

SIQUIJOR HERITAGE MUSEUM INAUGURATION  
PARISH OF LAZI, SIQUIJOR  
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[To our Parish Priest and Episcopal Vicar Rev. Fr. Victor Fontejon, Monsignor Robert Bongoyan and the Clergy, Local Officials of Lazi, Siquijor, Honored guests, Parishioners of the Diocese of Dumaguete Vicariate of St. Paul—San Isidro Labrador Parish, Friends in the Arts and Culture community, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.]

Being invited to speak before a religious community—especially in this mystical enchanting and highly-spiritual island of Siquijor situated at the heart of the Philippines—is truly a thrilling experience for someone like me whose daily itinerary is to shun away the hustle and bustle of Manila, traveling to and from the offices of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts at Intramuros, Manila and the National Historical Institute at Kalaw, side by side with my other appointments, meetings and speaking engagements. What is so thrilling then? Without prejudice, my speech will not end without me mentioning the much-publicized, “other face” of Siquijor.

Siquijor’s reputation for being a place of sorcery, black magic and generally strange people and rituals may be as old as the oldest churches here, or even older. The daring tourist who ventures in the locality may expect to land on a dark, eerie-place with weird-looking people and strange ways. But today, I, like many others, experienced otherwise. A pageantry of the rich culture and Christian belief is all that is here. The abundance of Christianity here could be traced to its proximity to Bohol and Cebu, whose residents were among the first Filipinos to embrace the faith.

In the light of our celebration today as we commemorate the 148<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary of San Isidro Labrador Parish here in Lazi, Siquijor, it is truly a grand celebration of faith not just of Siquijodnons but of the entire Filipino people. The convent of Lazi, which I consider the twin cultural treasure of the Lazi Church, is another jewel of this province.

In a nutshell, let me trace history in a minute or two by mentioning the glorious past of this community. Lazi, formerly Tigbawan, was the third parish established in the island of Siquijor through the recommendation of Fray Juan Felix de la Encarnacion in 1857. Built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the church is constructed of coralstone blocks abundant here in the Visayas. The simple structure is long and squat. Its severe, box-like nave connects to a plain façade. Niches flank the main entrance, naïf pilasters accentuate three unaligned windows on the façade that evokes an architectural pediment.

Today, in the words of Professor Regalado Trota Jose in his book “Simbahan: Church Art in Colonial Philippines 1565-1891”, he utters “Rare is the church which has preserved its original flooring...An intact wooden floor is a great rarity. One must go all the way to Lazi, Siquijor to savor such a marvel.”

In 1974, the National Historical Institute declared the Lazi Church and Convent as national Historical Landmarks of the Philippines. The National Commission for Culture and the Arts declared both structures as one of the Most Outstanding Heritage Churches in the Philippines in 2000. The National Museum, on the other hand, declared both the church and convent as National Cultural Treasures. Today, both structures are in the first four priority churches for technical and financial assistance by the NCCA.

Taken verbatim from the words of Faisal Alih, “When a group of structures like the Lazi Church and Convent exudes the craft, skills and expertise of the locals, and thus becoming an outstanding example of local and colonial architecture, such becomes not just a part of the propagation of the catholic religion but also the development of the Siquijodnons as a whole, that is, their culture, social life, dreams, aspirations and strength as a people.” Indeed, these two historical landmarks etched the life of Siquijodnons in more ways than one.

As we formally inaugurate the Siquijor Heritage Museum, let me send my sincerest appreciation to the people behind this momentous event. First, to Rev. Fr. Victor A. Fontejon, parish priest and Episcopal Vicar, together with the whole clergy and the Siquijor Heritage Foundation for leading the way in the attainment of this vision. Indeed, the dream is now a reality. Second, to the committees involved and the local government officials of your town for the undying guidance you have given this worthy cause. Most especially, to the parish people for the support you have extended your parish. For without the concerted efforts of everyone, this would be impossible.

The creation of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) on April 2, 1992 through Republic Act No. 7356 marked the advent of a conducive environment for the development and dissemination of Philippine culture and established a national endowment fund for culture and the arts and other purpose. The Commission paved the way for the formation of the National Committee on Museums (NCOM), the official institutional representative to UNESCO’s International Council of Museums (ICOM) to professionalize museum systems and to support them in undertakings that seek to promote Philippine cultural heritage. As we unfold another chapter in the history of Siquijor, I fervently hope for more success of this church, convent and your “newest baby”, the Siquijor Heritage Museum—most especially for the Siquijodnons, whose sense of devotion is immeasurable and whose passion for service to God and man is incomparable.

As a historian, I believe that it is my humble way to connect the remnants of the past to the realities of the present and express it in a manner well-understood by all. To talk about museums would mean to talk about a span of more than a hundred years. You may have built an annex building of this museum. But still our time for the historical background of museums is not enough. I am sure you will not allow me to expound that long.

At this juncture, I extend my sincerest gratitude on behalf of the NCCA as I take active part in the unfolding of this history—not just of the San Isidro Labrador Parish—but of the Philippine museum history in general. In recent years, museums have become cultural animators and social reformers at different levels of Philippine museum history. Conditions of government support for the arts, freedom of artistic expression, and private patronage of the arts provided conducive environment for the museums’ growth and transformation. Museums will continue to exist and evolve as long as they provide meaning to people and uplift their lives.

Today, I found the meaning and purpose of everything I delved about this morning. Siquijor—the church, the convent and the museum—are not just architectural heritage sites which we should all be proud of as a nation. It is a journey. It is a destination. Above all, it is a window to the past and a door to the future.

Congratulations to the San Isidro Labrador Parish for this notable endeavor and may it serve its purpose of bringing forth the words of God to the people through culture and arts.

Thank you and mabuhay po tayong lahat!

(Read for Mr. Ocampo by Architect German Torero, Member, National Board of the NCCA)