

Labyrinths viewed as form of prayer

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Lorraine VanCour walked slowly through the dimly lit gymnasium, placing one foot carefully in front of the other, her arms held slightly away from her sides for balance.

A labyrinth had been created on the gymnasium floor at Greece's St. Charles Borromeo School, its path mapped out by masking tape. When VanCour reached the labyrinth's center, she stood, face tilted up, and turned in a slow circle before making her way back out.

"When I got in the center I just wanted to stay there. In the center I felt like God was with me and all around me, and wherever I turned he was there," said VanCour, a member of St. Charles Borromeo Parish who walked the labyrinth last September.

During a labyrinth walk, participants follow a path laid out in one of several traditional designs. Often there is silence or quiet music, and participants are encouraged to pray or contemplate questions in their lives. Labyrinths are similar to

mazes, but have only one path to the center and back, making it impossible to get lost. Their circle design is thought by some to create unity, while the winding paths are thought to calm and focus participants.

Sister of St. Joseph Patricia Flass, pastoral associate at Rochester's Ss. Peter and Paul Parish, sees walking a labyrinth as a form of prayer.

"Praying doesn't always have to be a down-on-your-knees type of thing," Sister Flass said. "Just letting your mind relax and being in the presence of God has some healing value to it."

Ss. Peter and Paul Parish hosted a Lenten labyrinth walk in celebration of its 160th anniversary last year. The event received such a good response that another one was held this year on March 28, Sister Flass said.

Harriette Royer, owner of Labyrinth Quest, a company that runs labyrinth walks in the Rochester area, believes some of the labyrinth's effect might come from the fact that its design is the same



CNS file photo

Catholics in Plano, Texas, walk a labyrinth in 1999 as a form of prayer.

double-helix pattern as that of human DNA.

"When you're walking it, you're actually walking the template of human life. I think its power is not on the rational side; it's on the spiritual and intuitive side," Royer said.

Although many of the area's labyrinth walks have so far received a positive response, there are some who object to their use, claiming that they are an anti-Catholic, New Age and pagan practice. Some Catholics worry that labyrinths take the focus off God and put it on a geometric shape and an individual's personal experiences.

Although labyrinth walks are used by people of many different faiths, their supporters don't find anything particularly anti-Catholic about them.

"You don't have to be Christian to do it; it certainly has appeal across the board. It's a wonderful ecumenical activity. If you're a believer in God, or a supreme being, then you can do it," Sister Flass said.

Father Robert McNamara, archivist for the Diocese of Rochester, likened the labyrinth walk to other more widely accepted forms of Catholic prayer. He says that in its early days, the labyrinth was used as a pilgrimage for those who did not have the means to travel to Jerusalem.

"It's more or less like the Stations of the Cross," Father McNamara said. "It's an imitation pilgrimage of the last hours of our Lord. You might say it's sort of like the rosary, which is a boiled-down version of all the mysteries of the faith."



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