

Guide to the Labyrinth

A Pilgrim's Journey

A labyrinth is an ancient tool for prayer and meditation, serving as a metaphor for our spiritual journey. The circular design became popular during the Middle Ages when Christians made vows to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to walk in the steps of Jesus. Since the Crusades made that trip to Jerusalem dangerous and expensive, cathedrals were designated as pilgrimage sites throughout Europe. Labyrinths were constructed at these cathedrals for pilgrims to use on their 'spiritual journey' to Jerusalem.

The circle symbolized the Circle of Life for these pilgrims. The twists and turns of the labyrinth mirrored the hardships of their daily lives. Labyrinths may consist of an eleven circuit path or a seven circuit path. Our labyrinth is a seven circuit path.

The concept of the labyrinth is an allegory of the Christian journey. There are three basic movements of the labyrinth path that connect the Scripture stories of the Exodus, Jesus passage into Jerusalem and the Disciples walk to Emmaus with the Catholic mystical tradition of the Three-Fold Mystical path.

The first movement is from the outside toward the center – the purgative path. Here we seek to quiet our mind, soul, heart and body through the balancing motion of the turning path, very similar to that of a rocking chair. We seek to release, let go, cleanse ourselves of things we might be struggling with or anxious about. At times we are physically close to the center, but as we move along at other times, we seem far from the center.

Having reached the center, we begin the second part of the three-fold path: illumination. We reach the respite of the center and have a chance to be illumined by the light of Easter. We are in a place where we can simply 'be' with God. It's good to stay in the center for a bit, perhaps turn to face the four directions and hear or see what God might be trying to show you. This is a center for prayer, reflection and clear vision.

The third and culminating movement is the journey back out through the path – the unitive path. The Union is the joining of what you carried in, with the insights you may have received from God. This path helps us discover a renewed spirit of giving and receiving.

The most powerful tool you can use for your walk is your intention. Stop and consider what is on your mind. Remember an intention is different than an expectation. An expectation is tied to the outcome of a situation. An example of an intention might be, *I want to be open to receiving guidance on this question.*

A labyrinth will not fix a problem, but it can help to still your mind so you can hear the word of God within you. If you have difficulty stilling your mind, sometimes choosing a short word or phrase to meditate on may help.

- “Be still and know that I am God”
- Grace.....Hope.....Truth.....Love.....Peace

Remember how you are feeling at the beginning of your journey so you can compare it to how you feel after the end of your walk.

Walking the Labyrinth at St. Paul of the Cross

Inward path – purgative – *release and quiet*

As you enter the labyrinth, notice the three crosses on the path leading to the labyrinth – think of Jesus and the Paschal Mystery. As you enter the Labyrinth, focus on your walking and your breathing. Go at your own pace. Recall the intention, problem, or anxiety you set for yourself at the outset. Try to be true to your intention.

Center – illumination – *be open and receive*

Once you arrive at the center, pause and say a word or prayer of thanksgiving. Think of all the pilgrims throughout the ages who have walked the labyrinth before you. Take a deep breath and be open to what God might be saying to you. Remain in the center as long as you like, perhaps move to face the four directions, be open to receive what God wants to give you.

Outward path – union – *take what is gained back out into life*

As you leave the center of the labyrinth, think about how to integrate the insights you have gained into your daily life. As you begin the outward journey, slow down, be aware of your pace and your breathing. This part of the journey empowers and invites you to be authentic in sharing your gifts and responding to life situations.

