

## MARIST LIVES

# BISHOP THOMAS JOHN WADE, SM

# “It’s a great day to be alive.”

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A young Bishop Wade in his Simar, worn at non-liturgical functions, the attire he threatened to greet the Japanese in

*“If the Japanese come, I’ll meet them in my bishop’s paraphernalia.”* – Bishop Thomas Wade, ca. 1942

In a religious order known for its commitment to mission work, Thomas John Wade is still remembered for his steadfast devotion to the missions in the South Pacific, starting from the time of his priestly ordination and enduring until his death. Born in Providence, Rhode Island on August 4, 1893, Thomas Wade professed as a Marist in 1920. Before his ordination in 1922, he expressed his interest in serving in the foreign missions, a fact he did not share with his parents, who learned of his intention and imminent departure only at his ordination Mass. Father Thomas Wade left for Bougainville in the North Solomon Islands in February 1923, and by the time he made his first of only two visits home, in 1935, both of his parents had died.

His first assignment was in Buka, a town in Bougainville, in eastern Papua New Guinea, where Fr. Wade recognized the need for a native apostolate and began a school for native catechists. Despite hardships, there were 90 catechists at the school by 1927, and by 1930 the number had increased to 125. In 1930 Fr. Wade was appointed the first Vicar Apostolic of the North Solomons, and on October 26, a mere eight years after his ordination, Fr. Wade was consecrated a bishop, becoming the first native English-speaking bishop in the region. Five years later, he made an ad limina visit to Rome, followed by a tour of the United States for the purpose of raising funds for the mission. He captured the imaginations of his American audiences with stories of the primitive conditions in the North Solomons, still virtually impenetrable without costly airplanes or ships from elsewhere. Despite the difficult conditions, Bishop Wade and other Marist missionaries had made tremendous progress in building churches, schools and infirmaries. During his visit to the United States, he cemented his close friendship with Father Richard J. Cushing, who was then the assistant director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

Big changes loomed, however, when Bishop Wade returned to the Solomon Islands as the world crept inexorably toward a second world war.

When Japanese troops landed in the Solomon Islands, Bishop Wade fulfilled his promise by confronting them and demanding that his missionaries remain free to continue their work. Initial reports claimed that he was taken prisoner, but he avoided capture, along with 29 priests, nuns, laywomen and children. After ensuring the safety of the others, whose escape by submarine during an American raid he facilitated, Bishop Wade hid in the jungle for nearly a year. He later recounted in a letter to now Bishop Cushing, auxiliary bishop in Boston: “In the mountains I could have held on longer, as the natives were great and liked the game. At one time I was concealed alone for 36 days, didn’t even know the way out myself.” Other missionaries were not so fortunate; according to Bishop Wade. Two American Marist priests, George Lepping and John Conley, were captured because they were “full of beans, benevolence and charity” and refused to lie low. Father Lepping survived Japanese imprisonment, but Fr. Conley was beheaded by the Japanese.

In April 1943, U.S. troops gained control of the Solomon Islands, rescuing both Bishop Wade and the Most Rev. Jean-Marie Aubin, SM, bishop of the South Solomon Islands. Although both were safe, the missions had been destroyed, by both Japanese and American bombs. Bishop Wade wrote about the missionaries after his evacuation: “The



Bishop Wade with fellow missionaries and a few natives in the Solomons. Today, students attending a school named in his honor celebrate his feast day by visiting a cave where he hid during World War II.

place is very dangerous. Pray for their safety from our own bombs. Pray for the others; we do not know where they are.” He received needed medical care before tackling his next assignment as Catholic Military Vicar of the Western Pacific. A contemporary newspaper photograph shows Bishop Wade administering the Sacrament of Confirmation to 260 American soldiers, sailors and Marines, most of whom were recent converts. These actions later benefitted the missions, as veterans remembered the Bishop who had tended their spiritual needs during the war and contributed to rebuilding those missions decimated by Japanese and American bombs.

Bishop Wade reportedly had in his possession a photograph of the Japanese surrender on September 2, 1945, inscribed by Admiral C. W. Nimitz: “To T. J. Wade...with best wishes and great appreciation of your contribution to the war effort in the Pacific which made possible the above scene.”

After the war, in addition to rebuilding the missions, Bishop Wade focused on his goal of a native and self-supporting Church in the islands. In 1955, on a second trip to the United States intended to raise funds, Bishop Wade recalled the ordination of the first two native priests at Christmas in 1953 as a significant achievement, along with growing numbers of native seminarians and missionaries.

Repeated bouts with malaria and other health problems forced Bishop Wade’s resignation and return to the United States in 1960. Leaving the Solomon Islands, however, did not prevent his continued support of the region. Serving in Boston as an unofficial auxiliary to Archbishop, later Cardinal, Cushing who also tirelessly raised funds for the missions, Bishop Wade found time even to attend baseball games, with a fellow fan noting, “You could never talk to him during the game.”

In 1969, Bishop Wade traveled to California to ordain Dennis Steik, SM who was later to become Provincial of the Atlanta Province. Although he knew he was not well, Bishop Wade refused to see a doctor until after the ordination. He was immediately hospitalized and died in Daly City, California on June 11, 1969. At Bishop Wade’s funeral Mass, held at Our Lady of Victories in Boston, Cardinal Cushing, in his homily, recalled one of Bishop Wade’s favorite sayings, “It’s a great day to be alive.”