



## A Holy Walk

To walk the labyrinth  
Is to touch God  
and let God touch us.  
It is a matter of presence  
and response.

The labyrinth does nothing to make God more present...  
for God is always present.

The labyrinth can make  
us aware of the presence of God  
in our lives.

So be silent.

Walk.

Listen.

Wonder.

Receive God's gifts.

Go in peace  
on your journey.

- From *"The Labyrinth - A Holy Walk"*, Redemptorist Renewal Center,  
Tucson.

*Designed by Cheryl Austin  
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## How do you describe a labyrinth, versus a maze?

A labyrinth has only one path that leads to the center. There are no direction decisions when walking a labyrinth because there is a single path. You make no choices. You cannot get lost. Just follow the path, and it will take you to the center. When you walk out, the path will take you to the exit. They can have a variation in form, but they all still retain the ease of walking that identifies them as labyrinths. You can disengage your thinking mind and open the heart.

“Once you set your foot upon its path, the labyrinth gently and faultlessly leads you to the center of both the labyrinth and yourself, no matter how many twists and turns you negotiate in the process.”<sup>1</sup>

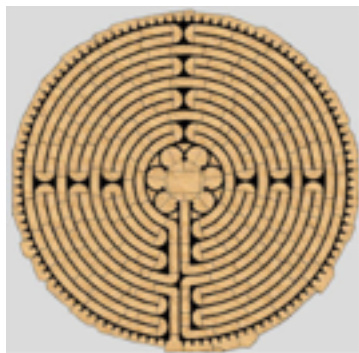
A maze and a labyrinth are different.

A maze offers many paths, and multiple entrances. There are blind alleys, detours, and wrong turns. There are multiple decisions to make on which direction to take. The result? You can end up at a dead end, disoriented, lost, or successful. A maze is a left-brain experience.

## What does a labyrinth look like?



Cretan, or Classical Labyrinth (illustration) - named after the island of Crete which is home of the mythical labyrinth in which is said to have dwelled the Minotaur. There are seven circuits before arriving at the center. Circuit is the number of circles or rings, not including the center. This is the oldest and most universal form of the labyrinth.



Chartres Labyrinth (illustration) - named after the famous marble tiled eleven-circuit labyrinth in Chartre's Cathedral in Northern France. They were set into the floor in the thirteenth century. Medieval cathedrals offered the labyrinth as a symbolic pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There is an equal-armed cross visible in its elegant layout, and in the center is a rosette, a six-petaled design, which can symbolize the six days of creation, the rose-shape is described as a symbol for the Virgin Mary.

## Where have labyrinths been found and in what form?

They have been found in ancient cultures from Greece, Crete, Egypt, China, India, Peru, Ireland and Scandinavia. In Scandinavia, more than 500 stone labyrinths have been documented. Labyrinths around the world have been carved in wood and rock face; laid out on the ground with stones, cut into the earth and woven into a design on a blanket or basket. The Romans widely adopted the labyrinth symbol and created them in mosaic tiles. An

example of how far back in time they have been discovered is a clay tablet from Pylos, Greece, which is 3,200 years old. It contains the design of a labyrinth!

The Tohono O'odham, Pima and Hopi tribes wove baskets with labyrinths. It symbolized the pathway to the top of a sacred mountain. The tribes' ancestral founder's spirit lives at the top of the mountain.

### **Purpose?**

There have been a number of perspectives about the purpose of walking a labyrinth. It is a potential physical metaphor for our journey in life. It takes us to the center, which could be the center of creation, or the center of our own hearts and souls. The purpose of walking the labyrinth can include bringing good fortune, protection, guarding that which is sacred to the community, empowerment, prayer, ritual, healing, growth, and spiritual insight and transformation.

It is a gift we can give to ourselves, of time, to nurture who we are. And, it can quiet our mind.

“The labyrinth just naturally causes your attention to start turning inward, focusing in the present moment” says Neal Harris, originator of the giant stone Earth Wisdom Labyrinth in Elgin, Illinois.”<sup>2</sup>

Because we don't have to think our way through a Labyrinth, we can suspend the work of the left hemisphere of the brain, which tends to be linear, analytical and mechanical. That enables the right brain to be engaged, which tends to be integrative and holistic. It is a tool to access our intuition and creativity.

“The right hemisphere is strong on empathy and emotion. It reads situations, atmosphere and moods. It is the locus of our social intelligence. It understands subtlety, nuance, ambiguity, irony and metaphor. It lives with the complexities the left brain tries to resolve by breaking them down into their component parts.”<sup>3</sup>

### **How Do You Prepare?**

a) Decide your intention, which is your way of being as you enter. It can be:

- a prayer
- a question
- a scripture that calms the mind (i.e. “Be still and know that I am God” Psalm 46:10)
- “I am a pilgrim seeking...” (from Helen Curry's book p. 45)

Curry also suggests language like: “My intention for this labyrinth walk is *to be open* to receiving *guidance* about this question.”<sup>4</sup>

The subject can be about growth, healing, grieving, issues that cause you stress, or a problem.

You can pray for a particular person or situation; reflect on a birthday or anniversary; work with an emotion like fear, confusion or forgiveness; relationship issue; pose a spiritual question; vocational issue; guidance on a creative project - which can help deal with blockages; or a particular event and its meaning for you. Once you have a focus, reduce it to a question or an intention.

b) As you walk, be fully present in the moment. For example, various ways of being present to this moment is to focus on your breathing, your feet as you walk, bring an image to mind, use music or use your sacred word (from centering prayer).

Walk without expectations and with an open mind. A common example would be expecting to receive the answer to a question. Release the expectation. An expectation gets in the way of fully participating in the present and can mask the unexpected. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." Proverbs 3:5, NIV

### How do you walk a Labyrinth?

The wonderful thing - there is no right and wrong way to walk a labyrinth. There are no "dos and don'ts," no "levels", no tests, nothing to memorize - just show up!

Walk at your own pace, and quietly step aside if someone wishes to pass. Enjoy a faster pace or take as long as you want. Stop as often, or as little as feels right for you, in that moment. Rest in the center, or not! If is fine to have fun, make it joyful; or be somber. If you wait before entering one way to prepare yourself is to start with gratitude. Remember you are blessed. "All that we have, all that we are is a blessing from the Divine."<sup>5</sup>

1. Walk inward - **RELEASE**. You might release fears, old patterns, worn-out ideas and concepts, debilitating emotional memories. Wait on the Lord to see what He wants to reveal. The world begins to fade through the effect of a walking meditation. Our minds can clear.

You can enter with a question, intention, or simply still the mind. A time to release.

2. Center - **ILLUMINATION**. Spend time, if desired at the center, in the light and presence of God. A time to receive.

3. Walk outward - **UNION**. You carry the gift you received and the Divine presence back into the world. A time to return, to resolve.

"Quite simply, labyrinths are a way of discovering the sacred in everyday life."<sup>6</sup>

### What are some possible effects?

Some possible effects include peace, quieting the mind, and opening the heart to be still and consent to the presence of God. The walk can provide an idea, healing, solve a problem, sooth nerves, deepen spirituality, access to intuition and creativity, simple awareness of breath and step, and/or integration of body and spirit. It can produce unexpected emotional responses, or nothing - just yet! The range of experiences is wide, from potentially intense to quiet and outwardly uneventful. Each walk is unique. Each walk is valuable.

"What accounts for this mythic appeal? Something about the turnings of the labyrinth releases us from the tyranny of the local and the habitual."<sup>7</sup>

"When you're walking the labyrinth with others, a powerful mirror is held up before you that basically shows you how productive or unproductive are the attitudes, thoughts, belief systems, and behaviors that you carry in everyday life, " says Neal Harris. "It becomes a very powerful opportunity for personal transformation. You can look at these judgments and the belief systems they represent as you walk: 'Oh, this person ahead of me is going way too slow. I'm so frustrated, I wish they'd get out of

my way,' instead of simply walking around them. You then realize, Gee, I do this same thing when I'm out walking the street."<sup>8</sup>

"Remember St. Francis's advice that, even if you simply return to your breath the whole time in meditation, it is time well spent."<sup>9</sup>

"It [the labyrinth] is a practice of mindfulness. You live life to the fullest when you are present in the moment. "Experience your experience" is the teaching."

## Reflection Questions

If you choose to reflect on your walk, you can ask yourself, how was the journey? You may also ask what you learned about your intention; and what you might understand differently now.

## Summary

This summary is from the Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, New Mexico. The founder is Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan. Fr. Richard is an internationally recognized author and spiritual teacher, Fr. Richard serves as Academic Dean of the Living School.

"A labyrinth is a way of learning and praying through movement instead of through thinking. You first have to enter the labyrinth and then simply keep going, walking as if on a pilgrimage, but without a goal. The idea is to let God Teach you as you walk."

Based on the classic seven circuit labyrinth the following are the "Seven Messages of the Labyrinth."

1. Bless each season of your life. (There is no one, correct lesson or message)
2. The seven turns on the labyrinth symbolize the many changes in life. (Life is change and transformation and repentance)
3. Like the labyrinth, life is not about "doing it right." (It's about "doing it")
4. Like the labyrinth, life is not a straight line - nor is it even a clear spiral toward the center.
5. The pole at the center of the labyrinth is the symbol of God and the Absolute we are all tending toward. (There IS a still point to this world.)
6. At the center of the labyrinth we discover we are at home, or better, that we have never left home.
7. Many slowly walk the labyrinth back out, letting go of the hurts of each season of life and forgiving it and all who have offended them. (There is no Future without forgiveness; we just keep repeating the past over and over.)

<sup>1</sup> Melissa Gayle West. Exploring the Labyrinth, A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth, NY: Random House, 2000. p. 5

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 11

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. *The Great Partnership, Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning*, NY: Schocken Books, 2011. p. 41

<sup>4</sup> Helen Curry, *The Way of the Labyrinth, A Powerful Meditation for Everyday Life*, NY: Penguin Group, 2000. p. 46

<sup>5</sup> Artress, Lauren. *The Sacred Path Companion, A Guide to Walking the Labyrinth to Heal and Transform*, NY: Riverhead Books, 2006. p. 40

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p.8

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p. xiii 7

<sup>8</sup> Melissa Gayle West. *Exploring the Labyrinth, A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth*, NY: Random House, 2000. p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* p. 138