Visita Iglesia
CEBU

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
ESTAN CABIGAS
SIMBAHAN.NET
Cebu is the cradle of Christianity in the Philippines with the conversion of the chieftain Humabon and his people to the Catholic faith in 1521. From its “re-colonization” with the arrival of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in 1565, the first church and monastery in the country, now the Basilica del Sto. Nino, has been established.

Through the centuries, several towns have been founded and administered by the Augustinians, Augustinian Recollects, and the Seculars and several churches constructed including the Jesuits that today, are still existing.

This segment of the visita iglesia series features 28 of the surviving Spanish colonial era churches in Cebu either wholly built or still retaining its original façade.
Basilica Minore del Sto. Niño

The Convent and Basilica Minore del Sto. Niño in Cebu City is the sanctuary and center of the Sto. Niño de Cebu devotion in the country where the image of the Holy Child, brought during the Magellan Expedition that arrived in the country in 1521 and rediscovered in 1565 by one of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi’s men is venerated under the custody of the Augustinians.

The first structures were made of light materials but were razed by a fire in 1566. It was only during the third attempt, that the structure was made of stone but was again destroyed by fire.

The present structure, made from coral stones hewn from Panay and its wood from Talisay and present day San Fernando is probably the fourth to be built, was started in 1735 and finished in 1739. The facade is said to be a blending of Muslim, Romanesque and neo-classical features.

In 1965, during the occasion of the quadricentennial of the christianization of the Philippines, heavy restoration work was undertaken.

Cebu Metropolitan Cathedral

In 1595, the Diocese of Cebu, together with Nueva Caceres and Nueva Segovia was established as suffragan dioceses to the Archdiocese of Manila. St. Vidal is the patron of the cathedral.

The mother church of the diocese, it was first made of nipa and wood. In 1689 the first stone church was started but due to the perennial lack of funds, even with the promised P10,000 given by the King of Spain and staggered for the next 10 years, construction has, time and again been delayed, later demolished (and transferred to the adjacent lot) and built again.

The current structure was built between 1829 and 1863. In 1865, the church was expanded and renovated but was overtaken by the 1898 revolution. It was finished by Bishop Juan Bautista Gordo during his term.
Talisay Church

As early as 1589, the first recorded rebellion in Cebu happened here when a Spanish colonist acquired land and angered the natives of the area. Talisay eventually became, like Banilad, an hacienda of the Augustinians. It was part of San Nicolas and was declared as an independent parish in 1836 under the advocacy of Sta. Teresa de Avila.

The second structure to be built on the site, the current stone church was constructed between 1836 - 1848 by Fray Juan Soriano. It is one of the unique churches in the country with its Graeco-Roman style of architecture which is shared with only a few churches in La Union, Pampanga and another church in Cebu, Carcar. It is marked with a recessed pediment and entrance covered by a porch and flanked with massive bell towers.

During World War II, it was one of very few structures left standing while the rest of the town was leveled. A good part of the church, including the convento, was destroyed but the facade survived unscathed.

Pardo Church

The beautiful and imposing Church of Santo Tomas de Villanueva in Pardo, which is still part of Cebu City, just along the main road is such a sight. Originally a part of the matrix of San Nicolas, it became an independent parish in 1866.

The first church was made of light materials and was replaced by a second one but, unfortunately, it was destroyed in 1877 by a typhoon. It was made of stone and tabique pampango with nipa roofing and connected to the convento.

The current structure was started at about 1880, based on the plans of the Spanish engineer-architect, Domingo Escondrillas, adopted the Latin-Byzantine order for its facade noting that no other church in the district have this kind of architecture.

Its massive belfry is integrated into the center flanked by two smaller towers. When viewed from a distance, it looks like a fortress.
San Fernando Church

The Parish Church of San Isidro Labrador rests at the center of a spacious ground. Ever since it became an independent parish in 1858, the only religious structure that existed was made of light materials.

It was in only 1870 that the current church was started during the acuracy of Fray Miguel del Burgo, however, probably due to lack of funds, it was only finished in 1886. The belltowers, incongruous in size and made of cement were only added later. A coat of *paletada* used to cover the walls and facade but has been stripped. The interior has also been renovated and is now modern looking.

The style of the church is Gothic as one parish priest considered it to be serious and majestic for this type of building. It was designed by the same architect who did the church in Pardo.

The convento, made of stone in the lower level and upper parts of wood still exists but has been converted into a school.

Naga Church

The small but impressive Parish Church of San Francisco de Asis in Naga is a gem.

One who visits or just passes by this church can’t help but take a second look at the intricate geometric patterns and whimsical figures of cherubs playing musical instruments, human faces, rosettes and other floral designs on its pediment contrasted by its bare lower part. At it’s side, two columns are crowned with minaret like domes. According to Coseteng in her book “Spanish churches in the Philippines,” the heavy embellishments of the facade is reminiscent of Islamic and Mexican art called “tequitequi.”

Naga became an independent parish in 1829 and the church was built in 1839 based on the plans of the Augustinian Bishop Santos Gomez Marañon. During World War II, the belltower located at the left side, if facing the facade, a portion of the triangular pediment as well as the convent were destroyed. The current belfry and convent were added in 1979 and mid 70’s respectively.

Much of the interior has been renovated.
**Sibonga Church**

The Church of Nuestra Senora del Pilar de Zaragoza in Sibonga is just beside the provincial highway a few kilometers after Carcar and precedes Argao. Like Carcar, the convent is not directly attached to the main church building.

Originally a visita of Carcar in 1690, it became an independent parish in 1830. The first structure was temporary and the current one was built and finished probably between 1868 and 1881. The convent, on the other hand was built much earlier.

The style of the church is Gothic. A high main entrance dominates the facade flanked with two massive bell towers. The decorations are quite scant and the facade simple with the rosette at the pediment the only interesting detail sporting the Augustinian seal in wrought iron.

Inside, early 20th century paintings by the famed Cebuano painter Raymundo Francia mesmerizes the visitor. The ceiling of the side aisles has a painted version of the Carcar coffered ceiling woodwork.

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**Carcar Church**

Built on a hill with a good view of the coast, the Parish Church of Santa Catalina de Alejandria in the town of Carcar is one of the beautiful churches in Cebu. It is probably the second or the third structure to be built in the area. The current one was erected in 1860. Its original site was in Barrio Valadolid but was relocated here when it was burned during one of the many Moro slave raids.

The facade is Graeco–Roman with a massive arch that calls to mind the Muslim iwan. Its twin belfries topped by a minaret-like design, no doubt, Muslim inspired, is one of its distinguishing feature. The statues of the 12 apostles at the patio, with that of Judas located at a good distance were added later. It’s beautiful coffered ceiling at the interior is the only one of its kind in Cebu.
Dalaguete Church

The parish of Dalaguete was established in 1711 under the advocacy of San Guillermo de Aquitania. The current structure, made from coral blocks, was started in 1802.

Like Argao, the interior is richly decorated with ceiling paintings and a baroque-rococo style retablo that was added in 1802 - 1825. Two interesting details is the presence of a pair of facing tribunas, balconies located at the apse which is quite rare in Cebu’s churches. Its belfry also contains a clock, although not working anymore, another rarity in the province.

There are other interesting elements within the church grounds. A century old watchtower fronting it gives testament to its turbulent past when Moro slave raiders frequented the town. Now, this structure has been renovated. At the side of the church is also a small, probably, a mortuary chapel with bas reliefs. The coral stone arch at the cemetery is also memorable for it’s bas relief and inscriptions.

This church and that of Argao is similar in design from the form of the facade to the placement of the belltower as well as the attached convent that it is easy to confuse the two. Compared with the latter, the relieves are much simpler and fewer and the convent longer.

Argao Church

The Church of San Miguel Arcangel in Argao was established as early as 1599 and formally as a parish in 1733, is one of the interesting churches in the south not only because of its age (one side entrance has the year 1783 inscribed on it) but also because of its facade that is baroque in style introduced with rococo elements. While it is just simple, relieves of birds, cherubs and flowers give it interest.

The interior too is rich with its ceiling paintings and baroque retablo while its pipe organ was brought in from Mexico.

Unfortunately, due to an uncaring parish priest, the centuries old main retablo was painted gold, one of the capilla possa, was destroyed and the ancient coral stone arch of the cemetery was torn down so that his vehicle can enter.
Nueva Caceres Church

Just a few kilometers before reaching the town center of Oslob is the small Church of San Jose Labrador in Nueva Caceres, still a part of this municipality.

It has none of the imposing and grand architecture that defines the other structures but nevertheless, its simplicity is its defining element. Originally called Ivisan, it was formerly a visita of Sialo (present day Valladolid, Carcar) in 1599, and was transferred to Boljoon in 1690. It only became an independent parish in 1877 through a superior Decree. Because of the lack of priests that time, it was administered by the parish priest of Boljoon.

This church and the convent was constructed by the famous soldier-priest Fr. Julian Bermejo, the then parish priest of Boljoon at around 1812.

Like the Augustinian built churches in southeastern Cebu, it was part of a defense network against the Muslim slave raiders. A reminder of this dark past is the presence of a watchtower behind the church which was then the corner of a defensive wall that used to enclose the church.

Boljoon Church

The Church of the Nuestra Senora del Patrocinio in Boljoon is one of the oldest churches in the province. The first few structures were destroyed by Muslim slave raiders and the current one was started in 1783. Because of the threat of these raiders, the famous soldier priest, Fr. Julian Bermejo started to fortify this town by enclosing it with walls (the front wall was demolished by the Americans) and organized the townspeople. His series of watchtowers stretching from Carcar to Santander eventually repelled further raider incursions.

The facade is simple topped with a triangular pediment. Relieves of saints, floral and animal motifs decorate it. A short belltower is connected to the main building.
Samboan Church

The town of Samboan used to be part of the Tanjay (Negros) matrix but was separated as an independent parish in 1784 under the advocacy of San Miguel Arcangel. Located in the far off southwestern side of Cebu near its tip, the unassuming and plain looking facade of the church greets the weary traveler.

The first stone church, and the current one, was built only in 1842 under Fr. Romuludo Avila, a Secular. It’s facade is quite plain and the only point of interest is the royal coat of arms of Spain indicating that this was built through the King’s support, one of eight other churches in Cebu.

While the renovated convento detracts the viewer, there is a watchtower a few meters from the church overlooking the sea and below it is a coral stone stairway named Jacob’s Ladder.

Oslob Church

The Church of the Nuestra Senora de la Inmaculada Concepcion in Oslob. The current structure was started by Fr. Julian Bermejo in 1830 and was finished 18 years later.

The facade is simple in design with no elaborate embellishments except for a royal seal at the pediment and a few finials above it. Its massive belfry flanks its left. Originally, it has five levels but the topmost was destroyed by a typhoon and never rebuilt. The convent is attached at its right. Fronting the church is a small chapel and the entire complex is surrounded with it’s still original fence.

The church got damaged by a fire in 1955. However, the fire of 26 March 2008 razed the antique convento, one of very few in Cebu and built by the soldier-priest Fray Julian Bermejo. The interior was also badly damaged with the roof collapsing.

During these two disasters, the antique bas relief of the Immaculate Concepcion, one of the few treasures of the parish survived.
Malabuyoc Church

Originally part of Samboan, Malabuyoc was declared a separate parish in 1832 with San Nicolas de Tolentino as its patron saint.

Like the church in Samboan, it is made of coral stones and its facade, topped with a triangular pediment is again simple and decorated with a few bas reliefs. Its royal coat-of-arms, indication that its construction was supported by the King of Spain, and located just above the main portal has already deteriorated and rubbed off that it is so hard to discern the markings. The structure is cruciform. Side buttresses line its side.

Inside, there are no longer traces of the original retablo although the choir loft, supported by two pillars still exist. Two windows at its side, however, were opened up and made into side entrances.

The convento is located a few meters from the church but built in line with the facade. Unfortunately, the coral stone lower level was covered in cement and some renovations have been done. A lone watchtower is located a few meters from the facade.

Ginatilan Church

Ginatilan, originally part of Samboan, was declared a separate parish in 1847 with Fr. Juan Clemente, its first parish priest.

Construction of the cruciform church started in 1854 and finished in 1866. The belfry was added later, built in 1883 - 1890. Like its neighboring town of Samboan, the facade is bereft of any interesting ornamentation, with its builders preferring a rather austere front. The statue of its patron, San Gregorio Magno is located at the second level and just above the main portal.

It’s interesting structural component is, however, the beautiful belfry which is connected to the church with a camarín, its graduated tiers, tapering off and capped with a pointed roof. It’s mudejar type windows calls to mind the one in Pardo Church and gives one the impression that this was also used for defensive purposes.

Originally, the edifice was surrounded by walls as it was a fortified settlement but only the front part with its puerta marina and one rampart/watchtower remain to this day.

Nothing much has changed on the exterior part of the structure except for the incongruous portico and galvanized iron roofing.
Moalboal Church

The parish of Moalboal was declared in 1852 under the advocacy of San Juan Nepomuceno.

The church, made from coral stones, was started by Fr. Agustin Melgar and was finished 38 years later in 1890 by its second parish priest, Fr. Pedro Brigaudit.

The facade design follows the Badian template but executed more elegantly consisting of three tiers with its triangular pediment, a pair of round windows and three portals at the central part. Several bas reliefs as well as fluted columns makes the front interesting.

Of all the churches in Cebu, this is the only one that was abandoned due to building defects. In 1956, a major renovation was done. The church was expanded including a massive belfry at the top. The facade and rear of the structure were retained while the walls were taken down and replaced with cement. Due to the rusting of the reinforcing metal bars of the walls and columns, it expanded and created fissures that the building was abandoned. A modern structure was then built right beside it.

Badian Church

Badian was separated as a parish from Barili in 1825 under the advocacy of Santiago de Apostol. Its church is unique compared to the others in the island province with its squat and unusual porticoed facade with four quadrilateral columns supporting a triangular pediment. Simple floral bas reliefs decorate these and four jar shaped finials are found at each corner.

The original belfry, now built at its side, used to sit atop the pediment but was taken down in 1990 upon the advice of NHI to ease pressure on the two free columns.

The church still has its original and beautiful wooden retablo.
Dumanjug Church

Dumanjug was separated as an independent parish from Barili in 1854 under the advocacy of St. Francis of Assisi. It is one of the few beautiful churches constructed by the Seculars who administered the western side of Cebu stretching from Samboan in the south to Bantayan in the north. Its first parish priest was Fr. Matias Cabrera.

The church started out as a temporary structure made of wood and nipa. It was Fr. Doroteo Godinez who built the present stone church made from coral stones for 10 years and finished in 1864 with the help of the parishioners.

Dumanjug Church is one of eight structures in Cebu built with generous patronage of the King of Spain. This can be gleaned from the royal seal found at its facade. However, instead of the usual royal coat of arms as can be seen in the Cebu Cathedral, Samboan, Malabuyoc, Oslob, Argao, Boljoon and Dalaguete, it consists of the double headed eagle emblem of the Hapsburgs.

Its facade is quite richly ornamented with several floral motifs running down its columns.

San Remegio Church

San Remegio was separated from Bogo as an independent parish in 1864 with Fr. Ceferino Montecillo as its first parish priest.

The church, built during the curacy of Fr. Ygnacio Espina, now immortalized on the floor with a marble plaque, was still being built when Felipe Redondo’s book, Breve Resena, was published.

The structure originally faced the sea but in 1972, Fr. Diosdado Isobal renovated the church, closed the facade and made a new entrance at what used to be the back of the church.

San Juan Nepomucena is the patron saint.
Daanbantayan Church

Daanbantayan (also Daan Bantayan) used to be part of Bantayan Parish and it was separated through a declaration of a diocesan decree in 1858. It was under the administration of the Seculars.

While Felipe Redondo, in his book, *Breve Resena*, published in 1886 still recorded it as having timber and *tabique pampango* walls, wooden floors and cogon roofing, a cartouche above the main portal details the construction of the church in 1886 during the curacy of Fr. Feliciano Torres.

The three sided facade of the church is the only one of its kind in the province of Cebu with the ones flanking the central part angled. The position of the belfry is also unique as it recedes from the facade, a feature that is shared with another church in Marilao, Bulacan.

The interior has already been renovated with the wooden retablo discarded and replaced with a much simpler one.

Santa Rosa de Lima is the patron saint.

Bantayan Church

Bantayan, located in the island of the same name is the oldest parish in Cebu being the first to be established by the Augustinians in 1580. A well populated town, it has suffered frequent incursions by Muslim slave raiders. In fact, the church used to be within a walled settlement.

In 1603, it was handed to the Seculars and administered the towns of Daanbantayan (separated in 1858) and nearby villages in north Cebu as well as the island of Maripipi in Leyte. The current stone church was constructed in 1839-63 by Fr. Doroteo Andrada del Rosario.

Bantayan church is one of the most impressive churches in the province and in the country. It’s richly ornamented facade is a sight to behold with its bas relief of saints and floral motif. Along the walls of its nave, both interior and exterior are profuse with another roster of these stone carvings.

The town is also famous for its lenten processions with lifesized and mostly antique images being borne on carozzas.
Catmon Church

The town of Catmon was declared as a vicarage of Danao and was separated as a parish in 1835. Even before its separation, it was already administered by the Augustinian Recollects, first by Fray Miguel Martinez from his church in Danao.

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The original site of the church used to be in what is now known as Catmon Daan (Old Catmon) where, atop a hill overlooking the sea, only the walls and a watchtower of a fort remains. Here the first church was built but unfinished as it was then relocated to its present site at the current poblacion.

The current stone church was constructed by Fray Bernando Ybanez and was finished in 1875 during the incumbency of three other parish priests. Fray Francisco Vergara did the finishing touches. The interior has been remodeled but fortunately, it’s beautiful ceiling woodwork is still intact.

It is one of the few Spanish colonial era churches in Cebu that still has its attic located above the sacristy intact.

San Guillermo Hermitanio is the patron saint.

Sogod Church

The town of Sogod was declared as a separate parish in 1832 but its first parish priest was the one assigned in Parian (Cebu City) before the latter was downgraded into a visita. It was only in 1842 that it had its own priest, Fray Patricio Cudelia de San Jose who took charge until 1851.

Nothing is known about when the present structure was constructed. Felipe Redondo in his Breve Resena (1886) already mentioned about the stone structure including its parochial house or convento. It was badly damaged during World War II and a typhoon in 1951.

Today, its very simple facade is what remains of the original structure. At its front is a ruined watchtower or baluarte, testament to its dark past when Muslim slave raiders used to terrorize the seas.

Like the church in its neighboring town of Catmon, the one in Sogod is located at a high promontory that overlooks the sea.

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Santiago Apostol is the patron saint.
Poro Church

Poro, one of the 3 towns that are in the Camotes group of islands off Carmen was administered by the Jesuits as early as 1737. It was established as a separate parish only in 1847 under the advocacy of the Sto. Nino.

The parish was first held by Fr. Florentino Dalmacio, a Secular but was later turned over to the Augustinian Recollects for administration with Fray Nicolas Gonzales as parish priest.

A single naved church, it is made of coral stones with buttressed sides which, during a 20th century renovation was grazed off. Only the facade and walls are original while the interior has been modernized. The belfry is also a later addition.

The wooden convent that used to stand a few meters from the church has long been demolished and a modern concrete one was built at the side sporting the original hardwood flooring of the former.

Some of the bells of the church were distributed and can still be found in some chapels within Poro.

Danao Church

Danao was part of the original north Cebu Augustinian missions and was transferred to the care of the Augustinian Recollects in 1744.

Fray Manuel de Santa Barbara is credited with the building of the original stone structure around 1755. During World War II, it was damaged with only the facade and walls standing. Renovation was done right after but from 1981 - 85, a major renovation was done that greatly altered the church save for the facade and belfry.

The church is cruciform and has one of the beautiful facades in the province.

Santo Tomas de Villanueva is the patron.
Liloan Church

Liloan was established as a parish in 1845 under the advocacy of San Fernando del Rey with the Augustinian Recollect Fray Vicente Dolores as its first parish priest.

Originally a visita of Cotcot, it was under the care of the Jesuits in 1737 and even before they were expelled from all Spanish dominions, the town was returned to the Augustinians during the 1740s. Liloan was part of their early missions.

The current church was started in 1859 under Fray de Santa Lucia and was finished 21 years later. Wood used for the construction came from Leyte. The rectory, which used to stand near the rear end of the church was built six years earlier but was demolished in the 20th century.

This church has still extant cargo y data, record books that shows that the workers who built the edifice were paid and not a product of forced labor.

Compostela Church

Compostela was established in 1865 through a diocesan decree and was handled by the Augustinian Recollects who took charge of the northern eastern part of Cebu. The edifice was constructed by Fray Manuel Alonzo and was originally composed of a stone facade while the rest were made of bamboo and nipa.

The church was renovated and expanded in the 1970s to accommodate parishioners with the coral stones now made as decorative items within the church vicinity. Only the facade and a small portion, actually a pillar at the sacristy, remains of the stone structure.

St. James the Apostle is the patron saint.
Visita Iglesia Cebu Map

1. Cebu Cathedral
2. Naga Church
3. Sto. Nino Basilica
4. San Fernando Church
5. Boljoon Church
6. Carcar Church
7. Nueva Caceres Church
8. Sibonga Church
9. Oslob Church
10. Dalaguete Church
11. Pardo Church
12. Samboan Church
13. Argao Church
14. Boljoon Church
15. Sibonga Church
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17. Pardo Church
18. Samboan Church
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20. Cebu Cathedral
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22. Sto. Nino Basilica
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24. Boljoon Church
25. Carcar Church
26. Nueva Caceres Church
27. Sibonga Church
28. Oslob Church
29. Pardo Church
30. Samboan Church
31. Argao Church
To know more about the Catholic churches in Cebu, check out our coffee table book, *Balaanong Bahandi: Sacred Treasures of the Archdiocese of Cebu* published in 2009 on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Archdiocese. I was one of the principal photographers.

Each town is treated with write ups on its history and, of course, illustrated with beautiful images ranging from facade shots, architectural details, interiors as well as interesting parts not only of the church but also of the conventos, fortifications and other related structures.

This book is available only at the Cathedral Museum of Cebu.
Simbahan.net is devoted to Philippine Catholic religious colonial architecture like heritage churches, cemeteries, fortifications and parochial houses or what is colloquially known as *kumbento*. As much as possible, I highlight these as detailed as I can. The posts that you can read in the blog are based on actual field work, documentation and research.

Background and history, however, all depend on the references that I can find. All photographs, unless stated otherwise are personally taken *in situ*.

Check simbahan.net for additional downloadable PDF files.
Estan Cabigas is a multiawarded blogger and freelance photographer based in Makati City, the Philippines. A true blue Cebuano, he makes stunning images and meaningful photo stories. He has written for CNN Go and his photograph will be published in the May 2010 issue of the National Geographic Magazine.

He is available for photo projects, assignments and talks on Photography as well as contributes travel related features and articles with beautiful images.

To know more about him and his photography, visit his portfolio site at estancabigas.com.