



The Church of St. John the Evangelist



The historical context

In the early days of the eighth century A.D., the territory now known as Roussillon, was part of a kingdom ruled by the Visigoths, extending from Toulouse to the south of the Iberian peninsula. In 711 A.D., an Arab-Berber army sailed across the straits of Gibraltar and put to rout Roderick, king of the Visigoths, who died at the battle of Guadalete. The Muslim troops then went on with their offensive, crossing the Pyrenees, sweeping through Roussillon and taking Narbonne eight years later, in 719 A.D. The Frankish king Pepin Le Bref (The Short One) decided to take the town back from the Ummayyads. After a harrowing siege that lasted nearly three years, Narbonne fell back under Frankish rule in 759 A.D. The Arab-Berbers then fled to the south of the Pyrenees.

In 793 A.D., while the northern part of the Pyrenees seemed to be enjoying a period of relative peace, the Ummayyads launched another attack on Roussillon and the Narbonne region. They organized several raids and ransacked the territory all the way to Narbonne. In order to ensure the safety of the area south of his kingdom, and to extend its boundaries, Charlemagne led a new army on an expedition to drive the Moors back beyond the river Ebro. Under the command of Louis Le Pieux (The Pious One), son of Charlemagne, **the Frankish armies laid siege to Barcelona and took the town in 801 A.D.** All those territories recaptured from the Arab-Muslims were then partitioned into earldoms, which became vassals to the Frankish kings. That is how the earldoms of Barcelona, Gerona and Roussillon were created.

It is within that context of a Frankish reconquest that some monks of the Benedictine order came at the start of the ninth century A.D. and settled in remote areas of the region. **The Benedictines, a monastic order founded by Benoît de Nursi around 530 A.D.,** were evangelizing monks who built abbeys, churches and chapels to establish christianity durably in the territories recently reconquered from the Muslims. At the time, their possessions numbered about 2000 abbeys and 20.000 priories in France, and no less than 100.000 monasteries across Europe.

That is how the abbey of Sorède was erected around 800 A.D., on the initiative of a monk named Miron. Around the same year, another monk called Sentimir founded the abbey of Saint-Génis-des-Fontaines and several cellae in Roussillon: one of them stood on the very spot where the church of Saint-Jean-Lasseille is now. A precept by Louis Le Pieux, dating back to the year 819 A.D., validates the possessions of the Saint-Génis abbey, and mentions the cella of Saint-Jean : it was the first time the church had been mentioned in a written document, among the archives that have been passed down to us.

Proceed now to the west-facing doorway, the one under the bells outside.

Pre-Romanesque doorway

Dating from the ninth century, A.D., St-Jean-Lasseille is a single-nave church facing east, which will be gradually reformed until the seventeenth century A.D. The western wing facing you is pre-Romanesque. The doorway is fitted with a semicircular arch over narrow piers, a typical feature of churches built before the year 1000 A.D. It is the original entrance the Benedictine monks used in the ninth century A.D.



The doorway is a very important element in Christian symbolism, as it materializes these very words of Christ's to be found in John's gospel: « *I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved. And he will go in and out and find pasture.* » The doorway therefore symbolises the passage from a profane environment into a sacred inner space. The doorway enables anyone entering to meet Jesus and save themselves through Him. But the doorway is also evocative of death. A Christian passes through death's door twice: the first time on the day he dies, and the second time, on Judgment Day, when all are resurrected.

In the old days, entering the church was through the western doorway, whereas nowadays, access is through the doorway with the semicircular arch located south. Indeed the sixteenth-century Counter-Reformation of the Roman Catholic Church is going to allow greater architectural liberty, to make religious edifices more functional. The Church of Saint-Jean is therefore going to benefit from another doorway, larger and doubtlessly more practical.

Holy water basin

The church has a white marble holy water basin **adorned with lions and volutes**, going back probably to the twelfth century A.D. It could be the capital of a column from the abbey of St-André-de-Sorède, taken down during the French Revolution. A pair of such capitals are preserved in the chapel of Saint Colombes de la Cabane, located a few kilometers away from Saint-Jean-Laseille. There were several marble quarries in the Pyrénées-Orientales in the twelfth century A.D., one in Baixas, two others in Céret and Py. The white marble used to carve out the capital in this case shows light and dark grey veins. Such hues are typical of marble stones found in Céret. Widely used in Roussillon and Vallespir, the Céret varieties of marble were renowned for their plastic qualities, offering great artistic freedom to Romanesque sculptors. For instance, **the lintel of the abbey of St-Génis des Fontaines** was cut out of that same material, **as was the doorway of the church in Brouilla**. We also invite you to visit these exceptional Romanesque sites.

Let's now have a closer look at the capital decorated with the two carved lions. The lion is a symbol that Romanesque sculptors regularly reproduce on religious buildings in the twelfth century A.D. Reference to the lion is frequently found in the psalms of the Old Testament or in the mouths of its prophets. In the Book of Judges, Samson kills a lion with his own hands. In the Book of Daniel, the lions of Persian king Darius refuse to devour the prophet Daniel whereas they immediately set on his accusers. The lion figure also appears in Peter's first Epistle, «The Devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.» The lion therefore is a dual symbol, sometimes destructive, sometimes benevolent. When the beast tears someone apart with its maw, it is the instrument of death, but when it spits them back out, it symbolises their resurrection.



The Church of St. John the Evangelist



The altar

Because **the light of the rising sun symbolizes the resurrection of Christ**, the church faces east, like all pre-Romanesque and Romanesque churches. Their architecture therefore reflects the words of the Scriptures and illustrates in a concrete way verse 12, chapter 8, of the Book of John, where Jesus claims that he is the light of the world. During the service, the congregation thus face the high altar located to the east. The altar plays a central part in the rite of the Roman Catholic church. It is both the convivial table which brings the Christians together to receive the Body and Blood of Christ and it is also a memorial of Jesus's sacrifice, with the white altar cloth symbolizing his shroud.

Stained-glass windows

In 2005, the church was wholly restored to its former glory after substantial renovation work. Do take a close look at the stained-glass windows, which were funded by donations from the members of the parish. They were made by a master glassmaker from Villefranche de Conflent. The window to the right of the altar represents the Greek letter **alpha** and the one to the left the letter **omega**. Those two letters are very often to be found in religious buildings, as they are widely acknowledged symbols of Christianity. They refer to chapter 22 verse 13 of the Book of Revelation where one can read : « *Behold, I am coming soon, and My reward is with Me, to give to each one according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.* ». The two semitranspts on each side of the altar were erected later, certainly in the seventeenth century. They were probably added to the initial building to allow the growing number of parishioners to attend the religious ceremonies.



Thank you for your visit. Hope to see you soon !

Contact : Mairie de Saint-Jean-Lasseille

Tél : 04.68.21.72.05