

The final chapter

The second of Cuét's stained windows records the final chapter in Peter Chanel's life. Early in the morning of Apr 28, 1841, Fr. Peter was awakened from sleep and clubbed to death, his skull split by the axe of a Futunian warrior. He was thirty-eight years old.

Oceania, with the Society of Mary, had its first martyr, who was to become one of Australia's patron saints.

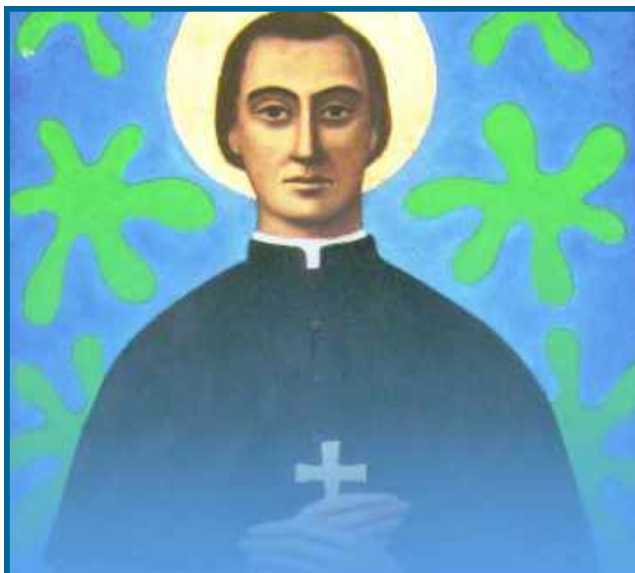
The true value

Peter Chanel's story is a lesson in faith and generosity. It is one of a human, lovable figure, blending the gentle availability of Mary with the manly strength of her Son.

Only after his death did the true value of Peter Chanel's work appear. Within two years the Marist Fathers were again shepherding the flock of Futuna and in a short time the whole island became Christian, including the murderers of Fr. Peter.

There is something peculiarly attractive about this 'man with the good heart'. Perhaps it is his simplicity — the simplicity of Mary and of her Society. St. Peter Chanel's strengths are the ones we sense are not beyond even us.

On Jun 12, 1954 Pope Pius XII declared St Peter Chanel SM to be a saint of the Church of God. We celebrate St Peter's feast day on Apr 28 each year.



Prayer to St Peter Chanel

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, in joy, and in fraternal 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.



ST PETER CHANEL

MARIST PRIEST AND
FIRST MARTYR
OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

An old well still stands... outside the tiny village church of Cuét in the south-east of France. Peter Chanel was baptised with water from a well like this at nearby Montrevel on July 16, 1803.

Today the parish of Cuét simply and proudly remembers its Marist son who yearned so much to bring the living waters of baptism to the peoples of the Pacific.

In Autumn of 1812 the parish priest of the neighbouring village of Cras, the Abbé Tromprier, had spoken to the lad about a priestly future in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd whom Peter already admired. Peter Chanel was a sturdy, cheerful nine year old, busy with the family work of leading their flock of sheep to pasture.

After moving to live at Cras under the careful tutelage of Fr Tromprier, the young Peter grew in devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Eucharist -- and the idea of a missionary life.

Rebuilding to be done

The Revolution had taken heavy toll, including in the lives of faithful Catholic people. Soon there would be much re-building to be done, not only of the civil life of war-torn France but of its flock of faithful people too.

So it was that Peter Chanel took the first step on a journey that would touch the lives of many along its way and end on a distant island twelve thousand miles away.

On Jul 15, 1827 Peter Chanel was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Devie in the church of Brou, at Bourg-en-Bresse. He became curate in the parish of Ambérieu east of Lyon and soon afterwards was entrusted with the care of the remote parish of Crozet, high in the Jura mountains overlooking the border of Switzerland. His new flock soon felt that sincerity and holiness by which they would remember him.

Four years later Fr. Peter joined the infant Society of Mary, following one of two instincts which were to have great influence in his life: a deep love for Our Lady and

a sense of being called to the foreign missions.

Touched by his goodness

As a Marist Father he was sent to the college of Belley, first as spiritual director, then as rector. A statue of Fr. Peter with a young student stands in the grounds of that school today, a reminder of how the boys and staff of the college were touched by his goodness.

In Apr 1836 Pope Gregory XVI entrusted the vast mission field of the south-west Pacific to the Society of Mary. Fr. Peter Chanel was amongst the first group to take religious vows a few months later. With six other Marists he left the port of Le Havre for the far-flung world of Oceania on the tide of Christmas Eve.

In the first weeks at sea sickness took the life of Fr Peter's close friend, Fr Claude Bret. The voyage was long and dangerous, round the Horn and westward across a mostly unchartered Pacific.

On Nov 08, 1837, almost a year after leaving his homeland and in the company of twenty-year-old Br Marie Nizier, Fr. Peter was left on the tiny dot which is the island of Futuna.

Four years on Futuna

Two simple stained windows in the church at Cuét depict the opening and closing chapters of Fr. Peter's brief life among the people of Futuna. The first shows the young priest's arrival. He was 34 years old and a Marist for six of the ten years of his priesthood,

Peter Chanel was to work generously among the thousand inhabitants of Futuna for the next four years. The population had once been much greater but constant fighting and cannibalism had decimated their numbers.

Indeed, not long before the arrival of Fr. Peter and Br. Marie Nizier, the native King Niuliki had been forced to outlaw cannibalism lest the natives eat themselves out of existence!



'The man with the good heart'

The two missionaries were now completely cut off from the outside world. They set about building a shelter, growing food and learning a language utterly foreign to them.

Progress in bringing the Good News of Christ to this unfriendly people was heartbreakingly slow - and the living water of baptism that Fr. Peter so longed to offer was hardly to be poured. At the end of six months he had baptised only one Futunian — a dying child.

Peter Chanel's selflessness and love for this new flock began to have an effect on the natives. They gave him the name 'the man with the good heart'.

All might have gone well had not the king turned against him and his call to the peace of the Gospel. The king determined to be rid of the missionaries and forbade anyone to give them food. He would starve them out.

Fr. Peter and Br. Nizier's attempt to grow vegetables were frustrated by raids on their garden. At one time they were reduced to eating their dog.

And then the order was given for the missionaries to be murdered.