

Augustinian Recollect History of Siquijor (1794-1898)¹

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ABSTRACT

During the Spanish rule Siquijor Island was under the *alcalde mayor* of Bohol in 1864, after being part of Cebu for decades. The lone town of Siquijor was separated from Dumaguete and created into a parish in 1781. It was handed over to the Recollects in 1794 and in 1800 it had 5,000 inhabitants. The growth of Christianity finds its roots in the intense systematic missionary activity by Augustinian Recollects who established four more parishes. They constructed stone churches, belfries, *kumbentos*, roads, municipal edifices and even water depositories. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the towns underwent cholera and smallpox outbreaks, typhoons, Moro piratical raids, locust plagues and earthquakes (1886, 1897). During famine, the Recollects distributed corn among parishioners. Juan Félix de la Encarnación, author of the iconic *Diccionario español bisaya, bisaya español*, served Siquijor for thirty years. The huge *kumbento* of Lazi was completed by Toribio Sánchez in 1891.

Keywords: Augustinian Recollects, Church History, Mission, Siquijor, Negros Oriental

Date Submitted: July 24, 2019
Date Revised: December 16, 2019
Date Accepted: December 29, 2019

Siquijor is an island of about 340 square kilometers in extension. It is situated between Negros, Bohol and Cebu. It belonged to the civil province of Cebu until 1864 when it became part of the province of Bohol. In 1892, on account of the petitions filed by the *gobernadorcillos* [town mayors] and the parish priests of the five towns and parishes of Siquijor, it was annexed to the province of Negros Oriental despite the objections posed by Spanish colony of Bohol. In the ecclesiastical sphere, Siquijor was the sole parish in the town of the same name. It was created as an independent parish, separated from that of Dumaguete in 1781. In 1794, Siquijor was handed over to the Augustinian Recollects.

¹Angel MARTÍNEZ CUESTA, *Historia de los Agustinos Recoletos*, vol II: El Siglo XIX (Madrid 2015) 718-726.

In 1800, the five thousand inhabitants of Siquijor were attended to by Father Alonso de los Dolores. His parish administration lasted until 1831 when he was promoted to the post of prior provincial in Manila. His successor Father Juan Félix de la Encarnación was parish priest in 1832-1849 and 1852-1861. During the terms of Alonso de los Dolores and Juan Félix, Siquijor suffered from endless Moro invasions. In 1818, twenty natives were hauled off as captives. But the population of Siquijor tripled in spite of the Moro raids and eventually went out of isolation wherein the island was wallowing in for years. For the first time, the people received continuous catechetical instruction and acquired the stable first civil structures.

Father Alonso de los Dolores finished the church edifices that were started decades before by Father José Fernández de Septién who was parish priest of Dumaguete from 1764 to 1776. Both the church edifice and the *kumbento* constituted the defense bulwark. Father Juan Félix provided stability in the parish, which fact attracted the attention of the government and the Recollect community on Siquijor. It further encouraged the creation of the parishes of Canoan (present-day Larena) in 1836 and Lazi in 1957, which substantially improved their religious situation, covering both north and south of the island. Apart from attending to a very forsaken area, the parish of Lazi included the pastoral care of a region where the fugitives from justice thrived and the use of arms was frequently used.

During his almost thirty years of stay in Siquijor, Father Juan Félix traversed the coastal areas and valleys, spreading the seeds of the Gospel, exploring their geography and studying their language, their plants and their customs. All that was reflected in his superb *Diccionario español bisaya, bisaya español*, which for so many years became the inseparable companion of missionaries. It had three editions (1851-1852, 1866 and 1885). Later on, the parish of San Juan was created in 1863 southwest of the island and that of María in 1880 in the east.

Parishes of Siquijor

Parish	Old Name	Year Founded	Parish Matrix	Patron Saint
Siquijor	Siquijor	1781	Dumaguete	San Francisco de Asís
Larena	Canoan	1836	Siquijor	San Vicente Ferrer
Lazi	Tigbauan	1857	Siquijor	San Isidro Labrador
San Juan	Macapilay	1863	Siquijor	San Agustín
María	Camiña	1880	Canoan ²	Nuestra Señora de la Providencia

The geographical nearness among the curacies, their isolation and small number as well as the apostolic zeal and affection for their own parish of so many ministers facilitated the communication with each other. This in turn favorably resounded in quality of their religious life and their apostolic service. They frequently visited each other; they helped one another in their necessities, at least in the last lusters of the nineteenth century. They confessed to another every fifteen days, a luxury that was not possible in other areas of the Recollect apostolate. A great number of the ministers stayed for many years in the island. They had felt great affection for the island and they exerted effort for the spiritual and material wellbeing of the natives. They constructed churches and convents in every town and in the most important villages. Father Timoteo Gonzalo, parish priest of Canoan, inaugurated in María a chapel dedicated to Saint Rita, on 13 November 1861, eleven years before it was decreed as a town (7 February 1872)

and twenty years before it was created into a parish (6 August 1880). The same thing was done by Father Eustaquio Ruiz in the village of San Antonio. Some parish priests invested in these edifices part of their personal savings and everyone collaborated with material improvement and even for the economic welfare of the faithful. In 1895 and 1896, the people of Lazi pitched in 2,780 pesos for the purchase of 780 quintales of galvanized sheets for the roofing of the convent.

The churches were more or less well-endowed with images, ornaments, and sacred vessels. Father Víctor García and Father Balbino Díaz were extra cautious. The former acquired an image of our Lady of Consolation for the church of San Juan. The parish of Siquijor had an organ since time immemorial. It was restored by Father Francisco Gómez towards the end of the nineteenth century. Almost all the churches had sets of bells, which were blest in solemn rites with the multitudinous attendance of the faithful. Siquijor had its six bells blest in July 1882. The bells of Canoan and San Juan had been blest the year before.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the churches of Siquijor, Lazi and María were first-class, all of them were made of stones. The other two were third-class churches. Of the convents, only that of Lazi can be classified as first-class. Even up to these days, the convent attracts a lot of attention on account of its dimension or size, the quality of its wood, the arches of its entrance and the expanse of its gallery. The convent of Lazi was the work of Father Toribio Sánchez in 1882-1893. Without a doubt, it is the most representative edifice of the Order in the whole island. The convents of Canoan and Siquijor are second-class, meaning to say, they were made of *mampostería* [rubblework] and *tabiquepampango* in the upper floor. The convents of María and San Juan are third-class. During the earthquake of 1897, the economic crisis of the years 1894-1896 and political circumstances in the last years of the century prohibited their substitution with other more solid materials. Father Manuel Guillorme had gathered all the materials to start the construction of the new church of Canoan.

Father Toribio Sánchez, like all his other confreres, were the least worried about making their work known or publicized. Nevertheless, through sheer luck, he had a successor, who took the trouble of doing justice to his work:

Due to his activity Lazi has the best edifices—church, *casa tribunal* [municipal hall] and *kumbento*—in the island. As soon as he took charge of the administration of this parish, he worked on the church project. In four years (1882-1886) the whole church nave and part of the transept on the epistle side are made of rubblework. The belfry, which is solid until the second tier, is likewise made of rubblework. In due time the lateral altars were done. Once the church was finished, he started the great work of the new *kumbento*. And he had the satisfaction of seeing it finished in December 1891. However, he could enjoy it for two and a half years only because his illness constrained him to relinquish [the post] and leave for Manila. As soon as he finished the *kumbento*, he enlarged the *casa tribunal* and erected a *cota* made of *tablilla* which exists till now. He carried out all these works with a lot of his personal savings and very insignificant were sums of money invested in them because the whole town, including the young boys and girls, volunteered to render manual work and lent their *carabaos* and carts for the transport of construction materials. The same population continued doing so

since the undersigned was placed in charge of the parish, because they worked on a voluntary basis and contributed cash in order to put the convent into perfection in whatever way possible and [they have] painted it. This work was finished towards the end of 1895.²

At the arrival of the missionaries, the island was backward with a population scattered and left to fend for themselves, with no schools nor roads to speak of and with a very primitive agriculture. Little by little the most visible deficiencies were remedied. One of the most noticeable was the dearth of roads. Between 1872 and 1874, Father Estaquio Ruiz constructed roads, eleven meters wide, from Siquijor to Canoan and to San Juan. During those time periods, Father Ramón Eraso opened the road from San Juan to Lazi, and at the end of this period (19th century) he replaced the age-old road that connected Canoan to Talingting (present-day Enrique Villanueva town) with another road much wider but a third shorter. The construction of these roads turned out laborious as they traversed almost always rocky terrain and crossed rivers and rivulets. On the first occasion they were forced to use gunpowder a lot to open roads. Then there was a vital need to construct bridges. Father Manuel Guillorme built thirteen bridges in 1897 between Canoan and Enrique Villanueva. The road that went almost around the island served as the basis for the first modern road of the province constructed by the Americans at the outset of the twentieth century

Another urgent need was the supply of potable water. Except for San Juan, the towns had deep wells whose water was often healthful. For a long time, the inhabitants of the capital drank turbid water which was fetched from a deep well in an adjoining *barangay*. Only towards the end of 1894 were they able to avail themselves of abundant and crystal-clear water, thanks to the determination of their parish priest. In spite of the apathy of the civil authorities and without having recourse to the services of the *polistas* [workers in communal projects], Father Francisco Gómez channeled the water of the “large spring named Songculan,” and conducted it by means of tubes made of bamboo canes six kilometers long up to the church plaza, where he constructed a depository made of rubblework equipped with eight spouts. Father Gervasio Margallón did the same thing in Canoan (1891-1893) and Father Manuel Guillorme in Lazi (1894).

Another sector that benefited most from the busy activity of the Recollect parish priests was education. The parish priests of the capital town of Siquijor started it. Father Víctor García followed suit in Lazi in 1857-1868. Father Ramón Eraso in 1863-1864 and 1865-1881 and Father Balbino Díaz in 1887-1897 in San Juan. Father Víctor exerted special effort in trying to convince the parents on the importance of education. Every day he gave his Mass servers and sacristans catechism classes. The *casas tribunales* or municipal halls were likewise the object of their attention.

In the pastoral sphere it is worth highlighting the zeal of Father Víctor García in Lazi, a new town with quarrelsome people coming from other places. His successor recalls the diligence and time he devoted to catechesis, preaching and the confessional.

²“*Cosas notables de la parroquia de Lazi*, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Marcilla, Navarra, Spain [AHPM], Legajo 56, folder 2.

Similarly, he was vigorous in correcting abuses and confronting the town braggarts' brazenness. The people welcomed his corrections because he knew how apply them with tenderness and supported them with the solicitude with which he helped them in their material needs. "Every year," goes on writing Patricio Adell, "during harvest time he purchased abundant corn and, as it was already known, in May and June all the residents went to the priest and, as much as possible he gave them advice, even as he fed them. He also bought rice as much as his money could afford, since this rice distribution served as his gift for the ill people."³ Years later, Father Gaudencio Marqués imitated his example in Canoan in 1885-1890.⁴ Other priests fomented agriculture with the introduction of crops and new methods. They acclimatized the coconuts, which strange as it seems, were unheard of in Siquijor. They earnestly promoted the production of abaca fibers in 1864 and plantation of coffee in 1880.⁵ Patricio Adell constructed a channel for the irrigation of fields. When he left his parish in 1874, this same priest could boast of the fact that not one couple was left canonically unmarried.

Generally, the religious ministers enjoyed peace and could do their work with great independence. The civil authorities were far-off and rarely showed themselves in Siquijor. Although they were of rustic customs and strong bad habits of old, the inhabitants were docile. Even Mother Nature was propitious to them. The typhoons were seldom present. Historical sources only recall two important storms. The typhoon of 25 December 1874 destroyed the corn plantations of Lazi and razed ninety-seven houses to the ground. Two years later, another one pulled down one hundred four houses in San Juan and wrought havoc on its public buildings.⁶ Famine became more frequent. The island was self-sufficient. It produced corn, rice and edible root crops which the inhabitants needed. They earned profits from the sale of cloth and carabaos in Cebu and Bohol. But the practice of exporting corn to Bohol during harvest time had some negative repercussion among the inhabitants. In 1880, hunger was felt in a special manner in María. In 1886, locusts devastated the fields of Canoan. In 1894-1896, the plague affected the whole island constraining the natives to emigrate [or] subsist by eating fruits and wild root crops, with which they could hardly survive."⁷

Cholera and smallpox were, as in other islands, almost customary visitors. "At the outset of November 1872, smallpox commenced in this island and ceased in June 1873," according to reports by the parish priest of Siquijor. The victims went up to 1,208: 326 in Siquijor; 275 in San Juan; 276 in Lazi; 150 in María and 181 in Canoan.⁸ The cholera outbreak of 1883 was apparently more benign. In Canoan, it lasted two months and a half, from 18 July to 14 September, cutting down the lives of thirty adults and six young children. On 30 September 1883, the *Te Deum* was sung in the whole island as thanksgiving for the end of the epidemic. Between November 1889 and February 1890, similar outbreaks of cholera and smallpox brought about countless deaths in the whole

³Patricio ADELL, "Adiciones a la necrología del. Padre Víctor García, Archivo General de la Orden de Agustinos Recoletos, Rome, Box A80, Legajo 0.

⁴ Archivo Histórico Provincial, Marcilla, Navarra, box 56 no. 5.

⁵"Cosas notables de la parroquia de Siquijor," AHPM, Legajo 56, No. 2.

⁶"Cosas notables de la parroquia de San Juan," AHPM, Legajo 56, No. 2.

⁷"Cosas notables de la parroquia de San Juan," AHPM, Legajo 56, No. 2.

⁸"Notables de Siquijor," AHPM Legajo 56, No. 2.

island. In San Juan, the number of cholera victims rose up to twenty while smallpox deaths numbered 478, a great number of whom were children.⁹

The local chroniclers recorded only two earthquakes. The first tremor took place in July 1886. Apparently, it caused great destruction. The earthquake of 21 September 1897 was more violent; it affected the entire island and its aftershocks continued until 9 November. In San Juan, it destroyed the newly-constructed church completely. In María, “the bells tolled by themselves and it caused cracks in the *cota* of the new church in its four corners: a vertical line two *varas* [roughly 15 meters] long and one centimeter wide.” The bells in the capital tolled and cracks were observed “in two arches of the *kumbento*.”¹⁰

⁹“*Cosas notables de la parroquia de San Juan*,” AHPM, Legajo 56, No. 2.

¹⁰“*Cosas notables de María, Siquijor y San Juan*.”