

St. Augustine and Labyrinths

Although St. Augustine never mentioned labyrinths in his writings, his theology of Interiority beautifully expresses the concept of walking a labyrinth, a path leading an individual to its center. Augustine viewed life as a journey, a pilgrimage, an ongoing search to find God and himself. One of his better known prayers expresses this desire: "Lord, let me know myself, let me know You." At the beginning of his rule of life, he admonishes: "Be of one mind and heart intent upon (on the way to) God." The Rule 1, 1. His is a dynamic theology: searching, on the way, striving, longing for, journeying, being a pilgrim: words that capture a sense of movement towards a goal.

His well known and often quoted prayer in The Confessions prompts one to think of his long search for God and meaning.

Late have I loved You, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved You! Lo, you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you, and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong. I, misshapen. You were with me, but I was not with You (Book VIII, 38)

Earlier, in Book VIII, when he wrote about his struggle in the garden in Milan, Augustine described his indecision to take the journey within to his heart. He was intellectually convinced that he should engage in this journey but he wrote:

"I was groaning in spirit because I could form no resolve to enter into a covenant with You, though in my bones I knew that this was what I ought to do... It was a journey not to be undertaken by ship or carriage or on foot, nor need it take me even that short distance I had walked from the house to the place where we were sitting; for to travel – and more, to reach journey's end – was nothing else but to want to go there, but to want it valiantly and with all my heart, not to whirl and toss this way and that a will half crippled by the struggle, as part of it rose up to walk while part sank down." (Book VIII, 19)

Walking a labyrinth can be a metaphor for making such a journey into our hearts. Our lives often are filled with time consuming activities, heavy responsibilities, tension filled times; there are many reasons we might give which keep us from taking such a walk. Hopefully the accessibility of this labyrinth on the campus of Merrimack College will provide us with the opportunity to make time to walk and to pray the labyrinth and thus to enter into our own hearts in search of both our God and ourselves.



THE LABYRINTH:

A SACRED PATH FOR TRANSFORMATION



This Labyrinth at Merrimack College is dedicated to the memory of
WILLIAM LAWRENCE WENZEL, SR.
and
GERTRUDE FRANCES MCFADDEN,
parents of
Rev. James A. Wenzel, O.S.A., '52.

THE LABYRINTH: A SACRED PATH FOR TRANSFORMATION

The Labyrinth is an ancient pattern found throughout the world and used by many persons of many faiths to experience a personal connection with the sacred. Walking the path becomes a metaphor for life's journey.

Merrimack College's labyrinth is a copy of the 13th century labyrinth laid in stone on the floor of the nave of Chartres Cathedral in France. Labyrinths were common in Europe in the Middle Ages, and walking them was part of popular and religious culture. Labyrinths are sacred spaces representing the intersection of the human and the divine. This is a unicursal labyrinth with a single path to the center and out again.

Ordinary people who could not make a pilgrimage to Rome or to Jerusalem used labyrinths in churches to substitute for the religious practice of walking or making a pilgrimage to sacred shrines.

The symbolism of the Chartres labyrinth is complex. The circle, a perfect form, can be seen as symbolizing eternity, the universe, the repetition of the seasons, the cosmos – the overall plan of the divine. The cross that bisects the circle and the small crosses at certain points in the path are symbols of Christ in our world. The meandering path is the journey of life. It can also be seen as a path towards Truth and Wisdom through the maze of choices that the world presents to each one of us.

The path through the labyrinth constitutes the longest possible way to arrive at the center. It is important not to hurry the experience but to allow the pathway to lead you in a journey of prayer and reflection.

The path is an opportunity for personal meditation. One should walk its circuitous route slowly and prayerfully. It is a symbol of the universe, God's masterpiece.

The labyrinth can also be experienced as an invitation to engage, as St. Augustine did, in one of life's greatest challenges: to make a journey within to one's heart, believing and trusting that you can experience God's abiding presence there. Known as Interiority, this is a hallmark of Augustinian spirituality.

PREPARING TO WALK THE PATH

"Let us leave a little room for reflection, room too for silence. Enter into yourself, and leave behind all noise and confusion. Look within yourself."

St. Augustine Sermon 52, 22

In the same spirit of which Augustine preached, you are invited to enter and walk this path at your leisure. There is no correct way to walk it. It can be walked slowly or briskly, simply walk at your own pace. It is important to do so in silence; always be respectful of others who maybe walking at the same time. The path in is the path out, a two-way path where you may meet others as they leave or travel at a different pace. Relax and try not to be self-conscious. The walk may take twenty minutes or over an hour; there is no right or wrong way to walk it.

In preparation for entering the labyrinth, you might well take a few moments to reflect upon where you are in life. Gain perspective by considering relationships, difficulties, new directions or whatever things brought you to this moment. Take a few moments to center yourself and identify what questions there might be in your life at this time or where your attention is focused at the moment: a new job, marriage, grief, parenthood, the need for new direction, a troubled relationship, etc. Walk and pray the labyrinth seeking new insights or guidance from God.

The journey to the center is a time to let go of all that might be a burden. You may feel joy, tears, peace . . . be open to receive whatever you experience with an open heart and mind. Once you reach the center, stay until you are ready to leave. Pray, reflect upon and receive whatever is given. The journey out of the labyrinth is an opportunity to integrate into your life any insights you may have received, knowing that God is with you. When you are finished, take some time to reflect on your walk, perhaps sitting on one of the benches near by.

To walk the labyrinth is to touch God and to invite God to touch you. It is a matter of presence and response. The labyrinth does nothing to make God more present for God is already always present. The labyrinth, however, can make you more aware of this presence of God in your life. So, be silent, still, listen, wonder, then walk and receive God's gifts. May you go in peace, then, on your life's journey.

