

THE LABYRINTH

HOW TO PRAY WITH A LABYRINTH

One walks the labyrinth, carefully following its direction from beginning to end. During the walking of the path, the labyrinth becomes a way of focusing the soul; a looking at Christ who dwells within us. The one who walks the path in this way must slow down in order to really focus on the presence of Jesus. The very density of the path and the tightness of its curves help to prevent anything like a race to the center.

For the goal-oriented person, slowing down can be frustrating. With the knowledge that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, the twisting and turning of the labyrinth defies that logic. It is designed to slow us down and make us reflect, ponder, and contemplate. Even though the straight line journey might be the shortest, it might not be the most radiant or beautiful!

Walking the labyrinth can be likened to the Spiritual Pilgrimage of Life. There are times in which we feel close to God. Thus, at those points where the path takes us closer to the center, we feel closer. At other times in life, we might experience dryness in our relationship with the Lord or even distant from Him due to sin in our lives. Thus, when the path of the labyrinth takes us farther from the center, the feeling of being distant is increased.

The slow pace of the journey allows time to converse with the Lord about the times of closeness and distance. We are encouraged to stay on the path throughout its twists and variances, knowing that there is just one way that leads to the center. Jesus is the way to the Heavenly City, our goal. Therefore, we are invited to stick with Him and to bring to Him on the journey all of our joys, sorrows, and pains.

Bishop Baron states in his reflection on the Chartres Labyrinth, "Christ referred to himself as "the way", indicating that his manner of being in the world is the path that His manner of being in the world is the path that leads to the Father. He by no means guarantees that this path will be straight or simple, but He does assure us that it leads where we want to go. The winding by sure path of the labyrinth is Christ the way; if we stay with it, even when it seems to be getting us nowhere, we will arrive."

HOW HAVE CHRISTIANS INTERPRETED A LABYRINTH OVER TIME?

Labyrinths were at first seen by Christians as metaphors for sin and the powers of Hell. The Virgin Mary was seen as the one who leads us from the pits of Hell by pointing toward her Divine Son. To enact this metaphor, one would start at the center of the Labyrinth, and thus, that person would then be led by Mary out as she would bring the traveler safe to Jesus.

Interestingly, this metaphoric reality can be seen in Chartres Cathedral; the Chartres labyrinth is situated at the Western end of the nave (main aisle) the church, and it has the same dimensions as the rose window, which is as high up on the facade as the labyrinth is away from the West wall. If you could fold the cathedral over onto itself as if it were hinged where the West facade and floor meet, the rose window depicting Our Lady would line up perfectly with -- and cover -- the maze.

Though originally seen as metaphors for the dark powers of Hell and our need to rely on Our Lady to show us her Son, over time labyrinths came to be seen quite differently. During the Crusades, when Christians couldn't make visits to the Holy Land, labyrinths came to

be used as substitute "Chemins de Jerusalem." Christians, barred from earthly Zion, would walk the labyrinths, often on their knees in penance, meditating on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ; thus making a substitute pilgrimage to the Holy City.

It is believed that in the Middle Ages, there was a bronze depiction of Jerusalem placed in the center of the labyrinth. This substitute journey was quite an undertaking! Consider this, the paths of the Chartres labyrinth, for example, make for a journey of 858 feet. Imagine walking on your knees on cold, hard marble for almost the length of three football fields! That would be quite a journey and workout!

Due to this way of approaching the labyrinth, the classical name "labyrinth" gave way to the name "Chemins de Jerusalem" or "Rue de Jerusalem."

When looked at now from the perspective of making a journey to the center/Jerusalem, the position of how the labyrinth was to be undertaken was reversed: the center of the labyrinth was seen now as the goal -- physical Jerusalem or the Heavenly Zion -- instead of that which is to be escaped -- the pits of Hell.

HISTORY

Our concrete labyrinth is based off the labyrinth found in Chartres Cathedral in France. It is an 11-circuit labyrinth, meaning that from one edge to the center are 11 circuits, or rows of paths, made by 12 concrete circles (i.e., it is 22 circuits across, plus the center).

Dedicated and blessed on Sunday, June 23, 2002, the labyrinth was made possible in part by a grant from the Tipton County Foundation. It was designed and hand-painted by John Ridder of Paxworks in Indianapolis.