

Santa Ana Church

Lecture on the 23 January 2009

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Do you want to visit Virgin Mary, Santa Ana's daughter, in her hidden dressing room behind the *retablo*?

Would you like to meet her devoted chamberlain?

Would you like to stare at the oldest datable paintings of the Philippines?

If so, then kindly follow the steps of our MVP group.

The Pasig River ferry offers a peaceful approach. Starting at Guadalupe Station, it carries you smoothly to Sta. Ana Station for only 25 pesos.

Santa Ana Church once dominated the surrounding countryside. It was meant to be visible from both sides of the Pasig River. It could still be seen from there if the buildings at the banks are lower. A few minutes walk from the ferry station and you will find a majestic old church with a hexagonal bell tower and treasures inside. It is definitely worth one or more visits.

A passionate and knowledgeable introduction was given by Dr. Jaime C. Laya, who also wrote the historical guide, where these quotes are taken from and where you will find a lot of information, pictures and historical drawings of Santa Ana. His presentation matched and widened the lectures we were given in the MVP-PPP history course.

The Franciscans arrived in the Philippines in 1577, built a small church of bamboo and nipa and decided later to replace it with stone. The first stone was laid in 1720, and the last five years later. The costs were 33.000 pesos. (What would we pay today for such a building?)

"It is remarkably well-preserved and retains much of its original appearance. It was built in the form of a Latin cross with a nave and a transept. The convent adjoins the church to the east, built along three sides of a patio. The church itself forms the fourth side. The convent is unusually large, apparently planned from the outset as a vacation place and as a home for aged or sick brethren."

You might have seen a beautiful rose-colored church in former times with terraces around and stone steps leading down to the plaza. Nowadays, Santa Ana appears blackish because renovation does not automatically mean restoration, and the rose colour was replaced in the 1970s by a mixture of cement and adobe. The space around the church was reduced by the alignment of roads. The bell tower lost his fifth storey, the tiles of the roof were once replaced by GI sheets, but later reinstated, and hexagonal windows were inserted in the upper front. Probably this was done as a consequence of the 1880 earthquake in order to reduce weight and thereby earthquake risk. In its history Sta. Ana served as barracks in the Philippine-American war, and fortunately was not damaged in WWII.

Now let's enter Santa Ana and discover its treasures. The walls are incredibly thick; more than an average adult's height.

Your eyes are immediately caught by the *retablo*, but to extend the tension you can first visit the little baptistry on the right of the vestibule.

Straight ahead is the huge 18th century, richly gilded screen behind the altar, called the *retablo*. It is the only one of its kind still in place in a Manila church. Its 13 niches contain The Blessed Sacrament and saints' statues, mainly Franciscan saints and males. In its central niche is the venerated image of *Nuestra Senora de los Desamparados*, or Our Lady of the Abandoned or of the Forsaken, carved in 1713 in Spain and brought to Sta. Ana in 1725. Once a year it is taken out, dressed differently and shown to worshippers in a procession. Many girls are named Amparo to honour The Lady of Sta. Ana. Devotees shower her with precious gifts. In the niche above you will see Sta. Ana teaching her daughter Mary. The last of the three women among the saints is Sta. Clara, the patroness of embroidery workers and washerwomen which were the jobs of many Santa Ana women in older times.



Now it's time to climb the stairs to enter the '*Camarin de la Virgen*', or 'Dressing Room of the Virgin'. Her chamberlain (Philip Escudero) will open the door and you will find yourself in a large room facing the back of the Virgin, her long hair cascading down a cape of heavily embroidered satin. Here devotees may kiss or touch the Virgin's long cape. To kiss the image is not allowed anymore. But the smart chamberlain put two mirrors in her niches to reflect her face to the *Camarin*. The room is large, the ceiling covered with paintings as old as the church making them the oldest datable paintings in the Philippines. They show scenes of the life of The Holy Family.



Thanks to Dr. Laya we had the honour to enter the Convent. We could see daily scenes of the brethren, several old images behind glass; and we discovered the hidden place, from where the brethren could hear mass.

Finally we had to say Good Bye to Dr. Laya, although we were still not tired of listening to his lively introductions. The donation from the MVP given by Jan Picken will help to preserve this wonderful old church.

On our own, we discovered the shrine of *Nuestra Señora del Pozo*, Our Lady of the Well, behind the church. It was once filled with healing water, but is now sealed to prevent diseases.

Do you now know what a *retablo* is, where to find the chamberlain of the Virgin Mary, and the oldest datable paintings of the Philippines?

These are only some of the impressions and facts you will acquire when you go to Sta. Ana on your own. We are sure you will enjoy it as much as we did.