



Abstract of the Museum of Protestantism of the Dauphiné

You are here in one of the rare protestant churches which were not destroyed following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Two others stand in Collet de Dèze and in Vialas, in the Cevennes, south of France

The inhabitants of Poët-Laval were able to preserve the building only because it served as the "Community House", the equivalent of the mayor's office of the village. It became a Protestant church again in 1807, after the Revolution, and remained so throughout the 19th century.

Later, another Protestant church was built in the valley, in the new village, and this one where we now stand, rather sank into oblivion until 1961 when it was transformed into a Protestant museum.

That is to say that a link exists between the history of the Protestant church and that of the village of Poët-Laval. From the 12th century, the village was the residence of the **Commander of the Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem**, founded in 1099 in the Holy Land at the time of the first Crusade. The building, where we are, was possibly the private residence of a knight of the Order of St. John before it became Community House and Protestant Church.

It is partly because the Commander of Poët-Laval, Jehan de Brotin, accepted the ideas of the Reformation in the 16th century that the entire village and the surrounding region became Protestant country.

It must be mentioned that this territory had been opened up to the evangelic ideas by the precursors, that is to say, *les Vaudois*. They were adherents to the ideas of Pierre Valdo, a young and rich man from Lyon who had, at the turn of the 12th to the 13th century, given all his fortune to the poor and engaged in a life of evangelic simplicity and a return of the truth of the biblical texts; similar to what Francis of Assisi did later on.

Excommunicated in consequence of the Council of Verona (1184) and their doctrine being condemned by the Council of Latran in 1215, the *Vaudois* influence extends throughout the Middle Ages as far as our regions of Provence and Dauphiné, thus preparing for the ideas of the reformers in the 16th century, particularly Martin Luther and Jean Calvin (who were the originators of the Reformed Church of France).

Let's return to the Protestant church where we now are. It is very characteristic for the Protestant churches of the epoch of the Reformation. To the right of the pulpit you can see the reproduction of a painting representing the **Protestant Church of Paradise** in Lyon (from the 16th century, very quickly destroyed) and you will find many similarities with this one here. In the centre are the Bible, the Word of God, and the pulpit from where the Word is being preached and commented on. This is the application of one of the main principles of the Protestant Reformation: "Sola scriptura", the Scriptures as the only source of truth. Around it are gathered, like in a circle, the faithful in a very convivial and, as one would say today, participatory formation. This is also the application of the Reformation, the "sacerdoce universel", the active participation of the faithful in the service through listening, praying and singing.

The pulpit dates back to the beginning of the 19th century and originates from a Protestant church in Lyon. The pulpit cover permits the preacher to make himself heard. A sandglass was attached to the pulpit cover so as to show to the pastor the time elapsing and to call him to order when his sermons were too long. One can observe the hourglass in the Protestant Church of Paradise.

In the glass cases surrounding the church you will see several interesting objects: a cup which could be dismantled in three parts so that it could be taken clandestinely to the Protestant services in the "wilderness". The "**Wilderness**" ("*Le Désert*") was the period which followed the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes when the so-called "Pretended Reformed Religion", or "RPR"¹, was banned.

The Protestants thus had only three possible options: either to convert to Catholicism and renounce the faith of their ancestors or practice their service underground, in the woods, grottos,

¹ = Religion Prétendue Réformée

mountains: this is the “Wilderness”; or else flee abroad (this is what we call the “**Huguenot Refuge**”). This is brought to mind because a major trail has recently been opened called “**On the Trail of the Huguenots**”. 1600 km long, it starts at the Museum of Poët-Laval and stretches to Bad-Karlsbaden in Germany (north of Frankfurt) where we find another Huguenot museum.

You will also see a **Bible** which was hidden in a dung heap and retrieved again. The cover page is missing where the word “Bible” was inserted; it had been torn out like in many other cases so that the soldiers of the King could not recognise the holy book because, apart from that, they couldn’t read.

You will also see a list of family names of those who fled abroad, to the « Refuge ».

The galleries, overhanging the hall of service, date from the 17th century, with very rustic, rather uncomfortable wooden benches like those in the Protestant Church of Paradise (for reasons of safety we can unfortunately not admit the visitors to the galleries any more).

In the hall adjacent to the church, you can roam through the history of Protestantism in our region through the centuries and up to the present time.

There are several constant features in this history:

- the solidarity of the Protestants with Freedom, Human Rights and the Republic
- their reasonably understandable action in favour of Education and schools, since they had to be able to read in order to read the Bible
- the periods of the spiritual « **Awakening** » just when the Church began to drift off and become lethargic
- the search for the unity of the churches in a Protestantism where the personal engagement generated a diversity of expressions of the faith
- the place reserved for women in the church authorities

Finally,

- the battle against oppression, probably as a result of past conflicts in the “Wilderness” since the Revolutions of the 19th century in France
- up to the engagement, during the second World War, against the fascist and Nazi ideology and for the defence of the Jews and oppressed peoples of all kinds

In the last hall of the museum, you can admire **the mosaics of Daniel Kaltenbach**, often of spiritual inspiration, realised with stones from the entire world. This is to demonstrate the universal vocation of our small Museum.

Chronological Abstract

1300

The ramparts surrounding the building date back to the 14th century. This building is thought to have been the private residence of a knight of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. The traces of black colour on the wall could indicate the former presence of a fireplace.

1400

The building becomes the “community house” of the village where the “congregation”, the predecessor of today’s municipal administration, met.

In late 1400

The first signs of The Reformation in our region predate Luther: At the end of the 15th century, the inhabitants of Chabeuil, under the influence of Pierre Valdo of Lyon, demand a return to the gospel of the reformed church.

1500

Under the influence of Guy de Brotin, Commander of the Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, the region adopts the creed of The Reformation. There followed a period of confrontations and wars. The church of St. John, devastated in 1531, serves the Protestants of Poët-Laval as a house of worship.

1600

In 1598, King Henry IV of France signs the Edict of Nantes, which grants the Protestants certain religious freedoms and puts an end to the religious wars that had raged throughout France. Shortly afterwards the members of the Reformed Church in Poët-Laval have to return the Church of St. John to the Catholics (in accordance with the clauses of the Edict). The Community House resumes its function as protestant church.

1700

Almost a century later in 1685, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV intensifies the persecution of Protestants by the State: prohibition of church services and meetings, banishment of the pastors, pressure to participate in the Catholic Mass and for the Catholic baptism of children, prevention of emigration and the destruction of Protestant churches. The House of Worship at Poët-Laval escapes destruction thanks to its main function as a Community House for the village. While 500 of the 650 inhabitants in 1685 were Protestants, 102 Protestants had migrated to foreign countries by 1687 (to the "Refugium"). Many take the "**Trail of the Huguenots**" towards Northern Germany. Those who remain, mostly the poorest, deprived of pastors and churches, "convert" back to Catholicism becoming the "new converts". However, many remain true to their faith and go into hiding. This is the time of the "Wilderness" ("*Le Désert* ").

1800

The Edict of Tolerance (1787) grants the Protestants civil status. Following the French Revolution (1789) and the Declaration of Human Rights, they recover the freedom of religion and worship. In April 1802, Napoléon Bonaparte officially acknowledges the rights of Protestants to freedom of worship and enforces those rights with the Law of the 18th Germinal in the Year X ("germinal month", April 8, 1802). The Church of Poët-Laval then resumes its functions. In the mid-19th century the inhabitants gradually relocate from the old village to the hamlet of Gougne in the valley. Subsequently a new church is built there while the old one sinks into oblivion.

1900

In December 1905 the Law acknowledging the separation of Church and State is enacted, approved by the vast majority of Protestants. The Reformed Church of France is being created. In 1961 two pastors from Poët-Laval decide to restore the church in the old village and to transform it into a Museum of Regional Protestantism. In 2005, about 90 families were still living in the village of Poët-Laval-Gougne.

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