

BROTHER EUGENE EYRAUD

FRANCE

February 15, 1820 – August 19, 1868

One of the most admirable episodes of our missionary history is surely the evangelization of Rapa Nui., the Easter Island. This was discovered by the Europeans when the Dutch admiral, Roggeveen, came across it on Easter Sunday 1772. The Congregation decided in 1863 to send missionaries to the Island and one of these was Brother Eugene Eyraud whom we may call, without exaggeration, the apostle of Easter Island.

Eugene was born on February 5, 1820 in Saint Bonnet, a little village in the French Alps. When he finished school he went to learn a trade in Blois, with his oldest brother Joseph. There he became a very skilled mechanic and locksmith. One day a manufacturer from Buenos Aires asked him to go with him to Argentina where he would be given a prominent position on his factory. Eugene accepted the invitation. When he arrived in Argentina he found that his chance for work had been destroyed by the war. With great difficulty he managed to earn enough money to get to Chile. In the village of Copiapo he started a trade which soon flourished. In June 1847, his brother Jean was ordained to the priesthood and departed as a missionary for China. Eugene offered his services to his brother but there was no way by which the offer could be accepted, so Eugene had to be content with arranging a solid financial base for the work of his missionary brother. The desire to become a missionary still remained in Eugene and one day the opportunity arrived as described by Eugene himself:

“One day when I was busy in my workshop, two clergymen passed by. I had the feeling that they were two fellow countrymen and I called: ‘Sirs, come in, come in!’ To my great surprise, they accepted the invitation and quite unexpectedly there stood before me, two French priests of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts.

Eugene became a friend of the Fathers and in 1862 he entered the novitiate of the Congregation in Valparaiso. It was not a peaceful novitiate. When Eugene’s mother became seriously ill he was given permission to keep a promise he had made, to visit his mother when she was dying. Arriving in France, he was told that his mother had already died. After a stay of some months in his native land he returned to Valparaiso to continue his novitiate. When the Congregation decided to send some Fathers to Rapa Nui, Eugene asked to be allowed to accompany them. Again he was given permission to interrupt his novitiate. He left with Fathers Montiton and Rigal for Tahiti, where all sorts of rumours were circulating. Some of these rumours mentioned the presence of all sorts of diseases, while others mentioned constant attacks by the Peruvians. It was decided that Eugene alone, would visit the Island and see what was happening. Once he had explored the situation, a decision would be made as to whether it was worthwhile to start evangelizing Rapa Nui. Eugene traveled to Easter Island by himself and went ashore at the beginning of 1864.

As the only white person among primitive natives, Eugene had to defend his few simple possessions. One of the natives called Torometi, looked upon the Brother as his personal slave. When Eugene lent him an axe, he used it as a weapon to force the missionary to obey him and successfully deprived Eugene of all his possessions. On the other hand, Torometi took care that Eugene had the necessary means to keep alive, so the missionary was free to teach catechism lessons. These lessons were a nice change for the people of Rapa Nui. As hardly any work was done on the Island, the natives would normally spend their day near the hut of the missionary. Their way of forcing Eugene to come out was to throw stones incessantly at his hut. Sadly, when the poor man began to recite the catechism and the prayers, his audience went to sleep. If a little while later, the Brother disappeared back into his little hut, another barrage of stones would force him out once more. In spite of everything, he taught some children a little catechism and some Christian prayers. He also visited the sick and baptized some people who were on the point of death. His poor little church collapsed like a house of cards at the first real downpour. However, the inhabitants of Easter Island, became more and more hostile towards Eugene. His ‘patron’ Torometi had many enemies.

Eugene began to fear for his life and took flight to another village. Torometi and his friends came to fetch him back and when the Brother refused to come with them, they simply carried him back. A little later on, Torometi was punished by his fellowmen for his misdeeds. His hut was set on fire and Eugene lost all his clothes and walked around the Island covered only by a blanket. In the end, Eugene as well as Torometi took refuge elsewhere. When a ship arrived with a fellow missionary aboard, Eugene went to the ship carried by Torometi, who by now was only too pleased to see him go. Eugene returned to Valparaiso in October 1864. On May 6,

1865 Eugene Eyraud was professed and at the end of the year he set off again with Father Hippolyte Roussel for Easter Island. They arrived on March 23, 1866. Again the attitude of the island people was hostile and the two missionaries stayed in their hut as a besieged fortress. Gradually however, the two missionaries began to gain the trust of the people and with their help, they began to expand their mission station. They built a simple chapel and the Brother planted orange trees and started a vegetable garden. To provide water for his simple agricultural enterprise, they searched for, and found a well. In November 1866, another two missionaries arrived and things began to go extremely smoothly. After a thorough preparation, all the inhabitants of Rapa Nui were baptized between February and August 1868. Eugene Eyraud was in bed seriously ill when the last catechumens were baptized.

When Father Gaspard came to him after the great baptismal ceremony of Friday, August 14, and told him that only seven natives needed to be baptized, the sick Brother managed to say in a weak voice: 'The wish of my life has been realized, yes now I can die in peace.' It was though possible that on the next day, Saturday August 15, he could be carried on a chair to the chapel, so that he could be present at the solemn Mass on the Assumption of Our Lady. Sadly, at 7 o'clock that Friday evening, Brother Theodule came to the chapel where Father Gaspard was baptizing the last neophytes, to say that Brother Eugene could no longer speak. He still recognized Father Gaspard and he received the last rites still fully conscious. During the night, he lapsed in a coma. For a little while on Tuesday the 18th he regained consciousness and asked: 'Have all been baptized now?' On hearing an affirmative reply, a last smile of joy lit up the emaciated face of the dying apostle. On Wednesday, August 19, 1868, at 11 o'clock at night, the founder of the Mission of Rapa Nui rendered his soul to his God."

In "Le centenaire de la mort de Frere Eugene Eyraud" in *Annales ss.cc.* 1969, pp.261-262.

The young Christian community with approximately 1,800 Catholics, seemed to have a golden future ahead. Sadly, in the same year 1868, a French sea captain came to live on Rapa Nui and he began to exploit the land and the people. A good number of the inhabitants were transported to Tahiti, where many of them died. The whole population of Easter Island lived under the terror of Commander Bornier. The missionaries, who spoke up for their flock were treated equally harshly. In the end, nothing could be done and they had to leave the Island. In 1873, the last missionary with approximately 150 Christians, left for Mangareva. A similar number of people remained in Rapa Nui. This tremendously sad end of a very promising mission, makes the historian realize the mysterious power of evil in the history of people.

From: Cor Rademaker ss.cc. "Call to Serve" Dublin, 1988. pp 120-123