

Our Lady of Caysasay, Taal, Batangas



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Taal, Batangas City, Philippines

In the year 1603, in a small barrio of Caysasay, in the town of Taal, a fisherman by the name of Juan Maningcad went out fishing and instead of casting his net on the sea, threw it into the nearby river, and instead of catching fish, caught a little statue of the Blessed Virgin of the Immaculate Conception about six inches high. Although it was soaked in water, it had a heavenly lustre and her face twinkled like a star. Upon seeing this marvel, the startled Juan, being a pious and virtuous man prostrated himself before the image and began to pray. He picked it up and brought it home. "No one knew how the image got to the river, and according to the old folks, perhaps the image was thrown by one of the Spaniards to pacify the ravages of the ocean during one of those expeditions and somehow the waves pushed it to the river. Another opinion was that perhaps someone exploring the river must have inadvertently dropped it. (Some believe it came from China.)

The news began to spread like lightning until it reached the priest in town, and the judge that represented the King of Spain at that time. Without notice they immediately went to Juan Maningcad's house and there they saw the beautiful image of the Mother of God. They knelt down to venerate it, and took the image to Taal where a town fiesta was celebrated.

The widow of the Justice of the Peace by the name of Madam Maria Espiritu, was given the task of caring for the image. She ordered a precious urn to be made for the image and kept it in her home. Every evening she noticed that the urn turned empty and the image gone, but then in the morning it would be back in its usual place.

Worried about these disappearances, the widow told the story to the priest. He accompanied her back to her house and indeed saw that the urn was empty, but soon the urn opened and there appeared Mary's image before them. For several times, in spite of the watch made by the priest, the same events would happen that made the priest and others perplexed, not knowing what the desire of the Virgin was. After sometime, the priest decided to take the image to the Church for safekeeping but it was in vain. The image continued to leave the church until one day it completely disappeared and was nowhere to be found.

Historical documents disagree on the exact date of Juan Maningcad's find. (Some say she was found in 1611.) Former Taal parish priest, Fr. Juan Coronel, however, agrees that 1603 is the more likely date because the priest mentioned in the account, Fray Juan Bautista de Montoya, was the Prior of Taal at that time. The *Catalogo de todos los Padres Agustinos Calzados* also puts the event in the year 1603, as does the Old Tagalog novena written by Fr. Francisco Buencuchillo in the mid-18th Century, from which the above account is based.

It is probable that after disappearing for a while, it was in 1611 that she was found by the hollow of the rock on the hillside beside the spring in the village of Caysasay. The Lady, measuring about 272 millimeters, came garbed only in a simple white tunic dress gathered above her waist, then billowing into huge folds around her ankles. She appears pregnant. A blue shawl is her only shield from the changing cycles of hot days and cold nights. She tilts very slightly forward, her fragile hands clasped across her breasts below her right shoulder. One eye is slightly bigger than the other, and in them dwell great mystery. This is the prologue of the story—the story of an enduring communal devotion to the Blessed Mother that has in no small way shaped a town and blessed its people.

In the early seventeenth Century, a series of apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary were reported at the rocky hillside of Caysasay, a barrio of Taal. According to a church inquiry, a vision first appeared to a native slave girl, Catalina Talayn, who had gone up the hillside with a companion to gather firewood and fetch some water. The unexpected vision of something small in stature but radiating extraordinary brilliance from a hollow in the rocky landscape so bewildered the girl that she ran to tell her companion, and both fled terrified back to the town of Taal, by the shore of the Lake. Fr. Pedro Murillo Velarde, S.J., in his *Historia de Filipinas*, and other 18th Century Spanish chroniclers put the year at 1611, when natives began reporting strange visions on the hillside. This was also the year, according to Fr. Pedro G. Galende, currently Director of the San Agustin Museum in Intramuros, that the first makeshift church was reportedly built there. Historian Jose M. Cruz, S.J., currently dean of the School of Social Sciences of the Ateneo de Manila University, reviewed original microfilm documents of the inquiry into the apparitions (his date, 1619). He reports that Church officials interrogated Catalina but she told them she could not clearly identify what she saw.

The sparseness of her report, however, seems to convince Fr. Cruz that she "was not fabricating the story." In 17th Century Philippines, an alipin like Catalina had "much to gain from associating herself to the divinity or to the saints," notes Cruz in his study on the Caysasay apparitions. At any rate, when word got around, many people flocked to the area. Stories later included in the Tagalog novena say that two girls had seen the image of the Lady in the spring, and when they looked up, they saw her perched on a branch of a Sampaga tree, two lighted candles by her side, and guarded by kingfishers or casay-casay birds that abound in the area. The village was by the Pansipit River, which was then a wide salt-water channel that connected Balayan (then Balangon) Bay to Taal (then Bombon) Lake. Even without official church sanction, native devotion to the reported Lady of Caysasay was quick and spontaneous.

Miraculous healing powers were attributed to the waters from the spring. And in a cave near the spring was found the image of the Blessed Virgin—the same image that was fished out of the river almost a decade earlier and mysteriously disappeared! More than 30 people declared they saw visions of the Lady at Caysasay.

The clearest one was reported by Juana Tanguí. Fr. Casimiro Díaz, a representative of the Mexican vicar, in his 18th Century *Conquista de las Islas Filipinas* (Part II), gives a detailed account: "In a sitio called Bingsacan, near the town of Caysasay, around 1611, the natives saw several times, mainly at night, near a river where they go to fetch water, a very great light coming from a small opening in a large rock. From a distance it shone more brightly than four giant wax candles. As they got nearer, they could hear sweet and harmonious music made by very pleasant instruments, which entranced them, not so much because they did not expect to hear music but because of the divine melody that they heard. As they approached closer, some saw a beautiful hand and arm jutting out of the opening in the rock. It held a lighted torch, which moved up and down, though it remained in its place in the opening. They watched this light for a long time, listening to music. Others saw only the great ray of light, while still others saw that above the rock, there was a very great light, and another group saw a great flame, which seemed to devour that sitio.

After this unusual phenomenon had been witnessed, which had never before been seen or heard of in that sitio, some natives, both men and women, decided to see what it really was. They saw an Image of Our Lady, just a little taller than the size of one open hand from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the middle finger, dressed in white, with a crown on her head, and in her arms was the Infant Jesus, who also wore a crown.

Divine Providence granted this vision to some devout native women. "The news reached a native called Juana Tanguí, from the town of Bauang, who was the 'slave' of Don Juan Mangabot, one of that town's prominent natives. She had been suffering for a long time from a burning sensation in the eyes, which left her no rest and which could not be healed by the many remedies that had been applied to it. Moved by strong faith and true devotion, she resolved to go to the rock where people said that the Blessed Virgin appeared. With this purpose in her heart, one day she went, accompanied by one of her master's daughters, to that place where the ray of light was first seen. She had also heard that everyone who took a bath in the small stream was cured of any sickness of which they may have been suffering.

For this reason she took a bath in the stream, in the company of nine or ten other people who were also bathing. During the entire time of her bath, she noticed an unusual shadow by her side, though there was neither sun nor moon that could cause it, since it was already evening, and it was very dark. After some time she felt that someone was holding her and turning her body. When she turned to the place toward which she was being turned, she saw a great light, like that coming from an enormous lighted candle, which caused her great wonder. But she did not dare to move forward in order to examine what she had seen. "She went to a nearby field where she recounted what had happened to some native women. But they told her to return and to examine closely what it was. Since she said that she could not see very well, on account of her eye disease, they offered a young servant to accompany her to that place. (The recent account of Fr. Cruz is similar but says it was a young servant boy that was sent back with Juana.) Upon their arrival at the spot, she made the girl kneel down. Juana walked further and saw a very bright light and the Image of Our Lady, almost two palm measurements in height, dressed in white, with a crown on her head and a cross on her forehead. The Image seemed to be alive, as it was moving and blinking. When the native woman moved closer to her, the Image spoke to her, thanking her for remembering her and coming back to see her.

The native declared that the apparition told her: You have been kind-hearted to me, but unless you wear the belt of San Agustin, do not come back to see me, until you are a member of the Cofradía, and you wear it. "The native woman returned to the town, and did not tell anyone about what had happened until she had spoken with Fr. Juan Bautista Montoya, Prior of the Taal Convent. She asked him reverentially to give her the belt of the Cofradía. The Prior gave it to her at once. After spending eight days in confession and in preparing herself as best she could, she returned to the place where the Blessed Virgin had spoken to her.

In addition to herself, a simple woman who led a devout life, she brought with her eight or nine people, among them the wife of her master, Doña Juliana Dimoyaguín and other prominent residents, whose declarations appear in the accounts published about the event. They returned to the same place where the girl who had accompanied her the first time had knelt down. She moved forward to the same spot where she had been a few days before, and she saw once more, clearly and distinctly, the Blessed Virgin, in great splendor and beauty. After making a deep bow, Juana knelt in her presence.

The Virgin told her that she was much more pleased with her than before, because she was wearing the belt of the Cofradía of San Agustin. The devout native asked the Virgin directly what sign she should carry so that people would believe that she had spoken to and been in the company of the Virgin. The Virgin responded by asking for Juana's rosary and belt, telling her that it was a sufficient sign for her to touch them. Juana gave the Queen of Heaven her belt and her rosary, together with the rosaries that her companions had taken care to bring with them.

The Virgin accepted them and then returned them to the said Juana Tanguí. The women who received the rosaries declared that the fragrance that emanated from them was so perfect and extraordinary that it elevated their souls. Moreover, Juana's eyes were healed, because her eyesight had never been good. Many natives declared that they had always known her to have bad eyesight. Now they saw that her eyesight was clear and good.

Many other native women saw this Holy Image, mainly Magdalena Pongsoin, from Bauang, Doña Catalina Guinatosan, Doña Mahalay and Catalina Talaín and many others, all native women, known to be good and virtuous Christians. More than thirty declare that they saw her. So numerous were those who showed interest that the church authorities felt compelled to launch an official inquiry.

On February 24, 1620, Augustinians issued an order to construct a church "in the same place and site as Caysasay, visita of Taal, as it has been verified through serious investigation that the Most Holy Virgin has appeared there. It is resolved, likewise, that it be given the title of Nuestra Señora de la Misericordia." (This is reported by Fr. Pedro Galende, O.S.A, in his book *Angels in Stone: Augustinian Churches in the Philippines*, citing the Augustinian *Libro del Gobierno*)

The Lady of Caysasay is not the oldest Marian image in the Philippines. However, the report and documentation of the apparitions of 1611-1619, and later 1639, are unique in Philippine church annals. They could very well be the first apparitions in the Philippines. (Other reports of Marian apparitions are hinted in the story of La Naval de Manila (1649) and in Bantay, Ilocos Sur where—as the Lady of Charity—she was credited with saving the church and the convent from destruction during the revolt of Malong in 1661.)

In Asia, her appearance for public veneration also precedes the miracles attributed to the Virgin Mary as Lady of Mahdu in Sri Lanka and the Lady of Lavang in Vietnam. Fr. Pedro Galende, O.S.A., director of the museum of San Agustin, says the documentation and confirmation reports are similar to those granted to the famed Lady of Guadalupe of Mexico. In those days, the Philippines was under the autonomous Mexican vicariate. Fr. Casimiro Diaz, who reported the confirmation of the apparitions and miracles, was a comisario of the order's Mexican center.

Initially, the public devotion to the Virgin Mary centered on the Caysasay spring. To the townsfolk, the vision had empowered the spring water with healing powers. Many stories say the Virgin had appeared as a reflection in the spring. Continues Fr. Diaz: "The Holy Image has performed numerous miracles, not only for those who have gone to the rock to ask for help from the Queen of Angels, but also for those who drank from the water and bathed in the nearby stream. "These miracles are confirmed in the accounts that Fr. Pedro de Arce, Bishop of Cebu, and Governor of the Archbishopric of Manila ordered to be drawn up and prepared by Fr. Juan Bautista de Montoya, Prior of Taal, together with Fr. Gerónimo de Medrano and Fr. Juan de Rojas." A beautifully carved stone dome or arch was also constructed over the spring near the church—so named Ang Balon ng Sta. Lucia or 'the Wells of Santa Lucia.' To this day, the site of the wells is known as 'Banal na Pook' (sacred site) and vestiges of the spring running close to the wells is known as 'Banal na Tubig' (sacred water).