

A Guide to the Labyrinth

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What is a labyrinth?

The labyrinth is a path of prayer. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth has no dead ends and there are no choices to make. A labyrinth has one path to the center. Walking the labyrinth is a prayer one does with the whole body. One way the labyrinth can be viewed is as a three-fold process of experiencing God. This three-fold process is found in Christian spirituality. The first, walking toward the center, is a time of releasing and quieting and focusing the mind on God. The second, remaining in the center, is a time to receive insight from God, and the final is walking back out of the labyrinth, taking what was learned and determining how to integrate it with the outside world. Be aware that the processes may not occur at the time indicated and it is possible not to get past the first process.

What is the history of the labyrinth?

The labyrinth is a symbol that can be traced back to ancient Greece. Christians later adopted this symbol for their use. The earliest Christian labyrinth, a small mosaic, was found in a basilica in northern Africa and is dated from the fourth century A.D.

In France, during the thirteen century, large walkable labyrinths were installed in many cathedrals. Many believe these labyrinths were walked or crawled by pilgrims who were unable to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. (At the time, Christians were strongly encouraged to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or other holy site once in their lifetime. Travel to Jerusalem was very dangerous and costly.) The labyrinth at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton is modeled after a thirteen-century labyrinth in the Notre Dame de Chartres Cathedral in France. This cathedral remains a popular pilgrimage site today.

Walking labyrinths in Churches began to decline in use during the seventeenth century as churches began to remove remnants of earlier times. This was also a time when outdoor mazes with their high walls, dead ends and multiple paths became popular. Today, there is a renewed interest in Christian labyrinths for spiritual pilgrimages.

How do I prepare to enter the labyrinth?

Preparation of body, mind, and spirit is important.

The following are only suggested steps. Be aware that praying in the labyrinth will be different for each person and different each time. Preparation may vary each time the labyrinth is used.

- ❖ Prepare to take some time to walk the labyrinth. (Allow at least 30 minutes.)
- ❖ Remove shoes. When removing your shoes, consciously think of putting aside the rush of everyday life.
- ❖ Think about where you are in your life and take some time to determine how you feel before you start your pilgrimage. You may wish to spend some time reflecting and/or journaling before proceeding.
- ❖ Consider one thing that you want to bring to prayer in the labyrinth. The following are just some examples:
 - An intention/intercession, question or issue. Helen Curry suggests answering the phrase: "I am a pilgrim seeking _____." (Be careful not to make this intention an expectation – see the section, "What can I expect.")
 - Scripture passage for further reflection
 - A prayer of Thanksgiving, Praise, or Desire for God...
 - Nothing at all, only openness to what might happen. As Donna Schaper states, "Being in a state of prayer is more like an attitude than a set of correct words."

Some people may repeat a prayer such as the Lord's Prayer while walking the labyrinth. When bringing an intention to the labyrinth, many people find it helpful to repeat a mantra while walking the labyrinth to keep themselves focused on God and the pilgrimage. A mantra is a word or short prayer that is repeated multiple times. Examples of mantras include: "Peace" or "Love" or "Be still and know that I am God" or "Jesus help me." or "Lead me Lord." or "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." A mantra must feel very comfortable to the person who uses it and should be appropriate for the intention that is brought to the labyrinth. Sometimes a mantra will make itself known to a person as he or she walks the labyrinth.

It is appropriate to use other devotional prayer forms within the labyrinth. For example, one could walk the labyrinth while using prayer beads such as the Rosary or reflecting on the Stations of the Cross.

What do I do when I enter the labyrinth?

Again, the following are only suggestions. Use what steps you find in the following that may be helpful for your walk. The best alternative would be to develop your own “Way” and to let the Spirit guide you.

- ❖ Pause at the opening.
- ❖ Say a short prayer before entering. This could be as simple as “Come, Holy Spirit.”
- ❖ Nod/bow to center or make sign of cross.
- ❖ Step onto the labyrinth and begin your pilgrimage. Move at your own pace. This pace may change.
- ❖ Focus on the item you bring to prayer. Open your mind to prayer. (Dismiss thoughts that interrupt your focus.)
- ❖ Pay attention as your feet touch the path, be aware of your breathing, and be aware of your surroundings around you and within yourself. Be aware of all but do not let it distract. Be open to find God in all things.
- ❖ Let go of the unimportant.
- ❖ Do not judge others or yourself.
- ❖ Walk, dance, or crawl. Don’t worry about whether you are “doing it right.” There is no “right way.” Let the Spirit lead you.
- ❖ Be prepared to stop along the way. You may feel compelled to walk off the labyrinth for a time.
- ❖ At the center, pause – stand, sit, or kneel in one or more of the petals or center. Take the time you need to contemplate your journey with God, meditate on the insights and begin to think about the journey back. This may be a time just to be still and listen.
- ❖ When you feel you are ready, return on the same path as you entered. (Walking the path back prepares us for the outside world.) Don’t rush just so you can get to the exit, but go at your own pace. As you go to the exit, think about how this part of the walk is different. You may wish to focus again on the item you brought to prayer and how you can bring the center back to the outside world or you may just wish to listen.
- ❖ As you exit, you may wish to pause to offer a prayer of Thanksgiving to God before leaving the labyrinth.
- ❖ After you exit the labyrinth, take time to reflect/journal on the experience. You can look at how your feelings changed throughout the process or what you learned or did not learn... This could be in the form of a journal entry, a poem, a picture... You may wish to share your experience or listen to others.

Labyrinth Etiquette - Byrinthiquette

- ❖ Allow a minute or two to pass after a person has entered the labyrinth before proceeding into the labyrinth yourself.
- ❖ Be mindful of others on the path as you or they may dance, run, skip or crawl. Everyone on the labyrinth should progress at their own pace.
 - If you feel someone is fast approaching you, step aside to let them pass.
 - If you are at a faster speed than someone in front of you, you may want to try their pace before stepping around to pass.

What can I expect?

Each individual experience will be unique and each time the labyrinth is used, the experience will be different.

As with other traditions of prayer, much of what is experienced depends upon how open one is and what one needs at that point in time. (What we need is not always what we want or what we expect!) Be careful to avoid preconceived expectations. Often intentions can become expectations. Expectations can lead to disappointments and missed insights. Sometimes, the experience is not fully realized until much later. This is why reflection on the experience is important. While walking the labyrinth, some people have:

- ❖ Experienced a renewed awareness of the awesomeness of God.
- ❖ Realized a powerful insight.
- ❖ Discovered more unanswered questions.
- ❖ Became aware of a different unanticipated perspective.
- ❖ Experienced a feeling of peace or relief.
- ❖ Experienced nothing – This can be sufficient. (Often reflection/journaling can reveal more.)

Some may have a meaningful experience the first time they walk the labyrinth. For others, it may take time and some may never find the labyrinth helpful or meaningful. The labyrinth is but one prayer form to help bring us closer to God.

Sources:

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