



A Visual Documentation of Fil-Hispanic Churches

Part XV: Parish Church of Loay, and Dimiao, Bohol

Regalado Trota Jose

A town on the westernmost edge of Bohol

According to canonical books in Loon cited in an 1886 survey, the parish was founded by the Jesuits on 22 June 1753. It was the westernmost establishment on the island of Bohol. The nearest town was Maribojoc to the south, itself erected in 1767 or 1768 although the Jesuits were active here about a century before. The Jesuits were made to leave Loon in 1768, leaving behind a church and convento of wood to the Augustinian Recollects (OAR) who took over that same year. Within a few years Bohol and the rest of the Visayas were subjected to intense pirate raids from the south. In the 1770s, the Recollects defended Loon with a stone fort replete with towers and cannon on a plateau a short distance from the sea. Within the enclosure were the church, convento, and plaza. This “uptown” was eventually called Motô (from the word for “hill”), while the coastal area “downtown” became known as Napô (“sandy soil”).

This dual-level composition is also found in Tagbilaran, Loay, and Maribojoc, places along the coast whose populations were probably pushed upwards into the hills by pirate raids. In all these four towns, massive stone stairways were built by the Recollects to link downtown with uptown, ending invariably at the convento. Loay’s was built 1836-1837; Maribojoc, 1864; while Loon’s was constructed during the term of Fr. Antonio Yus (1847-1849). It was called *inang-angan* (from *ang-ang*, steps cut into the hillside); with 194 solid steps divided into three sections, it was the grandest of the four stairways in Bohol.

A question of Marian iconography

Loon was dedicated by the Jesuits to Our Lady of Light, whose devotion was closely linked with the Jesuits especially in Italy, Spain and Mexico. Iconographically, Our Lady is

depicted cradling the Holy Child in one hand while rescuing a soul in the form of a person in another; to one side, an angel offers a basket or tray full of hearts representing souls. This image virtually replicates that of the Franciscans' Our Lady of Salvation, whose devotion is spread throughout the Bicol area with an important shrine at Joroan, Tiwi, Albay.

Sometime during the Recollect administration, the iconography of the patroness was changed. Our Lady still carried the Baby Jesus in one hand, but instead of a human figure representing a soul on the other, she held a scepter. Thus her cast image appears on a bell in the belfry, dated 1867 and inscribed *Nuestra Señora del Cetro*. Her images on the façade and on the central retablo have also exchanged the figure for the scepter. Although *Nuestra Señora del Cetro* is listed as Loon's patron in an 1879 survey by the Recollect historian Patricio Marcellan, the 2013 *Catholic Directory of the Philippines* enters Loon under Our Lady of the Light Parish, with the titular being the Birth of Mary, celebrated on September 8. Calling her *Birhen sa Kasilac*, locals retain her Jesuit identity.

A church graced with subtlety and refinement

In the 1780s, a church and convento were built with walls of *tabique* (woven bamboo strips covered with plaster) on a stone foundation. Another church was erected in 1815; it is not yet clear if this is the same church that was standing in the 1840s. Inscriptions on the present stone façade refer to Queen Isabel II (ruled Spain 1834-1868) and to Narciso Claveria (governor general 1844-1849), thereby dating this part of the church to 1849 at the latest. The building went up in flames in 1850 and again in 1853 or 1854. Fr. Jose Garcia OAR, parish priest from 1854 to 1890, resolved to rebuild the church that eventually would be one of the largest and finest in the country. After all, by mid-19th century Loon was one of the most populous and prosperous towns in the Visayas.

The plans were drawn by Domingo de Escondrillas, Director of Public Works in Cebu. Escondrillas was a man of many accomplishments. In 1855, he prepared prototype plans for forts to be built in Bohol, although none of them were probably built. He designed the plans for the church in Talibon and placed his initials over the door to the sacristy, repeating the gesture in the church of Dumanjug, Cebu, completed in 1864. In 1863, he was asked to inspect the Loboc church floor for any danger from flooding (there was none). A writer and publisher, he founded the first printing press in Cebu in 1873, although it seems to have closed after two years.

Loon was definitely his most important and challenging project. He had to build the nave between the façade and the convento, both built in the 1840s. He resolved the problem of space by widening the nave beyond the limits of the façade, so that it had the greatest girth among the churches in Bohol. The project lasted from 1855 to 1864. Recollect historians credit Guillermo Kirkpatrick with an important role in the work, although without elaboration. Kirkpatrick came in 1854 as first governor of Bohol, augmented with a degree in engineering obtained from Guadalajara, Spain, and a captainship at the Corps of Military Engineers in Manila. We know that he prepared a plan for the provincial capitol at Tagbilaran

in 1855 and was responsible for the construction of several bridges in the island as well as the causeway linking Dauis and Tagbilaran. Still, we know nothing more about his involvement in Loon. After only three years, Kirkpatrick left Bohol for Spain in 1857.

Even less is known about the author of the church façade, it is truly one of the most refined churches not only in the Visayas but in the Philippines as well. Its well-ornamented façade reaches horizontally beyond its flanks to “wrap” around the towers on either side, similar to Dimiao church built a few decades earlier. Its surface is a subtle undulation of convexes and concaves, which can only be appreciated by coming up close and looking up. The almost imperceptible but sensuous movement is echoed in the pillars and entrance arch of the vestibule. The cladding of the walls with coralstone slabs here is truly a masterpiece of the art of the *cotero* (the term for mason in the expense accounts, derived from *cota*, a rubblework fort or wall). This rich and majestic vision is set off by a large plaza, unmarred by any monument, porte-cochere or foliage. On Dec. 6, 2010, the Nuestra Señora de la Luz Parish Church Complex was declared a National Cultural Property.

A town on the edge

A 7.2 intensity earthquake hit Bohol on October 15, 2013, reducing the magnificence of Loon and nearby Maribojoc to utter rubble. Other churches were greatly damaged but not to the extent as in these two towns. The western coastline was raised a number of meters, preventing shallow boats from mooring, while roads along the picturesque waterfront were broken. Terrified people left their collapsed homes and camped in the plaza in front of their ruined church, cooking food on the very stones their ancestors had carefully hewn.

It was soon discovered that an unrecorded fault line lay in the vicinity of Loon. The tremor caused the liquefaction of the coralstone layers under the town, a consideration to be made regarding the continued existence of Loon on its original site. Mother Mary, *Birhen sa Kasilac*, is surely lighting the way. In the meantime, there are a number of lessons to be learned, and countless souls to console. ■

Select Bibliography

Cosas notables de Loon. Ms. in folder 1, Vol. 67. Quezon City: Bulwagang Rekoletos.

Jose, Regalado Trota. 2001. *Visita Iglesia Bohol*. Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts.

_____. 2003. “Settling down and building in Old Bohol.” Ramon Villegas, ed., *Tubod. The Heart of Bohol*. Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts.

Redondo y Sendino, Felipe. 1886. *Breve reseña de lo que fue y lo que es la Diócesis de Cebu en las Islas Filipinas*. Manila: Establecimiento Tipografico del Colegio de Santo Tomas.



Map of the Philippines with focus on the province of Bohol

All pictures in the following pages were taken before the earthquake of 2013.



Algué, Atlas de Filipinas, 1899

Map of the Philippines with focus on the province of Bohol

The white towers of Loon church, a prominent landmark along the western-most coast of Bohol.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

The remains of a tower that formed part of a fortification in the 1770s. This is the oldest part of the church complex. It has been incorporated into the rear of the convento complex, and watches over the stairway linking downtown and uptown Loon.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

A cannon in the plaza, formerly part of the 1770s defenses of the town.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Middle section of the grand stairway leading from the coastal area (popularly called Napô) to the main part of town (Mutô). This section has stone seats to provide rest for pedestrians. A smaller stairway leads to the back of the *convento*.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Beginning of the 194-step stairway, built by Fr. Antonio Yus OAR, parish priest from 1847 to 1849.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Ruins of the old municipal hall, built with the aid of the Recollects, near the foot of the stairway. This was destroyed with much of the town when American troops razed the place in May 1901.



Richard Ahlborn

The magnificent block of Loon church, as it appeared in the late 1950s.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



The subtle undulations of the façade—concave towards the center, slightly convex on the sides—are best seen close to the wall then looking upwards.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

Detail of the capitals on the finely-cut façade.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Leftmost panel of the façade referring to Queen Isabel II, who reigned from 1834 to 1868.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Rightmost panel of the façade referring to Narciso Claveria, governor general from 1844 to 1849. This indicates that a major part of the façade was concluded in the late 1840s, during the tenure of Fr. Yus.

View of the right tower and south flank of the church, showing the “break” between the 1840s facade and the wider nave. This nave was built from 1855 to 1864, during the term of Fr. Jose Garcia OAR, and under the direction of Domingo de Escondrillas, Director of Public Works in Cebu.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

View of the north flank of the church from the old convento, now a school. The upper part of a buttress, one of only a pair for the entire church, rises above the tree in the center.

Ground level of the former mortuary chapel, now converted into a Knights of Columbus meeting place. The chapel bears the same kind of capital as the façade, and thus may also have been built in the late 1840s.



Hannah Parado, 1997

In the interior of the church, some of the thin plaster has peeled off, revealing numbered stone blocks. These numbers, incised then filled in with a black agent, may have guided builders in assembling the blocks.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1998

Richard Ahlborn



Interior of the nave, looking towards the main altar, as it appeared in the late 1950s. Loon's is the widest church nave in Bohol. The ceiling murals are by Ray Francia, a Cebu-based painter active in the 1920s and 1930s.

The concave surfaces of the arches and pilasters in the vestibule are almost imperceptible. An obtrusive speaker breaks the spell.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

Regalado Trota Jose, 1995



The convex central *retablo* is placed in a concave sanctuary. In its single niche is an image of the patroness, Our Lady of Light whose present appearance however is more like Our Lady of the Scepter. Over its dome are four volutes, curiously topped by winged angel heads.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1995



Where the pulpit was removed, an earlier decorative painting scheme was revealed. This consisted of flowers, stems, and leaves in yellow outlined in reddish-brown, on a field of white.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1995



Azulejos (bluish tiles) of the sanctuary.

Flanking the central *retablo* are relieves featuring four of the Joyful Mysteries of the rosary.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



The Annunciation of Our Lord.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



The Visitation.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



The Birth of Our Lord.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



The Presentation of Our Lord in the temple.

Above the Mysteries are symbols of Mary taken from the Litany of Loreto.

Regalado Trota Jose, 2003



Spiritual Vessel, in the unusual form of a radiant host over a chalice.

Mystical Rose.



Regalado Trota Jose, 2003

Regalado Trota Jose, 2003



Tower of David.

Tower of Ivory (borne on an elephant).



Regalado Trota Jose, 2003

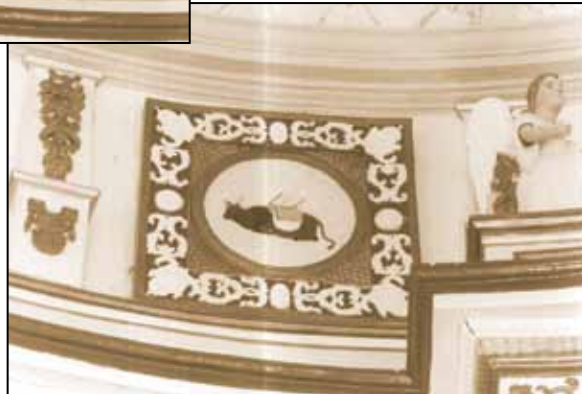
High above the Mysteries and the Marian symbols are icons of the Four Evangelists.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



An eagle, (St. Matthew).

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



A cow on its haunches
(St. Luke).

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



A winged angel (St. John
the Evangelist).

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



A standing lion (St. Mark).

Luis Faustino, 1980



The side *retablo* left of the main altar with the images of, from left, San Roque, San Jose, and Sta. Maria Goretti.

Luis Faustino, 1980



The side *retablo* right of the main altar with the image of, from left, San Nicolas de Tolentino, Nuestra Señora de Consolacion, and San Agustin.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Pierced *calado* panels high on the walls provide ventilation between the sanctuary and the sacristy.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Image of San Roque on the left side altar.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Image of St. Joseph cuddling an affectionate Baby Jesus, on the left side altar.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Image of San Nicolas de Tolentino, patron of the Augustinian Recollects in the Philippines, on the right side altar.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Image of San Agustin, spiritual founder of the order that bears his name, on the right side altar. The image of Our Lady of Consolation on this same altar was stolen some years ago.

The baptistry and its neoclassic *retablo*. The floor is paved with *azulejos*.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Instead of the usual background of wood, glass panes painted with floral designs were installed. This provided back-lighting for the image of St. John the Baptist, now gone.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1995

Wooden cover of the baptismal font.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1995



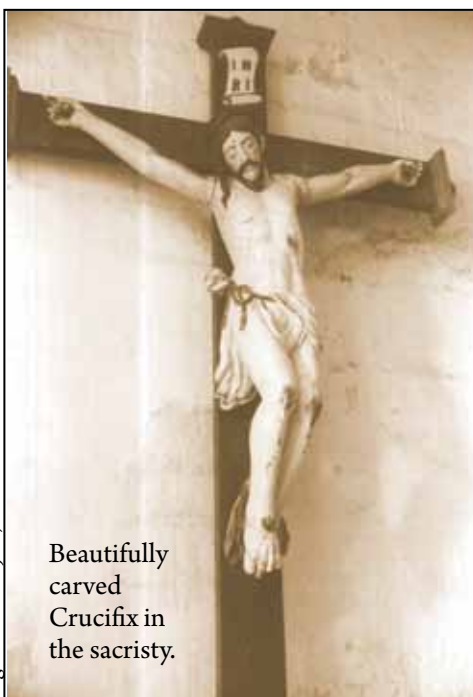
The sacristy with an unusually high ceiling accommodates a gallery whose flat railing imitates turned balusters. Residents of the *convento* behind the apse could visit the Blessed Sacrament in the sanctuary through this gallery.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

Candlestand for the paschal candle.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Beautifully carved Crucifix in the sacristy.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1998

Image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, framed in cut and pierced *lagang* (the nacreous inner surface of shells), an art form typical of the Visayas.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



The *cajonería*, a chest of drawers for storing liturgical vestments and appurtenances.

Long bench on which the *principales* of the town sat during mass.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Pipe organ, possibly commissioned from Manila in the first half of the 19th century like the organs of Loboc, Loay, and Baclayon.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Clock on the right belltower, installed in 1921 by Agustin Ayco according to a faded inscription.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1998



Central and largest bell in the tower dated 1867, still hanging by means of thick ropes. The hammers on the left tolled the hours of the clock.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1998



Raised image of San Jose, with his staff, hat, and toolbox, on a bell dated 1883. Raised images on Philippine bells are rare.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1998



Raised image of the Santo Niño on a bell dated 1867.

The section of the *convento* behind the apse possibly dates from the 1780s. The building was later expanded during the term of Fr. Pedro Polo (1844-1846). In recent times it housed the Sacred Heart Academy.



Parish of Our Lady of the Light Archives, 1973

Portion of the rear of the *convento*, with an imposing neoclassical entrance.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

A large room at the rear of the *convento*, with its wide windows receiving sea winds blowing over Napô, may have been the coolest enclosure in the building. It may have been the area where visitors were received.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

The side of the *convento* corresponding to the epistle end of the church. Nearby stood the remains of the 1770s tower. The *volada* (cantilevered running balcony) used to have sliding windows with panes of translucent *lampirong* or capiz clams.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

Principal stairway leading to the second floor of the *convento*.

Aparador (cabinet) topped with an unusual treatment of (angels'?) wings.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

The original cemetery was exchanged for a larger piece of land, and is now the site of the Loon Municipal Nursery. The circular stone walls which surround are still extant.



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

Entrance to the ruins of the chapel in the old cemetery.

Inside the chapel are niches for entire cadavers to be interred.



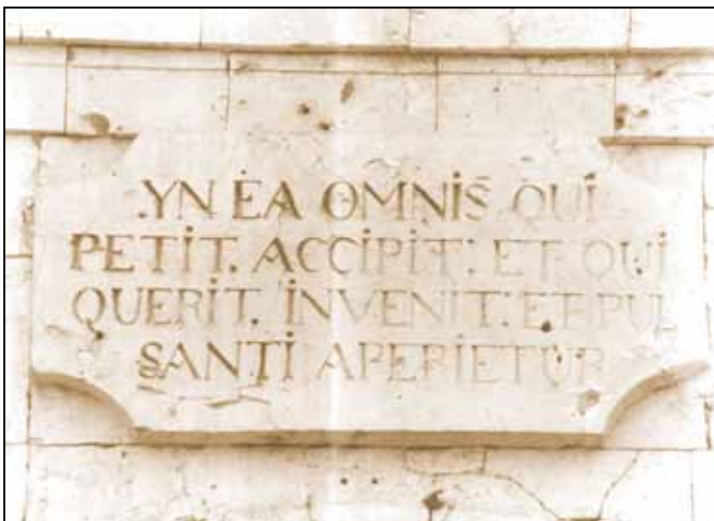
Regalado Trota Jose, 1997

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



The church of Loon in its heyday.

Regalado Trota Jose, 1997



This Latin inscription used to greet worshipers to the church as they entered the main entrance. It is from Matthew 7:8 "For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."



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), the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 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 trotajose55@yahoo.com.