

THE FULL HISTORY OF
**SANTUARIO DEL STO. CRISTO
CHURCH**



By Fr. Eladio Neira, OP

THE DOMINICANS COME TO SAN JUAN (1602)

The year was 1602, four hundred ten years ago, when the Dominican Fathers came to San Juan. Then it was not “San Juan del Monte,” but the mountains of San Juan. A few clusters of nipa huts scattered on the property of a certain Captain Julian de Cuenca, who had been granted an “encomienda” along the San Juan River banks, where cattle was bred and raised. The Spaniards had just arrived in the Philippines and founded Manila as the capital of the colony and seat of the government (Governor General, the Audencia and the Bishop) only 35 years before.

The Dominicans arrived in the Philippines in 1587, that is, 15 years before coming to San Juan. They had founded the Santo Domingo Convent in what we now call Intramuros. Soon after, their missionary work among the Chinese began in Binondo. They had accepted also and began in earnest the work of evangelization in Bataan, Pangasinan and the Cagayan Valley. They had attempted several times, but without success, to enter China. In that same year, 1602, they were able to send missionaries to Japan, some of whom would eventually die martyrs and are now beatified.

The heavy work and the hot climate were taking their toll on some of the Fathers who had been working here for several years already. Some of them were rather old when they arrived in the Philippines. The question arose whether it would be proper and in consonance with the vow of poverty to have a R and R house (repose or rest and recovery) for the Dominicans working in Manila and in the provinces who might be in need of special care. Some were for it, some against it. Eventually it was decided that it would be in order, as long as three conditions were met: 1) the land would have to be donated, since they could not afford the luxury of buying it, 2) it should be in a healthy place, with cooler climate than Manila and 3) not far from the capital and readily accessible.

It so happened, as stated earlier, that a certain Spaniard, Captain Julian de Cuenca, lived in Manila and heard about the plan of the Dominican Fathers. He had been in Mexico before coming to Manila, where he had been befriended by the Fathers there. He thought, as well as his wife, that that was the time to show his gratitude and that of his family. He offered to donate to the Dominicans a plot of wooded land (nearly three hectares) in his “hacienda” along the San Juan River for the purpose they were contemplating.

The three conditions required were met. It was donated, it was in a place higher than Manila and, therefore, of better climate, and not too far away from the city (“one legua” or five kilometers to the east); besides, it could be reached easily by “banca” or river boat: up the Pasig river, then entering into the San Juan river, and finally landing on the “embarcadero” constructed by Captain Cuenca in the junction of the San Juan river and the Maytunas creek.

So the offer was accepted with gratitude and the work began. In a matter of a few months the house and the small church or chapel of “San Juan Bautista

on the hills” were built, exactly in the same place where they are now. At first it was a “filial house” of Santo Domingo convent, from where it was administered, even if there were a Father and a Brother in residence to attend to those who came for R and R (rest and recovery).

A few years later, in 1616, the house became independent from Santo Domingo convent. A religious house on its own right, it came to be known as the “House of San Juan Bautista del Monte.” Three Fathers were assigned there in 1617: Fathers Huete, Oriol and Samaniego.

The small foundation of San Juan was destined to play a role more important than just being an “R and R” place for tired and sick Dominican missionaries. In 1642, it became a famous shrine, when the venerable image of the Crucified Lord was transferred from the Dominican church at the Parian, (Chinese market place outside the Manila walls) first to Santo Domingo church and then to the small church on the hills of San Juan.

The venerable image began to perform miracles on behalf of the devotees that would come to pray before it. The news spread to Manila and all the surrounding area, particularly the Franciscan parish and town of Sta. Ana, to which the area of Mandaluyong and San Juan used to belong. The “Confraternity of the Santo Cristo” was established and approved by the Pope in 1648, roughly 45 years after the arrival of the Dominican Fathers in San Juan. Prominent citizens of Manila and other towns became members of the confraternity and made yearly pilgrimages to the Shrine of the Santo Cristo. Others settled in the vicinity of the Shrine and so, little by little, the town of San Juan came into being.

THE CONVENT AND THE SANTUARIO

The first convent and the church of San Juan must have been simple and unpretentious, in keeping with the rustic surroundings, and yet very apt and comfortable for the purpose they were meant to serve: “a house and a church where the sick (Dominicans) may go for convalescence and the religious who wish to go there (from Manila) could enjoy some quiet.” The place was desierto, sano y apacible, and those who could enjoy a short sojourn there could return to their normal work and activities invigorated (con nuevos bríos).

Unfortunately, the first convent and church were not to last long and would have a premature and tragic end. A few years later (1639) the Chinese insurrection took place in Manila. When the rebels were defeated by the Spanish-Filipino troops, they retreated to the Mariquina mountains, passing on their way there by San Juan. For some time they occupied the convent and the church and, when they decided to proceed towards the mountains, they put to the torch the convent, the church and the few houses in the vicinity. The buildings went up in a column of smoke which could be seen from far off for several days.

In 1641, the prior of Santo Domingo in Intramuros, the famous Fr. Sebastian Oquendo, decided to rebuild the convent and church of San Juan. There was an initial difficulty, since the title of ownership had been burnt and Captain Cuenca was not any more the owner of the property from which the donation had been made to the Dominicans. Fortunately, the new owner, Captain Gaztelu, had no difficulty in admitting that the property donated to the Dominicans by Captain Cuenca belonged legally to them. He even added another donation of his own "a piece of land so that the said prior could build an orchard or huerta and had it fenced together with the former property around the convent." He was indebted to Fr. Oquendo for favors granted and also "to the religious who lived in and looked after the convent of San Juan, who celebrated Mass the whole year round, heard the confessions and administered all the sacraments to the people of their estancia and also to themselves (the Gaztelu) whenever they retired to their property." So the new title was notarized, and the convent and the church were rebuilt, now better and stronger than before, using solid materials (adobe) that could be found in the area.

The church suddenly became a "Santuario," and one of the best in the country at that! Fr. Oquendo thought that the new church was the ideal place to transfer the image of the "Santo Cristo" which had been sculpted, following the instructions of the saintly Fr. Bartolome Martinez, for the Parian church and that, after the Chinese insurrection, had been kept in the church of Santo Domingo convent in Intramuros. The image was too big for niches in the conventual church, since it was "nine palmos in height" or 1.80 meters. The venerable image was brought to the reconstructed church in San Juan and placed in the main altar, displacing St. John the Baptist who had previously occupied the place of honor. And lo and behold! "No sooner the Santo Cristo was placed on the hills of San Juan that he immediately began to perform prodigies" and from then on the place was called the "Santuario del Santo Cristo". Attracted by the devotion to the venerated image of the crucified Lord, many devotees from Manila and the neighboring towns came in pilgrimage to San Juan. Soon after, on April 14, 1643, the Confraternity ("Hermandad del Santo Cristo") was established, counting among the founding members some of the most important people in Manila. The "Hermandad" was approved by Pope Innocent X on March 4, 1648.

The number of people coming to the "Santuario," pilgrims and devotees with their families, was substantial and the visits of the members of the "Hermandad" were very frequent. Donations were offered by the devotees to the "Santo Cristo." The Fathers decided that the rentals for the use of these lands be exclusively used for the "Santuario" (for the votive lamps and the decorations). Some expensive holy vessels and some worthwhile "ternos" embroidered in silver and gold were purchased for the solemn liturgical services. During the solemn religious functions, when the image of the "Santo Cristo" was unveiled, at least 80 big candles had to be lit. If the rent from the lands donated to the "Santo Cristo" was not enough to cover all the expenses for the "Santuario" and to attend to the needs of the pilgrims, the Dominican Fathers administering important towns in Bataan and Pangasinan had to contribute in kind, with rice quotas. The importance of the "Santuario" was

enhanced in 1658 when a good piece of the Lignum Crucis was brought to Manila and part of it was given to the “Santuario del Santo Cristo.”

Meanwhile the venerated image kept on performing maravillas for the residents of San Juan and for the devotees coming from other places, as attested to by the Dominican historian Fr. Juan Peguero in 1690. The “Santuario” became even better known when a spring of good drinking water was discovered within the property, and an aqueduct was built by the same Fr. Peguero to bring the water from the “Santuario” to the San Juan river, and from there fetched in big “tinajas” and brought by “bancas” to Manila.

The convent and the “Santuario” building were improved with the passing of time. Fr. Peguero, who was vicar of San Juan, tells us that the Santuario was “the biggest in the Islands and the refuge and consolation of all.” According to him, “it was built on a mountain of solid rock and, thanks to that, it had not been damaged by earthquakes. It has been repaired well recently. It is all—the convent and the church—of stone quarry, and both are strong, firm, beautiful and devout. All in all they are the most perfect structures (of their kind) that exist in the Philippines.” He goes on to describe the “Santuario” more in detail: “It is all painted al oleo en jaspe (imitation marble) from the floor to the ceiling and adorned with many Latin and Spanish verses and texts from the Holy Scriptures. There are three altars with artistic and proportionate ‘retablos.’ It has five rich ‘ternos’—some better than others—and six ordinary ones. It has not much silver, but what it has is enough for the service of the altar.”

Unfortunately all this glory and splendor would be destroyed in 1763. The British had occupied Manila. The city was raped and all its churches vandalized. The convent and the “Santuario of the Santo Cristo” and many houses in the vicinity did not fare any better. They were ransacked then set to the torch by the soldiers. Many thousands of pesos were lost, not only by the convent and the “Santuario,” but also by the people of San Juan who had brought their belongings to the convent “bodegas,” hoping that they would be safer there. After this great tragedy, reconstruction had to be started all over again. The work began in 1777 and the task was entrusted to a certain Fr. Jose Miguez. He was determined to do it properly, as the “Santo Cristo” and the people of San Juan deserved nothing less. He solicited and received generous contributions from different donors and, once again, the convent and the “Santuario del Santo Cristo” rose from the ashes. The devotees, in great numbers, continued to visit it regularly. Fr. Miguez remained as vicar of San Juan for many years, even after the work of reconstruction had been finished, perhaps as a reward for a job well done! He was not a historian, unlike Fr. Peguero, and he did not leave an account on how the new convent and “Santuario” looked. Most unfortunately, he has not told us what happened to the venerated image of the “Santo Cristo”: whether it was the same old one or a replica of the one that was enthroned in the “Santuario.” One thing is sure: the “Santuario” remained to be known as the “Santuario del Santo Cristo” and the devotees continued to visit and venerate the Crucified Lord there. The “Santuario” and the convent rebuilt by Fr. Miguez were, fundamentally, the structures that could be seen up to modern times, except

for some repairs and improvements carried out after the earthquake of 1880 and after the occupation of the Katipunan forces in 1896-1897.

A PARISH FOR SAN JUAN?

San Juan had been from the beginning part of the Franciscan Parish of Sta. Ana. When in 1863 the new Parish of San Felipe Neri was erected in Mandaluyong, San Juan was attached to it.

The San Juan residents must have felt somehow slighted and ill-at-ease having to be under Mandaluyong in spiritual affairs and tried to become an independent parish. They petitioned the then Archbishop of Manila Dr. Don Gregorio Meliton Martinez, that the town be given a parish of its own and that for several reasons: the importance of the town (which has been a municipio since long ago), the number of people living there and the distance from San Felipe – the roads are not in very good state most of the time and some of the parishioners have to do an hour's walk to go to church in Mandaluyong.

They requested that the Santuario of the Sto. Cristo, of the Dominican Fathers, so closely associated to the town, be elevated to the parish rank. It is big enough to serve the purpose and thus, neither the diocese nor the town will have to incur the high expenses that normally are associated with the construction of a new parish church and convent.

We do not know if the local authorities spoke with the Dominican Fathers before they elevated their petition to the archbishop. The move was bitterly opposed th the Franciscan Fathers. Father Huerta himself wrote the position paper for the Franciscans. To separate San Juan from Mandaluyong and create a new parish, he says, “would be like stealing from a poor man.” The move was not enthusiastically supported by the Dominicans, always afraid of doing anything that might make sour the relations with their Franciscan brothers, ever so cordial, because of the little town of San Juan. So, to the disappointment of the San Juan people, the case was dropped for the time being. It would take some time before the convenience of having a parish in San Juan would be taken up again by the ecclesiastical authorities.

A NEW PARISH FOR SAN JUAN

In 1892, San Juan finally succeeds in having its own parish but not in the Santuario, as it had been requested by the people of San Juan twenty years before. The Archbishop of Manila, Father Bernardino Nozaleda OP who succeeded another Dominican, Father Pedro Payo, in the Metropolitan See, approved the creation of the new parish for the town of San Juan, and a new church and the parochial house built in the section of town now known as Pinaglabanan, where the center of the poblacion had been moving, along the area then simply called Camino de Mariquina, on the grounds of the Santo Cristo hacienda, donated for that purpose.

The new parish was placed under the advocate of San Juan Bautista and, like the former mother parishes, Sta. Ana and San Felipe Neri, the new one was also entrusted to the care of the Franciscan Fathers. The image of San Juan Bautista, who for a long time now had not presided over the main altar of the Santuario was transferred to the new parish church named after him. The royal decree of erection was signed by the Vice-Royal Patron on July 15, 1894.

The negotiations to have the Santuario raised to the status of a parish between the Archbishop of Manila and the Dominican Order began in 1941. At a meeting in the Archbishop's Palace held on November 4, 1941, at which the parish priest of Pinaglabanan and Mandaluyong from where the territory of the intended new parish would be dismembered, were also present, the creation of the Santuario del Sto. Cristo Parish and the limits of the same were agreed upon. But before the resolution could be put into effect, the war broke out. It would be the following year, with the country already occupied by the Japanese, that, at long last, some 70 years after the local people had asked for it, and 50 years from the establishment of the Parish at Pinaglabanan, that a parish was canonically erected at the Santuario del Sto. Cristo on May 3, 1942, thus making it two now for San Juan. Father Peregrine de la Fuente OP, formerly Parish Priest for 18 years in the Dominican ministries in Louisiana USA and later on first Apostolic Prelate and Bishop of Batanes and Babuyan, was appointed first parish priest.

The official inauguration of the Parish and the installation of the Parish Priest was carried out by the Archbishop of Manila himself, Dr Don Miguel J. O'Doherty, in a solemn ceremony coinciding with the Feast of the Santuario and now titular advocate of the new Parish, the Holy Cross. In the decree for erection, signed on March 28, 1942, the following limits of the new Parish "for reasons of necessity and convenience" are set: to the north, R. Pascual Street and its continuation eastwards to the Ermitaño River; to the west, San Juan River; to the southwest, Shaw Boulevard; and to the east, Ermitaño River.

The reasons that moved the Archbishop to take this step (the erection of the new parish) were, in his own words: the insistence of the people of San Juan, for several years already that the Santuario be made a Parish, the great increase in population and the request of the Parish Priest of Pinaglabanan himself, Father Artemio Casas.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE SANTUARIO

During the mid-fifties, then Parish Priest Father Patricio Rodrigo OP conceived the idea of enlarging the Parish Church. San Juan was becoming more populated and the present church could not cope with the many parochial activities. Fully backed by the parishioners, Father Rodrigo launched the first all-out-campaign to raise money for his pet project. The people of San Juan responded generously and enthusiastically. When Father Rodrigo left to take charge of his new assignment at the Santisimo Rosario Parish at UST, the project remained untouched for many years.

In August 1961, the superior of the Santuario, Father Augusto Antonio OP, called on the parishioners to carry on a campaign to raise more funds for the Santuario. He organized the committee for the construction and appointed Celso Tuazon President. The whole parochial territory was divided into 184 blocks and assigned one member per block with the duty of passing on to everyone the goal of the project to generate funds. At the time the committee on construction was organized, the amount needed to complete the new Santuario was estimated at one million pesos. One of the first suggestions of the committee was to hold a procession of the image of the Sto. Cristo around the entire parish hoped to make the people of San Juan realize their debt of gratitude to the Sto. Cristo. A few months later, Mr. Tuazon left for Australia while Father Antonio was assigned to Spain. The committee then named Judge Antonio Quirino President and Father Gerardo Manzanedo OP, the new superior of the convent, Treasurer.

Father Manzanedo OP redoubled efforts for the fund-raising campaign to add to the P58,000.00 funds turned over at the end Father Antonio's term. Other means were resorted to: bingo socials, a fashion show, food festivals, fraternal agapes, two big raffles, etc. In one of the meetings of the committee, it was agreed that the expenses of the construction would be shared proportionally by the Dominican Community and the Parishioners. As recorded by Father Manzanedo, the final figures are: Dominican Fathers P 601,255.82 and Parishioners P 551,347.01 for a Total P 1,152,602.83.

THE NEW SANTUARIO: SOME MILESTONES

1963 FEBRUARY 16 The cornerstone of the new Santuario was blessed by his Eminence Rufino Cardinal Santos. The stone, together with other documents, was kept in a concrete box and remained exposed to the public for 8 years. On 8 September 1971, it was finally buried right at the middle of the main altar.

1967 NOVEMBER 13-14 Arte Español, Inc. delivered 10 chandeliers which were immediately installed.

1968 JANUARY 9 The Molave wooden crosses of the Way of the Cross were blessed and installed. They were made from the beams of the old church. Father Jose Martinez, a Franciscan from the convent of Santa Ana, Manila blessed and installed them.

1968 SEPTEMBER The 16 stained glass windows of the church arrived. Featured are fourteen stations of the Way of the Cross, one Our Lady of the Rosary and another one the Dominican Saints Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great and Vincent Ferrer. Mounted later were the other smaller ones of the presbytery from left to right The Evangelists St Matthew and St Luke, an allegory of the Sermon on the Mount, St Paul Preaching to the Gentiles, Evangelists St Mark and St John. They were designed by Cenon Rivera and made by Kraut Art and Co.

1973 MAY 8 Construction of the ceiling of the church was started. By December 12 of the same year it was finished. The architect was Adolfo Benavides. At about the same time the Narra ceiling of the Chapel of the Resurrection was mounted.

1974 APRIL 6 (a day before palm Sunday) The painting of the church dome which was started on 6 February 1974 was completed. The initial plan was to crown the dome of the church with a mosaic of the Resurrection. High cost and other considerations blocked the idea. Finally a painting with the same theme was commissioned to then young UST artist Ireneo Robles.

1978 NOVEMBER The work on the façade was finished. Among the many proposals for the façade of the church, Architect Lorenzo del Castillo's concept was accepted. The old façade was kept and a twin tower was built at the right side. Both towers are united by two arches and an enshrined cross on top that give balance to the façade. The work began on 10 October 1977. The stones of the old convent were used in the new part of the façade.

1979 Two bells arrived from Spain. They were cast in Quintana's Factory, Saldaña, Palencia. One bell weighs 267 kilos and the other 207 kilos. Following old tradition, one is named after the Santo Cristo and the other after Our Lady of the Rosary.

1990 NOVEMBER a group of eight Dominican saints cast in concrete were placed in the niches at the entrance of the church.

THE FIRST PROCESSION AND THE CAROSA OF THE SANTO CRISTO

The first time that the image of the Santo Cristo, venerated in our Santuario, went out on procession around the Parish was on May 3, 1924. Before this date, whenever there was a procession the image carried was the Crucifix that was kept in the sacristy of the old church and at present is venerated on Good Friday. The Santo Cristo was too heavy to be carried around.

In 1923 the Dominican Priests started collecting donations for a big andas, or float, for the Santo Cristo. It was intended to be shoulder-carried. They did the first year (1924), but it was very difficult – muy trabajoso the records say. So the next year it was decided to mount the andas on four wheels. Later electrical lighting was added. This andas ,or float, was the work of Maximo Vicente.

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