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Liturgical Arts Journal: Monastery Architect Jean-Louis Pagès

by John Paul Sonnen

5-6 minutes



St. Michael's Abbey, Orange, California

One of my favorite senior Catholic architects living today is [Jean-Louis Pages](#) of France. Jean-Louis is famous in his own right. For decades he has been building beautiful structures - some more modern and some more traditional - true architectural landmarks, structures built for the ages. He is well known in Catholic circles in France since the 1980's as the architect who worked for 22 years to build the Benedictine monasteries of Le Barroux, designing and constructing two

traditional monasteries in the South of France, one for tonsured monks and the other for nuns. Both monasteries were cleverly built to look old, although new and complete with modern amenities.



I encourage readers to take a look at this inspiring 7 minute video available [here](#) that was produced by the Norbertines of Orange County to showcase his relationship with them as the architect of their new Abbey in California.

As an architect with a massive portfolio that spans decades, Jean-Louis has built many structures in many different styles over the years. At a time when no one was building traditional architecture in France, he was willing to take the risk. His fans and critics alike agree that his monastic architecture stands out, setting him apart above all others in France. Indeed, the monastic architecture of Jean-Louis is what he will be best remembered for, standing on the authority of the past, bringing to mind a popular quote from Chesterton in *The Everlasting Man*: "The boldest plans for the future invoke the authority of the past."

Jean-Louis was born in 1933 in Rabat, Morocco when his father

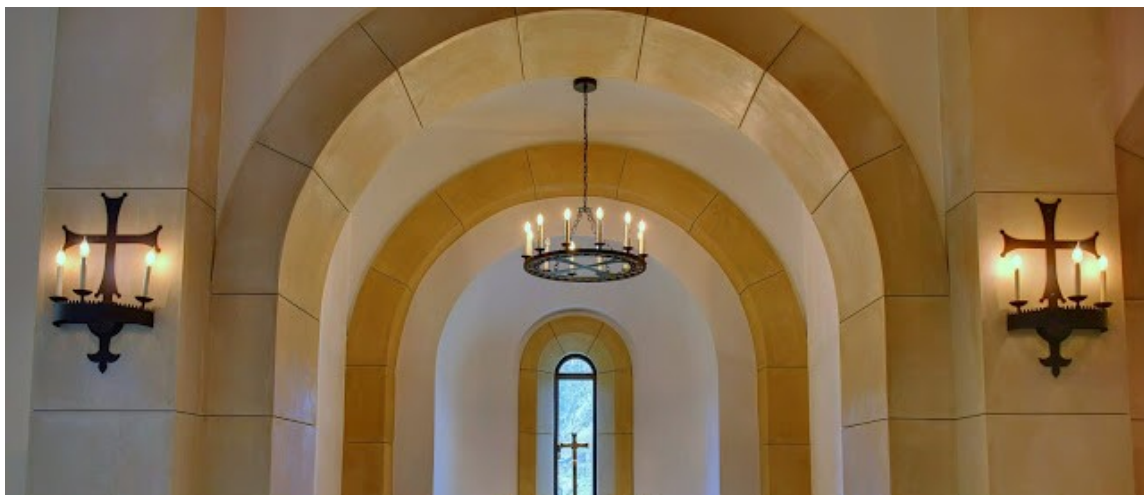
was in the foreign service. As a boy he was most interested in drawing. As a young man he already showed signs of being a great architect. His parents enrolled him at the Special School of Architecture in Paris where he graduated in 1959. In 1960 he moved permanently from Morocco to France and settled in Nimes. His career has been remarkable, with the construction of many villas, hotels, housing projects and other buildings. In 1970 he designed his own dream home. Busy with work, he quickly found himself traveling the world and realizing projects in dozens of countries across Europe, Africa, Asia and beyond. His memoirs were published in 2016.

Jean-Louis's taste for monastic architecture was born when in his youth he visited his uncle at the Abbey of Hautecombe, one of the most beautiful monastic locations in the world (this stunning monastery is located overlooking a charming lake in Saint-Pierre-de-Curtille, Savoy). In his younger years the busy architect journeyed through the Mediterranean and became interested in the Early Church rock chapels of Cappadocia as well as the first monasteries of the desert in Upper Egypt. Jean-Louis went as a pilgrim to Mt. Athos where he spent a few weeks with his sketch book and watercolors, studying the monastic architecture and observing monastic life and spirituality.



Abbey of Le Barroux, France

The latest and perhaps last project of Jean-Louis is [St. Michael's Abbey](#) in Orange County, California. In 2007 he was asked by the abbot to assume the duty of designing architect. Last year we featured the story of the new abbey [here](#), commenting on the progress of construction and pleasurable good taste and harmony of the architectural design. The complex, located in Silverado, California, is home to the Norbertines of Orange County who successfully raised \$120 million to finance the legacy project, finally nearing completion.





The new abbey church is a triumph. It is complete with a proper crypt chapel lined with side altars, something not seen for a long time in new monastic construction. The project includes a residence for the priests, brothers and seminarians, as well as a convent for nuns and St. Michael's Abbey Preparatory School. The construction is in two stages: first of which includes the construction of the new church, monastery, guest wing, offices, cemetery and crypt chapel underneath the magnificent abbey church. Stage two of construction will include the construction of the Abbey Prep school, student dormitory, gym and sports facilities.

Congratulations to Jean-Louis, now nearing his 90th year! He is a champion, an inspiration who has given the Church much and is a good mentor and hero for young Catholic architects who dream big and seek to build for the future while invoking the vision and authority of the past. More than once I have been to Le Barroux Abbey where I have had the distinct pleasure of seeing first hand, behind the scenes, the terrific work of this great architect. The monks there personally attest to his genius and remarkable vision, a lasting legacy, building traditional monasteries from a past epoch in a modern era when to do so is still largely forbidden.