

## In Memoriam

DON RAMIRO ESTÉVEZ 1928-1996\*

CHILE WAS THE CRADLE—and the grave of Don Ramiro Estévez, the late priest of Rapa Nui, who was born May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1928 and died December, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1996. Despite having met him just a few times during my stay in Hangaroa in 1995, I remember him very well: a wise and simple man with whom I spoke in his house, attached to the island's church. We were surrounded by wooden saints whose neo-gothic style blended with the features reminiscent of the *moai* that gave a worldly reputation to Rapa Nui.

Such a noble man is difficult to forget. Don Ramiro was the kind of person you meet and, after five minutes of talking, have the impression of being in contact for a very long time. Remembering is a function of memory. Thanks to it, we can recall the experiences we had and the people we met in the past. The content of this article, as the title says, comes basically from the memory I have of our meeting. Part of it, however, rises also from some readings and an interview I had with Mrs. Carmiña Estévez, Don Ramiro's sister, to whom I am indebted.

Ramiro Estévez Tascón was ordained a Catholic priest on 20 September 1958. Many years later, in February 1993, he was designed priest of the *iglesia* of Santa Cruz, in Hangaroa. Before becoming a priest, Don Ramiro studied architecture and painting, thus art and culture were a part of his life, as well as his religious affairs. According to his sister, Don Ramiro was essentially a contemplative man, devoted to meditating and praying. About five years before his death, he founded a house of prayer in the Chilean city of Pucón.

A dynamic man, Don Ramiro had the intention of setting a pastoral in the island, which did not come true due to his illness and death. Conscious of the cultural and anthropological idiosyncrasies of Rapa Nui, Don Ramiro defended the preservation of the art and of the natural physiognomy of the island. He knew that the more than one thousand nautical miles that separate Rapa Nui from Pitcairn (the nearest inhabited place) represent an enormous distance – a barrier of water that kept the aboriginal cultural isolated from other men during several centuries. Even nowadays, 278 years since Rapa Nui was discovered by the Dutch – and consequently entered the *mappamundi* of Western culture as Easter Island – and 112 years since Chile annexed it to its maritime territory, the island is marked by its *extreme anonymity in relation to the world*, as Don Ramiro himself used to stress when talking about Rapanui culture.

Rapa Nui for the aboriginal inhabitants, Isla de Pascua for Chilean people: this is not a simple duplicity of names; rather it reflects a cultural conflict that is still far from a satisfactory solution. Being a Chilean Island awards Rapa Nui certain advantages, such as financial facilities for the native students who want to study in Chile; nevertheless Chilean political hegemony tends to be regarded as foreign domination, damaging the cultural identity of the islanders. It is true that Chilean control was sometimes arbitrary and perhaps oppressive, dictating

measures such as the confinement to the Hangaroa area and the suppression of the Rapa Nui language during the 1960s. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the Chilean presence on the island, at least in the present moment, represents a positive factor in many aspects.

Don Ramiro was aware of all these circumstances. He disliked violence of any kind. His weapons were words and his very life was built on the moral foundations of sincerity and goodness. He protested against increasing consumerism, alienation, and the spread of typical occidental vices, such as alcoholism, drugs and promiscuity. In his pastorate plan, whose written version I have now in front of my eyes, he expresses the will of *giving Rapa Nui people a sense of faith based on their own cultural background*.

Don Ramiro at Hangaroa Airport (photo by Carlos Sierra).



Don Ramiro gave special attention to young people. In his project for setting a pastorate in Rapa Nui, he dedicated an entire topic to what he calls his *main concern*. He wanted Rapa Nui youths to be given specific training in the fields of art, handcraft, agriculture, fishing and other activities suitable to the place. Rapa Nui does not offer enough opportunities for working nor, obviously, provide good economic conditions for

its inhabitants. Tourism is the chief industry now, a fact that brings advantages and disadvantages, as Don Ramiro always said. It is true that it provides jobs. Nonetheless, tourism jeopardizes cultural identity, bringing the risk that the island and its people may become a mere curiosity for tourists – as it is already happening in many parts of Latin America, such as the Peruvian island of Taquile and the Chilean city of San Pedro de Atacama.

Living on the island led Don Ramiro to perceive that the islanders are more attached to Eastern patterns of thinking than to Western ones, since, for them, feelings and intuition have more value than rational reflection. The pastorate plan, according to him, had to be adapted to their own reality, respecting their way of thinking and being.

It was hard for Don Ramiro to live on the island; loneliness was *oppressive and anguishing*, he said. But he provided continuity to the work began by Brother Eugene Eyraud, the first European missionary of Rapa Nui. Don Ramiro no longer has to cope with loneliness nor with any kind of human suffering and pain. There is no place for this in eternity.

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