WALKING A SACRED PATH
Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool
By Lauren Artress
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REVIEWED BY PATRICIA HOLT

Here we are at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in France, where Lauren Artress, canon for special ministrants at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, has brought a small band of pilgrims.

Their mission, as Artress poignantly describes it in her new, personal yet scholarly book, "Walking a Sacred Path," is to find the "classical labyrinth," a 52-foot sample of sacred geometry that has been embedded in Chartres' stone floor for centuries.

Aimless Jones, dean of Grace Cathedral, has joined the pilgrims, as have several congregation members, and all of them are suddenly a bit "anxious." What might have been a redundant example of ancient spiritual design at Chartres appears to have been entirely forgotten — in fact, standing on top of the labyrinth they seek are 268 chairs.

Pushing the chairs aside to get a better view of the labyrinth — let alone walk its sacred path — might be considered a rash or impulsive act. Artress figures. Back home at Grace Cathedral, we would not provide a warm welcome to tourists who came in and moved our chairs," she writes. Some time before, "we had attempted to contact Chartres officials by letter and fax, but to no avail." Once at Chartres, "we asked at the gift shop if we could speak to a church official" but received no response. Now, having "come all this way ... it was clear that we were on our own."

Artress writes that she had discovered the spiritual nature of labyrinths in 1985 at a psychology seminar where she was invited to walk the simple medieval pattern within a circle whose path would lead each of us to our own center. Unlike a maze, which tricks the walker with false paths and dead-ends, the labyrinth offers a single meditative path that weaves and winds its way through all four quadrants of the circle before delivering the walker to the center.

At Chartres, having "bothered our courage" with coffee and pastries, "we decided to take things into our own hands," Artress recalls. "Two members of our group did not get involved in moving the chairs, in case we got into trouble and needed their help. The other four of us moved all the chairs without anyone asking any questions. Once the labyrinth was cleared, we held hands and said a brief prayer.

After they each walked the labyrinth's path, 50 other similar services at such goings-on took the walk as well. Everyone, says Artress, "felt an awesome, mysterious sense of grounding and empowerment from the walk,"

The pattern of the labyrinth as seen from above

The mind ... find rest, comfort, and harmony.

Inside the labyrinth, for example, Artress points out an icon of the Nazarene Crucifixion "with the hands joined together," which she says is a "symbol of the sacramental act of washing the feet of the disciples, a gesture of the death and resurrection of Christ." Inside, she adds, "there is a deep sense of the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit." And, she notes, "in the center of the labyrinth, there is a small altar with a cross and a candle." The labyrinth, she says, is a "place of prayer and reflection, a place to encounter the living God." "The labyrinth is a place of solitude, a place of silence, a place of contemplation," she writes. "And, most importantly, the labyrinth is a place of peace, a place of peace and serenity."