

ST. PETER CHANEL SM

July 12th 1803 – April 28th 1841



'I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth' (Acts 13:44-49)

St. Peter Chanel

- 1803** 12th July – born in La Potière, near Cuet, S.W. France
- 1819** enters the minor seminary at Meximieux
- 1824** enters the major seminary at Brou
- 1827** July 15th – ordained priest and appointed as curate to Amberieux
- 1831** joins the Marist Fathers (Society of Mary)
- 1832** Spiritual director of the college at Belley
- 1833** accompanies Jean-Claude Colin (founder of Marist Fathers) to the Pope in Rome to promote the cause of the Marists.
- 1834** vice-superior and head of college at Belley
- 1836** Marist Fathers (Society of Mary) approved by the Pope in Rome, and accepts responsibility for the new missions in the south-west pacific (Oceania)
Peter is accepted as one of the first band of Marist missionaries to go to Oceania.
24th Sept. – makes his first profession to the newly approved Society of Mary (Marist Fathers)
15th Oct. – service of consecration to Mary, the mother of Jesus at Fourviere
24th Dec. – sets sail from Le Havre to begin missionary work.
- 1837** 1st Nov. – two Marists placed on the Island of Wallis
8th Nov. – Peter Chanel and Marie Nizier arrive on the island of Futuna.
- 1841** 28th April – Peter Chanel is clubbed to death on the island of Futuna.
- 1889** Peter Chanel is declared a martyr and beatified
- 1954** Peter Chanel is declared a saint by Pope Pius X11

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (Jn. 12:12)

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The Early years



Peter Chanel was born on 12 July 1803, the fifth of eight children in a farming family with a small holding in the hamlet of La Potière near Cuet in south-western France. The area was still troubled by the political instability that followed the Revolution. That, plus the need to help on the farm, meant his primary schooling was

rather fragmented. He spent part of his schooling at Cras and in his early teens the parish priest helped him with his studies, so that at 16 he was ready to begin his four years of secondary education at the minor seminary at Meximieux in 1819. In 1824 after some months at the college in Belley he entered the major seminary at Brou, being ordained priest on July 15th 1827.

After Ordination

For his first year of priesthood he was assistant in a medium sized town called Amberieux where the seminarian Claude Bret, his later friend, fellow Marist and companion on the voyage to Oceania was active in the school. Since the age of 14, Chanel had been thinking about going on the foreign missions and his intention was strengthened by the letters that arrived at Amberieux from a former curate, now a missionary in India.

The following year he applied to the bishop of Belley for permission to go to the missions. His application was not accepted and instead he was appointed for the next three years as parish priest of Crozet, a small country town where the

Church was still in disarray a generation after the Revolution. With quiet zeal, tact and compassion he transformed it. Underlying his approach was his personal motto “Aimer Marie et faire l'aimer” - to love Mary and bring others to love her.

Society of Mary (Marist Fathers)

During this time Peter heard of a group of diocesan priests who had hopes of starting a Society of Mary. In 1831, aged 28, and with his bishop's agreement, he joined them at Belley and in September that year took with them a vow to work for the establishment of the Society of Mary (Marist Fathers). In November of that year his sister Françoise who had been his housekeeper at Crozet joined the Marist Sisters at Bon-Repos.



In 1832 Peter became spiritual director of the college at Belley. In 1833 he accompanied Fathers Colin and Bourdin on their journey to Rome to promote the Society's cause and to ask the Pope's approval for their planned Society of Mary. In 1834 Peter became vice-superior and effective head of the college in Belley. In this position he was not exactly a success, a fact of which he was himself painfully aware. The approval for the Society of Mary was given in April

1836 when Marists accepted responsibility for new missions in the little-known Western Pacific (Oceania).

Oceania (Western Pacific)

In 1836 Peter offered his name for the new missions in western Pacific and by the end of that year he was one of the first band of Marist missionaries for this pioneering mission.

Jeanne Marie Chavoin (Foundress of the Marist Sisters) tells of her part in encouraging Father Chanel, who was having doubts about pursuing the missionary call and who was strongly tempted to give up the venture. When Mother Superior met him, she cheered him up, saying “Oh ! Father Chanel, what great grace God has shown you”, and to keep up his courage she added a few energetic words about priests who grow mouldy in the midst of comfort and do nothing for God’s glory. Peter Chanel was also one of the first group of Marists who met for the retreat which culminated in the election of Jean-Claude Colin as General and the first professions on September 24th. Having visited his family and said his goodbyes, he made his way to Lyons and on October 15th with his companions took part in a service of consecration to Mary before her statue in the shrine of Fourviere.

The Journey to Futuna



Finally, after a long wait in Le Havre, the band set forth on Christmas eve 1836. The first group of Marists consisted of a bishop, (Pompallier) four priests (Frs. Pierre Chanel, Pierre Bataillon, Catherin Servant, Pierre Bret) and three brothers (Brs. Marie-Nizier Delorme, Joseph-Xavier Luzy and Michel Colombon, trained like all the Brothers at that period by Father Champagnat).

They left France with no fixed destination in mind. Bishop Pompallier’s mandate was just to find the best location to establish a Catholic beachhead in the vast area entrusted to them. Pompallier chose to travel around Cape Horn to make contact with Valparaiso in Chile. A few years previously the base for a mission to Eastern Oceania had been established there, staffed by French Picpus Fathers. The bishop was anxious to profit from their practical knowledge and

experience. The journey took almost a year, round the Horn and up to Valparaiso on the Pacific coast of South America. In March 1837, Peter's friend Bret died off the Canary Isles and was buried at sea.

Pompallier had the benefit of sharing Picpus transport for his group from Valparaiso to Tahiti. There he leased the schooner *Raiatea* to take him further west, over the line on the map that marked the beginning of his territory. By then he was becoming convinced that New Zealand would be the best location for his base, though he still thought of New Guinea as an alternative. After three week's sailing the 2,300km from Tahiti, the *Raiatea* reached Tonga. Here Wesleyan missionaries were already well established. So the *Raiatea* went north to Wallis where on All Saints Day 1837 Bishop Pompallier placed Fr Peter Bataillon and Br Joseph Luzy on Wallis Island, in an island group north of Fiji.



A week later he founded a second mission, leaving Fr Peter Chanel and Br Marie-Nizier Delorme (aged 21) 170km away on Futuna, the smaller island of the two. Futuna was roughly 13km long, 8km at it widest point, with a coastline of 40km. Its only contact with the outside world came via occasional passing trading ships. By then the Bishop had decided to make his base in New Zealand.

The Futuna mission

Peter Chanel and Marie Nizier were received by the king of one of the two factions into which the islanders were split and they were allowed to stay. Pompallier left, promising to return with another missionary in six months, a promise he proved unable to keep and which seriously undermined the missionaries' position in the eyes of the islanders.

On the island were also some white English traders and they had the assistance of Thomas Boag an English Protestant and widower of a Futunian woman. For three and a half years on Futuna, Chanel and Marie-Nizier battled with language difficulties, strange customs and food, sickness, malnutrition and loneliness. They often found themselves caught in the middle of tensions between the two rival factions on the island, which from time to time erupted into open warfare. At first the king was quite welcoming, though his moods and attitudes were rather erratic.

Hardest to bear was the seeming lack of success in adult conversions. But they persevered, living and preaching the Gospel, in spite of the king's intolerance at times.

Martyrdom



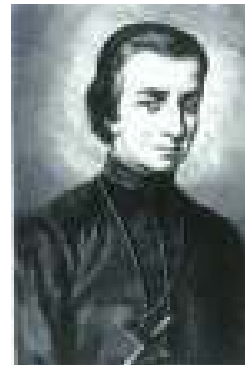
Some progress was registered. However the king's tolerance gradually wore thin and changed into outright opposition when he learned of the impending baptism of his son. The king kept control of his people largely through their worship of evil spirits. His son becoming a Christian undermined this power.

He tacitly ordered Chanel's death, and Peter was clubbed to death on 28th April 1841 while Marie-Nizier was on the other side of the island.

The news of Chanel's death took months to reach the outside world. It was almost a year before Marists in France learned of it; for those in New Zealand it took half that time. Two weeks after the killing the *William Hamilton*, a passing American trading ship, took Br Marie-Nizier to Wallis and safety. In time it came on to Kororareka carrying also two American beachcombers who had abandoned Futuna fearing its changed mood. There Marie Nizier told Pompallier's deputy, Fr Jean-Baptiste Épalle, that Peter Chanel had been murdered. On 19th November, Pompallier and Viard set sail for Wallis and then on to Futuna on the mission's schooner, *Sancta Maria*, escorted by the French corvette *L'Allier* which had just begun a tour of duty in the South Pacific

Viard went ashore with an unarmed party, and was able to have Peter Chanel's remains exhumed and to collect his few remaining possessions. The *L'Allier* returned to Akaroa, and the *Sancta Maria* (with Viard) returned to Kororareka. There the relics were reverently kept till 1849 when they were returned to France via Auckland and Sydney.

How Peter Chanel died - the oral tradition



(Bro Petelo Sekeme a locally born Futunian shares the oral tradition of how Peter Chanel died. Bro Petelo who had learned the story at his mother's knee, and lived close to the tradition most of his life, told the story as he knew it. The following is a summary of the main points of the narrative.)

“Niuliki was the only king on Futuna at the time that Peter lived there near him at Poi. His son Meitala lived in a different part of the island near the present airport, and when he was

converted to Christianity there was trouble. Musumusu was a noble whom the king loved like a son. He said to Musumusu to do whatever was necessary to fix the problem. Musumusu went to Meitala, and found him and his friends at prayer. He remonstrated with him, and the two men fought. Meitala was a smaller man, but held his own and Musumusu was injured. Musumusu and his friends returned to Poi. He approached Fr Peter who was home alone. Peter had injured himself while gardening, so Br Marie-Nizier had to do the visiting on his own that day.



Musumusu asked Peter to tend the wound on his forehead. As he turned away and went into the house, Musumusu's friends stormed into the house by another door, and began to smash and loot the place. One of them injured Fr Peter with a spear, and he staggered outside, and sat supporting himself by the side of the house. Inside the house as suitcases and trunks were emptied out, chalices and gear fell everywhere.

At this point Musumusu entered the house and shouted, 'Did we come here to rob the papalagi, or kill him?' When a garden hoe fell out of a trunk, Musumusu said 'This is what I need' and delivered the mortal blow to the head of Peter. The two daughters of Niuliki tended Peter in his dying moments.

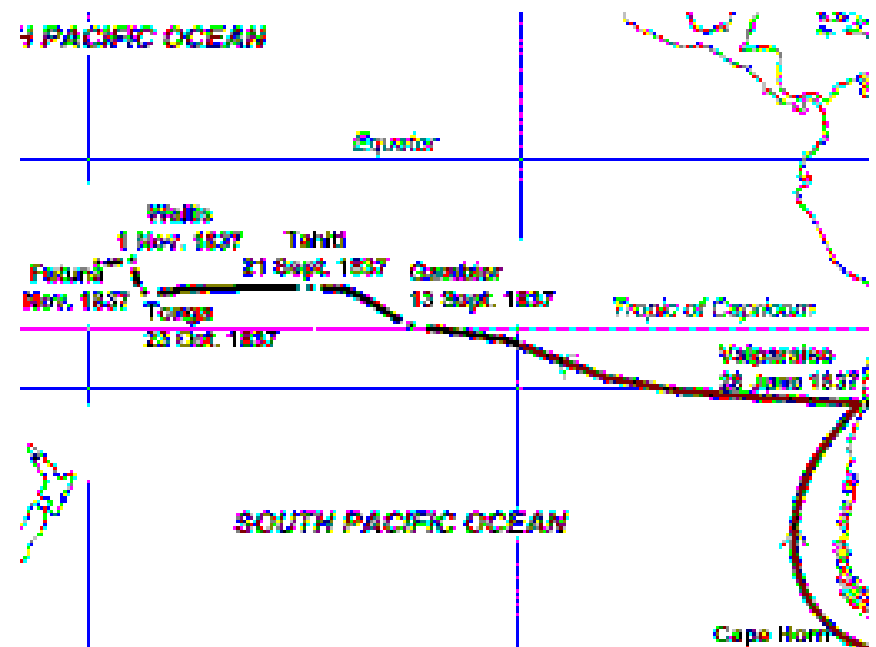
When Fr. Viard called at the island a year later to claim the body, he was on a French warship. He declined the captain's offer to fire the ships' guns. Musumusu at this stage was king himself. He waited in his house for the French soldiers to come and arrest him, but no one came near him.

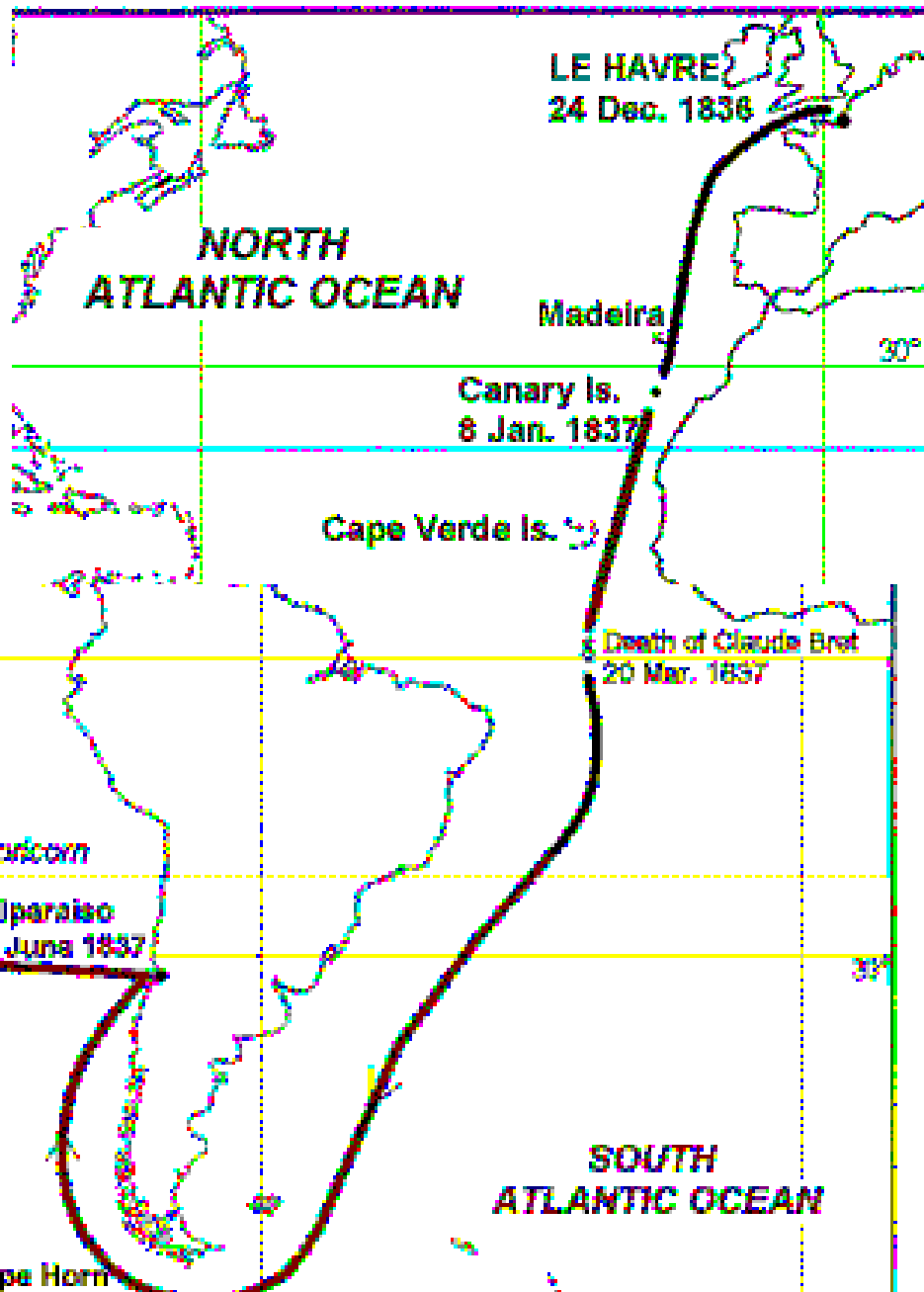
Later when Fr Servant, Br Marie-Nizier and one other returned to the island, Musumusu eventually became a Christian. His grave is a large one on the lawn outside the shrine. When near death he said he hoped that visitors would walk over his grave as they came to honour Peter Chanel."

*'Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all you lands.
Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
announce his salvation, day after day.*

*Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds'.*

(Ps. 96: 1-3)





The mission to Futuna after Chanel's death

Bishop Pompallier appointed Frs. Catherin Servant and François Roulleaux-Dubignon to Futuna to continue the mission, along with Marie-Nizier who had courageously agreed to go back. They arrived on the 9th June 1842. The same problems that had beset Peter Chanel continued to plague this second venture. The difficulties were aggravated by a group of about two hundred Wallisians, disaffected by the progress Bataillon had made on their island, crossing to Futuna to foment discord. But, in spite of this, the three missionaries did make slow progress, and came to realise the gradual conversion of the island was the result of grace won by Peter Chanel's martyrdom. Servant stayed on Futuna for most of the rest of his life and died there in 1860.



Canonisation

In the course of his work on Futuna, Fr. Servant prepared formal affidavits from eyewitnesses of the circumstances of Peter's killing, and these would later serve the process leading to Beatification. One clear fact was at the heart of these statements. The king held sway over his people through their fear of the evil spirits they worshipped. His son's conversion threatened an end to this control, so Peter had to be stopped. Hatred of the faith emerged clearly as the motive for having Chanel killed.

As the story of Peter's martyrdom spread through mission magazines, especially the French Annals of the Propagation of the Faith, he became newsworthy. The difficulty was in finding worthy news in a life that seemed unremarkable – the details of which we have read above.



Because of the difficulty of getting reliable eye-witness evidence, it took the Church a long time to be satisfied that Peter died because of hatred of the Catholic faith, and not merely through greed for his few possessions, or resentment at Peter's efforts to act as peacemaker between warring tribes.

In an effort to make his life more attractive, more heroic-sounding, some early accounts of his life on Futuna tended to be somewhat fanciful to fill out a biography which inevitably had to be rather slim. The rigorous scrutiny demanded by his Beatification as a martyr in 1889, and even more by his canonisation in 1954, sifted out such exaggerations and embellished piety. Two of the three notebooks containing his Futuna diary survived, and these provide a solid reference point in assessing his character as a missionary. In 1991 his diary was translated into English and published as 'Ever Your Poor Brother'. The book includes a selection of his surviving letters, with just enough background to help put them in context. The idea of the book is to let the saint speak for himself without interpretation. There is a simplicity and a sameness about it. At first glance it appears as if Chanel's whole world amounts to the ordinary details of a life circumscribed by the perimeter of the small island which God's Providence had placed in his spiritual charge. However with a more reflective reading the maturing of a saint emerges from the humdrum detail.

1. Prayer, always mental prayer at the start of the day, lest the demands of his work make it impossible to find unbroken space for it later.
2. The Masses offered when opportunity allowed were carefully numbered as days of special privilege. In the Eucharist he found the cheerful patient endurance to overcome discouragement

when his results in adult baptisms were minimal compared with those on Wallis.

3. Everything in his life was focused on planting the Gospel in seemingly sterile soil. When this turned sour and there was no escape he accepted death with calm bravery.
4. The most significant boost to his morale came after he had been on Futuna for almost a year and a half, when the first follow-up group of Marists dropped anchor at Futuna on 8 May 1839, the eve of Ascension Day on their way to New Zealand. Letters later sent back to France by the visitors commented with admiration on the stark simplicity and poverty of Chanel's life.

Due to lack of a favourable wind the ship was delayed at Futuna for ten days till Pentecost Sunday. The nine Marists had the opportunity of making together the Church's novena which linked the two feast days. In union with Mary and the apostles at the first Pentecost they could pray for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit on their fledgling mission. When they left, Peter Chanel and Marie Nizier returned to their isolation, but renewed in spirit.



5. The next group of Marists to leave France for the western pacific missions reached New Zealand on the 10th December 1839. Two of them, Fr Joseph-André Chevron and Br Attale Grimaud were sent further on to Futuna. It took the pair five months to get there via Fiji and Tonga. From May to November 1840 Peter and Marie-Nizier had this added help. Then, learning of Bataillon's sudden success on Wallis, they open-heartedly sent the newcomers to assist there in instructing

unexpected numbers of catechumens, and accepted once again their loneliness and isolation.

6. By this time Peter had begun to gather a small number of young men around him. The success of the mission on Wallis led the king to fear a similar flood of conversions on Futuna. From then on his attitude changed from one of erratic tolerance to positive opposition and petty persecution, with obstacles placed in the way of islanders wanting to visit Peter. The situation worsened over the remaining six months till the king echoed the infamous line “Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?”

Peter Chanel was officially declared a martyr and beatified in 1889. He was declared a saint by Pope Pius XII in 1954

The Story of his “Relics”



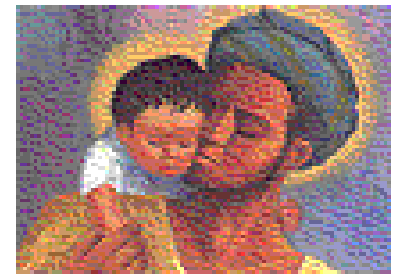
As we read earlier, Fr Viard arrived in Futuna to collect the remains of Peter Chanel and his few possessions. A chief named Maligi, who had not agreed to Chanel’s murder, agreed to disinter Fr. Chanel’s body, and brought it to the French ship the *L’Allier* the next day, wrapped in several mats. The Commander of the vessel asked the ship’s doctor M. Rault, to inspect

the remains. After a prolonged examination he was able to certify the identity of the remains bearing in mind the description of the manner of the Saint’s death given previously by Brother Marie-Nizier S.M.

The doctor undertook to embalm the remains so that they could be kept without upsetting the crew. They were wrapped in linen and placed in a cask, and taken to the *Sancta Maria*. Bishop

Pompallier decided to stay on Wallis Island, and Fr. Viard, on the *Sancta Maria* brought Fr. Chanel’s remains back to the Bay of Islands in New Zealand. He arrived on 3rd February 1842. Late in May 1842 a French Vessel, the *Jonas* arrived in the Bay of Islands. The ship’s doctor visited the Marists there, and they mentioned to him their concern to have Chanel’s remains more fittingly cared for. The bones were by now completely stripped of flesh. With the doctor’s help a little tin chest was made and well-lined with linen, and the remains were placed in it as decently as possible. This chest was wrapped in linen., and then placed in a “box made of good quality wood”. After telling Fr. Colin, the Founder and first Superior General of the Society of Mary in France about these arrangements for more appropriate care of the Saint’s remains, Fr. Forest S.M. said that the box would be kept “in a fitting place”.

The Saint’s remains stayed at Kororareka until 1849. Bishop Pompallier drew up a document proving the authenticity of the bones, and gave the axe which had smashed the missionary’s skull to the Council for the Propagation of The Faith in Lyons, France. In 1949, according to a Marist Messenger article of that time, the axe was in the Society’s museum at 72, Rue Sala. Other articles belonging to Fr. Chanel were given to the Mission in Futuna Island or sent to Lyons for the Society of Mary.



The relics were accompanied by Fr. Petitjean to Auckland - most likely early in April 1849. They left New Zealand on 15th April 1849 by the ship *Maukin* and arrived in Sydney, Australia on 4th May, Fr. Rocher S.M. who had been in Sydney since 1845 setting up the Procure (business office) for the Oceania

Marist Mission, received the container which held the bones and took it to the Procure Chapel at Gladesville in Sydney on 7th May.

Fr. Rocher was very careful in making the decision as to when to send the container on to England and France. He looked for a trustworthy Captain, and a reliable person in London to receive the consignment, attend to the Customs, and have it sent on to Lyons.

Early in 1850, Fr. Bernin S.M., pro-vicar for Bishop Douarre, vicar-apostolic of New Caledonia, had to leave for France. He left Sydney for London on the *Waterloo* on 1st February 1850 taking Peter Chanel's remains with him. On June 1st 1850 the remains arrived at the Mother House of the Society of Mary in Lyons, to the great joy, in particular, of Father Colin, founder of the Marists.

Substantially the relics remained in or near Lyons except the skull which was taken to the Marist General House in Rome at the time of Peter Chanel's canonisation in 1954.



In 1977, at the request of the Bishop of Wallis and Futuna, the main reliquary containing the major bones of Peter Chanel, was returned to Futuna Island. They traveled by air through Australia, New Zealand, on to Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Wallis. They were placed in the Church at Poi on Futuna Island, the site of the martyrdom, on 28th April 1977, the day this Saint is honoured throughout the Catholic Church in the world.

The 1985 General Chapter of the Society of Mary, decided that the major relic of the Saint, his fractured skull, should likewise be returned to Futuna Island. Accompanied by an Assistant-General of the Marist Order, Fr. Joaquin Fernandez, it arrived in Futuna on 7th November 1985.

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Prayer

St Peter Chanel you left your homeland to proclaim Jesus, Saviour of the world, to the peoples of Oceania. Guided by the spirit of God, who is the strength of the gentle, you bore witness to love, even laying down your life. Grant that like you we may live our daily life in peace, joy, and in love. May your prayer and example call forth from our midst many workers for the Gospel so that God's kingdom may reach to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Scripture

'Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all you lands. Sing to the Lord, bless his name; announce his salvation, day after day. Tell his glory among the nations; among all peoples, his wondrous deeds'. (Ps. 96: 1-3)

'But to you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. (Luke 6;27-28)

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (Jn.12:24)

I have suffered the loss of all things, that I might know Christ and the power of his resurrection (Ph2:6-11)

Reflection

Father Colin (Founder of the Marist Fathers) continued, 'this is the time of our birth, let us make ourselves strong, and let us grow in the shadows. The time to burst forth will come soon enough. To each his proper time, besides, nowadays creating a stir is not the way to do good. If I have spoken so much of remaining hidden, it is because I intend us to do even more good..... I do not mean we shall be sheltered from that kind of suffering, from the persecutions, which the upright suffer. No we shall have many martyrs, and of more than one kind. Have we not two already, Father Chanel and Bishop Epalle? But this is the time of our birth, let us make ourselves strong. (FS 149:2)

They learn from him (Jesus) and like him from Mary, how to approach the work of evangelization so that the Gospel may be received in all its power and clarity. Fired with apostolic zeal for the Kingdom, they follow the Lord in emptying themselves of all self-seeking so that nothing will prevent the work of God from being heard. It was by coming into the world in obscurity and poverty that Jesus drew men and women to His Father.

Call to mind what you most value and what you would be willing to sacrifice for the sake of others.

Remember now those people and concerns that are dear to you and entrust them to God.

Prayer

Lord,
By his work and death St. Peter sowed the seed of your Gospel.
May that Word grow in our hearts,
So that, stirred on by his example of patience and love,
We too may spend all we have and are for the sake of your kingdom.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sources

- Marist Celebrations – *Anthony Ward sm*
- www.maristpacific.org – authors include *M O'Meeghan sm, Peter J Ewart sm, B Quin sm*
- The Marist Messenger, - *New Zealand Province of the Society of Mary.*
- Saint Peter Chanel s.m., First Martyr of the South Pacific. *Philip Graystone s.m.*
- Ever your poor Brother. *Anthony Ward sm and William Stuart sm.*

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The Name of Chanel

Among some of the Marist Fathers ministries named after Peter Chanel are the following:

- Chanel College, Coolock, Dublin,, Ireland
- Colegio Parroquial “San Pedro Chanel”, Sullana Peru
- Chanel College, Apia, Samoa, South Pacific
- Colegio San Pedro Chanel, Malgrat de Mar, Spain
- Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Peter Chanel Parish, Hull, England
- Scolasticat Saint-Pierre Chanel – Yaounde, Cameroon
- St. Peter Chanel Seminary – Berkeley, USA
- Chanel Noviciate, Davao, Philippines

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Lord, you sent St. Peter Chanel to bring the light of faith to the peoples of Oceania and gave him the crown of martyrdom.