



# Solvitur Ambulando

“It is solved by walking.” - Augustine

Ron Dicker

## THE LABYRINTH FROM THE CATHEDRAL IN CHARTRES, ABOVE AUGUSTINE’S MAXIM

### Practice

A labyrinth offers just one path and that path takes you “home.” Unlike a maze, it does not deceive or dead-end. As you tread its path, though, you are at times, in the same moment, getting both closer to, and farther from your goal (the center). This is not an illusion. And despite the paradox, your progress is real and your success assured.

### History

Though commonly associated with Catholicism, labyrinths predate Christianity by two millennia or more. The earliest known occurrence, in Sardinia, dates to 2500 – 2000 BC. A petroglyph on a riverbank in Goa, India may date to the same period. Since then, nearly all religions have used them.

### Holy City, Holy War and a Labyrinth Laid in Chartres

Pilgrimage to the holy city, Jerusalem, was often made by Medieval Christians. But Jerusalem plunged into war when European monarchs and Pope Urban II responded to Muslim armies storming into eastern Europe by initiating the Crusades in 1096. By 1291, however, the Crusades, the Middle East and all hope of taking Jerusalem were abandoned. By then the Church had sanctioned seven alternative continental pilgrimage destinations. One of them was the cathedral at Chartres, which thrust its spires so far heavenward that wayfarers could see them rising for hours before arriving. Once they entered its western portal, the labyrinth beckoned pilgrims to approach, focus and amble its path before proceeding to the relic.

### Sacred Geometry: A Case in Point

The diameters of the labyrinth and the great rose window are the same. The distances from the threshold to the labyrinth and to the rose window are also the same. Thus if the floor or the wall were to pivot around the threshold, the labyrinth and the rose window would register. This conjunction implies that by following the prescribed earthly path, participants attain the heavenly goal expressed in the divine radiance of the glass.

### Why Labyrinths Sooth

Participants typically feel tranquil after walking a labyrinth. This makes sense: the desired outcome is certain - your goal is the center and you will surely get there.

But there are subtler reasons. For one, a case can be made that the labyrinth is an archetype in the human psyche. In that case, by following the path, the participant is in some sense tracing a template in his own constitution. It resonates. Another reason compares to storytelling. The suspense in one storyline is that you don’t know the outcome. But in another, you do know the outcome and the drama lies in how you get there. For the audience, the psychological dynamics are quite different. Labyrinths fall into the second category.

Finally, the path does not follow the course we anticipate. This is startling without being disorienting. It’s human to love this dynamic: mystery within certainty, variety within familiarity, complexity within simplicity, serendipity within design. It answers our attraction to chaos within order.

### Specifications of the Chartres Labyrinth

Classification: Chartres-type labyrinth, i. e., 11 circuit, unicursal (Eulerian) path.

Size: roughly 41’ across, though slightly elliptical. Largest extant indoor labyrinth. Covers the full width of the nave.

Path length: about 860.’ So the course in and out measures roughly 1/3 mile or 1/2 kilometer.

Location: nave, third and fourth bays.

Orientation: east/west. On axis with the nave. Entrance at the west.

Composition: 365 stones - blue-black marble inlaid into light gray.

Completion date: debated. Dates typically assigned are 1200, 1220 and 1260.

The toothed perimeter and petaled center are unique. A credible explanation for them has yet to be offered.