALOYSIUS MARY CHANEL

Rev. E. Courtais, S.M.

IN the Pacific, a little north of a line drawn between Fiji and Samoa, lie two small islands, separated by a narrow channel which in ordinary weather is easily crossed by native canoes. The larger is Futuna, and is inhabited; the smaller is Alofi, and is used by the natives for their plantations.

On the charts the little group is marked Horn Islands, but it is better known by the native name of Futuna (pronounced Foo-too-na).

Futuna is a very small island, about nine miles long and six miles wide; looked at on a map of the Pacific it appears as a mere speck on this vast expanse, yet the sea traveller approaching it is confronted by a land of majestic appearance with high, steep and rugged mountains and luxuriant tropical vegetation.

A little over a hundred years ago, its inhabitants were as wild as the country itself; they had become cannibals after a hurricane which swept over the island and brought about a terrible famine. The desire for human flesh had become so great that, when the wars between rival tribes did not provide sufficient, the wretched people killed their own kith and kin in order to supply the material for their horrible feasts. One of their first missionaries wrote: "Many a time did I shake hands with a man who had cooked his old parents and had feasted on them with his friends. One day I was shown an old man who, alone of a village of 300 souls, had escaped massacre and . . . the oven."

A small island, which one would hardly notice on the surface of our planet! And yet, God, in His infinite mercy and wisdom, decreed that this island should be the scene of the first martyrdom in Oceania, and that these savage people would all become Catholics within a few years of the first missionary's arrival

Let us see how this miracle of God's grace happened, and how the blood of the Proto-martyr of Oceania became the seed of Christians.

## EARLY LIFE OF SAINT PETER CHANEL:

1803-1827

The hero of our history was born on 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1803, at the village of Cuet, in the diocese of Belley, France, and was baptized four days later in the neighbouring church of Montrevel. The infant received the name of Peter, the names of Aloysius Mary being added at the time of his Confirmation.

Peter, the fifth child of a family of eight, received his first education from a pious mother, who looked after the souls of her children as well as after their bodily wants. This good mother it was who taught him first to lisp the holy names of Jesus and Mary, then to say the Our Father and the Hail Mary, and, later, to conduct the night prayers which were said in the presence of the whole family and presided over by each of the children in turn, so as to make sure that each one knew them by heart. The good mother, too, it was who instilled in her children's young minds the first ideas of Our Lord and His Blessed Mother, of heaven and hell, of the beauty of virtue and the hideousness of sin; and young Peter, under this sweet motherly influence, was not slow in opening his heart to the love of heavenly things.

Like all children, Peter was fond of games, but, even in his play, he showed the spirit that was to actuate his after-life: imitating what he had seen in the Church, ringing a bell, going through the ceremonies of Mass, holding processions, repeating to an audience of children like himself the sermon just heard in the church.

Life, though, could not be all play with the child. He belonged to a family of working farmers, and, according to the customs of the time, he very early shared the labours of his parents, brothers and sisters. At the age of seven, he had to look after the cattle in the fields; due regard, of course, was given to his tender years, and we are told that his task was to mind the quiet plough oxen and docile milch (milk) cattle. Speaking of this happy time, Father Chanel once said to a friend: "Before I started for the fields, my mother never missed asking me whether I had said my prayers. I then kissed her, as if to beg her blessing. She put on my arm a little basket with some provisions for the day. With that I merrily took my leave, followed by a faithful dog who kept good watch on the flock. The animal was not a beauty, but he had a

wonderful instinct, and I could trust him to keep everything in order; afterwards, as a reward, I gave him a share in my meal." A beautiful picture, is it not, of humble work, sanctified by prayer?

Meantime, the child's instruction was not overlooked. There was no school in Cuët, and the nearest one was nearly three miles from the hamlet where the Chanel family lived. When seven years of age, Peter went to that school during the winter months, weather permitting, but made little progress. The following years passed without any schooling at all, and it is only during the next two winters that the boy learned to read and write.

When he reached the age of eleven, Divine Providence intervened on his behalf in the person of the saintly parish priest of Cras, Father Trompier. The good priest, looking right and left for future priests, had often noticed the open and candid countenance of Peter Chanel. One day, passing along the field where the young shepherd, was tending his flock, he stopped and said: "Halloa, Peter! Shall I take you with me to Cras? You are now a big boy; don't you want to be a priest?"

"Yes, Father," answered the boy, "it is my great wish."

Wasting no time, the pastor goes straight to the Chanel's farm; the mother is alone; she receives the priest's proposition with joy and pride, and her consent is readily ratified by the father; so that, when Peter, all excited, comes back from the field, somewhat earlier than usual, he has no time to ask questions: "All is well, Peter," says the mother, "your father and I have settled it."

The boy then went to Cras to attend the primary school, and soon he began a course in Latin with the good parish priest. On 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1817, he made his First Communion, at the age of fourteen. We, who are now privileged to follow the instructions of the saintly Pontiff, St. Pius X, in regard to frequent and early Communion, may be surprised at this long delay; we should remember, though, that it was according to the custom of the time, and that young Peter had had very little schooling as yet. Anyway, if he had to wait a long time, he was certainly all the better prepared for this first Feast with Our Blessed Lord; and we know that, if he gave himself, heart and soul, to Jesus in this first meeting, Jesus, in return, was pleased to give him the call to an apostolic vocation.

In 1819, Peter went to college, four years at Amberieu for literary studies, and one year at Belley for a course in philosophy. During all those years, he showed himself one of those unobtrusively good boys, whom everybody likes.

The professors trusted him, and of this we have a proof in the following little fact, amongst others. Two of his classmates were a great worry to their masters, one by his inveterate laziness, the other by his incorrigible restlessness. In the hope that his influence might stimulate the former and subdue the latter, Peter was put between the two in the study room; and we know that the master's hope was realized, at least partly; the noisy and mischief-making one turned his overflowing activity to better account and became a serious student.

Peter was a favourite, too, with his companions, not without some merit on his part. According to a method then followed in the French colleges, he had been appointed one of the prefects, entrusted with the keeping of discipline; the exercise of this charge, in order not to be resented by the other boys, required much tact and prudence. Peter Chanel, as a prefect, never lost the esteem and affection of his companions. Only two of them, worthless individuals who were later on turned out of school, submitted him for a time to a malicious petty persecution, and even then, one of the two came back to better sentiments and wrote to his former prefect a letter full of the humblest apologies. Nothing, better than this, can show the gentle and beneficent influence of our hero over his fellow-students.

What was the source of this influence? A true spirit of piety and supernatural charity. Peter Chanel did good to his fellows, because he loved them; and he loved them because he loved God, to Whose service he wished to consecrate his whole life. His great devotions were to the Blessed Eucharist and to Our Blessed Lady; he belonged to the Sodality of Children of Mary, and became president of that sodality. One day, he dipped his pen into the blood that was oozing out of a wound in his hand, and, as others have done before and after him, he wrote with his blood what was upper-most in his mind and heart: "To love Mary and make her loved." This was then his ambition, and it remained all through his life.

In October, 1824, he entered the seminary of his diocese, at Brou, near Bourg. "I was much impressed," said he, "when I put on the soutane in order to go to Brou, but my feelings run still much higher when I crossed the threshold of the seminary; it seemed to me that God had created for me a new heaven and a new world." Life, though, was hard at the

seminary; during the winter, the cold was keenly felt in the big fireless halls, recreation was not vigorous in the small yard where the students walked round and round for an hour or so; one outing a week was not over much for young men shut in by four walls the rest of the time; the food, while wholesome, was rather on the coarse side.. But it was the life, and Peter took it as it was, without grumbling: “Let nature cry out as it will,” was his comment; “where there is love, there is no pain. And God helps us with an abundance of graces. May I ever be faithful to them!”

Thus passed four happy years, during which he ascended the steps leading to the altar. He received the sub-diaconate in March, 1826, and the diaconate in May of the same year. On 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1827, he was ordained to the priesthood. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, he celebrated his first Mass at Cras, assisted by the old parish priest, Father Trompier. We can easily imagine the joy of the latter. For many years he had worked hard to educate boys for the priesthood, and here he was, assisting one whom he had taken, long ago, from the fields and adopted as his own child, assisting the little shepherd who had become, thanks to his influence, a shepherd of souls. He was glad indeed, and, at the dinner which he gave the newly-ordained priest and his family, he had no wish to contradict the new priest’s happy and proud father, Francis Chanel, who said: “During the Mass, I was watching you all, your Reverence, the deacon and the sub-deacon. Well, let anyone say what he will; my own boy was the best looking of the lot.”

### **THE PRIESTLY WORK IN FRANCE, 1827-1836.**

The work of those nine years is summed up by one of the Saint’s panegyrists in the following words: “Peter Chanel seems to have been chosen by God to offer a model of holiness by the practice of common duties; and this is no doubt the reason why Divine Providence, before calling him to the supreme sacrifice, so ordained that he might pass through all the ministries where priestly zeal spends itself in the eyes of the faithful. During the nine years which elapsed between his ordination to the priesthood and his departure for the foreign field, he was successively curate and parish priest, spiritual director and superior of an ecclesiastical college. His priestly life, so full and yet so plain, begun among the diocesan clergy and continued under religious obedience in the Society of Mary, gives us an example of all manner of sacerdotal devotion to duty, of all trials that stand to test sacerdotal virtue, of all means that concur to sanctify sacerdotal work. There is not one priest who can resist the authority of a teaching so well fitted to his needs and so well adapted to his condition.” These are the words of a great French prelate, Monsignor d’Hulst, and they show well how Father Chanel, by his very humility and simplicity, became a model whom all can emulate.

He was first sent to Amberieu, as curate of Father Collieux, a Confessor of the Faith during the great French Revolution. It was his good fortune to fight his first battles for Christ under the leadership of such a pastor; but on the other hand, like Canon Sheehan’s “New Curate,” he was young, and his ideas sometimes clashed with those of his old parish priest. The renovation of the church, the training of altar boys, the holding of processions, were easily enough approved by the old man; but when the month of May came and the young curate spoke of having a Month of Mary, there was some difficulty. Father Collieux had to be coaxed into it; then he wondered at Our Lady’s altar being so well decorated and aglow with lights, and he asked what could be done after that for any great festival like Easter or Christmas. In the end, he was very pleased with the consoling results of the month’s devotions. When, after thirteen months, his curate was taken from him and appointed parish priest of Crozet, he greatly regretted the transfer, so much had he come to appreciate him.

A protest against the appointment came from another quarter, and for quite different reasons. Crozet was a small parish at the foot of the Jura mountains, in the Gex country, opposite Geneva. The country had been Calvinist for a time, and then was won back to the Faith by St. Francis of Sales; but Catholicity there was at a very low ebb again at the time of Father Chanel’s appointment, and the transfer to such a parish did not look like a reward. Anyway, the parish priest’s father did not regard it as such; he entertained some contempt for the barren country of Gex, and expressed it in high quarters: “You put my son,” he complained, “in the mountains, among the bears; I did not give him to you for that.”

Father Chanel smiled at the paternal wrath and went his way, quite satisfied with his lot; he, who dreamed of savage pagans, could not be afraid of the “bears” of Crozet, and he merely remarked to one of his friends: “If I were nearer to my

parents, I might be farther off from God.”

We have it from one of his parishioners that, in a short while, the parish was completely changed. The Crozet people had grown careless about Mass attendance; their pastor drew them by kindness and patience; he went to see them in their homes and in the fields, talked to them, helped the poor and the sick; and they returned his politeness and kindness by coming to see and hear him in the church. Distrust of the priest thus disappeared and gave place to mutual understanding. The pastor diligently instructed his flock, plainly showing them their duties, without ever rebuking them for their past negligences. The grace of the Sacraments, frequently and regularly received, did the rest.

The children also were his special care. Father Chanel explained to them the elements of Catholic doctrine in catechism lessons, which he knew how to make attractive as well as instructive and edifying. He found Crozet without a Catholic school, but he soon provided one for the boys and another for the girls. His best recreation was to be among the children, taking part in their games and seizing every opportunity to lift up their young hearts towards heavenly things.

Thus the good shepherd tended his flock during three years; all this time, though, after the example of his Divine Master, he was feeling a great compassion for the multitude of pagans “living like sheep that have no shepherd.”

The foreign missions were in his thoughts from the day of his First Communion. At college he had made friends with two boys, Bret and Maitrepierre, who had the same aspirations as himself and who, later on, also entered the Society of Mary. While curate at Amberieu, he said to a friend, who had shown him letters from a missionary in India: “Please ask Father Bonnard, when you next write to him, whether he has not found my name written over there on the sand or on the bark of a tree, and tell him that I shall start my journey as soon as God will have given me a sign of His Holy Will.” The same thought pursues him whilst at Crozet. There had been talk of moving him to another parish: “No,” he said, “I shall only leave my dear parishioners to go and work among the infidels.”

The desire to work in the foreign field was there, but the way was not clear as yet; his Bishop told him to wait, and he himself was not settled about the missionary society that he would enter.

At last, in 1831, he, the fervent client of the Blessed Virgin, was attracted by the name of a religious society which was just then being founded in his own diocese, the Society of Mary. He went to see the founder, the Ven. J. C. Colin, reflected, prayed, and, with his Bishop’s consent, left Crozet at the end of October, to become one of the pioneers among the Marist Fathers.

At that time, the Society of Mary had charge of the college of Belley; for two years, Father Chanel was spiritual director of that college, and for another two years Superior. It does not enter into the plan of this short account to give many details of those four years of his life; suffice it to mention a few which will bring into relief some of his characteristics.

His zeal as a spiritual director is well shown in the following incident: One boy, who later on became a priest and a religious, narrates how Father Chanel once called him and inquired about a suspicious book which he had got, unknown to his masters. “‘Give it to me,’ said the good Father, ‘I shall look it over and give it back if there is nothing in it against Faith and morals.; As I was holding back and proving very obstinate, he fell on his knees before me and begged of me, for the sake of my dearest interests, to desist and make the sacrifice of that book. I was so impressed that at last I yielded.’”

How well Father Chanel fulfilled his duties as a Superior, we can gather from the following words of his panegyrist, Monsignor d’Hulst, already quoted: “Let the persons who are attached to the work of Christian education come and seek in the examples of Blessed Chanel a lesson suitable to the hidden sublimity of this ministry; they will learn how much of self-abnegation and meekness, vigilance and steadfastness, of the spirit of prayer and interior virtues, is required in order to beget Jesus Christ in souls, in order to give true Christians to society and worthy priests to the Church.” Yes, Father Chanel was a model of all those virtues, but especially of meekness. We know that no person, not even the greatest Saint or the most capable of men, can please everybody. Father Chanel did not please everybody; some said that he was too weak, and that this was not in the best interests of the college. He heard the reproach, and accepted it; he went even so far as to submit afterwards to his critic the firmness of his attitude on several occasions, but for all continued to rule in his own gentle way. He was convinced, with St. Francis of Sales, that “an ounce of honey will catch more flies than a whole

barrelful of vinegar.” And, after all, events vindicated his method. During his term of office, the best spirit prevailed among the boys, good harmony and great zeal were shown in the professorial staff, and even the domestic staff constantly praised the gentle Superior.

In 1836, a great event took place, which was the turning point in the life of Father Chanel. “Oh! the glad tidings I have to give you,” he wrote to a friend. “Our Holy Father, Gregory XVI, approved our Society on 29<sup>th</sup> April, and entrusted it with the Missions of Oceania. I manifested my old longings, and now my heart throbs with joy as my name is put on the roll for the first draft of missionaries. We shall, no doubt, encounter many dangers during the journey, but I am not the least afraid; I already offered to God the sacrifice of my life. One thing alone frightens me; my unworthiness for this apostolic vocation. I sorely need God’s help and Mary’s assistance; this is why I am begging for prayers on every side; I rely on yours.”

We can understand this outpouring of the heart on the part of one who had so long dreamed of the foreign missions, for we know that at times God rewards sacrifice by such a joy; but we also know that the same merciful God, at other times, allows the victims to feel all the bitterness of the sacrifice; and so it happened with Father Chanel. As long as he was kept busy with the usual routine of college life, he had not much time left for thoughts other than those of his actual work; but when the boys had gone on their vacation, and he began to prepare for his departure, then the thought of his unworthiness, of his weakness for the tremendous task ahead, came uppermost in his mind; he felt depressed, miserable, and, after the example of his Divine Master, he found himself saying: “Let this chalice pass from me.” One day in August he had gone to the Marist Convent of Belley to visit his sister, and, as he was expressing his troubled state of mind to the Mother Superior, this holy nun said to him: “What! would you now let go the palm of the apostolate, perhaps that of martyrdom? Would you refuse to answer the call of Almighty God? Yes, everywhere one must work out his salvation in fear and trembling, but, if somewhere difficulties are greater, will not also sufficient graces be granted to overcome them? Pluck up your courage and trust in God. Do not waver any more; set out for Oceania; you have our prayers; do not forget us in yours.” These valiant words were enough; the interior storm was calmed, and a few days later Father Chanel could write to a friend: “I long to be off. Even if I had a thousand lives to lose, could you find fault in my consecrating them all to the salvation of the poor islanders of Oceania?”

On 24<sup>th</sup> September, 1836, the first twenty Marists met at Belley, elected the Ven. Father Colin (their founder) as Superior-General, and pronounced their vows of religion. Father Chanel, appointed Pro-Vicar by Bishop Pompallier and Religious Superior by Father Colin, then took leave of his family and friends and went on to Lyons and thence to Havre, where the missionary band was to embark.

### **THE JOURNEY TO FUTUNA: 1836-1837.**

In 1836 there were no steamers speeding across the seas towards Oceania. Our missionaries took passage on a sailing ship, the *Delphine*, together with some Picpus Fathers going to the Cambier Islands. There were four priests, Reverend Fathers Chanel, Bataillon, Servant and Bret, and three Brothers, Joseph Xavier, Mary Nizier and Michael, under the leadership of Bishop Pompallier; they sailed on 24<sup>th</sup> December. When they left the wharf at Havre, the rudder was fouled, but nobody noticed it until a fierce storm broke upon them and threatened to end the journey. They had to put into Santa Cruz harbour, Teneriffe Island, for repairs. As the port was poorly equipped for such repairs, the work lasted seven weeks, a long and weary wait, during which time the missionaries had to be satisfied with the accommodation of an inn ashore, and to suffer from an epidemic which swept over the little town.

When the day of departure arrived they were too ill to travel. Father Bret’s temperature was dangerously high. On the 19<sup>th</sup> March he received the Last Sacraments and that same day passed peacefully away. Nobody felt the death more keenly than Father Chanel, to whom the deceased was a very dear friend for many years. Writing to his mother, he said: “Father Bret, whom you often saw at home, died of a fever caught at Teneriffe., Almighty God, in spite of our prayers and tears, took him from us and was pleased to crown him before the combat. His death is a great loss to our mission, and a deep wound to my heart. His fate, though, is to be envied rather than mourned, his edifying death was as an eloquent sermon to

the officers and crew of our ship, who, to our great joy and consolation, have now all gone to Confession and Holy Communion.”

Here we see Father Chanel speaking of the sailors’ conversion and ascribing it to the influence of Father Bret’s saintly death. The missionaries, following the instructions given by Father Colin, had been true apostles on board the *Delphine*, doing their best to instruct sailors and passengers. Most of the men attended the catechism classes, but could not be induced to frequent the Sacraments until Father Bret’s death. Deeply struck by the simplicity of these priests who were willing to live or die for God, passengers and sailors daily attended the religious instructions, and, with only one exception, made their Confessions and received Holy Communion at Valparaiso. The Bishop afterwards confirmed those who had not yet received this Sacrament.

The *Delphine* reached Valparaiso on 28<sup>th</sup> June, 1837, and on 10<sup>th</sup> August the missionaries embarked on the American brig, *Europa*, bound for Tahiti.

The crew of the *Europa* were Protestants, and the “papist” missionaries were far from welcome on board, one officer in particular showing a very bitter spirit against them. “Never mind,” Father Chanel said to his companions, “let us pray for them and be always kind and courteous.” This advice was followed and brought about a complete change in the men’s dispositions. The abovementioned officer became their best friend, and even promised to become a Catholic as soon as he reached Tahiti; he himself jokingly explained that his hatred for “papists” had come to him from his mother, who depicted Catholic priests as monsters whom nobody should approach for fear of contamination, “and I had taken the lesson so much to heart,” he said, “that I had sworn never to be in the company of one; but your kind behaviour scattered all my prejudices to the winds.”

On 13<sup>th</sup> September the *Europa* was at the Gambier Islands, where the Picpus Fathers were landed, and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> she arrived at Tahiti, her destination, where the famous Protestant minister, Mr. Pitchard, was then the governing spirit behind the throne of Queen Pomare.

Tahiti, as well as the Gambier Islands, had been allotted some years previously by Propaganda to the Picpus Fathers and formed the Vicariate Apostolic of Occidental Oceania. All the islands to the west were entrusted to Bishop Pompallier and his little band of Marist missionaries. At Tahiti, therefore, they looked for another boat that would carry them to their own mission field. The Bishop was able to charter a small schooner, the *Raiatea*, and on 4<sup>th</sup> October they set sail for Vavau, in the Tonga group, the first port on their journey towards Central Oceania.,

Their hearts were beating fast with joy and expectation as they approached the beautiful Vavau harbour. The entrance is difficult for sailing boats and the *Raiatea* was nearly wrecked against the cliffs. The missionaries were landed safely, and when they saw the native king of the island His Majesty politely told them that he himself offered no objection to the Catholic missionaries settling in his kingdom, but could decide nothing in the absence of the Protestant missionary, Mr. Thomas. The latter, another governing spirit behind the throne, granted an audience a few days later and said to the Bishop: “This island is too small for two religions. There are other islands nearby; Wallis, for instance, where our religion has not yet been preached; you have full liberty to go there.”

In order to understand fully the irony of this suggestion one must know that, shortly before, the Wallis people had massacred the crews of two boats as well as some fifty native teachers sent there by the Methodists.

The advice of Mr. Thomas, although not kindly meant, helped to lay the foundation on one of the finest Catholic establishments in this part of the world. Leaving Vavau on 30<sup>th</sup> October, the missionaries arrived at Wallis on 1<sup>st</sup> November; the natives received Father Bataillon and Brother Joseph Xavier, and, four years later, thanks to the untiring zeal of their priest, they were all Catholics, as they are still to this day. When, in 1843, a Methodist minister came to bring the benefit of his teaching to these ex-savages, he was firmly but politely told to expend his labours in some other field than Wallis.

We have seen how the first missionaries arrived at Wallis on 1<sup>st</sup> November, where the Bishop left Father Bataillon and Brother Joseph Xavier. On the 7<sup>th</sup>, the *Raiatea* put to sea again and set her course for the Island of Futuna. Divine Providence was truly leading the priests there for Its own purpose. It was the Bishop’s intention to go from Wallis to

Rotuma, in which place he would leave Father Chanel; his object in calling at Futuna was to land a Mr. Tom Boog, an English trader, together with twelve Futuna natives from Wallis. But the passengers' landing took more time than was expected, and then the crew of an English whaleboat recently wrecked on one of the Fiji reefs came on board, and the marooned captain asked a passage for himself and his men on the Raiatea. Whilst the parleys were going on a crowd of natives swarmed all over the little vessel. They attracted the attention of Monsignor Pompallier, who pondering deeply for a while, drew aside Father Chanel and said to him: "Well, Father, what about staying at Futuna?" The answer came immediately: "My Lord, I am quite willing and ready." So it was decided that Father Chanel, with Brother Mary Nizier as companion, should try to establish a mission at Futuna, instead of going to Rotuma.

But it was necessary to obtain the consent of the chief, Niuliki. On Saturday, 11<sup>th</sup> November, the Bishop, with Father Chanel, Brother Mary Nizier, Tom Boog and several other white men, went to Alo, the chief's residence, and asked His Majesty to allow the two missionaries to stay in his kingdom. The proposition, submitted to a council, met with some opposition, but finally was agreed to on a motion of Maile, a chief famed for his courage. According to native fashion, kava was prepared and drunk by all as a token of friendship, a native repast was served, and, late at night, the Bishop and his companions were back on board the Raiatea, where some fear had been entertained for their safety.

The next day, Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> November, Father Chanel took leave of Monsignor Pompallier, Father Servant and Brother Michael, who proceeded on their journey towards Rotuma and Sydney; he knelt down on this land which was to be the theatre of his apostolate and martyrdom, consecrated it to the Blessed Virgin Mary, affixed a Miraculous Medal to a tree, and stepped into his temporary abode in the chief's house.

### **THE APOSTOLATE: 1837-1840**

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "I most gladly will spend myself and be spent for your souls; although loving you more, I be loved the less." Father Chanel, for twenty years, since the day of his First Communion, had dreamed of spending himself and being spent for the souls of infidels. There he was now, among the pagan people of Futuna whom he loved with a purely supernatural charity, but by whom he would be less loved. During three years he spent himself untiringly for their conversion, and, before achieving any visible result, in the fourth year he was spent in glorious martyrdom.

I said before achieving any visible result. Indeed, we might say that his apostolate is summed up in one word, failure; but, once more in the Church's history, this same word failure was to be turned into another—triumph. Futuna today is, and for the last hundred years has been, Catholic, wholly Catholic. Its conversion is truly the triumph of failure.

The apostolate itself was a failure. We cannot narrate great deeds followed by greater results; there is no tale to be told of churches and schools built, of eloquent preaching, of Sacraments administered with great solemnity. No, Father Chanel sowed in tears, that others might reap in joy; he led a hidden life, hidden from his friends abroad, hidden even from the very people whom he loved so much, and for whom he was exhausting all his energy.

Left on this small island of Futuna, thousands of miles away from their own country, separated from the nearest priest by one hundred miles of stormy sea, the missionaries were at the complete mercy of the chief Niuliki, who had agreed to keep them in his little dominion, but who, as we shall see, had been actuated in that concession by no supernatural motive. Not knowing when another boat might visit them and replenish their stores, they had to settle down immediately to native life. Food was supposed to be provided by the chief; at first, he saw to it that the missionaries were supplied with a scanty morning meal; but the cooks soon tired of preparing a meal of which they did not partake; the customary afternoon meal, native fashion, was considered as quite sufficient. Taros, yams, bananas and bread-fruits were the staple food, with some pork on festival occasions. Later on, the missionaries had their own garden, mostly tilled by their own hands, but it was systematically pillaged; or, when they had worked hard to grow and prepare some food, they saw their house invaded by a crowd of hungry people, who, native fashion again, came to partake of the meal and felt greatly hurt if sent away with an empty stomach. Did Father Chanel ever complain? No; his companion, Brother Mary Nizier, bears witness that "he remained always kind, gentle and cheerful, receiving all with an exquisite charity, and doing all he could to help

everybody.”

The lodging was no better than the food. The missionaries first were lodged in the chief's native house at Alo, and they saw many days pass before they secured a hut that they could call their own. After a few months, during an absence of Father Chanel, Niuliki moved to the other side of the island and he had all the priest's belongings removed to his new residence; which meant another stay in the chief's house. Subsequently Father Chanel had a small house built for himself by Tom Boog. A hurricane destroyed it once, but it was rebuilt. Scantly fed, poorly lodged, often overcome by fatigue, Father Chanel was, nevertheless, fulfilling his apostolic mission to the best of his ability. A stranger in a strange country, he first applied all his energy to mastering the native language, which was no easy matter without grammar or dictionary of any kind; and it was before 1840, that is to say, after three years, that he began to speak fluently. In the meantime, his imperfect knowledge was put to the best possible advantage.

Among the many difficulties which hindered the preaching of the Gospel, we may first mention the troubled state of the country and the war-like spirit of its inhabitants. Futuna, though very small, was divided into two factions, the victors and the vanquished, and each side had its own chief. At the time of Father Chanel's arrival, Niuliki, of Alo, was the head of the victors and practically ruled over the whole of the island; but the vanquished of Sigave, were only waiting for an opportunity to fight and try to turn the tables. This opportunity offered itself in January, 1838; the war cry was heard all over Futuna; but, when one man had been killed on either side a parley was called and a peace arranged.

The next opportunity came fifteen months later, in July, 1839, and this time the war was more serious. After a great number of ambushes and skirmishes, a pitched battle took place on 10<sup>th</sup> August, wherein twenty-four of the vanquished and thirteen of the victors were slain: “a considerable number,” says Father Chanel, “for the small population of this island.” And what could he do in the midst of all this turmoil? Very little indeed, his counsels of peace went unheeded; his only consolation was to minister to the wounded and dying on the field of battle, and to baptize those who were sufficiently instructed in our holy religion; thus was baptized Maile, the valorous warrior, who had spoken in his favour at the fateful council of November, 1837.

We can easily understand how this continuous warfare was hampering the priest's apostolate, and how little heed was taken of the Gospel of peace when all hearts were bent on struggle and revenge. Still another obstacle, and perhaps a greater one, was the deep-rooted paganism of the people. Like all the inhabitants of the Pacific Isles, the Futuna natives were literally steeped in superstition; from birth until death they were taught to dread and propitiate the innumerable evil spirits which surrounded them and were responsible for rain or sunshine, wind or calm, sickness or health, failure or success in any enterprise. And those spirits were supposed to dwell in, and act by, some man or other of the tribe, mostly the chiefs, the king himself being considered as the incarnation of the most powerful spirit of all. This explains how Niuliki, who, according to all accounts, liked Father Chanel and was really impressed by his beautiful doctrine, yet was afraid to embrace Christianity, lest his spirit should abandon him in anger and betray him into the hands of his enemies. On the other hand, it was plainly evident to Father Chanel that as long as the king held aloof there was little hope of the conversion of his subjects; the missionary's aim, therefore, was the king's conversion, and, as we already said, it resulted in a temporary failure.

Does it mean that Father Chanel's labour was completely wasted? No, indeed; he prepared the way for the Gospel, as St. John the Baptist had prepared the way for the Saviour, and his preparation was no more lost than that of the Precursor, although both alike did not see the fruit of their efforts. Let us now cast a glance on this work of preparation.

Father Chanel, as we have seen, lived first at the chief's house, without privacy of any kind, and, for fear of “casting his pearls before swine,” he spent nearly a month without offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. On 8<sup>th</sup> December, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, he said Mass privately, having waited until all the natives had left the village for their work, and he managed to do so six times before Christmas. Then he decided to officiate, as solemnly as possible in the circumstances, on Christmas night, Niuliki and some fifteen natives assisting at the ceremony.

In March, 1838, Father Chanel went to Wallis and spent two months there with Father Bataillon, making with the latter a comparative study of the native languages, translating the principal prayers and fitting himself generally for his

missionary work.

We find him next at Poi, the chief's new residence. There he travelled to the villages, visited the sick, baptized some dying children and adults. He complains in his journal that the sick were hidden from him; too often the mourning cries of the women were the first intimation he had that a person was ill and had died without the Sacraments. He lamented the hard-heartedness of his beloved flock, but, says he, "their very obstinacy gives me the hope that, once converted, they will be firm in the practice of their religion." On 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1839, he writes: "Twenty baptisms, of which four were of adults and all in danger of death, such is the harvest of the last eighteen months; we see with pleasure that the natives' dispositions are getting better every day."

In this same month of May, the two Futuna exiles were greatly consoled by the visit of Father Bataillon and three priests and three Brothers who were on their way to New Zealand. "This visit made a good impression," writes Father Chanel; "the Bishop having failed to call within six months as promised, the natives were treating us as liars and said that we had been forsaken." Father Bataillon remained at Futuna for two months, during which time both missionaries worked hard for the chief's conversion.

Then came the war, to which we have already referred. After this war Niuliki transferred his residence to Tamana, whilst Father Chanel remained at Poi. Some of the chiefs showed a certain readiness to embrace the new religion, and one of them went to far as to say that the whole island was only waiting for the king to take the first step; but the king kept aloof, and now even forbade the supplying of food to the missionaries.

In May, 1840, Father Chevron and Brother Attale arrived at Futuna. They came from Wallis, where there was every promise of a bountiful spiritual harvest, and they hoped their presence might help to bring about the same result in Futuna. It was not to be, however, and, on the contrary, it would appear that their presence only aroused the petty persecution which had been already directed against the two first missionaries. "I still have the consolation of baptizing some children and adults in danger of death," Father Chanel wrote at this time: "Our catechumens are too few and dare not appear in public, though they remain firm against the taunts and anger of their parents."

In November, 1840, came the joyful news that the whole of Wallis had embraced the Faith, and at the same time an earnest appeal from Father Bataillon for help in gathering in the harvest. So it happened that, on 21<sup>st</sup> November, Father Chanel bade adieu to Father Chevron and Brother Attale, and again found himself alone with Brother Mary Nizier. Persecution, as we have said, was raging then in Futuna; the victim was ready for the sacrifice; the consummation was near at hand.

### **MARTYRDOM: 1841.**

In his last letter, dated 19<sup>th</sup> November, 1840, and addressed to Father Bataillon, Father Chanel says: "I take the keenest interest in your enviable position, and this is why I willingly let Father Chevron and Brother Attale return to share your cares and your consolations. The rumour of the Wallis conversion seems to have moved the spirits of our Futuna islanders. But, alas! now that my poor king Niuliki is definitely the victor, he seems to cling more than ever to his devilish practices. I sincerely wish he would receive some salutary lesson. The few young men who were beginning to join us were threatened with death by roasting, and this frightened them a little. Would to God that the example of your catechumens might inspire them!" We see here how anxious Father Chanel was for the conversion of Niuliki; but it was not to be. In fact, after Father Chevron's departure, the persecution, far from abating, grew worse.

Father Chanel, having mastered the native language, exerted all his zeal in the instruction of his people. His patience was often sorely tried by all kinds of questions and puerile objections, such as might arise in the minds of savage people, but he never yielded to even the least sign of annoyance; so much so that all named him "the kind-hearted man." His boundless charity attracted some of the best disposed among the natives; but, at the same time, his success excited the rage of the chiefs and pagan priests, who saw their influence undermined and threatened with extinction. "Our divinities will desert us," they said, "as soon as the new strange one is introduced to our country. Let us destroy this new religion."

And Niuliki, as king and as high priest, in whom was supposed to abide the mightiest spirit or divinity, found himself

in a dilemma. A shifting personality was this Niuliki. On one hand, he really seemed to have been forcibly impressed by the priest's teaching, to have admired his doctrine, and to have wished for his friendship. On the other hand, as high priest, he was afraid of his divinities, and as high chief he feared the other chiefs under him. And the result was that Niuliki indirectly ordered the priest's death.

Here is the conversation, sworn to by a native witness in the process of beatification, between Niuliki and Musumusu

Niuliki: "You come here to ask me what is to be done; do what you like. I love this man (Father Chanel), because I have lived with him. I do not tell you to strike him; nevertheless, I am not opposed to your striking. Do what you will."

Musumusu: "Be at ease; leave the affair to us, and we shall act according to our will."

This was about the middle of April, 1841. A few days later the rumour spread that the king's eldest son, Meitala, had embraced the new faith. In a council of chiefs, where the question was debated whether they should kill all the catechumens, Musumusu declared: "Let us strike at the priest, for it is from him that the new religion comes; if he dies, his religion will die in Futuna." And to somebody who asked whether this would be agreeable to Niuliki: "Yes," he answered, "this will please him." So it was decided first to ill-treat the catechumens and then murder the priest.

On the morning of 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1841, Father Chanel was alone near his poor little hut at Poi; Brother Mary Nizier had been sent two days before to Sigave to see a sick man and baptize any children who might be in danger of death. A man came asking medicine for Musumusu, who himself arrived soon after with another native. Whilst Father Chanel prepared the medicine a crowd assembled and began to loot the house. Musumusu shouted angrily: "Are you come only for the spoils? Why delay in killing this man?" At once a native struck with his club, instinctively the victim lifted up his right arm to ward off the blow, but the arm fell back, broken; another stroke of the club hit him on the left temple, and the blood gushed forth from the wound, as the victim repeated several times: "'Tis well, 'tis well." Another native struck with a spear, and Father Chanel fell back three or four steps, then dropped on the floor, his shoulders propped up against the wall, his head dropping, and blood flowing over his face.

At that moment one of the catechumens entered the house and told the priest that the only influential chief who could yet save him was far away at Alofi. The martyr understood that the last human hope had vanished, and to his faithful one, who wanted to help him out of the house, he said: "No, leave me here; death is a boon."

Musumusu was there, threatening; the catechumen went outside, and immediately after, he heard a fearful blow. Looking in again he saw Musumusu trying to extract a hatchet from the head of Father Chanel. The savage chief then tore the soutane from the martyr's body and ran away. Another man and woman stripped the body completely, and so it remained until a good Samaritan covered it with a native mat.

The sacrifice was complete; another name had been added to the long list of martyrs. The soul of Peter Aloysius Mary Chanel had gone to Heaven to plead the cause of his murderers.

### **THE TRIUMPH**

We have seen the failure of Father Chanel's apostolate, how the apostle was killed in order that his religion should die with him. But this apparent failure was to be turned into triumph; and this triumph was heralded from above immediately after the martyr's death. Although the sky was clear, a darkness spread over Poi, and an awe-inspiring and rumbling sound was heard, followed by a formidable thunder-clap; and then there came a great calm. All the inhabitants witnessed this prodigy; the flying murderers and plunderers, seized with fear and trembling threw away their booty, and lay down or took to the bush.

This same day, Brother Mary Nizier, coming back to Poi, met a native who apprised him of the morning's event, and practically forced him to retrace his steps towards Sigave, where he would be safe. Two weeks later an American vessel took the Brother, Tom Boog, and the other white men to Wallis. Father Chanel's enemies rejoiced: "The priest is dead," they said; "his religion is dead with him." But their joy was short-lived; for the God, Whom they had rejected, soon showed them that He was the true and only God.

One of the king's brothers, who had also been one of his main counsellors, died. Then the king himself was stricken

with an awful disease; his body, from head to foot, became a putrid sore; he was carried here and there to all the divinities of the island, but to no purpose. He died in the midst of excruciating pains, and all the natives saw in his death the vengeance of Father Chanel's God. Then the catechumens openly rebuked the murderers and pleaded that their atrocious deed would be the ruin of Futuna, whilst their only hope lay in adopting the martyr's religion.

Less than a year later, on 18<sup>th</sup> January, 1842, a French sloop of war came to Futuna with Bishop Pompallier on board, and the martyr's body was demanded. On the 19<sup>th</sup> a chief, accompanied by thirty natives, brought the hallowed body, and at the same time offered a huge kava root in token of peace. Next day, at the Commander's request, the natives brought all that could be found in the island of the martyr's belongings, his chalice, some sacred vestments, a soutane, a crucifix . . . ; and then, plainly seeing that the Bishop, in spite of the warship's presence, had come to them in no spirit of revenge, they had confidence to beg on their knees that another missionary might be sent to them.

This unexpected request could not be granted at once; but, four months later, on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1842, Bishop Pompallier landed at Futuna with three priests, two Brothers, the now converted high chief of Wallis, and fifty of his subjects. So well disposed then were the people of Futuna that the Bishop, during his stay, baptized and confirmed 104 natives, amongst whom were the chief of Sigave and his wife and little daughter. In February, 1843, Father Servant could write: "It is just about eight months since we arrived at Futuna; we have already two churches, 840 Christians, and, to all appearances, the remaining 300-odd catechumens will soon be brought into the Saviour's fold." In July, 1844, another missionary wrote: "All the natives are baptized; many have already made their First Communion; their behaviour is truly edifying; they only require a little more instruction."

When the apostle had failed, the martyr conquered; three years after his death the whole of Futuna was Catholic. Once more THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYR HAD BECOME THE SEED OF CHRISTIANS.

"The Blood of the MARTYR"; these words were whispered from the first; we can now repeat them loudly and clearly, far and wide, since our Holy Mother the Church has authorized them.

On 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1888, Father Peter Aloysius Mary Chanel was declared a Martyr, and on 16<sup>th</sup> November, 1889, he was ranked among the Blessed of the Heavenly Courts by a solemn decree of His Holiness Pope Leo XIII. Another title is bestowed on him in this same decree, which says: "Thus the illustrious PROTO-MARTYR OF OCEANIA, having shed his Pure blood on 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1841, ascended into Heaven."

On Saturday 12 June, 1954, His Holiness Pope Pius XII, declared, from the steps of St. Peter's Basilica, to the hundreds of thousands in St. Peter's Square, that Father Peter Aloysius Mary Chanel was numbered among the Saints.

### **HYMN IN HONOUR OF SAINT PETER CHANEL**

Praise to Peter Chanel's name  
To Mary's son who died  
In meekness, pain and poverty,  
Like Thee, her Son, the Crucified.  
Hearth and home no more could bind him,  
Once Thy voice was heard;  
In Mary's name he braved the seas,  
To bear afar Thy saving word.  
Barren was the soil he sowed  
But strong his love of Thee;  
Each weary day he told the beads  
That formed a martyr's rosary.  
Not for him the reaper's joy;  
And yet that and field  
By grace fresh-watered, through his blood,

A harvest rich and full did yield.  
Shepherd boy of France, who died  
The shepherdless to save,  
O lead us, through the "Gate of Heav'n,"  
Safe to our home beyond the grave.  
Mary, Mother, may thy name  
In all lands honoured be!  
O grant, like Peter Chanel, we  
May live and die in love of thee.  
(Approved by the Wellington Church Music Commission)  
Copies of his hymn (words by Rev. Kevin Maher, S.M  
music by Rev. E. E. Kimbell, S.M.) may be had free on  
application to the Marist Messenger, Otaki, NZ

**Peter Chanel's Body in Australia**  
**Giving Australia a most intimate connection with a canonized saint.**  
**BY J. GORINSKI, S.M.**

There still stands today in the old Marist parish of Villa Maria, Hunter's Hill, Sydney, the building in which the body of Peter Chanel was kept from May, 1849, to February, 1850, when it was sent home to its final resting-place in Lyons, France.

On 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1849, Father Rocher, Marist priest of Villa Maria, Sydney, received at a Sydney wharf, the damp bones of his friend, Peter Chanel, and taking them to the Villa Maria Monastery devoutly washed them to ensure their preservation.

Marist Missionary Peter Chanel had been martyred on Futuna Island, his remains having been sent first to New Zealand, then to Australia, on the way home to France. In a letter dated 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1849, Father Rocher wrote: "Tomorrow we are going to Sydney to receive the precious remains of Father Chanel.... We shall place the coffin in the chapel of the Mission Procure.... We will probably wait (before sending it) until we find a captain whom we can trust . . ." A later letter stated that the New Zealand port of departure was Auckland. Files of Sydney Morning Herald newspaper reveal that the brig Maukin, of one hundred and six tons, left Auckland on 15<sup>th</sup> April, and arrived in Port Jackson on 4<sup>th</sup> May. So it is certain that the martyr's body rested in the chapel at the Mission Procure, Villa Maria, Hunter's Hill, from 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1849. The exact place was not on the present Villa Maria site, but on the original Villa Maria property, a nearby site which now forms part of the Gladesville Hospital. This group of buildings still stands today, and has always been called "The Priory."

We learn from records that the Fathers' chapel was first a small room in the main house, but "a short time afterwards" the separate chapel was erected, and here the faithful attended Mass on Sundays. This separate chapel was certainly the first Marist Church in Australia, and it still exists in an excellent state.

Was Peter Chanel's body kept in this separate chapel or in the small room which served as the original chapel?

There is no definite information about the exact date of the erection of this separate chapel. If it had not been erected before 1849, naturally the body of Peter Chanel would have been placed in the chapel room of the main house. Because of the reference to building the separate chapel "a little time after," which would have been a short time after the Marist Fathers took up residence there in 1847, I think there is a fairly strong probability that the new separate chapel had been constructed before May, 1849. It is also known that this new chapel had been in existence some time before the Fathers vacated the site late in the 1850's for the present Villa Maria site. Consequently there is a fairly strong probability that while Peter Chanel's body was in Australia, it rested in the separate chapel building.

On 1<sup>st</sup> February, 1850, Father Rocher wrote in a letter to Father Claude Colin, Superior-General and founder of the Society of Mary, that he was sending the body of the martyr to France under the supervision of Father C. Bernin, S.M.

The newspaper, Sydney Morning Herald, included the name, C. Bemis, on the passenger list of the ship, Waterloo, which left Port Jackson on Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> February, bound for London.

The body was received at the General House of the Society of Mary, in Lyons, France, in June, 1850, where it was officially recognized as the body of Peter Chanel.

Nihil Obstat:  
D. P. MURPHY,  
Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur:  
✠ D. MANNIX,  
Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.  
9<sup>th</sup> August, 1954.

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