Santuario del Santo Cristo: San Juan’s Original Church

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The city of San Juan has a rich history in itself, dating back to the days of the Spanish colonial period when it was known before as San Juan del Monte or the town of St. John (the Baptist) of the mountain, owing to San Juan’s hilly elevation. Its storied past is something we will be getting to in the future from time to time but for starters, the Urban Roamer shall take you to the place where the city was born.

Contrary to the belief of some, the church of San Juan we are referring to here is not the one located near Pinaglabanan, the one officially named St. John the Baptist Church. Can’t blame them though since it is after the city’s Catholic patron saint which can cause confusion. Instead, the one we are referring to here is the one alongside F. Blumentritt Street at the old town center. Known before as the San Juan del Monte Church, it is now officially known as the Santuario del Santo Cristo.
Unlike many of the Spanish-era churches, the Santuario de Santo Cristo was not originally intended to be parish where it would serve as the center of a new community. In fact, the church was originally envisioned as a retreat for the Dominican priests, especially for the more elderly of the order who have become physically weary from their evangelization activities. And at that time, the community we now know as San Juan was an ideal place for such a retreat, thanks to its hilly terrain which brought about more cooler air breezes than what is normally felt in Manila. (As a sidenote, that explains why there is a barangay in San Juan called Little Baguio)
Thanks to a donation of land, the Dominicans were able to build this retreat by 1602 and was dedicated to St. John the Baptist, AKA San Juan Bautista del Monte. What would become San Juan del Monte Church 1.0 was unfortunately burned down by immigrant Chinese rebels in 1639. The Dominicans quickly proceeded to build San Juan del Monte 2.0 which was completed by 1641. The second church was made of sturdier materials this time such as adobe which was easily sourced in the area before. In addition, the church also served to house a large icon from Santo Domingo Church, a large image of Jesus Christ on the cross known as the “Santo Cristo.”
Soon, the image of the Santo Cristo was being attributed for a number of “miraculous events.” This brought greater popularity to the image as the church where it was housed became a pilgrimage site among the devout Catholics. Eventually, the church would become known by its second name: the Santuario del Santo Cristo. However, the church suffered significant damage anew in 1763, caused by the pillaging British soldiers during the British occupation of Manila.
The third iteration of the church would be built by 1777. This would be the church that still stands today, although it had gone through numerous renovations and expansions, most notably the one done in the late 1960s which enlarged the church.
The growth of the church coincided with the growth of the community of San Juan del Monte itself, prompting calls for the town to have its own parish. (at that time, San Juan was administered as part of the parish of San Felipe Neri in what is now Mandaluyong) While San Juan would eventually have its own parish by 1892, it was decided that the parish church would be built instead in what is now Pinaglabanan. The image of St. John the Baptist in the Santuario del Santo Cristo was eventually relocated to the new one, signifying the loss of Santuario del Santo Cristo’s role as the Catholic center of the town.
Despite this development, the Santuario del Santo Cristo remained to be a notable and prominent landmark of the town. Eventually, it did become a parish of its own in 1942, serving the town’s southwestern portion as well as parts of Mandaluyong. The area itself is an upper-middle class neighborhood where some prominent families resided. Thus, it should be no surprise that the church’s cemetery, located at the back of the church, bears the remains of prominent personages such as Leyte writer and politician (also uncle of former First Lady Imelda Marcos) Norberto Romualdez Sr.; the family of former Senator Jose Arroyo (who himself is the father of the former First Gentleman Mike Arroyo and father-in-law of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo); and the spouses Felipe and Marcela Agoncillo. Yup, the same Felipe Agoncillo who was the first Filipino diplomat and wife Marcela who sew the first Philippine flag. It’s said that their children (all daughters and died spinsters) resided in San Juan, which explains why their remains, as well as that of their daughters, are in the church.
R. I. P.

NORBERTO ROMUALDEZ Y LÓPEZ
6 DE JUNIO, 1875
4 DE NOVIEMBRE, 1941

BEATRIZ BUZ DE ROMUALDEZ
17 DE FEBRERO, 1882
15 DE AGOSTO, 1955
ROGAD POR ELLOS
As it stands today, the Santuario del Santo Cristo serves as an overlooked yet interesting landmark that has borne witness to the many changes that has happened in the landscape for centuries and, hopefully, to bear witness to the changes yet to come.

Ref.: http://www.theurbanroamer.com/santuario-del-santo-cristo/

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https://aboutphilippines.org/catholicchurch.html#The_Story_of_Santuario_Del_Sto._Cristo