

A Visual Documentation of Fil-Hispanic Churches

Part VIII: Cathedral of St. Joseph, Romblon

Regalado Trota Jose

A Vital Link in *Bisaismo*

Romblon and its cluster of islands has provided food and shelter to sea-voyagers negotiating the turbulent waters between Luzon and the Visayas. Proof of the antiquity of the islands' significance in navigational lore is the series of cave burials in seemingly isolated Banton, which dates from about the 13th or 14th century.¹ Though the area was known to Spanish explorers from 1572, it was only in 1622 when the first Christian settlement in Banton was formally organized.² In 1631, a second establishment was made in Romblon, on the island of the same name.³ Both settlements were under the spiritual care of the diocesan clergy of the Diocese of Cebu.

On 27 July 1635, the care of souls of *Romblong*—as it appeared in the documents of the time—along with its adjacent islands was turned over by the Bishop of Cebu, Don Pedro de Arce, to the Province of San Nicolas de Tolentino of the Order of Discalced Augustinians, represented by its Procurator General Fray Pedro de San Nicolas. The turnover was made possible through the exchange of *Romblong* by its priest-in-charge, Canon Francisco Rodriguez Relator, for a benefice of 100 pesos a year for life to be given by the Discalced Augustinians or Recollects.

Abbreviations:

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| AR | Archivo Recoleta, Recoletos Formation Center, Tandang Sora Avenue, Quezon City. The AR keeps digital copies of the records in the archives of the Province of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino of the Order of Augustinian Recollects, Marcilla, Navarra, Spain. Citations (Legajo, Caja) are those according to the Marcilla originals. |
| Leg. | Legajo |
| MCEO | <i>Misiones Católicas en Extremo Oriente</i> . Manila: Cacho Hermanos, 1937. |

¹ The so-called Banton cloth was used as a funeral blanket. It was found in Guyangan Cave, and is said to be the oldest cloth in Southeast Asia. It is a National Cultural Treasure of the Philippines.

² "Distrito de Romblon Año de 1873", AR: Leg. 55, caja 2. Banton, and the Diocese of Romblon in general, may thus lay claim to 400 years of Christianity in 2022.

³ [Patricio Marcellan de San José], *Provincia de San Nicolás de Tolentino*, (Manila: Imprenta del Colegio de Santo Tomas, 1879), p. 123.

This also meant the separation of Romblon from the parish of Ajuy in Iloilo to which these islands until then pertained.⁴ The area remained a district of the province of Capiz throughout the rest of the Spanish regime.

The Recollects accepted Romblon because it provided them a vital link as they travelled from Luzon past the Visayas (or *Bisaismo* as the region was known in 17th century Spanish correspondence) to their missions in northeast Mindanao.⁵ In Banton, which lay along the route of the Manila-Acapulco galleons, the Recollects moved the settlement from Bacoco on a hill to the slope of a mountain by the sea called Cagata.

The friars soon realized that their missions were very much exposed to pirate raids which struck suddenly and savagely. In fact, the raiders had set up their lairs in these very islands; from here they would strike out on their slave-capturing expeditions throughout the archipelago. In 1644, the prior of Romblon was taken captive and brought to Jolo, Sulu; he was only released through the exchange of a prisoner from the Spanish ranks. Thus the Recollect Superior ordered the transfer this same year of Fray Pedro de San Agustin from Cagayan de Misamis in Mindanao to Romblon.

Island Fortresses

Fray Pedro was born in 1599 in Bragança, Portugal. As a student in the Recollect monastery in Valladolid, he developed a love for mathematics and military science although his superiors thought the latter improper for a religious. This background proved essential when Fray Pedro was assigned in the 1620s to the missions in what is now the Caraga region of Mindanao. Because of constant attacks from the mountains, Fray Pedro began to train the newly converted Christians to defend themselves. In Linao, he taught them to build a palisaded fort. In what is now Cagayan de Oro City, he built a fort solid enough to withstand the onslaught of Kudarat's troops. In 1639, he took the offensive to Kudarat's own Lake Lanao where the enemy forces were routed. These victories earned him the name *el Padre Capitán*; the title was soon recorded in chronicles of the era such as the *Historia de Mindanao* by the Jesuit historian Francisco Combés.

⁴ In 1638, Canon Francisco Rodriguez Relator exchanged this benefice for the chaplaincy of Binalbagan on the Island of Negros, which had been under the Recollects since 1622 or 1626. The original documents are in AR: Leg. 55, caja 1. See also Marcellan, *op.cit.*, pp. 122-123; Licinio Ruiz, *Sinopsis Histórica de la Provincia de S. Nicolás de Tolentino*, (Manila: Tip. Pont. de la Univ. De Sto. Tomas, 1925), pp. 496-497; and Martin Legarra, "Los Pp. Agustinos Recoletos en la Evangelización de Filipinas", *MCEO*, p.105.

⁵ In 1622, missions were founded in what is now Cagayan de Oro, as well as in the provinces of Agusan and Surigao, and the islands of Siargao, Dinagat, and Camiguin.

It was without hesitation that the Recollect superior re-assigned Fray Pedro to aid the Romblon mission. From 1644 to 1650, Fray Pedro inculcated in the Romblomanons the art of defense, including fighting on land and in sea, surprise attacks, and pursuit of the enemy. On his first year alone, he led the people in thwarting two ferocious Camucon attacks on Romblon and another, led by raiders from Jolo and Basilan, on Banton. He instructed them in constructing forts on Romblon and Banton islands. He died in 1653, and his remains are lovingly enshrined at the foot of the Romblon bell-tower which used to serve as his own bulwark.⁶

In Romblon, Fray Pedro chose a semicircular enclave facing the sea, with its back shielded by a thickly forested mountain with nearly vertical slopes. (In fact, a Recollect writing in the early 20th century concluded that the area was ensconced in the crater of an extinct volcano⁷). The enclave faced west, and was located on the northern end of the island. Turbulent waves were prevented from its quiet harbour by the islands of Lugbung, Cobrador, and Alad. The beach formed the diameter of the semicircle; a stone bulwark was erected at each end of the diameter, where the mountain plummeted into the sea. A 300 foot-long masonry wall connected both bulwarks and closed off any enemy entry into the town. In the middle of the wall a square bulwark kept watch over the entrance, which led to a rectangular guardhouse also of stone. Inside the enclosure a church was built. Its apse or rear was firmly set into the mountain wall for stability and security, a unique undertaking in Philippine architecture. The convento extended from the right side of the façade so that the compound formed an “L”. The houses of the residents radiated from the church. Fray Pedro instructed the warden of the fort to entrust the keys to him every night. We get an idea of how the fort looked like through a plan prepared in 1734 by Governor General Fernando Valdés Tamón.⁸

El Padre Capitán is also credited for having built a fort in Banton (or *Bantoón*, its earlier name), though the present structure cannot be attributed to him with certainty. The fort is in the form of an isosceles triangle, with each corner protected by a bulwark. One corner points out to sea, while one side straddles the base of the mountain. Thus any attacking force would be effectively bisected as it landed on the shoreline. (By way of comparison, an isosceles fort was built for the protection of the capital town of Capiz on Panay Island, although it was falling into ruin by the time of Valdés Tamón’s 1734 *Report*. Another isosceles fort was built in 1796 by the Recollects on the westernmost point of Bohol, Punta Cruz in the town of Maribohoc.)

⁶ Victorino Capánaga de S. Agustin, “Heroes de Antaño: El P. Capitan”, MCEO, pp. 282-286.

⁷ “Memoria estadística forestal del distrito de Romblon” (s.XX), AR: Leg. 55, caja 2, fol. 130r.

⁸ Fernando Valdés Tamón, *Report In Which, by Order of His Catholic Majesty (May God Protect Him), The Strongholds, Castles, Forts And Garrisons Of The Provinces Under His Royal Dominion in the Philippine Islands Are Listed*, (n.p.: Santander Investment, 1995), pp. 115, 118, 120, 121.

The forts in Romblon and Banton were built with local labor and under the direction and financing of the Augustinian Recollects. Weapons and ammunition were also provided by the latter. There was no funding from the central government, as made clear in official and religious documents. For a hundred years after the coming of el Padre Capitán to Romblon, the district enjoyed a period of relative calm. Roman numerals for the year “1726” mark the construction of the *retablo mayor* in the church of Romblon. The two *retablos* fronting each other in the transept are of the same Baroque style and should have come at around the same time. Roman numerals for the year “1727” provide a date for the lower level of the bell-tower. An image of the Santo Niño based on the famous one in Cebu was gifted to the church in 1728 by Fray Benito de San Pablo, who received it from his close friend Fray Manuel Gonzales.⁹ The church and convento of Banton were also built in 1726,¹⁰ although the retablo bears *rocaille* elements that were more popular in the latter part of the 18th century.

A Turbulent Century

All this was upset by a wave of bloody raids that commenced in 1740. In that year, pirates pillaged the islands of Sibali (now Maestre de Campo) and Simara, and the settlements of Andayao (now Calatrava) and Odiongan in Usigan (now Tablas Island). The church and convento in Sibali were burned and the church in Simara was sacked, which tells us something about the levels of church infrastructure in those forlorn islands. Many were taken prisoner and manacled, their fate unknown. Fray Hipólito de San Agustín was captured at sea and taken to Jolo; the Order had to pay a ransom of 12,000 pesos to get him back.¹¹ In 1747 Don Juan de Arechederra, bishop-elect of Nueva Segovia, added two iron cannons to the two he had earlier given to the fortress in Romblon. The reinforcement came with 100 cannon balls and 85 pounds of gunpowder.¹² Permission for rehabilitating the fortress in Banton was given in 1751 by the Governor General, the Marqués of Obando. This was complemented with the construction west of the fort of a castle with a commanding view of the sea, named “San José”.¹³

⁹ This image was one of three carved by an *indio* “to whom the Santo Niño wanted to give this special grace.” One image was sent to Spain, while the third one was acquired by a Calced Augustinian. Fray Benito made the gift to his church because he realized that the devotion to the Holy Child would be a “river of blessings” to the people of Romblon. Fray Benito provided this image with a set of accessories made of precious materials. “Copias de documentos,” AR: Leg. 55 caja 2, fols. 112v-113r. Eventually some *loas* were composed for the Santo Niño’s feastdays: two examples in Spanish are in *ibid.*, fols. 114r-115r.

¹⁰ “Distrito de Romblon Año de 1873. Banton,” AR: Leg. 55 caja 2.

¹¹ Ruiz, *op.cit.*, pp. 500-503.

¹² “Documento de 1747,” AR: Leg 55 caja 1.

¹³ “Distrito de Romblon. Año de 1873. Pueblo de Banton,” AR: Leg. 55 caja 2.

In 1755, another request for two *falconetes* or cannon was sent by the Recollect Provincial to the the Marqués de Obando, but this was denied. They would have to be paid for, the Governor remarked. These were provided for in 1760 by his successor, Don Lino Ezpeleta, acting Governor-General who was at the same time Archbishop of Manila. Archbishop Ezpeleta also ordered the fortification of the two hills that flanked the town of Romblon. These are presently known as the Forts of San Antonio and Santiago.¹⁴ The raids continued in other islands, however, so that by the 1780s many towns lay desolate and depopulated. Devastating typhoons in 1778 and 1781 destroyed crops and property and a general famine ensued. Mothers were seen selling their children in the plaza in exchange for rice. Even fortified Romblon suffered, because its residents had lost their fields and cattle in the adjoining islands of Tablas and Sibuyan. There was a diaspora of Romblomanons, with the islanders seeking refuge in the surrounding provinces such as Iloilo, Capiz, Mindoro, Batangas, Tayabas and even Tondo.

Acting on a petition sent by the Governor General which was in turn prompted by a request from the Recollects,¹⁵ in 1788 the King exempted the Romblomanons from paying tribute for a number of years. At the same time he exhorted them to return to their homes so that they could rebuild their lives. Not much is known on how much was done to protect the islands from more pirate raids, but a manual for the defense of Romblon written in 1817 alludes to a certain maintenance of military discipline and vigilance.¹⁶ In 1796 the Gobernadorcillo of Romblon, Lorenzo de la Cruz, issued a series of ordinances for the conduct of life in the district. People were still warned to heed the call of the drums and bring out their arms in times of danger. They were also exhorted to go to mass on Sundays and holidays without exception, and prohibited from keeping strangers at home. However, they were also ordered to raise domestic animals, and to bring the sick to town where they could be better taken care of. Significantly, they were admonished to pray the Rosary at home in Spanish, and to obtain the advantages of learning that language by using it among themselves.¹⁷

Tenacity, Industry, and Expansion

The turn of the 19th century was a period of resettlement and recovery. In the island of Tablas, there was a town of the same name. Its location cannot be ascertained:

¹⁴ Ruiz, *op.cit.*, pp. 508-509. The Fort of San Andres keeps watch over the town, 156 feet above sea level; it is reached after climbing 210 stone steps.

¹⁵ A copy of portions of the letter of Recollect Provincial Fr. Ramon de Santo Thomas de Aquino to the Governor General in 1785, including eyewitness accounts, is in "Copias de documentos" in AR: Leg. 55 caja 2, beginning with fol. 87r.

¹⁶ Ruiz, *op.cit.*, p. 499.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 516-518.

it was described to be “at the end of the island” and “exposed to raids, far from help from Romblon”. If it was in the north, it could have been in the proximity of Andayao/ Calatrava. If in the south, it could have been the old site of Looc, or of Lauang (now Alcantara) or of Catolog (now Santa Fe). In the past it had six *barangays* (divisions of a town), whereas now (in 1796) it was reduced to one. Thus the *gobernadorcillo* of Tablas was advised to merge his pueblo with that of Guintiguian which was closer to Romblon and had a *baluarte* to defend it.¹⁸ Here was laid the formation of the present town of San Agustín.

By sheer tenacity, the Romblomanons and the Recollects held on to their land, slowly re-grouping and gathering strength. A sense of normalcy, even of nascent prosperity, may be read in a report of 1822 concerning the town of Romblon and its *visita* Guintiguian. There were coconuts in abundance, from which commercial quantities of oil were derived. There was a thriving *petate* (mat) and *bayong* (market bag) industry: the costliest ones were those of finely woven *buri*, of many colors and of large dimensions, which were destined for churches. Rice, tobacco, and abaca were widely cultivated; wax was collected from the forests, while some quantities of *balatan* (sea cucumber) were obtained from the seashore. These products were traded in seven ships manufactured in the years 1811, 1817, 1819, 1820, and 1822; one was owned by the community, the rest were built by private entrepreneurs. Guintiguian had at its disposal five ships, constructed in the years 1806, 1815, 1818, and 1822.¹⁹

Though the threat of slave-raiding was becoming a thing of the past, there was no countering the fury of Nature. A powerful storm hit the islands on October 25, 1829, devastating a third of the district. All the churches, conventos, and townhalls were badly damaged. There were plans of moving Cajidiocan to another site because of the ill effects of its river.²⁰

For all its minuscule size, the island of Banton arguably exercised the widest influence over the district.²¹ It had its own small-scale agriculture and industries (*sinamay* cloth and *bayong* making), and was a known exporter of gesso for the plastering of buildings. But its sea-trafficking residents tilled lands and fed their livestock on the islands of Maestre de Campo (formerly Sibali) and Simara, and even

¹⁸ “Copias de documentos- 1796”, AR: Leg. 55 caja 2, fol. 87r.

¹⁹ “Pueblo de Romblon con su visita de Guintiguian en la Prov.a de Capiz”, in “Copias de documentos”, AR: Leg. 55 caja 2, fols. 102r-103r.

²⁰ “Copias de documentos”, AR: Leg. 55, caja 2, fol. 107v.

²¹ The material for the following paragraphs on the growth of towns and parishes were principally drawn from the following: Marcellan, *op.cit.*, pp. 122-131; Ruiz, *op.cit.*, pp. 496-531; Fr. Gregorio Fidel de Blas de la Asunción, *Labor Evangelica de los Padres Agustinos Recoletos en las Islas Filipinas*, (Zaragoza, 1910), pp. 27-28; Pedro Aróstegui, “Los Agustinos Recoletos en Romblón”, MCEO, pp. 153-156; Lee Vance, *Tracing Your Philippine Ancestors*, (Provo, Utah: Stevenson’s Genealogical Center, 1980); and Regalado Trota Jose, “Romblon”, in *Curas de Almas*, (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 2008)III, pp. 208-218.

up to the western and south-eastern parts of Tablas (formerly Usigan). The *visitas* (missions) in these areas were listed for much of the 19th century under the spiritual administration of the parish priest of Banton. A petition was made in 1826 by residents of the barrios of Looc, Odiongan, Lauan and Guintiguian for their localities to be formed into a parish, but this was too premature because they lacked the requisite number of tributes. The families of Banton were able to secure the foundation of the town of Odiongan in 1841; it became a parish in 1858. Salado, a settlement north of Odiongan, was renamed Parpagoja in the 1850s, made a new town around 1882 and renamed Despujols, and erected as a parish in 1894; it is the present municipality of San Andres. A *visita* south of Odiongan was Tingalay (also spelled Tingaray), on the border with Looc; it was known as Ferrol by the 1890s.

The sheltered port of Looc was separated spiritually from Odiongan in 1863, and politically in 1874. It included the *visitas* of Catolog and Lauang on the south-western and south-eastern ends of the island respectively; these were renamed Santa Fe and Alcantara in the latter part of the 19th century.

The *visita* of Corcuera on Simara Island was made a parish independent of Banton in 1884 or 1885. The *visita* of Concepción in Maestre de Campo remained a part of Banton until the 20th century.

The northeastern section of Tablas Island was under the cultural influence of Romblon, which faced it across a narrow channel. As mentioned above, Guintiguian was a *visita* of Romblon as early as the 1790s. Northwest of it was the settlement of Andayao or Andagao, destroyed in the raid of 1740 also described above. This latter place was erected as a parish by a decree of the bishop in 1868. However, the seat of the parish was moved to Guintiguian in 1872, which was then renamed Badajoz (it is now the town of San Agustín). Andayao remained a *visita* of Badajoz until the 20th century; by the 1890s, it had changed its indigenous name to that of Calatrava.

The entire island of Sibuyan was administered from Romblon. In 1744, the Recollects succeeded in opening the mission of San Juan de Maylog up in the northwest mountains that was composed of semi-pagan refugees from Mindoro and other islands.²² A settlement on the eastern side of the island also called Sibuyan was established as a parish in 1848, by which time it was renamed Cajidiocan. Magallanes, on the northern coast and on the slopes of the extinct volcano Guitingguiting, was spiritually separated from Cajidiocan in 1867 or 1868 (it is now the town of Magdiwang). Cautit, the southernmost tip of the island, was made a parish independent of Cajidiocan in 1881; it had been established as a town a few years earlier, with the new name of Azagra. West of Azagra was the *visita* of Pagalad which, re-baptized as San Fernando by the 1890s, became the new seat of both parish and municipality. Still further northwest of Pagalad was another *visita*, España.

²² Ruiz, *op. cit.*, pp. 504-506.

As more and more communities became settled, the Augustinian Recollects busied themselves with enhancing the quality of the Romblomanons' lives in both spiritual and temporal matters. Continuing the tradition of the past, they built schools at no expense from the government. They directed the construction of roads, bridges and canals that greatly enhanced travel between the towns. We may cite the road traversing the mountainous spine of Tablas, linking Badajoz (San Agustín) on the east coast with Parpagoja (San Andrés) on the west. In account after account, the Recollects noted that the inhabitants of Romblon were the most industrious and work-oriented of their race; this virtue was even highlighted by the inhospitable area in which they lived. The marble industry which has made Romblon so famous seems to have been initiated only in the last years of the 19th century, as there is no mention of it in earlier chronicles. The Recollects assisted the residents in carving holy water and baptismal fonts.²³

The Endurance of the Friars

The simplicity of the lifestyles of the friars may be seen in the short, one page inventory of items left behind by the deceased parish priest of Banton in 1876. Fray Pablo Bienzobas, former provincial of the Recollects, slept on a stark *catre*, kept his books in an *estante*, and stored his belongings in a *comoda* with four *cajones* (drawers). Among the items in the kitchen were a *metate* for grinding chocolate, 12 plates, 4 drinking glasses, 4 *jicaras* (small cups) and their saucers for drinking chocolate, 4 small glasses for drinking wine, 6 napkins and 2 tablecloths.²⁴

The arrival of two boatloads of Filipino revolutionaries in Romblon on July 25, 1898,²⁵ seemingly ended more than 250 years of spiritual administration under the Recollects. Church funds were confiscated and the conventos were emptied of much of their furniture. Cemeteries were taken over by the civil government, earning a considerable income from burial fees for many years. Civil marriages were celebrated. The churches were left without priests for long expanses of time, and schismatic priests from Marinduque and Antique preached against the Pope from

²³ A pair of holy water fonts from the 1890s and inscribed "Romblon" in the Intramuros Administration collection is on display at the San Agustin Museum. "Tambien se dedican a la fabricación de pilas y otros ensures utiles de marmol por existir magnificas canteras, que los produce por termino medio anual \$1,500," in "Relacion sobre Romblon s. XX", AR: Leg. 55 caja 2. "Tambien se dedican, aconsejados por los Padres, a la industria de hacer pilas bautismales, de agua bendita y otros trabajos de esta industria," Ruiz, *op.cit.*, p. 522.

²⁴ "Enseres y demas efectos del difunto ex-Provincial Fr. Pablo Bienzobas Cura Parroco que fue de este pueblo de Banton [1876]," AR: Leg. 55, caja 2. Lists of the Recollect parish priests of Romblon are in Fidel de Blas, *op.cit.*, pp. 27-28.

²⁵ Majority of the soldiers from Maragondon and Indang, Cavite; they were led by Mariano Riego de Dios, himself from the former town.

their venerable pulpits²⁶. Things did not quite improve with the American takeover in midDecember, 1899.

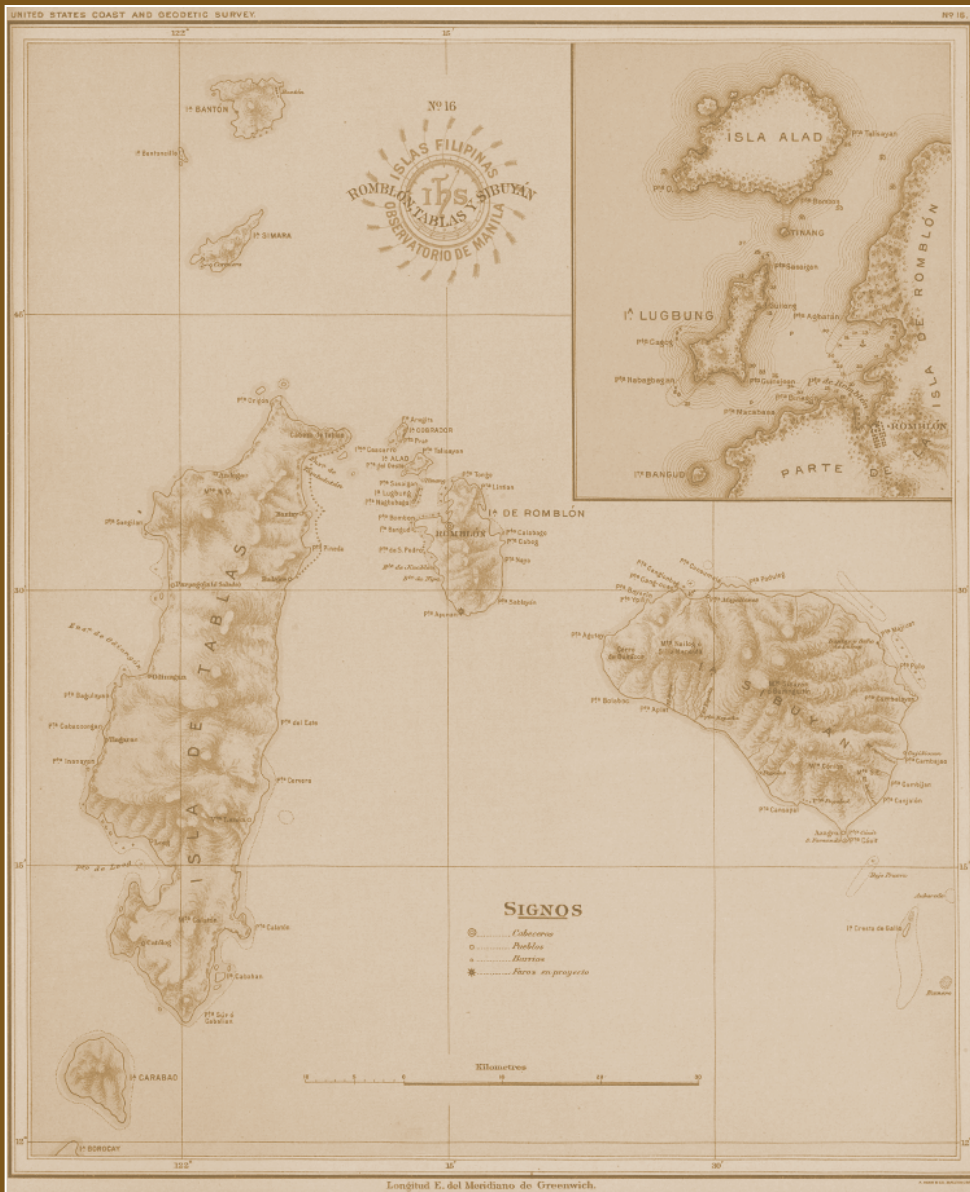
But the islanders recognized their debt of gratitude to the Augustinian Recollects, and wrote the Recollect Superior and the Bishop to send them back their black-habited pastors. In 1905, Romblon was the first to send such a petition, followed by Badajoz and then Cajidiocan and San Fernando. By the time the Recollects turned over their wards to the secular clergy in 1933, they had won most of the province²⁷ back to the Roman Catholic fold. Fruit of the work of almost 400 years of Christianization, much of it under duress, the Diocese of Romblon was created on December 19, 1974, and erected on April 17, 1975.²⁸ In recognition of its excellent state of preservation and of its significance not only to the people of Romblon but to the Filipino nation, the National Museum declared the Cathedral of St. Joseph as a National Cultural Treasure on July 31, 2001. The people of Romblon may seek the intercession of León Inchausti, a Recollect who was pastor of Banton in the 1890s. He was martyred for the Faith in the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007.■



²⁶ See for example the following accounts: “Report trimestral de lo ocurrido en los pueblos de Corcuera y Banton del Distrito de Romblon en los meses de Mayo, Junio y Julio de 1907 ... [por P. Fr. Manuel Ma. Gómez]” and “Varios apuntes del Distrito de Romblon hasta el 30 de junio de 1907 [por P. Fr. Eulogio Saez]”, AR: Leg. 55, caja 2, fols. 58r-58v and 60r-70v respectively.

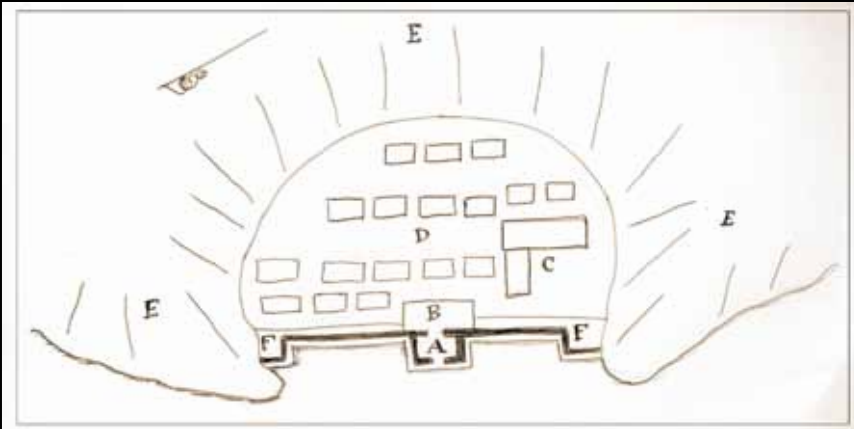
²⁷ Romblon remained a politico-military *comandancia* under Capiz since its creation in 1853 until the end of the Spanish era. Under American rule, it was established as a province in 1901. Vance, *op.cit.*, II, pp. 518-519.

²⁸ *The 2008-2009 Catholic Directory of the Philippines*, (Quezon City: Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines and Claretian Publications, 2008), p. 293.



Map of Romblon, prepared by Jose Algué, S.J., from *Atlas of the Philippine Islands*, Washington, 1900.

REDRAWN BY RTJ



Plan de la Fuerza de Romblon de la Provinzia de Panai (1734). From Fernando Valdes Tamon, *Report In Which... the Strongholds,...in the Philippine Islands are Listed*, n.p., (Santander Investment), pp.120-121. Legend: A, Baluarte de en medio y puerta de la fuerza. B, Cuerpo de guardia. C, Yglesia y combento. D, casas de los naturales. E, Montes que circumbalan la Poblazon y dha fuerza. F, Baluartes colaterales.



REDRAWN BY RAFAEL KALAW

View of Romblon from Fuerza de San Andres. Reconstructed from three photographs taken by Meerkamp van Embden, 1894, and published in Otto van den Muijzenberg, *The Philippines Through European Lenses*, Quezon City (Ateneo de Manila University Press), 2008, pp. 245-247. The reclaiming of land by the end of the 19th century was well in advance. The ponderous defensive buildings in the foreground were eventually demolished. Van Embden, who spent only two hours in Romblon on the way to Cebu, remarked that Romblon was a “little garden of Eden.”

The foundations for the Cathedral of St. Joseph, with the bell-tower on the left and the *convento* on the right, were doubtlessly laid in the middle to the late 1600s. The cathedral is solidly built of coral-

stone, supported by four buttresses on either side. Recent interventions on the façade have altered its original appearance. The engaged columns flanking the façade were formerly flat pilasters. The round-arched windows on the second level were originally rectangular, with square colored glass panes.



RTJ 2003



RTJ 2003

Image of St. Joseph cradling the Christ Child, in the central niche of the façade. The Christ Child affectionately curls his right hand on his earthly father's nape.

RTJ 2003



South flank of the cathedral. The left-most window used to be the doorway linking the church and the *convento* before the latter was taken down in the 1860s-1870s. This was to give passage to the transept which was added in this period. The parish priest at this time,

Fr. Toribio Sanchez, also raised the walls of the nave by a few meters, constructed a cupola over the crossing, and roofed the building with tile. In the 1890s, the tile roof was replaced with a lighter one of zinc, and the side entrances were closed (Ruiz, *Sinopsis*, p. 521). The side entrances were re-opened in the 20th century.

RTJ 2003



The apse of the church is partially set into the mountainside. This security and stability feature is unique in Philippine architecture.

The crossing of the nave and transept. In 1919 a typhoon destroyed the cupola which was subsequently repaired. The low pyramidal and octagonal cupola was recently replaced with an ill-proportioned dome.



RTJ 2003

A closer view of the irregularly-sized quadrangular coral-stonework; brick bits and coral chips were inserted in the cracks. Cement was used to patch over hollows in the wall. Fr. Nicasio Rodeles, the Recollect parish priest who repaired the cupola after the storm of 1919, also plastered the church with cement [Arostegui, *MCEO*, p. 156]. In recent times, this plastering was removed.



RTJ 2003



RTJ 2003

Most of the cement plaster (which was destructive to the stone) has been removed, but the coral-stone walls have now been exposed where, in previous times they would have been protected with an organic lime plaster. The uppermost courses were of a softer stone, which is deteriorating due to weathering. The wall of the transept seems to have detached itself from the rest of the building, necessitating the addition of buttresses. Note the bricks inserted to close the fissure. A recent grid-work of cement obviates the original stonework.



RTJ 2003

This buttress by the apse has been relatively untouched. It is possible to better appreciate the stonework from this aspect.



RTJ 2003

One is greeted at the entrance with this magnificently carved door of the 17th or 18th century. The theme of flowering plants in urns is similar to that in the main doorway of the church in Maragondon, Cavite.

Postern of the door at the northern transept. The flaming heart central to Augustinian iconography is crowned by the initials of Jesus Christ, made more popular by the Jesuits but used by the other religious orders as well.



RTJ 2003



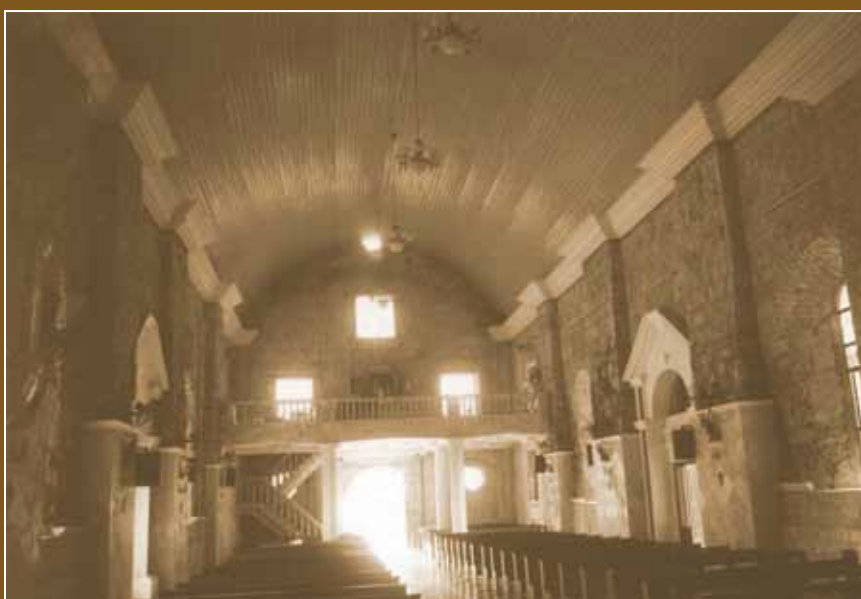
RTJ 2003

Postern of the door at the southern transept. A sun with a face (which was to feature in the Philippine flag) supports the cross. Both transept doors date from the 19th century.

RTJ 12003



View of the nave from the vestibule to the *retablo mayor*.



RTJ 2003

View from the *retablo mayor* towards the choirloft. In 1890 the two side entrances were closed, but were re-opened in the next century. The parish priest from 1891 to 1897, Fr. Eulogio Saez, enlarged the windows and enhanced them with colored glass panes, installed a pipe organ, and had the church painted (Ruiz, *op.cit.*, p.521). Fr. Saez, upon petition by his parishioners, returned for work in 1905.

RTJ 12003



The well-preserved *retablo mayor* bears the Roman numerals for “1726” (M.DCC.XX.VI), which make it a bench-mark for Philippine colonial art history. The Baroque style is distinguished by twisted columns, graceful scrolls, and flowery finials and flanges.



RTJ 2003

The base of the *retablo* bears icons common to both Augustinians and Augustinian Recollects: the flaming heart pierced by arrows (St. Augustine's love for the conversion of souls), the bishop's hat and tassels (St. Augustine was Bishop of Hippo), and the book (St. Augustine's chance reading of St. Paul led to his conversion).

RTJ 12003



Middle tier of the *retablo mayor*, with St. Thomas of Villanova standing on the right of the Cathedral's patron, St. Joseph.



RTJ 2003

The saint in the right section of the middle tier could be either Saint Peter (but his keys are missing and he seems to have more hair on the head) or Saint Paul the Apostle (but the sword of his martyrdom is missing and his beard seems a bit short).

RTJ 12003



Left section of the lowest tier of the *retablo mayor*. The saint on the left seems to be Saint Monica, the mother of St. Augustine. She stands next to Saint Anthony of Padua, a Franciscan whose devotion reached all over the Philippines.



RTJ 2003

Right section of the lowest tier. On the left is Saint Augustine. The saint on the right seems to be Saint Clare of Montefalco, an Augustinian nun who held a scale in her hands (now missing).



RTJ 2003

The Baroque *retablo* left of the main altar. Because it features the *arma Christi*, the symbols of Christ's passion, the images in the niches are not the original ones. Possibly an image of Our Lady at the Cross or a *Pietá* would have been in the central niche.

The Baroque *retablo* right of the main altar. Curiously, the *Santo Entierro* (Dead Christ) is placed at the bottom where it would have been more logical in the *arma Christi* *retablo* on the opposite side. The see-saw-like supports for the floral ornaments on the second level are Philippine interpretations of the Baroque.



RTJ 2003

RTJ 2003



Closer view of the flange of the *arma Christi* retablo.



RTJ 2003

Closer view of the flange of the *Santo Entierro* retablo.

RTJ 2003



A portion of paint in the transept has peeled off, revealing an earlier "marbling" effect.



RTJ 2003

View behind the *Santo Entierro* retablo, showing its attachment to the wall.

RTJ 12003



View of the transept right of the main altar.



RTJ 2003

The retablo to the right of the main altar houses the image of the Santo Niño given in 1728. It is in the Neo-classic style, popular in the second half of the 19th century just when this transept was built. It is possible that the Santo Niño was enshrined in the *retablo mayor* before a separate altar was made for the image.

RTJ 2003



The pulpit was placed at the crossing of the church. The original stairway has disappeared.

RTJ 2003



A room behind the *retablo* to the left of the main altar houses the baptistery. The baptismal font is surely of Romblon marble; its rounded cover lies on the floor. Next to it is a *facistol*, a rare stand for the large music books read by the choir.

RTJ 2003



The *retablo* of the baptistery is perhaps a transition piece, with “quiet” Baroque elements that flank the Neo-classic columns.

General view of the bell-tower, standing by itself to the left of the Cathedral. The ground level is said to have been the headquarters of *el Padre Capitán* (Ruiz, *op.cit.*, p.522).



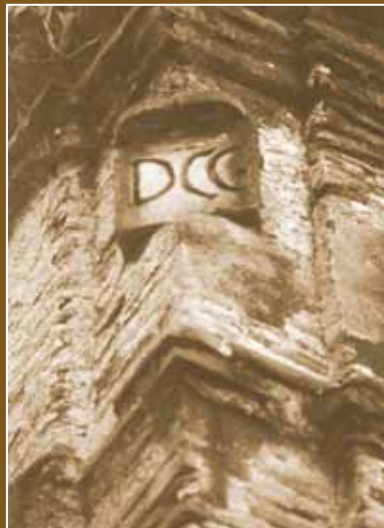
RTJ 2003



RTJ 2003

The ground level is characterized by brick bands in between courses of coral-stone, a feature found in a number of 18th century Philippine buildings. The second level is of brick; much of its protective lime plaster has worn away, and the so the bricks are decomposing.

The four corners of the second level bear Roman numerals (M; DCC; XX; VII) for the year “1727” a year after the installation of the three Baroque *retablos*. This is also the year after the church and *convento* of Banton are said to have been built. Less than two decades later, the seas would erupt with virulent pirate raids.

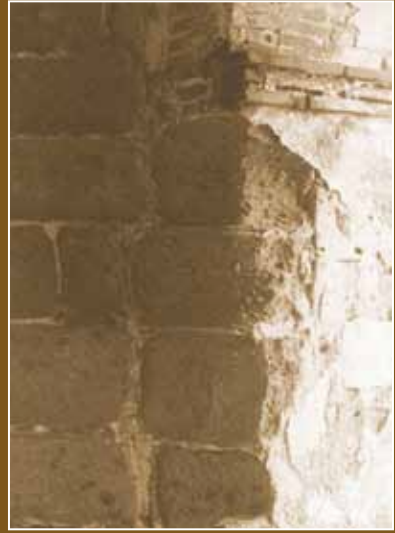


RTJ 2003

RTJ 2003



Close-up of the coral-stone wall of the bell-tower with a sliver of lime plaster.



RTJ 2003

Close-up of the adobe stone used for the upper two stories of the bell-tower. The loss of the lime plaster has led to the deterioration of the stone.

RTJ 2003



Above one of the openings of the second level of the belltower is the acronym for "Santo Niño Ora Pro Nobis" (Holy Child Pray for Us).

RTJ 2003



Above another opening is an acronym for what could be "Sanctus Deus" (Holy God) which seems to allude to a prayer common among bells and belfries.

RTJ 2003



Inside the bell-tower is a hollow octagonal column from which wooden steps radiate.

A section of the wooden steps fixed between the inner column and the walls.



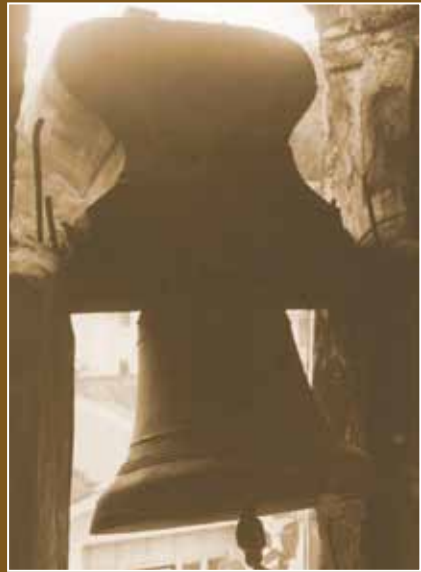
RTJ 2003

RTJ 2003



The landing above the column is a framework with many floor-boards missing.

The oldest of four bells dates only from 1874, and is dedicated to the Santo Niño. The other bells date from 1890 (Patriarca de San José) and 1895 (two bells cast in the foundry of Hilario Sunico in Manila, one dedicated to Our Lady of Carmel and a smaller one intriguingly named “Luisa”).



RTJ 2003

RTJ 2003



The unusual cross design on the 1874 bell.

Inscription on the Santo Niño 1874 bell.



RTJ 2003

RTJ 12003



The stone convento was destroyed in the 1781 typhoon and was greatly damaged by another one in 1829. In the 1860s and 1870s, the section adjoining the church was pulled down to create a passage way to the newly built transept. (Ruiz, *op.cit.*, pp.513, 521).



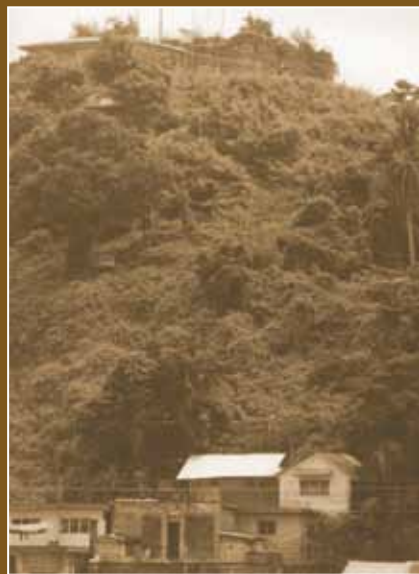
NCCA

The space between the convent and the cathedral served as a venue for Romblon music during the launch of Heritage Month on May 1, 2012. Heritage Month is a project of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts.



Fort San Antonio, built in 1760, as it appeared in the early 20th century. *MCEO*, p.283. Courtesy of the Archivo de la Universidad de Santo Tomas.

Fort San Antonio seen in context of the town. The weather station in front of it will be transferred, so the significance of the site may be better appreciated.



RTJ 12003



RTJ 12003

Aerial view of Romblon port and the surrounding islands of Lugbung, Alad, and Cobrador.

PARISH OF SAN NICOLAS DE TOLENTINO, BANTON



Vintage photo of *retablo* of San Nicolas de Tolentino Parish Church, on Banton Island.

Church bench in Banton, with the year “1830” carved on its backrest. Its companion piece is in the Archbishop’s Residence, Jaro, Iloilo.



ANGEL BAUTISTA, NATIONAL MUSEUM 2012



Regalado Trota Jose has advocated for the study and protection of the cultural heritage of the Catholic Church in the Philippines since the 1980s. He has worked with numerous local public and private organizations such as the Ayala Museum, the University of the Philippines (A.B. Anthropology, 1978; M.A. Philippine Studies, 1991), and the University of Santo Tomas. He is now the Archivist and professor at the Cultural Heritage Studies Program of the University of Santo Tomas. He can be contacted at archives@mnl.ust.edu.ph.