

LABYRINTH PATHWAYS



12th Edition : September 2018

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Walking a Labyrinth in St. Petersburg

Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion



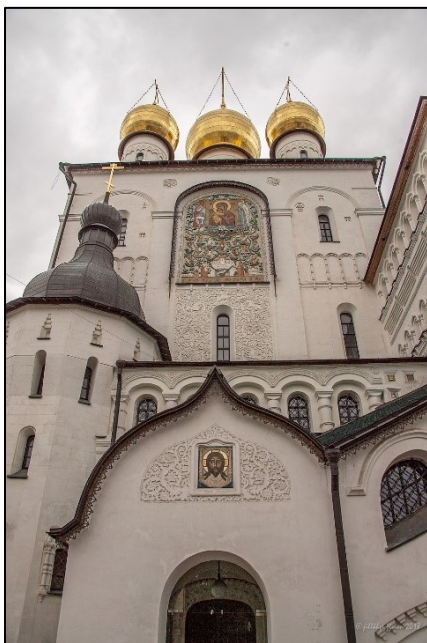
*Interior of the Lower Church of Feodorovskaya Icon Cathedral
All photos by Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion*

“Have you ever walked a labyrinth?” I asked Yaroslava, a Russian intern with the Chemin Neuf Community in Chartres, France. “Our church has a labyrinth!” she responded. Although Yaroslava didn’t know a lot of details about their labyrinth and its use, she was very proud of the Chartres-style labyrinth that was inlaid in the floor of the Lower Church of Feodorovskaya Icon Cathedral (also known as the Cathedral of Our Lady of St. Theodore) in St. Petersburg, Russia. When looking for more information, I found a photo and address on the World-Wide Labyrinth Locator website, where the labyrinth is listed.¹

Labyrinths in Orthodox churches are much less common than in Catholic and Protestant churches. I wondered how the architecture and imagery in this Russian Orthodox cathedral might influence the experience of prayer on a labyrinth that used the Chartres-style pattern. When making plans to visit St. Petersburg, I connected with a member of the cathedral community who was an official English-language guide in the city. Svetlana knew about the labyrinth but had never walked it. My husband, Tim, and I spent a morning with her, exploring the church and its labyrinth, as well as meeting with Father Alexei, one of the parish priests, to hear his thoughts about what their church calls, “a symbol of the way to God.”

Façade and Main Entrance to the church

During the Soviet era, the Feodorovskaya Icon Cathedral was closed in 1932 and converted into a milk processing plant. Restoration of the church began in 2007 and was completed in 2013. An Orthodox monk and respected icon painter/writer, Archimandrite Zinon (Theodora), redesigned the lower church which had originally been built in the early twentieth century to reflect the medieval churches of the 13th century. Archimandrite Zinon had walked the labyrinth in the Chartres Cathedral in France and included a Chartres-style labyrinth in his proposal for the new lower church.² It was then approved by the Church Authority, the Board of Trustees, and supported by the authorities for the protection of cultural heritage in St. Petersburg.

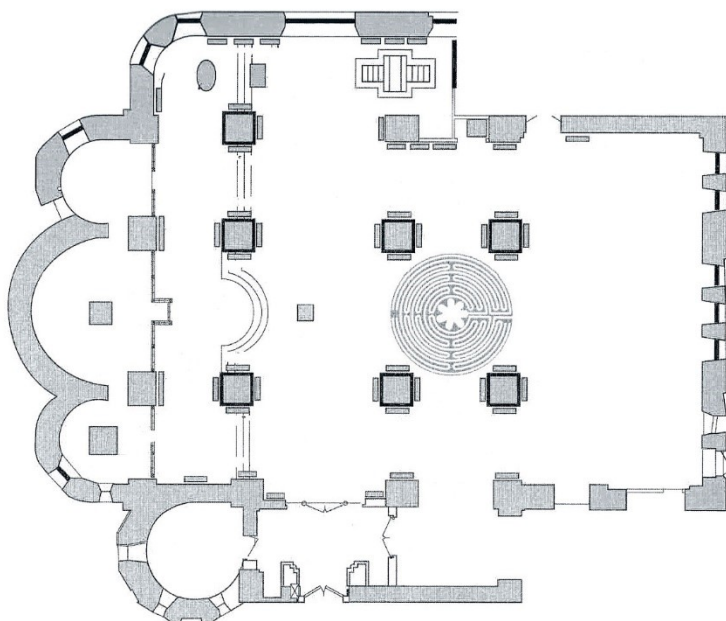


The labyrinth was empty when we arrived. Seeing our interest, a hospitable member turned on lights so that we could more fully appreciate the beauty of the space and its elements.

The labyrinth is placed between four large pillars in the middle of the lower church, with its entrance directly facing the main altar and the mosaic of Christ and the apostles behind it.

A side view of the labyrinth (looking south). Holy water was available in the alcove. A 19th century icon of the Mother of God (Mary) is visible from the center and many points on the pathway.





*Plan of the Lower Church of the Feodorovskaya Icon Cathedral.*³

Icons (represented in the architectural schema by forty-five small rectangles) can be seen from all vantage points on the labyrinth, with those of both biblical figures (the four Evangelists and Saints Peter and Paul) and significant Russian saints (St. Seraphim of Sarov and St. Sergius of Radonezh) flanking the labyrinth's circumference. Lit candles, representing prayers, warm the immediate environment.⁴



While walking the labyrinth, the mural images and icons of Christian saints were constant companions, influencing our prayer. As we moved from quadrant to quadrant, different images appeared and disappeared, much like what happens with the images of the stained glass in the Chartres Cathedral. The strengthening sense of being accompanied by a “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) was almost tangible.



Svetlana and Tim praying on the labyrinth

The similarities and differences in this adaptation of the Chartres labyrinth and its ‘mother’ were obvious. The colors of the two stones chosen for the path and ‘walls’ of the labyrinth in St. Petersburg were reminiscent of those on the floor of the Chartres Cathedral. While I forgot to take measurements, it was clear that the overall size of the labyrinth was smaller, and the paths were narrower in the Russian church than in the church at Chartres. The positioning of the threshold of the labyrinth in this Orthodox church mirrors that of its inspiration; one enters walking East (toward the altar symbolizing Christ’s presence) and exits to the west. Both labyrinths are found in the ‘lay’ section of the church. The labyrinths are both placed between significant pillars that represent the Ancestors of the Faith (St. Petersburg) and the Apostles (Chartres). While the center motif of both labyrinths is a flower, in Chartres there are six petals and a circular center, while in this church there are seven petals with two interior circles.



The labyrinth centers
left: Chartres Cathedral
below: Feodorovskya Icon Cathedral



Members of the church who had come to pray in the lower church discreetly watched us walk the labyrinth. Though our Russian was limited, Tim used gestures and a smile to invite the most curious to walk and pray with us. The congregant pictured below, knowing our guide through their church community, asked Svetlana how she should pray. “Just pray from your heart with your own words while you walk,” was the answer. The woman did. After she finished walking to the center, spending time there, and taking the pathway back to the threshold, she turned around and re-entered the labyrinth to walk and pray some more. Later, after touring the rest of the lower church, we noticed that a man had also begun walking the labyrinth.



Praying the labyrinth for the first time

Father Alexei, a member of the cathedral staff, graciously spoke with us about the gifts and challenges of having a labyrinth in their church. While the labyrinth is an important element of a unified worship space, the staff and congregation are still discovering its potential. Having seen first-hand, how through example and the slightest explanation, church members began to pray there, our hope is that this church will find more ways to use the labyrinth to strengthen those who walk it.

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Author Note

Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion loves to pray using labyrinths, especially those based on the pattern of the 13th century Chartres Cathedral labyrinth. Jill uses the World-Wide Labyrinth Locator to prepare for her trips in the US and abroad. She has written extensively about labyrinths and photographed labyrinth events around the globe.



Notes

1. <http://www.labyrinthlocator.org>
2. <http://en.feosobor.ru/cathedral/lower-church>
3. Adapted from the inside of the back cover of *The Lower Church of Feodorovskaya Icon Cathedral* by Archpriest Alexander Sorokin and Alexander Zimin. St. Petersburg, 2013.
4. <http://en.feosobor.ru/cathedral/icons-of-lower-church>