

MISSIONER WHO WORKED AMONG T 'BOLI TRIBALS CLEARED OF RAPE CHARGE

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Former Passionist Father Rex Mansmann has been found not guilty of raping a 12-year-old T'boli girl at the Santa Cruz Mission he ran for 30 years in the southern Philippines.

Regional Trial Court Judge Cristeto Dinopol of Surallah, South Cotabato, ruled on the case May 19. The ruling was promulgated July 8 and released to the media July 19.

Father Mansmann founded the Santa Cruz Mission for the T'boli tribe in southern Mindanao 30 years ago.

He developed the mission from a small outpost to a Church-centered complex with educational facilities from elementary school to vocational and tertiary level training.

The mission also sponsored livelihood projects and

environmental protection. T'boli products, such as brassware, beaded jewelry and woven cloth, are marketed worldwide and provide funds for expansion of the mission area.

In pronouncing the not guilty verdict, Judge Dinopol said the "prosecution presented weak evidence."

He said the girl, who was 12 at the time of the alleged rape in 1991, showed "no fear during her testimony" and "even appeared to have been rehearsed."

He said her use of "strong English slang words" to describe her experience were beyond her capacity "to learn by herself."

The judge also gave importance to the fact that the priest, in the United States for medical treatment when the rape charges were filed, voluntarily returned to the Philippines and South Cotabato.

This, the judge said, helped persuade him that the rape charges were "instigated by people who were interested in taking control of the T'boli people and other tribal people in the Lake Sebu area."

It was the judge's opinion that the girl "was exploited ...

(and that) this case was filed to drive the accused from Santa Cruz Mission in Lake Sebu."

In September 1991, a T'boli girl said Father Mansmann raped her in his room when she asked the priest to help her sick brother.

A nun at the mission clinic later testified that she treated the girl after the alleged rape and confirmed the girl had been sexually abused.

The mission also became an obstacle to illegal loggers, cattle ranchers, gold prospectors and landgrabbers.

The rape charge, according to observers, reflected undercurrents in the community which pitted tribals, Religious and politicians against each other in the struggle to wield influence over the thriving mission area.

Charges were filed against Father Mansmann two weeks after the alleged rape and the day after he left for the United States. He sent formal statements to tribal and police officials and the media denying the charges.

At the time of the alleged rape, Father Mansmann recounted, about a dozen tribal leaders were meeting in his house to discuss growing threats of "encroachments of

outsiders" in the mission area.

Father Mansmann returned to the Philippines Jan. 23, 1993, and presented himself to police and court officials, invoking his right to a fair trial and the opportunity to face his accusers. He posted bail and a trial date was set.

Father Mansmann was dismissed from the Passionists for disobeying his superiors' orders not to return to the T'boli area after he returned to the Philippines from the United States.

However, he has legally retained his membership on the board of directors of some projects of the overall Santa Cruz T'boli tribal program.

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