



*Photo by Norman Posecion taken at 3 AM on Good Friday, 2013 before the start of the 'Pagtaltal' procession with the Milky Way lighting up the skies above.*

## History and Mysteries of Miag-ao Church: An interview with Msgr. Claudio S. Sale

by

**Jonathan R. Matias**

Sulu Garden, Miag-ao, Iloilo

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with

Arjun P. Palmos and Jacob Adrian Lorella

I have always wanted to know more about Miag-ao Church beyond the often rehashed trivia written in travel blogs and the bland descriptions of the church in Wikipedia and similar type of information sources.

I always considered any house of worship like a living being. It has a colorful, complicated past and uncertain future. It has mysteries and legends. Its daily life has a rhythm of its own, a dynamic personality being shaped slowly by the changing times and the people.

Miag-ao Church is very much alive. Only if its sandstone walls could talk. What stories we would hear from the many centuries that have passed and the tens thousands who whispered stories within its wall. Of stories and gossips, of intrigues and of pure religious expressions of the faithfuls.



*Monsignor Claudio Sale, photo by Miagao Hits.*

Revolution of 1898, fire again during World War II and the earthquake of 1948. Over the next four years, I met Monsignor Sale a few more times, but mostly during church functions or briefly on social occasions. He christened my youngest daughter, Kristine. That event was memorable because the eye of the typhoon was above Miag-ao precisely at the time of the christening. The daytime sky was so dark, the winds and rain all of sudden died down, and the stillness of the day was so palpable and eerie as the eye of the storm lingered in Miagao for perhaps an hour. But, the christening went on without a pause.

I left Mia-gao in December 1999. By the time I had returned in 2012, Monsignor Sale was already living in retirement in his home town of San Miguel

Monsignor Sale was the parish priest of Miag-ao Church for 17 years and been in the midst of the restoration that culminated in its designation as a UNESCO Heritage Site in December 11, 1993. Not many in Miagao know that he received his master's degree in archaeology in Spain and perhaps in our generation the most knowledgeable person about the Church. I thought that an interview with Monsignor Sale would answer some of the questions that had bothered me over

The Facebook post by 'Bobot' Montealto (Miagao Hits) in December 22, 2014 on the subject of the 55th Sacerdotal Anniversary of Monsignor Claudio S. Sale made me pause. (Frankly, I did not know what sacerdotal meant and had to look it up in the dictionary which is defined as "of or relating to priesthood." Just in case you didn't either, now you know!). If you might wish to read that post, just click for a copy [HERE](#).

The FB post made me remember a chance meeting with Monsignor Sale in 1995. I was new in Miag-ao, working on a special project for my company in New York. I took some time off one afternoon for a leisurely walk around the Church and met Monsignor Sale for the first time. He was gracious enough to take me on a tour of the church, the altar and belfries. Monsignor talked animatedly about the restorations that had transpired over the years to bring the church back to its original grandeur after enduring fire during the Philippine

the years about many 'urban legends' related to the Church. In particular, I was interested in knowing if there were secret tunnels from the Church to the cemetery and to the watch tower called Cotta in Baybay.

I asked my friend, Arjun P. Perez, who was studying law in Central Philippines University (Iloilo City) to take a day or two off during his Christmas vacation to find Monsignor Sale in the town of San Miguel. Finally, an appointment was made and Arjun went off to San Miguel, accompanied by Jacob Adrian Lorella from Marillac Academy. A series of interviews ensued altogether lasting a total of 12 hours over several days from January to April.

Monsignor Sale insisted during the interviews that no photographs or video were to be taken and that no sound recording devices to be used. It was reminiscent of 1940 movies when journalists and private detectives still used a notepad and pen. I was sure that Arjun and Jacob wished they learned short-hand before that first interview on January 6, 2015. It was a challenging five hours, writing as fast as they could while Monsignor Sale answered a list of questions I had prepared before the interviewing team left for San Miguel. The guys came back with cramped hands after the long session. A few more meetings followed and then the arduous task of transcribing from their hand-written notes in Hiligaynon to English for me. Monsignor was able to read the transcripts of the interview on Black Saturday and finally approved the text you are about to read today.

The following are the highlights of the interview that touched subjects that are probably unknown to most of the faithfuls of Miag-ao. I hope that this gives all of us a greater appreciation of Miag-ao Church and how intricate its 'life' had been.

I have yet to meet Monsignor Sale. There will be time enough to do so after today, Easter Sunday.

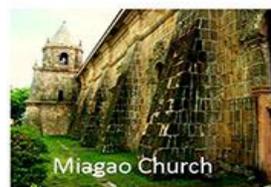
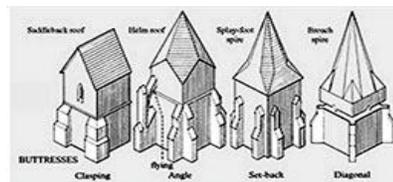
Interviewer: Arjun P. Perez [APP]

**PAPP: Monsignor, can you please give us an overall view of Miag-ao Church?**

*Monsignor:* At the outset, church is not just about the structure. The Church is actually about the people of God. Miag-ao church is over 200 years old. It celebrated its bicentennial in the year 1997. One of the baroque churches in the Philippines, yes, but Miag-ao Church is not a fortress church. It is a misconception to call Miag-ao Church as a fortress church although it may look like one.

**APP: Why is that so Monsignor?**

*Monsignor:* The impression may have arisen because of the huge buttresses of the Church. If you take a look at it, the Church has 7 stone buttresses on each side. These serve as "Contra Puertes" of the church meaning, these massive buttresses were constructed and designed to reinforce and



**Examples of buttresses found in European churches**



withstand earthquakes and typhoons, but not for any military purpose. So, it is wrong to claim that Miag-ao church is a fortress church.

**APP: There any other church that stands like Miag-ao church?**

*Monsignor:* Yes the one in Patnongon, Antique as far as the relief in the façade is concerned. The façade of the Patnongon Church also shows St. Christopher carrying the child Jesus just like in Miagao.

**APP: Monsignor, what specific and unique feature of an Augustinian-built church?**

*Monsignor:* Augustinian-built churches have a prominent Santo Niño image at the facade or at the main altar. That is because Santo Niño is the patron of the Augustinian congregations. The presentation of this image may be expressed in many ways.

**APP: In the case of Miag-ao church, where is the image of Santo Niño?**

*Monsignor:* Have you seen the central figure of the church's facade? It is the bas relief of St. Christopher carrying the child Jesus (Santo Niño) on his shoulder. The sculpture in the pediment narrates the popular legend of St. Christopher who was tasked to carry people across the river where there was no bridge. Only to find out that one of them, an unusually heavy child was Jesus Christ.

**APP: Monsignor, let's talk about the belfries. What where the towers for?**

*Monsignor:* The towers were part of the architectural design of the Church. That was common during those times. For me, it stands for the authority of the Church. It could also be watch post at the time of raids of Moros which was prevalent during those years. But, surely, it has to hold the belfries at the higher level so that the people can hear the bells. Those bells express the voice of God calling them to worship and also a medium for an emergency call.

**APP: Why where two belfries built unequal in height?**

*Monsignor:* No one really knows. I had done some research on this issue but no information was available in the archives. As far I know, when the church was finished in 1797, the left tower was lower than the right. Then it was leveled to make them equal in height years later. Nothing really significant about it.

**APP: Monsignor, it is commonly believed that there is a tunnel in one of the belfries of the Church that connects down to either the Capilla in the cemetery or the other watch tower in Baybay. Is there really a subterranean structure down there?**

*Monsignor:* There was no truth on that. When I started the restoration of the Church, I actually ordered an excavation of floor of the towers. And there was none. What I discovered at the bottom of the right tower when you're facing the church was a baptismal holy water depository. This is a common structure found in churches, especially those with baptismal fonts.

**APP: So, There is no tunnel?**

*Monsignor:* I want to make it clear; there is no tunnel in the Church. In fact I made it available for the public to see so as to stop speculation about the existence of the tunnel. There was even a legend about hidden treasures. There is none. I personally supervised the search for the 'tunnel.' What I found was a depository walled by tiles in quadrilateral form and about a meter and a half deep. 'I'm afraid that one day people will just start to



*Miagao Church illuminated by fireworks during Salakayan Festival. Photo by Norman Posecion.*

excavate the church ground thinking and believing that there's a hidden treasure. The church may collapse due to soil movement. That was why we have to end this speculation. Again, there is no tunnel. There is no hidden treasure.

**APP: Monsignor, let us go to the renovation of the church. Give us the idea about it?**

*Monsignor:* During the entire existence of the church, it had been burned three times. Notably the church was burned during World War II. What remained standing were the walls, facade and belfries. The stone walls were then plastered with cement mortars. When the National Historical Institute spearheaded the reconstruction and rehabilitation work, the first thing they did was to peel off the cement plaster on the exterior wall surface. This was then followed by the installation of the roof. It must be noted that I insisted that the roofing was to be elevated 2 meters higher than its original roofing for ventilation purposes. The roof has very strong and solid trusses. After the roofing was completed, we started to work on the ceiling. Then after the ceiling, the cement on the interior wall was peeled off to reveal the natural yellow sandstones of which the walls were built..

The concept of the design of the exterior wall was taken from the details of the facade's design. As you can see, the tassel and trimmings, the plaster was all consistent with the architectural design of the facade. That is what you call continuity of design.

**APP: How about the flooring?**

*Monsignor:* I discovered that the original flooring of the church was buried 23 inches deep. We therefore took out the soil and other materials to recover the original and correct floor level of the Church.

**APP: Did you discover anything unusual?**

*Monsignor:* There were debris like burnt wood, broken jar, stone blocks and particularly two skeletons buried on each side of the entrance to the sanctuary.

**APP: Who do you think were these people? Were there markers of their identity?**

*Monsignor:* Maybe they were prominent people at the time. No, there were no markers or any way to identify them. Maybe these two had important contributions to the Church. They may be the priests, cabezas or town captains from a long time ago. Why I say this? Just like in Jaro Cathedral the "Capitan" of the village at the time of the construction of the Church was buried at the front of the left side of the altar of the cathedral.

**APP: So what was the original flooring of the church?**

*Monsignor:* Well, it was stone-bricks. That was the common flooring at the time. But you know, the stone bricks are huge stones. This is normal in the flooring design of churches. Why? That is to avoid soil movement and to serve as the foundation. This is even stronger than the "BUHOS" we have now.

**APP: At present, Monsignor, what is the finished flooring?**

*Monsignor:* After renovation, the flooring now is finished with 60 cm x 60 cm marble slabs shipped from Romblon and Bulacan. The pinkish marble came from the quarries of Bulacan while the ordinary grayish marble was from Romblon. You have to remember that before the work had started, the workers had to locate the original floor level of the church and they had to excavate about twenty-three inches.

**APP: That was a lot of work, Monsignor?**

*Monsignor:* In fact, I personally supervised the work. The workers had to change the entire thing whenever I am not contented or impressed with the results. I had to be around to watch them working so that I can revise whatever needs to be modified. Good that all the workers were able to adjust and adapt to my work standards. Most of the works were done by the local craftsmen of Miagao.

**APP: Monsignor, what else were renovated?**

*Monsignor:* Renovation, rehabilitation and reconstruction of Miagao did not only happen during my time. You have to take note that during the Japanese occupation, Miagao church was burned. When Liberation came, Msgr. Enojo led the effort of reconstructing the church. That was a huge task for Msgr. Enojo and the people of Miagao to bring back the glorious structure of the church.

**APP: What came next, Monsignor?**

*Monsignor:* As I was emphasizing to you even before our off-the-record interview that I fear that many works may be attributed to me which were not really mine. In all fairness, Msgr. Javillo also had a remarkable contribution to the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the Church. During his time, Msgr. Javillo put his attention on the massive restoration and reconstruction of the facade. Most of the rehabilitation work on the facade was done during the term of Msgr. Javillo. So, to be safe, it was not only me who had exerted efforts to restore, rehabilitate and reconstruct Miagao Church. All priests, during their term in Miagao, had their own significant contribution to what Miagao Church looks like now.

**APP: How about the faithfuls?**

*Monsignor:* Yes, people of Miag-ao were very supportive and cooperative with me. I never had any sleepless nights when I started the renovations of the Church. The people were so generous. Imagine the fund we needed to sustain the project? It was millions of pesos, but I had no problem raising that huge amount because the people were kind-hearted. In fact, we organized a reconstruction committee to work specifically on the renovation and improvement of the interior of the Church. This committee was headed by Col. Solomon Flores. This committee had played an indispensable role in progress of the work during those times. Col. Flores was so unselfish both with his resources and time. The people of Miag-ao should thank Nong Solomon for this.



*Simbang gabi. From Facebook photo by Ernik Janik*

**APP: Monsignor, how about the altar. How does the original design of the altar looked like?**

*Monsignor:* No documents were available to attest to the original design and structure of the altar. Before the work on the altar started, I researched in San Agustin Library in Manila but unfortunately no materials were available to speak of how the altar's original design was. It was actually a challenge on my part to come up with the design of the altar since the next work after the walls and the floor was the

altar. I commissioned a well-known group of architects from Manila to come up with the design of the altar. To make the long story short, they had started with the design and after a while they submitted to me their proposal. But, modesty aside, I was not convinced of the design. So, I decided to slow down with the work on the altar. There was no progress about this for couple of months.

My plan was to finish the altar in the year 2000 to dedicate our Church to the Lord's 2000th birthday. But, you know, God was so good. While I was conducting a mass in Palaca, a vision on how the altar should look like appeared to me. I hurriedly went home to the convent and started

drawing the idea that appeared to me. I know it was God's work. Yes, I was able to come up with a concept of the design and was able to translate that into a drawing. I immediately called the architects in Manila to inform them of what happened. I gave them my drawing and they started to work on a technical design for the altar. And behold, when they submitted to me the final layout of the design, it was so perfect. The vision was perfectly translated into that piece of paper.

**APP: So, what happened next?**

*Monsignor:* We started talking now about the budgetary requirement, the time frame within which the project has to be finished and so on and so forth. So I started convening the different committees for a consultative meeting and tried to solicit their support. I am very happy that no one objected to the plan though it will cost us millions of pesos. Everybody seemed to be positive and enthusiastic about it. To make it short, I had a signed a contract with the firm and the work on the altar had started.

**APP: Any problems along the way?**

*Monsignor:* Nothing. The contract stipulated that I shall pay the firm in installment. I always paid them even earlier than the deadline. I never had any problem with the fund. Our people were so kind. I am so thankful of that. I never had any problem.

**APP: So, the altar was finished on time?**

*Monsignor:* Yes and we dedicated that in year 2000 in honor of the Lord's 2000th Birthday.

**APP: What are the materials used for the altar?**

*Monsignor:* It is a special kind of cement then it was plated with gold. Why gold plated? I followed what I saw in in the church near the Mall of Asia. I visited that church and I was so impressed by the altar. So, I incorporated that to our own altar. If you take a closer look at the altar, it is also consistent with the grand design of the church. It does not violate the continuity of the design. Like for example, the pilaster found in the facade of the church is very prominent in the altar. The pilaster at the altar is a faithful reproduction of pilaster found at the facade. As you can notice, the pilasters in both the altar and the facade are laced at one side with leaf patterned ornaments.

*[The pilaster is an architectural element in classical architecture used to give the appearance of a supporting column and to articulate an extent of wall, with only an ornamental function. In contrast, an engaged column or buttress can support the structure of a wall and roof above. – Wikipedia]*

**APP: Monsignor, how about the walls?**

*Monsignor:* If you can remember, when the flooring was under construction I insisted that it had to be excavated to find the original floor level. What happened in the construction of the wall was that I ordered that the wall had to be added 2 meters on the top to enhance the ventilation. In effect, we elevated the roofing by 2 meters. After the cement plaster was peeled off on the exterior wall surface, the natural characteristics of the stone were revealed. The next challenge was what to do with the added two meters to the wall to elevate to roofing. What I did was I

banded it with tassels and trimmings. This tassel design is very prominent at the belfry of the church. So that was what I did to be consistent with the design. So as you can see it now, that is the result of my imagination.

**APP: So, Monsignor, what we can see right now is the original stone walls?**

*Monsignor:* Exactly. Those are original stones. These blocks of stones were quarried from the mountains of Igbaras and some were from Sitio Tubog in San Joaquin. So, you can imagine the labor of our forefathers to construct our church. This is something that we should value. This is something that we should take care of and always remember.

**APP: How about the roofing, Monsignor?**

*Monsignor:* The roofing was primarily supervised by the National Historical Institute (NHI). They designed a new steel truss replacing the wooden trusses and roofing. These trusses are very strong. After the roofing was done, the work on the ceiling started. The form of the ceiling practically followed the trusses designed by the NHI.

**APP: What are the other projects that involve the rehabilitation and renovation of the church?**

*Monsignor:* One of the notable projects is the construction of the choir loft. Originally, the choir loft is not part of the Church design. The construction of the choir loft is intended to reinforce the church. But, the design still is consistent with the design of the church, especially the columns and the piers.

**APP: If there something a Miagaowanon can do to help the preservation of the church, what should it be?**

*Monsignor:* Miagaowanon should be proud of their Church. The preservation of this World Heritage structure is everybody's responsibility. Let the next generation be as fortunate as you to still see this structure, a product of the labor of our 'kalolohans' (great grandfathers). But above all, we must dedicate this Church as the manifestation of our faith. This Church is nothing more than a structure but our faith is everything. The church is not the center of our faith, Jesus is. So Miagaowanons should take pride of this heritage while living the true essence of being a Christian.

**APP: Thank you, Monsignor.**

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