

**FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF AIDAN
WALKING A LABYRINTH**

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This is the Feast Day of St. Aidan. Now this is not his birthday because we do not know that, but it is the day he died in 651. He follows in the footsteps of Patrick and Columba and is best known as the Bishop of Lindisfarne

The collect for St. Aidan tells you a little about him. "O loving God, you called your servant Aidan from the peace of a cloister to re-establish the Christian mission in northern England, and endowed him with gentleness, simplicity, and strength: Grant that we, following his example, may use what you have given us for the relief of human need and may persevere in commending the saving Gospel of our Redeemer Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever."

Aidan was bringing Christianity back to parts of England that had returned to pagan ways following the decline of the Roman Empire and subsequent invasions by a variety of raiders. When Augustine of Canterbury was sent to England the pope told him, feel free to reinterpret local customs and holidays into Christian terms. I suspect he may have done this with some pagan labyrinths that he found in England.

Labyrinths have been part of the human search for the Divine since prehistoric times. Labyrinths have been found world wide made from stone, carved in stone, mosaic tile and turf Labyrinths in England, Scandinavia and Germany The oldest dates back to 2500-2000 BCE. The oldest European form is Cretan Labyrinth with 7 circuits. So it is entirely possible that Aidan would have come across one of the turf labyrinths in England. Now some folks criticize labyrinths as pagan and while they started as part of pagan worship the church especially during the Crusades made their use quite common. The most famous is the labyrinth in the Cathedral at Chartres. It was uncovering this labyrinth that launched the modern interest in labyrinths.

Labyrinths have always been a tool for prayer and contemplation. During the crusades the walking and praying the labyrinth was a way to make a symbolic pilgrimage to Jerusalem in support of the crusaders. It is not a maze there is only one path in and you reverse the path coming out. It is simple and I could imagine Aidan teaching his monks and nuns to use them in their search for unity with God.

Because it is not a maze or puzzle it does not engage our brain in that manner. It invites our intuitive symbolic mind to come forth writes Lauren Artress in her book

Walking the Sacred Path. Spirals are a common design in nature and these follow a natural pattern. The person walking the labyrinth enters and walks clockwise on the way in and counter-clockwise on the way out. This path for early Christians also symbolized the path to salvation.

We all know that as we travel the path of life it is never in a straight line. We constantly are turning one way or another. Sometimes we feel like we've almost achieved are goal only to find ourselves heading in another direction. As you walk the St. Aidan's labyrinth you will find yourself almost at the center in the first few minutes, but just as you get close the path takes you back out towards the edge.

So how do you pray a labyrinth? Some people walk the path saying some sort of mantra, a word or short phrase that helps keep you focused. One of the great advantages is for those who have a tough time sitting still to meditate or pray because you can engage your body as well as your mind allowing you to focus your mind.

Let me give you to examples of how I have prayed a labyrinth. While on retreat last fall I was aware of the many burdens I was carrying both with parish issues and family issues since this was the time my dad was declining. As I walked the grounds of the retreat center I gathered some little tokens, a small stone, corn kernels from the field corn, soybeans, just a variety of little things. As I prepared to leave my retreat time, I walked the labyrinth at the retreat center. I took those items with me into the labyrinth. Praying for God's presence as I walked in, I then placed those items in the center and gave them to God for God to care for. As I prayed my way out I gave thanks to God for his care of these people and concerns. I left feeling like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

Another time I had been tasked with my spiritual director to spend a couple of days looking at how my sins had hurt myself and others. Then the assignment was to confess these and offer them to God by having a conversation with Mary, then Jesus and finally with God. I did the first two near statues of Mary and Jesus but for the conversation with God a prayed my way into the labyrinth. Then offered my confession to God at the center and then thanked God on the way for the forgiveness I felt.

The labyrinth is a great way to engage your body mind and soul in prayer with God. That is why the labyrinth is so powerful. There are many ways to pray your way through a labyrinth and whatever works for you is fine as long as you find it helpful in your search for the divine or maybe just some inner peace.

I am very grateful that Jack Stephenson was willing to take on this project for his Eagle Scout project. I have invited Jack to be here and I hope you will take a moment to talk with him. I think this has been an interesting project for him and he learned a lot about the history and design of labyrinths.

Someone asked how will others know how to use the labyrinth? We will have a post with a literature box on it with instructions and information about our parish. Who knows maybe somebody will find their way to the labyrinth and then to our door. This is part of being a church for the community.

This is just the start though of making this part of our property into a place for prayer and meditation. I have another scout who is planning on laying out a Stations of the Cross around the perimeter. Seton is interested in doing a brick path into the area and selling bricks to raise money for their endowment. They have also asked if maybe they could get some people to endow a bench or two. They have also in the past two years helped with cleaning up this part of our property when they have volunteers who are looking to help them. Ultimately this has the potential to be a place of prayer for all of King's Grant and I would like to consider putting some signage on the street that says something like: St. Aidan's Community Prayer Garden, All are welcome.

Sometimes in fact often, parishes take on characteristics of their patron saint. This type of outreach, this type of welcome is just the type of effort of which Aidan would approve.