

# This priest is also a parent

Missionary from N.D. learning about parenthood while in New Guinea

By Bob Lind

STAFF WRITER

Let's call him "Father Trenk." People attending Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in West Fargo do. But not his parishioners in Irian Jaya. They call him Wason. It means "jungle man."

His son has another name for him: Di. It's the equivalent of "dad."

"Among the people there, having a son is the most natural thing in the world," Father Trenk says. "It's the other missionaries who kid me."

Father Trenk is short for the Rev. Frank Trenkschuh. He's home to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his ordination. Trenk's parents are former residents of West Fargo; his father died and his mother lives in a nursing home near Hawley, Minn.

Trenk has spent most of those 25 priesthood years with the Asmat people in Irian Jaya, on the island of New Guinea.

He's poured his life into directing a people who had no word for God in their language into an understanding and belief in his God, all while being careful not to damage their own culture.

In the process, he adopted a son. It's not a legal adoption recognized by the government, but as far as the tribe is concerned, it's official.

It came about because his young friend wanted to marry the girl he loved. But according to Asmat custom, parents arranged all weddings, and the parents in this case had others in mind to be their children's spouses.

The man asked Trenk to intercede. He did so, persuading the parents to let the young couple marry.

So they did, and when their son (and to date only child) was born, they gave him to Trenk in gratitude for arranging their marriage.

Trenk protested, telling them he was often away tending to the needs of his parishioners in the seven villages he serves. No problem, the parents said; they'd look after the child when he was gone.

So, with that understanding, the baby became Father Trenk's. He's named Francis for his "Di."

He's now 14, and Trenk loves him as though he were his natural son.

"I've learned what parenting is," Trenk says. "Not many of us priests have that privilege. Now I'm facing puberty and adolescence and I



Father Trenk and his son, Francis.

don't know what I'll do when he's in trouble with some girls in the village.

"He's very attractive. He's a real catch. I'll have to go through the facts of life with him, and all that.

"But now when people tell me about the problems with their children, I can understand."

Trenk came to the Asmats due in part to his concern for what he felt was happening to Native Americans in North Dakota.

The Dickinson native says growing up near

an Indian reservation showed him "Indian people were totally devastated by the presence of the white population and the loss of their identity, their culture." He felt the Christian church wasn't doing anything about the problem.

Later, as he studied theology, he says "I more and more believed that Christianity DID have something to say to these people."

But he felt that if he went as a missionary to established mission fields in Africa, South America or among Native Americans, he'd have to undo the mistakes unintentionally made by missionaries for hundreds of years.

"I don't mean they set out to hurt people," he says, "but the missionaries were products of their own times; they insisted on conversion, sometimes using force. People were converted to Christianity but not necessarily to the Gospel."

He says the church pushed "the externals (going to church, abstaining from meat on Friday) rather than going to the core of Jesus' message: that we're supposed to love one another."

So he asked to be sent to the Asmats because of their "more traditional, pristine state." They'd escaped the outside world because of their reputation as vicious headhunters and cannibals. The Allied and Japanese troops fought each other on New Guinea but stayed away from the Asmats out of fear of them.

Trenk worked to achieve what he calls "a dialogue between their culture and the Gospel." He explained that "Here is what you had, and God had to be there; you did not know the name of God, but in my belief, God helped you become what you are.

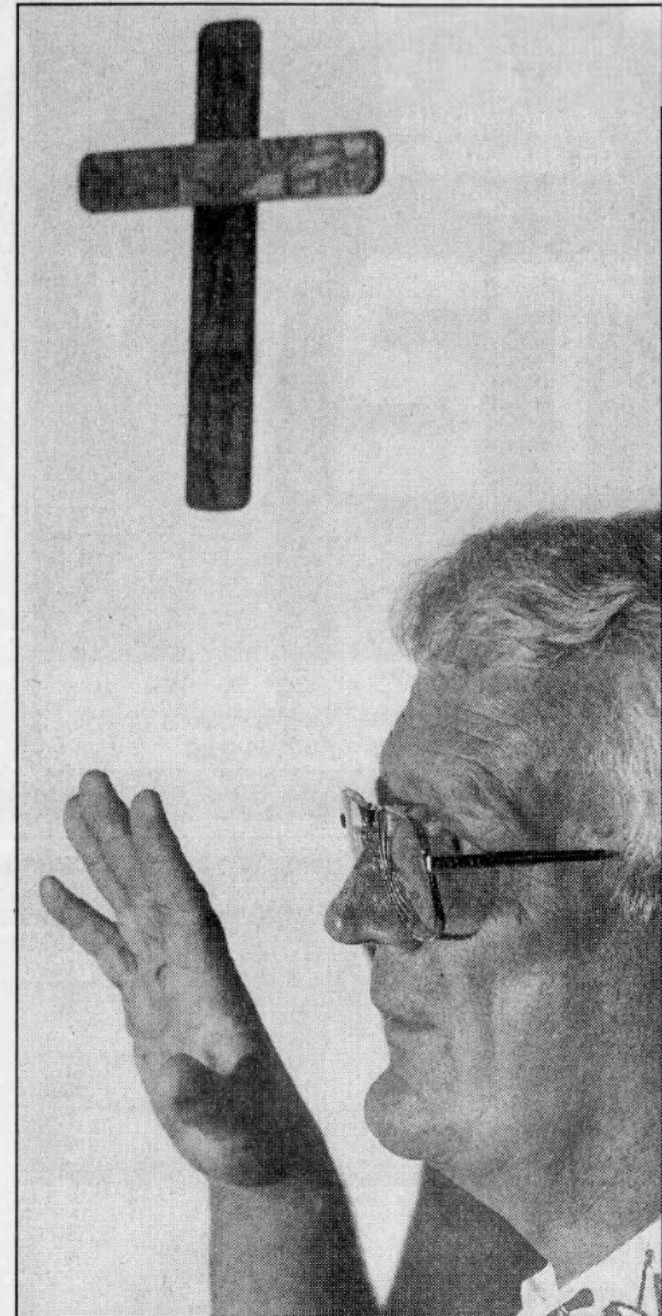
"Now, here is what Jesus said; now work this out as how these two (their culture and the Gospel) can merge."

He and other missionaries in the region plan to vacate Irian Jaya by the year 2000, when they hope the local church can make it on its own.

It will be hard for him to leave, though, especially because of Francis, who will stay with his people. By then he'll be out of high school and "should have a direction of where he wants to go," Trenk says.

It's difficult being away from him even this summer. "I'm very aware of how easily people die there," Trenk says. "He crawls up trees looking for lizards, and guys fall out of trees and get killed."

But it will be an even more difficult day when the Francis says goodbye, perhaps for good, to the man most people call "father" but who he calls "Di" — "dad."



JOE HEINZLE/THE FORUM

Father Trenk is a Catholic missionary in Irian Jaya.