

A Visual Documentation of Fil-Hispanic Churches

Part VI: Parish Church of Saints Peter and Paul, Calasiao, Pangasinan

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Santo Domingo de Gabón

In September of 1587, just two months after their arrival in the Philippines, four Dominicans began the apostolic work of their Order in the vast province of Pangasinan by establishing a mission in Binalatongan. A satellite mission was also set up in Gabon. Both missions, dedicated to Saint Dominic, fell within an *encomienda* (land whose inhabitants' spiritual and material welfare were entrusted to an administrator, who in turn had the right to some produce of the land) called Labaya . It was most probably the *encomendero* who requested the Dominicans to send a pioneer missionary team. The next year, "Santo Domingo de Binalatongan" and "Santo Domingo de Gabón" were accepted as Houses in the Dominican chapter held in Manila. It took the Dominicans about three hard-working years to overcome the resistance of the Pangasinan people. As it turned out, neither of these two principal sites survived to be a great town or city in the present era. In 1763 Binalatongan, "the place of the *balatong* bean" became the hotbed of a rebellion against the Spaniards. Led by Palaris, rebels torched the cradle of the Dominicans' missionary work. When Spanish troops regained Pangasinan, Binalatongan was erased from the map, and its citizens were regrouped under a new site called San Carlos by order of the king, Charles III.

In Gabón, on the other hand, native opposition forced the Dominicans to relocate to another site called Calasiao, "the place of lightning". Thus in 1592 the place was referred to as "Santo Domingo de Calasiao (alias Gabón)". Perhaps because of envy, the people of Gabón refused to support the church in Calasiao, and so a chapel was erected in Gabón to replace the first one that had since disappeared. A reconciliation was effected by the missionaries between Gabón and Calasiao, which had merged with the communities of Nalúan and Dinaloan, so that in 1596 the Dominican chapter re-accepted the mission as "San Pablo de Calasiao". The fledgling town underwent a third change in saintly patronage as reflected in its listing in the 1621 Dominican chapter as "San Pedro y San Pablo de Calasiao". Today Gabón is a barrio of Calasiao, just as Binalatongan is a barrio of San Carlos City.

The changing borders of Pangasinan

The history of church building in Pangasinan is still quite sketchy, although the monuments that have survived are indeed expressions of a vibrant architectural and artistic heritage that merit serious study. The geographical coverage could be confusing at first. It must be remembered that the boundaries of the political province of Pangasinan today do not exactly correspond to what the province was during Spanish times. If the map of today's Pangasinan were to be divided into three parts, the central and eastern parts would roughly contain the Pangasinan of Spanish times. Ecclesiastically speaking, these are the Archdiocese of Lingayen-Dagupan and the Diocese of Urdaneta respectively, both extensions of the ancient Diocese of Nueva Segovia. Eastern Pangasinan increased its territory with the accretion of Tayug and San Nicolas (formerly from the northwestern section of Nueva Ecija) in 1864; the eastward push continued into the 20th century with the incorporation of Umingan, San Quintin, Balungao and Rosales. The southern Pangasinan area centered around Camiling and Paniqui was incorporated into the newly created province of Tarlac in 1875. The western arm of Pangasinan would pertain to the northern third of the Spanish-era province of Zambales, the domain of today's Diocese of Alaminos, and historically the northwestern-most tip of the Archdiocese of Manila.

In terms of missionary geography, however, the boundaries changed quite a few times. The first systematic missionaries were the Augustinians, who established bases in Lingayen and other places as early as 1575. The Dominicans arrived in 1587, as recounted above, and the Augustinian missions were turned over to them early in the 17th century: Manaoag in 1605, then Lingayen and Dagupan (then called Bagnotan) in 1613. Their missionary jurisdiction extended as far south as Camiling in what is now northern Tarlac. The administration of the Zambales portion of Pangasinan, centered around Bolinao, was assigned to the Augustinian Recollects, except for a few decades in the 18th century when it was entrusted to the Dominicans. Also in the 18th century, the ministration of the southern part of today's La Union province was transferred from the Augustinians to the Dominicans. This explains why a bell bearing the name of Manaoag hangs in the church of Aringay, La Union. Tayug and San Nicolas in the east were founded by the Augustinians but passed on to the secular clergy and then, in 1841, to the Dominicans. The easternmost towns of Umingan and San Quintin were under the Franciscans.

Thus it can be seen that Calasiao was in the heartland of the "original" Pangasinan ethnic territory. Through tributaries it was linked to the Agno River, by which its citizens could communicate with the surrounding towns of San Isidro Labrador, Salasa, Lingayen, Binalatongan/ San Carlos, Binmaley, and Dagupan. In earlier times the Agno flowed into the Canaren Lake, which led to the great Pampanga River passing through today's Rosales and Cuyapo. By that connection it was possible

to deliver goods and ideas largely by watercraft from Manila all the way to Lingayen Gulf via the Central Plain. A less popular, and more difficult, cultural and economic route was eked out by the Dominicans from Manaoag to the southern end of Nueva Vizcaya along the so-called Villaverde Trail.

Culturally speaking, Calasiao and the Pangasinan “heartland” had for neighbors to the west people who spoke languages known as Bolinao, Botolan, and Zambal. The mountains to the east were peopled by pagans who on certain occasions came down to burn villages, and were referred to invariably as “Igorots”. Ilocano settlers moved in great numbers into eastern Pangasinan especially after the Sarat revolt in 1814.

Early church-building activity

Having sketched the setting of Calasiao in very broad strokes, we may now bring our focus back on the church of Saints Peter and Paul in that town. Hardly anything is known of its beginning apart from what was recounted about the shift from Gabón to Calasiao above. A 19th century painting now in the Archbishop’s Palace in Dagupan portrays Fray Luis Gandullo, the Dominican responsible for moving the mission center to Calasiao (Fig. 1). He holds a column and a hammer, which would make one think that these were symbols of his being a builder, but the inscription at the bottom of the painting says he was a tender lover of the Passion

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Fig. 1. Portrait of Fr. Luis Gandullo, O.P., in the Archbishop’s Residence, Dagupan.

of Christ. Thus the column is partially draped with a cloak, and at his feet are pincers and a scimitar-like blade (did this replace the lance?); just behind him is the towel with Jesus' face imprinted on it.

For the next century and a half there are scant accounts of building activity in the region, although we are told that the foundations for a large church in San Jacinto were dug in 1653, and that a grand and richly decorated church was up in Lingayen by the 1690s. The first half of the 18th century saw the erection or rebuilding of masonry churches or conventos in Lingayen (replacing the 17th century structure), Binalatongan, Mangaldan, Binmaley, and Manaoag. The lower portion of the belltower in Binmaley, believed to belong to an early church that burned in 1745, is possibly one of the oldest ecclesiastical structures in Pangasinan (the church itself was finished in 1754, and is fairly intact to this day). The church in Salasa, finished in 1747 or 1748, is also one of the oldest in the province.

The British Occupation of Manila in 1762 set off revolts in Pangasinan and the Ilocos, with great numbers of Filipinos taking advantage of the confusion at the time to attempt to overthrow the Spaniards. At the end of the Palaris Revolt in 1763, the churches and conventos in Binalatongan, Calasiao, Malasiqui, Telbáng (ancestor of today's Bautista) and Barug (Gerona) were all but heaps of ashes. It is only then that we get some more solid data about Calasiao. The church is said to have been rebuilt by Fr. Cristobal Ausina, parish priest from 1769 to 1773. Fr. Ausina is also said to have rebuilt the church of San Carlos (after its relocation from Binalatongan) in 1773. Thus it seems that Fr. Ausina was more than the average friar-builder.

A catenated façade

The earliest known photograph of Calasiao, taken after the 1880 or 1892 earthquake, shows a façade quite unlike that seen today [Fig. 2]. Its most striking aspect is the catenated silhouette of its pediment, with pointed finials marking the juncture where one "dip" ends and another begins¹. As a matter of conjecture, to be borne out with more archival sleuthing, a Dominican Brother may be the "missing link" between the "catenated" façade of Calasiao and the "catenated" façades popular throughout the Cagayan Valley, beginning with Tuguegarao in 1766². Hermano Francisco Ferrer (1721-1779), was renowned as an *excelente carpintero*. He was in Lallo, Cagayan, in 1763, and was on his way back to Manila when he was caught by

¹ This is the effect when a length of chain (Spanish *cadena*) is mounted on pole supports, hence the word "catenated".

² Smaller versions of the Tuguegarao façade appeared on the churches in Dupax (finished 1776), Aritao (begun 1780), Bambang (begun 1782), and Bayombong (built within 1773-1792), all in Nueva Vizcaya.

surprise by the Palaris Revolt in Pangasinan. His services must therefore have been in great demand all over the stricken province. The churches in Lingayen and San Fabian are said to have been rebuilt by Hermano Francisco; indeed the belltowers of these two churches are similar in design. So too, for that matter, is the *campanario* of Calasiao (though reputed to be as old as the church that was burned in 1763, it may have received its decorative details from Brother Ferrer)³.



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Fig. 2. The church of Calasiao as it appeared after the earthquake of 1880 or 1892.

The church and convento in Calasiao by the 1770s must have been the most spacious in the region, because it was here on May 30 and 31, 1773 that Bishop Miguel Garcia convoked a synod for the entire northern diocese of Nueva Segovia. It was the first large gathering of its kind in the diocese, and one wonders how everyone managed to bed down in the convento; or perhaps a number of the priests may have been “fielded out” to host families in the town. Unfortunately the resolute bishop presented the assembly with the acts drawn by himself beforehand; there was not the slightest discussion; and the King did not approve it so the acts never made it to Rome for approval⁴.

³ Neira, I, p. 361.

⁴ For some of the Acts of the Synod of Calasiao, see Francisco Gainza, O.P., “Amovilidad de los Curas Regulares” in the present issue of *Philippiniana Sacra*. See also Pablo Fernández, O.P., *History of the Church in the Philippines 1521-1898*, Manila: National Book Store, 1979, pp. 96-97.

A report made during the visit of Bishop Pedro Blaquier to Calasiao on June 7, 1803, and filed in the Archives of the University of Santo Tomas, gives us a tantalizing glimpse of the wealth of the Parish of Saints Peter and Paul at the time. The church, of three naves, was totally of brick. It had two rows of windows, and had three retablos. The most richly endowed statue was that of the Santo Niño, with its silver sandals and gold-embroidered capes. There were two statues of the Virgin: one presumably in its niche in a retablo, with a rosary of gold, and another for processions, with a gilded sun and silver moon. There was a large sanctuary lamp of silver (Fig. 13); even the dog of St. Dominic bore in its mouth a torch of silver. Yet another silver fitting was to be acquired by the church: a frontal for the main altar, to be fashioned in Manila according to the instructions of Bishop Blaquier. Part of the cost was to be shouldered by the two confraternities, one dedicated to the Santo Niño (alternatively, the Most Holy Name of Jesus) and another to the Holy Souls in Purgatory.

19th century rebuilding

Much of this was lost in the conflagration that razed the church and convento in 1840 or 1841. It was left to Fr. Ramon Dalmau, parish priest from 1837 to 1843, to begin rebuilding the compound. The work was continued by Fr. Jose Misa Caballero, minister from 1845 to 1852. He refashioned the apse on new foundations and amplified the sacristies behind the two side altars, so that slender, fin-like “arms” appeared at the head of the once-closed rectangular nave (Fig. 9). He added a cistern (*aljibe*) to the convento, constructed bridges and irrigation canals, and planted coconut trees. During his term two bells corresponding to the holy souls and Santo Niño confraternities (dated 1846) were hung on the belltower (Figs. 40, 41). Ironically, his intense work did not exempt him from punishment by the governor of Pangasinan. Worse, on the same year as his departure from Calasiao (1852), with all the rebuilding not yet quite finished, another fire broke out. Fr. Ramon Martin Suarez Moral arrived in 1853 and doggedly continued the rebuilding effort. The result of his work is proclaimed over an arch in the ground floor reception area (*zaguan*) of the convento: “*Reedificose* [rebuilt] *en 1854 y 1855*”. He bequeathed the church with a large golden reliquary fitted with relics of Calasiao’s patron saints.

The 1840s-1850s chapter of the building history of Calasiao is reflected in a number of ways. In the interior, the five wooden retablos and two massive side benches must date at the earliest from this period (Figs. 13-26). Only one level of windows remains where two were noted in 1803. It seems that the walls were lowered, as in San Carlos in 1802-1803, and the upper row of windows suppressed. The upper sections of the walls were irregularly reconstructed with rectangular stone blocks or *sillares*, indicating that much of the earlier brick walls was retained (Fig. 10). The

same type of *sillares* was also used in the expansion of the apse, and in the remarkably enormous kitchen. This kitchen was built separate from the convento, most probably a lesson learned from all those fires. The *aljibe* or cistern occupies the greater part of the ground level of this structure, with an arched storage area for firewood. The kitchen is connected to the convento by a covered “bridge” resting on brick pillars. Another exceptional feature of the kitchen is its elongated dome resembling an inverted vat, painstakingly and skillfully constructed of sandwich-thin bricks. This worthy ancestor of today’s “dirty kitchen” is certainly one of the largest and most intact in Pangasinan, larger than the one in Dagupan (Figs. 37, 38).

The last quarter of the 19th century was cataclysmic for much of Philippine architecture. Two powerful earthquakes struck Luzon in 1880 and 1892, cracking walls or toppling towers. In Pangasinan, the churches of San Jacinto and Mangaldan were irreparably damaged; new ones were built in the next century. Those of Calasiao, Manaoag, Dagupan, Malasiqui, San Fabian and Camiling necessitated major repair. The people of Dagupan were resourceful enough to raise a new façade in 1895, just three years after the 1892 tremor rendered the old one useless. The construction was under the direction of Fr. Vicente Iztegui, a “builder priest” who was responsible for the continued work on Mangatarem church and who also built that town’s convento, cemetery, and two schools (1875-1884), the Colegio del Santísimo Rosario in Lingayen (1890), and the Colegio de San Alberto Magno in Dagupan (1891). The façade of Calasiao, as seen in the old photograph mentioned above, was crisscrossed with ghastly cracks. A provisional chapel of light materials was built in front of the church plaza.

Eventually the great catenated pediment had to be torn down, to be replaced by the more sober triangular silhouette we see today (Figs. 2, 3). The three entrances on the ground level, the five windows on the second level, and the niche with images of the patron saints on the third level (Fig. 8) were retained. A pair of *ojo de buey* (ox eye) windows were opened flanking the saints’ niche. The tower, according to an inscription on the ground level, was repaired in 1933 and 1934. But in 1991 the venerable *campanario* lost its upper storeys to an earthquake that assaulted the rest of the province as well. Monsignor Luis Unson took care that the belltower be rebuilt along its original lines.

Today the Church of Saints Peter and Paul of Calasiao wears its heritage proudly yet graciously. At 100 meters, it is the longest church in Pangasinan. Its girth of 25.5 meters makes it the widest in the province. Its broad façade looks over what is arguably the most expansive church plaza in the region (that it has survived at all with nary a basketball court, food stall, or grotto, bearing in mind the fate of its “siblings” in other towns, is short of miraculous). Its interior is rivalled only by Binmaley in

decoration. Its antique treasures have made it the victim of many robberies, especially in 1999. Its convento would do well to have a marker commemorating the stormy yet historic 1773 Synod of Calasiao. Its kitchen *cum aljibe* is certainly one of the most outstanding monuments of its class. Thus, it was the first church in Pangasinan to be declared by the National Museum as a National Cultural Treasure on July 31, 2001. ■

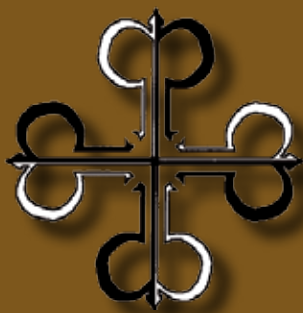
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Regalado Trota Jose has advocated for the study and protection of the cultural heritage of the Catholic Church in the Philippines since the 1980s. He has worked with numerous local public and private organizations such as the Ayala Museum, the University 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.



Fig. 3. Early 20th century photograph of Calasiao church, with its coat of limewash still intact.



Fig. 4. 1940s view of the church and tower.



Fig. 5. Façade and *convento*, with the expansive church plaza.



Fig. 6. Façade and tower, as reconstructed by Monsignor Luis Unson.



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Fig. 7. San Miguel Arcangel at the apex of the pediment.

Fig. 8. Saints Peter and Paul in the central niche of the façade.

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Fig. 9. Southern flank of the nave, with the extension of the apse introduced in middle of the 19th century.



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Fig. 10. Section of the southern flank, showing the addition of cut stone blocks over the brickwork. The column-like buttresses with stepped bases are similar to those in other Pangasinan churches.



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Fig. 11. View of the nave from the choirloft.

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Fig. 12. View of the nave from the main altar, looking towards the choirloft.



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Fig. 13. The central *retablo*. The great silver lamp mentioned in the 1803 inventory may be glimpsed at the upper right.

Fig. 14. The same *retablo* several years later.



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Fig. 15. St. Peter and St. Paul, the patron saints of Calasiao.

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Fig. 16. Left section of the main *retablo*.

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Fig. 17. Rear view of the central *retablo*. The backs of two niches may be seen, as well as the openwork flange to the right.



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Fig. 18. Underside of the base of the *retablo*.



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Fig. 19. Secondary *retablo*, left of the main altar. The Santo Niño is in the central niche, with crucifixion above.

Fig. 20. The same *retablo* several years later. The images of the two female saints flanking the Santo Niño have been changed. These are probably the “Sta. Catalina” and “Sta. Scholastica” mentioned as being stolen in 1999. The figures of the Blessed Mother and Saint John at the foot of the cross have also disappeared.



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Fig. 21. Secondary *retablo*, right of the main altar. Our Lady of the Rosary is featured in the central niche, while she is flanked on the left by St. Joseph and on the right by San Roque. Above is Santa Magdalena.

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Fig. 22. Confessional.



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Fig. 23. Side *retablo*, dedicated to San Vicente Ferrer.

Fig. 24. Side *retablo*, dedicated to San Miguel Arcangel.



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Fig. 25. Church bench with butterfly-like backs.



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Fig. 26. An almost identical bench, although with an intricately-cut serrated “apron”.



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Fig. 27. Front view of the extensive *convento*, renovated in 1854 and 1855.



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Fig. 28. The *convento* housed the Synod of Calasiao in 1773.

FERNANDEZ 1946

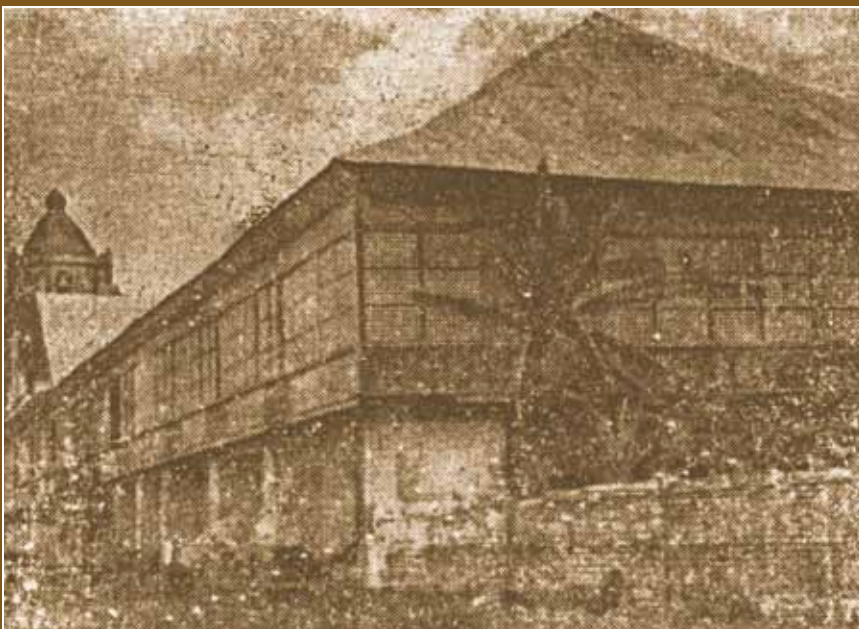


Fig. 29. 1940s view of a corner of the *convento*.



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Fig. 30. The same corner today.



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Fig. 31. Rear view of the *convento*. Some of the spaces below have been enclosed with hollow blocks.

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Fig. 32. Extension of the *convento* housing the stairway linking the ground and upper levels.



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Fig. 33. Landing midway between the ground and upper floor. The floor still retains some of its azulejo tiles. Stone seats line the walls.

Fig. 34. Stairway leading to the upper level of the *convento*. The black and white design on the ceiling is similar to others found in northwestern Luzon buildings.



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Fig. 35. Hallway in the *convento*.



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Fig. 36. One of the spacious rooms in the *convento*.



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Fig. 37. The kitchen complex, built separately from the *convento*. The ground level is composed an aljibe (cistern) and arched storage tunnel for firewood and timber. A covered bridge on brick columns links it to the *convento*, while stone steps lead to the garden. The roof resembles a huge inverted vat.

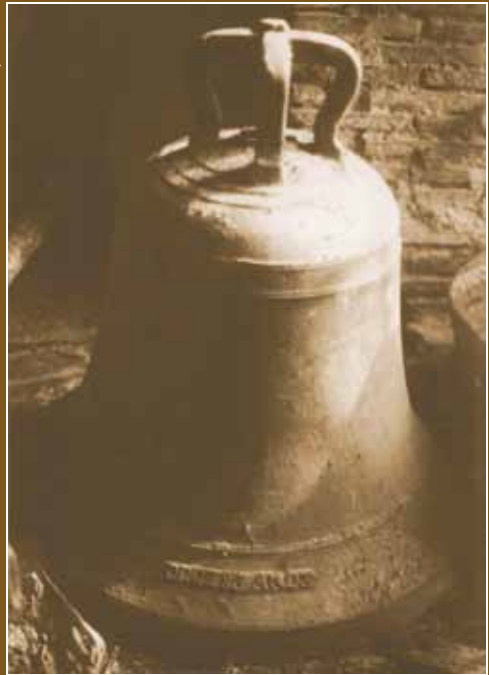


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Fig. 38. Interior of the kitchen ceiling.

Fig. 39. 1783 bell, dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul. The dating of another bell, the largest, was not possible because it was inaccessible.

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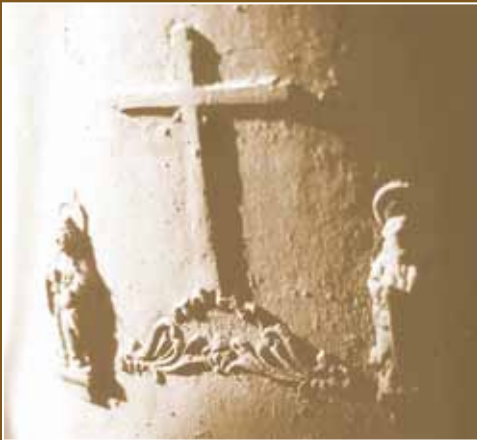


Fig. 39a. Detail of the 1783 bell showing Saints Peter and Paul.

Fig. 39b. Detail of the 1783 bell showing the year.

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Fig. 40. 1846 bell, commissioned by Fr. Jose Benito Misa Cavallero and dedicated to the Santo Niño de Calasiao.



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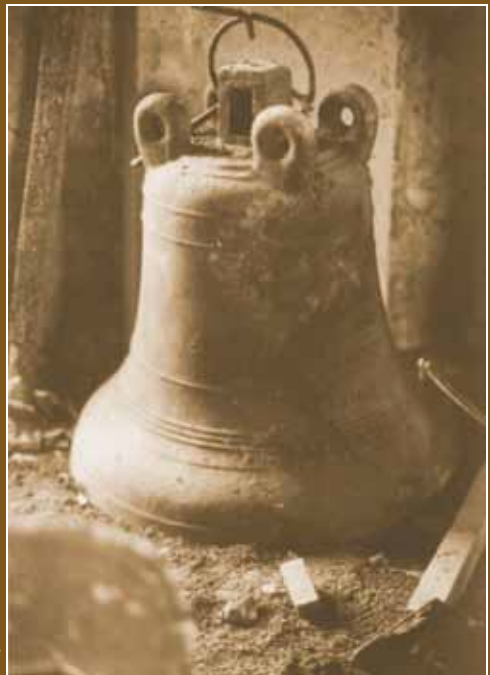
Fig. 41. 1846 bell, commissioned also by Fr. Misa, and dedicated to the Animas Benditas de Calasiao (Blessed Souls of Calasiao).



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Fig. 42. 1872 bell, dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary.

Fig. 43. 1895 bell, dedicated to the Holy Family. Cast in the Hilario Sunico Foundry, Binondo.



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Enlargement of the earliest known photograph of the Calasiao church with its “catenated” façade.

The editors wish to express their deep gratitude to the Filipinas Heritage Library for making accessible the vintage photos in this article from their Retrato Collection.