



ARCHIVES

The Story of Br Hyacinthe Chatelet 1817 - 1847

Br Michael Flanagan

Recently, I was asked by our Provincial to find some information on Br Hyacinthe Chatelet, an early Marist missionary to the Solomon Islands. He was killed there with two Marist priests on April 20, 1847. The news of his death was conveyed to Br Francois, Superior General, in a letter from Br Gennade - which is reproduced below, in a shortened form. Br Hyacinthe is written about in the Province's *Necrology* but is recorded as having no known grave.

Introduction

Written by Br Edward Clisby, FMS, New Zealand

Br Gennade (John-Pierre Rolland 1817 - 1898) entered the Hermitage at the age of 23 in July 1840. He claimed to have known the Founder while he was living with his family at Saint-Genis-Terrenoire, not far from St Chamond. He made perpetual profession in 1844, a few months before leaving for Oceania with Mgr Epalle. A smith and stonemason by trade, he worked as carpenter, blacksmith, gardener, and cook as necessary. Gennade seems to have been relatively



immune to the malaria which periodically laid low his confreres.

Since their installation at Makira in 1846, the missionaries had been plagued with fever. At the beginning of 1847 they sought to find a healthier area by establishing a station at Pia Bay, several miles north of port Sainte-Marie. But within a month of taking up residence one of the priests had died of malaria. A further attempt to find a more suitable site was made the following month. Two priests

and a Brother were sent to investigate the possibilities of Ouanga (Wango) on the north coast. Both Jean-Marie Paget (1816-1847) and Claude Jacquet (1812-1847) had joined the Society not long before leaving France with Epalle (1843 and 1844 respectively). Br Hyacinthe had taken over as carpenter of the mission in 1846. They ran across another danger, having to pass through the territory of the Toro, a hill tribe with whom the Marists did not enjoy good relations. The latter seized their opportunity and attacked and killed all three on 20 April 1847.

Gennade refers to these deaths as martyrdoms and Francois, in the introduction to the Necrology in his circular of 1 August 1848, also writes: "Our very dear Brothers ...I have the consolation of announcing to you that we have a martyr from among our ranks, our dear Brother Hyacinthe ..." (CSG 1 137). [2]

But as Gennade himself points out, the three died not from hatred for their religion but in revenge for what the Toro regarded as the hostility of the Marists, who were, moreover, friends of their traditional enemies, the Jone. For the next few months the missionaries lived under a virtual state of siege, eventually abandoned even by the Jone. When Collomb arrived at Makira Bay on 28 August he thus had little hesitation in ordering the evacuation of the mission.

Collomb had been consecrated bishop not in Australia, but in New Zealand, at Kororareka, by Viard on May 27, 1847. He then sailed for New Caledonia, planning a rendezvous at Balade with the "Anonyme", a ship of the Oceania Society, and so return to his vicariate. But the vessel had not arrived and he was forced to wait at Balade with his supplies. He could not have come at a more critical time. The local people had been suffering for more than a year from drought and disease, for which they blamed the Marists. The latter, moreover, were seen to be well supplied but refusing to supply relief. The latest arrival proved the last straw. The Balade attacked the mission on July 18, seriously wounding Br Blaise and besieging the house. The next

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day the Marists surrendered the storehouse and fled to Pouebo, several miles to the south-east. Blaise could not keep up with the others and was axed to death. At Pouebo they found themselves again under siege and only the arrival of two French frigates in mid-August prevented the rest from meeting a similar fate. One of Collomb's party, Fr Leopold Verguet, did a sketch later, incorporating the scene of Blaise's murder and other details mentioned by Gennade.

On September 3, Collomb sailed with what remained of his personnel, three priests and three Brothers, westward for Woodlark (Murua) Island, about which he had heard good reports in Sydney. They arrived on the 15th and established themselves at Guasopa harbour, which they named Port of the Nativity (of Mary). Gennade observes that some of the island's advantages had been overrated and, in addition, they were still subject to attacks of fever. But they managed to hold on here until Collomb's own death

on Rook Island, in July 1848, prompted Colin to request Rome that the vicariate should be confided to another congregation.

Out of 20 missionaries the Society had provided for Micronesia and Melanesia, only seven remained. The last Marists withdrew from Woodlark in 1853. Of the Brothers, Aristide and Optat returned to France via Sydney in 1850, while Gennade himself, one of the last to leave, was appointed to the procure in Sydney where he spent the rest of his life. (He is buried in the Marist Father's cemetery in Hunters Hill.)

(*A warning to readers: the following letter contains descriptions of violence. It also should be taken in the context of being an historical document, with historical views. Editor.)

Text of the Gennade Letter to Br Francois (shortened)

Very honourable Brother,

Here is some very sad news I would scarcely dare to communicate to you if I were not aware your faith is strong enough to raise you above the most depressing events. You have lost a Brother, but you have the joy of having a martyr from the ranks of the Society. The one I am talking about is Brother Hyacinthe. I will give you the details of his death, as well as those of the two priests murdered with him, for his death, unfortunately, is not the only loss the mission mourns. On Aril 20th Frs Paget and Jacquet, accompanied by Br Hyacinthe, left Makira, the site of our residence, to go and visit Ouango, a place

they had been told was ideal for the setting up of a new station. It was about six o'clock in the morning. Some time later they reached a village of the Toro, a mountain tribe, as opposed to the Jone, or people of the coast. The natives made a great show of friendship – on the surface at least. They even went so far as to escort them beyond the village as a mark of respect. The Fathers suspected nothing. Suddenly there was a shout and they were attacked. The savages had taken care to separate their victims and had no great difficulty in dispatching them. Fr Paget received a spear in the pit of the stomach, which felled him. A single axe blow smashed Fr Jacquet's head. As for Br Hyacinthe, a native who had his arm around his neck in a friendly fashion, struck his spear between his shoulders. The first attempt was not successful, as the weapon slid over the skin, so he finished his prey off with blows of his axe. We learned this ominous news at nine o'clock and you can imagine, very honourable Brother, the thoughts going around in our minds. We were afraid, and with some justification, that the savages, intoxicated by their triumph, would come and attack us

at our station. We have since been informed that, since they did not dare to mount an expedition themselves, they had suggested the idea of massacring us to the Jone, so as to get the plunder more easily. But God, who never allows people to be tried beyond their strength, frustrated their evil designs. The Jone remained loyal to us – at least they did nothing against us themselves.

Sometime after the crime had been carried out we had a number of visits of condolence. The natives showed signs of sadness. But none of us put any trust in these outward displays because we already knew from experience they have no rivals in the art of hypocrisy. Treachery is a characteristic of our savages, as a general rule. Our informants told us that after striking down their victims, the Toros had temporarily fled the scene of the bloodshed, as if frightened by their crime. But then they returned in even greater fury, carried off the bodies, dismembered them, and made arrangements to send various parts to their allies, for they were going to feast on them the following day. ... (parts removed)

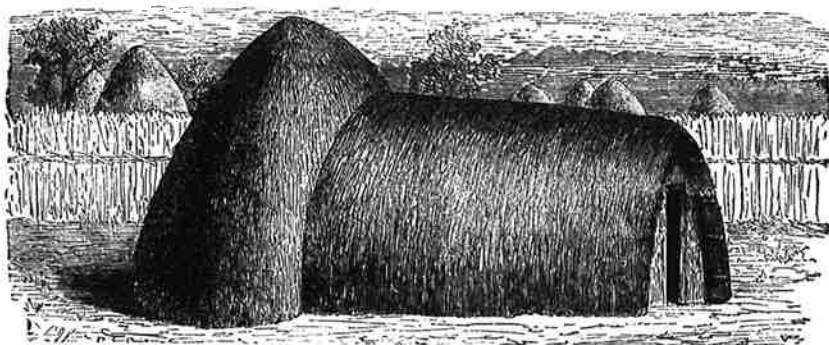
I will not tell you of my normal occupations. They vary from day to day. Sometimes I am carpenter, sometimes blacksmith, or gardener, or cook. What I can tell you is that work is not lacking, and there is plenty for those of our Brothers who feel themselves called to the foreign missions. Among occupations exhausting in themselves, but especially so in a hot climate, I am very happy and have no regrets at having left France. God, who puts us to the test, helps us to come through with his grace. He has given me back my strength, for example, so I can get down to work, and now I am very well. It's the same with the other Brothers. But the fever has not been so kind to our priests.

This is a long letter, reverend Brother. Dare I ask a similar one in return? You cannot imagine how much I would enjoy receiving one. I often think of the Hermitage and everything going on there is of interest to me. It will always make me happy to hear that the Brothers are growing in numbers and that the Holy Virgin continues to bless her children.

Allow me, in closing, to embrace you in the Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

Br Gennade.

Br Michael Flanagan
Province Archivist



SOLOMON ISLANDS HOUSE

Solomon Islands House - Scanned 1890 Engraving

Source: Marist Studies Wiki: Letters of French Catholic Missionaries in the Pacific 1836-1854...includes: Clisby Contents, the set of translations by Br Edward Clisby FMS, which has been privately published under the title Letters Received from Oceania.