

Trial over, doubts linger in Chicago priest's death

By Teresa Albor
Special to The Tribune

KORONADAL, Philippines—The trial of Sagin Munday, accused of murdering Rev. Carl Schmitz, a Chicago priest, drew to a close this week in a small, noisy courtroom in southern Mindanao, 650 miles south of Manila.

Although the presiding judge has 90 days to announce his decision—there is no jury in Philippine criminal cases—the expectation among most observers, including Special State Prosecutor Aurelio Trampe, is a murder conviction.

The courtroom was crowded this week with American missionary priests, nuns and local townspeople. Tribal representatives, dressed in embroidered wraparounds and beaded head-dresses, were asked to turn over their heavy brass belts with jingling bells to courtroom guards.

According to witnesses, Father Schmitz, 70, was shot to death April 7, 1988, around 9 p.m. on the steps of his mountain mission in Bulol, 10 rugged miles north of the provincial capital of Koronadal. The man who fired the gun was Munday, 28, a tribal villager who graduated from

the mission school.

Munday admits to the killing but pleaded innocent to murder, hoping for a lesser conviction on homicide.

"I did it, I should be punished—but I didn't mean to," says Munday, who speaks and understands English well.

Why did Munday, a clean-cut, slender man, and a father of four, kill Father Schmitz?

There is no clear answer.

There are, however, a number of unproven but credible stories circulating besides Munday's statement that he believed Father Schmitz was "collaborating with communists."

Many think Munday did not act alone.

"The question everyone is asking is who ordered the killing and why?" says Bishop Dinualdo Gutierrez, head of the million-member Diocese of Koronadal, which includes the Bulol mission.

The unproven conspiracy theories point to the military, businessmen involved in logging, the village leader, and even the Communist Party itself.

It seems one pious man, committed to serving the poor, was

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able to make plenty of enemies.

"The quick and unfounded accusation of 'communist' against anyone serving the poor and working for a more just distribution of national wealth and human rights ... is a technique of the anti-reformists," says Rev. Rex Mansmann, interviewed in his bamboo and thatch home in Lake Sebu, a nearby tribal community. Father Mansmann, who has worked here for 25 years, has himself received death threats in the last year.

Antireformists, according to Father Mansmann, include big land owners and old-style politicians who have contacts with corrupt and criminal elements. Mindanao, the "wild south" of the Philippines, is said to have its share of the kind of people Father Mansmann describes.

"It used to be unthinkable to shoot a priest," says Father Mansmann, "but in the last eight years, four priests have been murdered in Mindanao."

The label of "communist" seems especially inconceivable to many in the case of Father Schmitz, who was forced to leave China in 1949 after the communist takeover and was outspoken against communism.

"I feel [our work] will gradually cut the ground from under the feet of the communist rebels," he wrote in 1987, referring to the military arm of the outlawed communist organization of the Philippines called the New People's Army.

Father Schmitz, born in Chicago, was a member of the missionary

Congregation of the Passion. Ordained as a Catholic priest in 1944, he dedicated 40 years of his life to missionary work in Asia—10 in the tribal village of Bulol.

Besides being home to the Bilaan tribe, the heavily forested area where Father Schmitz worked provides cover for cattle rustlers, the communists and illegal loggers. Father Schmitz was often asked to act as an intermediary by suspected outlaws because of their fear of "salvaging" (illegal execution) by the military before they could be given a fair trial.

As a go-between, Father Schmitz alienated the military and the communists.

Since many communist rebels surrendered to the priest, who in turn brought them to proper authorities, there is speculation the communist group may have wanted Father Schmitz eliminated.

There is ample evidence that Munday, who lived with his family near the mission residence, had personal reasons to be upset with the priest. His wife had been repeatedly turned down for a teaching position. Neighbors say Munday had a disagreement with Father Schmitz over a loan, and that the priest sided with a family involved in a feud with the village leader, who is related to Munday through marriage.

During the trial, which ended Tuesday, Munday lost his temper with prosecutor Trampe, and had to be reprimanded by the judge. At one point he refused to answer questions, saying he was hungry and weak, and shouted at Trampe: "You only questioned others for 30 minutes; haven't you asked me enough questions?"

During cross-examination he de-



Rev. Carl Schmitz

nied he once approached Trampe asking for protection and saying he wanted to implicate others, but changed his mind.

His attorney, Nilo Flaviano, known to represent military and paramilitary defendants, contends he was being paid by tribal villagers but refused to name them. There is speculation the military requested him to represent Munday.

Flaviano, in a surprise move, resigned from the case this week. He told the prosecutor: "I don't want to have anything to do with this case anymore."

As the trial ended, Munday and his court-appointed lawyer maintained the accused acted alone in self-defense, saying Father Schmitz punched him—a story discredited by eyewitnesses who took the stand during the trial.