

Marian Imagery Around the Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth

Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion

“Why do the people who come to walk the labyrinth want to take pictures in the center?” It was a sincere question spoken by an older friend who has lived in Chartres since he was a child. “They are acting like tourists!” He continued, “What do you think?” I tried to explain to him what it means to someone who has walked Chartres-style labyrinths in other places, whether canvas replicas or large-scale land installations, to actually be in Chartres Cathedral and walk the labyrinth. He looked a little skeptical as I explained that being in the setting of the original Chartres labyrinth opens up all sorts of new experiences and understandings.



Walking the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral

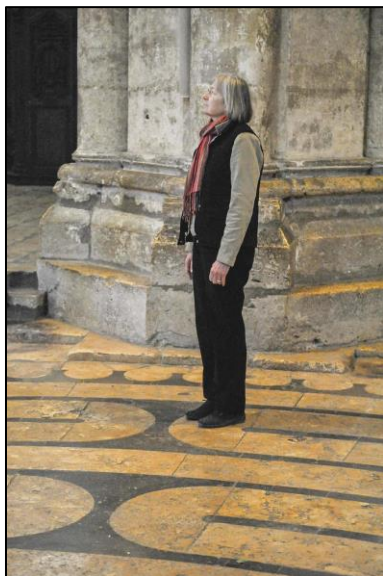
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While working on my book *Visions of Mary: Art, Devotion, and Beauty* these last nine years, I have been curious, surprised, pleased, and intrigued by how the forty-three different stained-glass images of Mary that can be seen during a single labyrinth walk in the cathedral speak to those moving below them. Not all of these images were visible when the labyrinth was placed in the Chartres Cathedral in the thirteenth century. While it will be important to investigate the relationship between the original images seen from the labyrinth, the focus in this article is the current experience of pilgrims as they walk with the Marian imagery that surrounds them on the labyrinth.

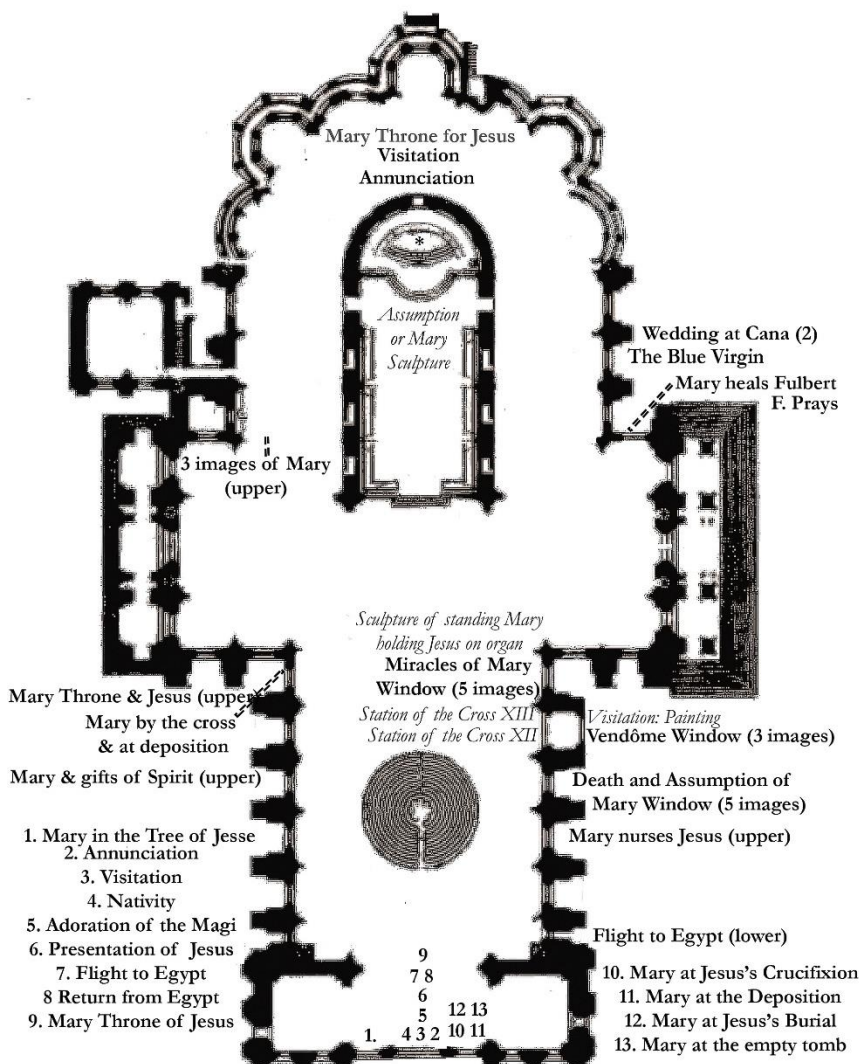


The Annunciation, Visitation and Nativity of Christ images from the Life of Christ Window (west of the labyrinth)

In this article, I would like to reveal some of the stained-glass images of Mary seen above, on the right, and on the left as one moves on the labyrinth of the cathedral in Chartres. I have not included paintings or sculptures of Mary which can also be seen (and are marked in light italics on the diagram of Marian imagery seen from the labyrinth on the accompanying diagram). Brief descriptions of the images and possible correlations with labyrinth walking will be offered. As you read and look, it may be helpful to imagine yourself walking the Chartres labyrinth while noticing what these images might be communicating as you do so.



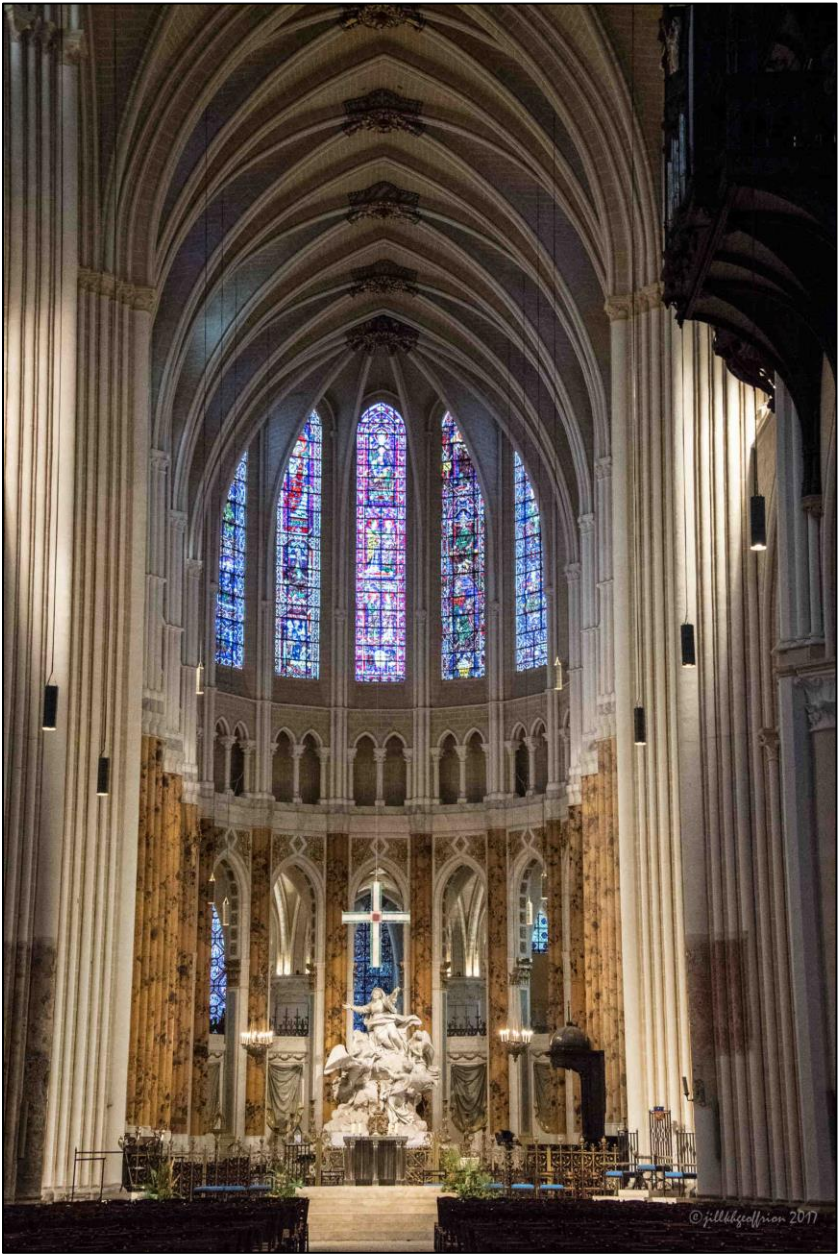
Mary Jean McGregor walking the Chartres labyrinth



Prepared by Jill K H Geoffrion ©2017
Drawing: M J Bulteau, *Monographie de la Cathédrale de Chartres*

Images of Mary seen while walking the Chartres Labyrinth

Standing on the threshold stone of the labyrinth three key images of Mary greet you from the East.



The East end of the cathedral

On the top of the central window is Mary, The Throne of Wisdom, with Jesus sitting on her lap. This depiction of Mary and her son is found many times both inside and outside the cathedral. It is linked with theological understandings of both the importance of Mary and her role as one who reveals Jesus to the world.

*Jesus sitting on Mary's lap
as he blesses the world*



The middle image is of the Visitation when Mary and Elizabeth greeted each other. Luke 1:29-56 describes their meeting and records the lyrics of Mary's Song of Praise, the Magnificat. Placed as it is facing all who move toward the altar of the church, it reminds the faithful of the importance of praising God.

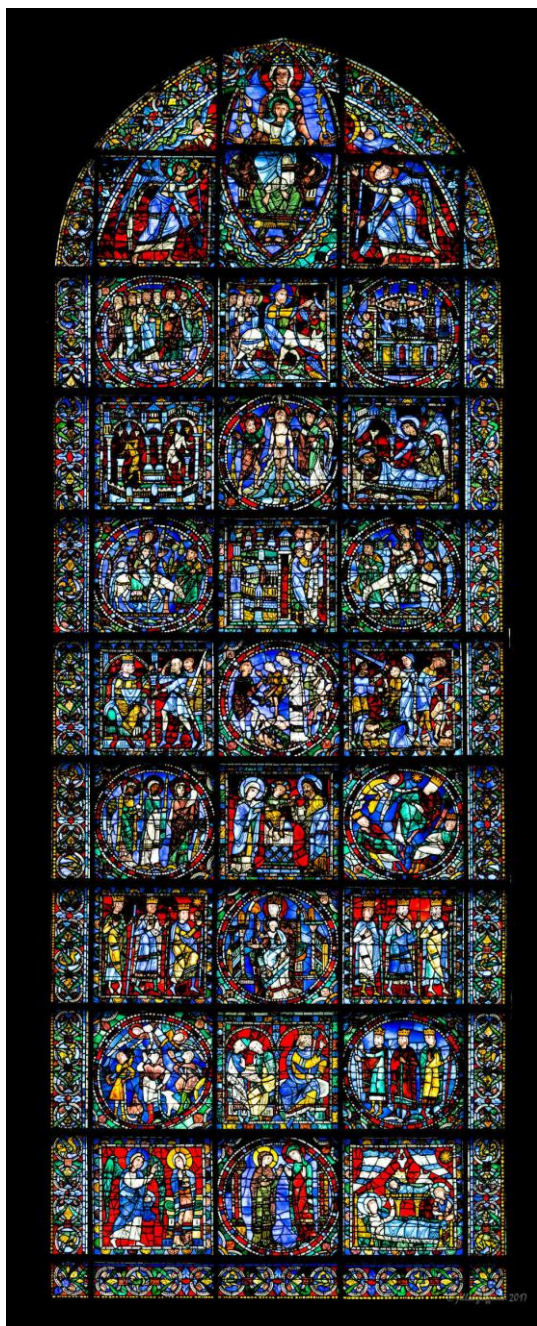
Mary and Elizabeth



*Annunciation: Mary
pointing to Jesus in
the next window*

The third image is of Mary saying “Yes” to God’s plan of the incarnation and mission of Jesus in one of the seventeen Annunciation images found at Chartres. Luke 1:26-38 describes the encounter between God’s angel, Gabriel, and Mary. It’s placement in the highest point at the East of the church is meant to encourage all entering the church, as well as all entering the labyrinth, to say their own “Yes” to God.

All of these images are also shown in the earlier (1145) central west lancet of the Life of Christ window above the labyrinth. John and Odette Ketley-Laporte explain in their book *Chartres : le labyrinthe déchiffré* that there is a planned correspondence between the image of Mary with Jesus on her lap (Throne of Wisdom) on the top of this window and the center of the labyrinth.



The Life of Christ Window with its eight images of Mary and Jesus



Top image of the Life of Christ Window (west of the labyrinth)

This image would be directly behind you as you start to walk the labyrinth, and directly in front of you as you finish. The Ketley-Laportes demonstrate how a ray of sun passes through the top of this image and extends to the middle of the labyrinth on the feast day of Mary's Assumption (p.64-65). Chartres is a "Mary cathedral," Our Lady of Chartres is the patron saint of the church. In fact, it is Our Lady of the Assumption to which Chartres is dedicated.

Besides the panel of three windows showing the Annunciation, Visitation, and Nativity images included in the introduction to this article, and the Throne of Wisdom image shown directly above, there are four other images with Mary in the Life of Christ window in the west. They can easily be seen

from the labyrinth. The first shows the wise men from the East arriving and being greeted by Mary and Jesus before leaving again (Matthew 2:1-12).



The crowned wise men arriving; Mary and Christ greet them; the three Wise men leave

The presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:22-33) in the same twelfth-century window shows Mary fulfilling her religious obligations.

Mary handing Jesus to Simeon



Finally, there is a pair of images in which Mary, Joseph and Jesus flee as refugees to Egypt and return to Nazareth after the death of King Herod (Matthew 2:13-23). Mary's oversized hands indicate how competent and attentive her care was.

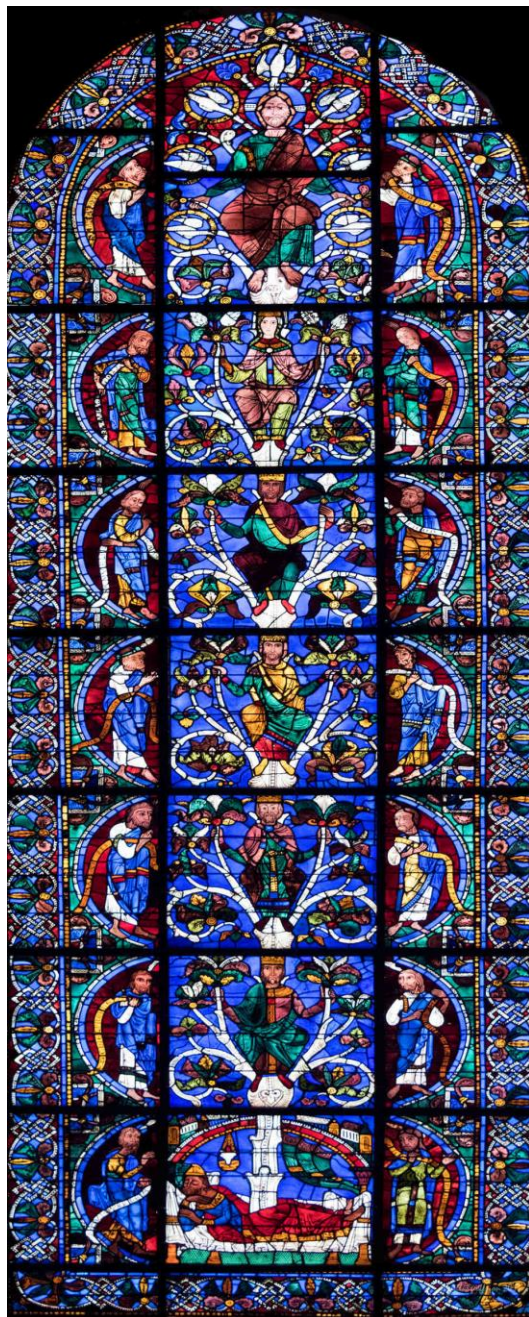
The Flight to Egypt

The Return to Nazareth from Egypt

It may be significant that seven of the eight images of Mary and Jesus in the Life of Christ window involve comings and goings.



In the tree of Jesse window, also to the west of the labyrinth but on the north side of the wall (to the right as you face it), movement is again suggested, but a different type. The flowing of life through the ancestral line of David is portrayed in this Tree of Jesse image. Mary is shown as one of the integral links both spiritually and physically of her son, Jesus, and his forbearers. She participated in his prophetic and royal lineage stemming from Jesse who is shown in the bottom of this image with a tree that grows heavenward, and at its crown is Jesus, who sits directly above his mother.



Mary is the only woman in the tree of Jesse, shown second from the top

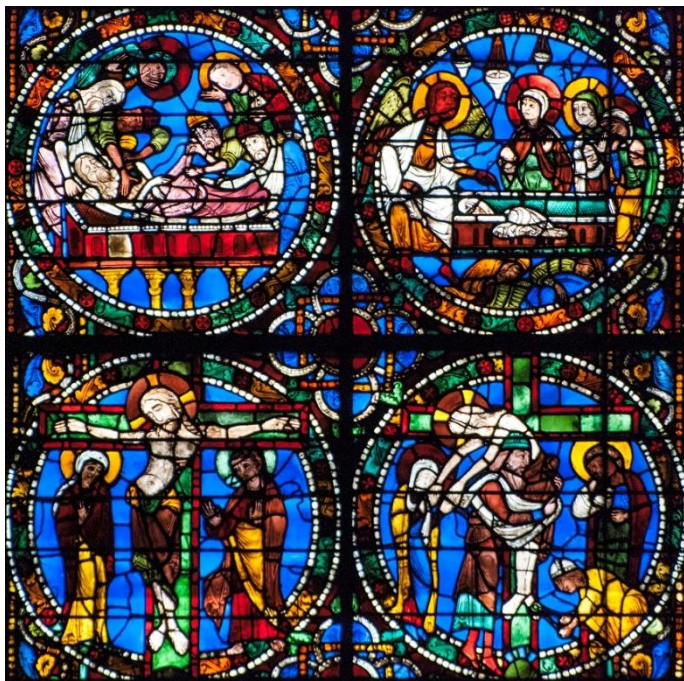
The prophets Isaiah and Daniel are found on Mary's left and right, emphasizing the fulfillment of God's plan in her life, and the life of her son. Based on the Latin writings of the third century theologian Tertullian, Jesse could be understood as the root (*radix*), Mary the stem (*virgo*) and Jesus the flower (*flos*).



Isaiah, Mary, Daniel in the Jesse Tree

The awareness of the importance of those who have moved on the labyrinth throughout the centuries is quite common for walkers of the labyrinth. Being a part of the sacred history and literally following the footsteps of those who have gone before is but one resonance felt by modern-day walkers that relates to the messages of this image.

Four other images shine forth from the west as one moves on the labyrinth. Three of these images reflect the suffering of both Jesus on the cross and his mother who is present before, during and after his death. The final image shows an incredulous Mary – with her signature cross in the middle of the veil on her forehead – at the empty tomb. Mary is not mentioned anywhere in the New Testament accounts of the resurrection as being present at the tomb on the first Easter Sunday, but at Chartres where Mary's presence was so important, it was impossible for the twelfth century creators of this window to not imagine that she was there – in fact the first one there!



Reading the images from bottom to top and left to right: Jesus death on the cross (Mary on the right), The deposition from the cross (Mary on the right), the placing of Jesus in the tomb (Mary above), and the angel's announcement of Christ's resurrection (Mary closest the angel)

Since suffering is known to all who walk the path of life, and thus also the labyrinth, these stories can speak to various life journeys that involve emotional and physical pain being lived out by those moving below them. Although they are most easily visible to those already



Mary holding her dead son's hands

familiar with them, the specific images and details of Mary at the time of her son's crucifixion and burial will surely resonate with anyone who has lost a loved one to death.



Mary watching Jesus's entombment

Images of Mary to the south of the labyrinth are found both in the ambulatory (lower) windows and the upper windows found above the triforium. The nurturing care of Mary shines through the recently restored image of her breast-feeding her son. It towers above the labyrinth not far from the ceiling, reminding viewers of her ability to provide for the well-being and growth of her child, and by extension, all those who look to her for nourishment.

*Holy Mary
(Sancta Maria)
with Jesus
blessing her
milk-filled
breast*



Another image of the tender maternal care of Mary is found in the south, closer to the level of those walking the labyrinth. Here, she holds her son securely as they flee from the murderous intent of King Herod. Jesus looks to her with peace and trust. This image which includes both parental fear and comfort signals the need for trust and openness to being led – themes familiar to anyone who moves on a labyrinth toward a center that is promised, but not experienced, until one arrives.



*Mary, Jesus,
and Joseph
fleeing to
Egypt*

Two entire windows dedicated to Mary can also be seen by those walking the labyrinth on the southern side of the labyrinth. The first is the Death and Assumption of Mary Window in which five images involving Mary's death, burial, and reunion with Christ are found. Labyrinths, including the medieval labyrinth in the Chartres Cathedral, have long been associated with death and rebirth, so it is not that surprising to find this window so close beside the labyrinth. Reports in various periods of reflection by labyrinth walkers have demonstrated that both the concepts and experience of these themes get symbolically "walked out" on the labyrinth.

*The window dedicated
to Mary's death and
Assumption*



The mandorla (almond shaped area) in this window which Mary uses to move from earth into heaven during her Assumption is a common symbol for a threshold moment of transition.



The Assumption of Mary: two angels holding open the “doorway” of Heaven

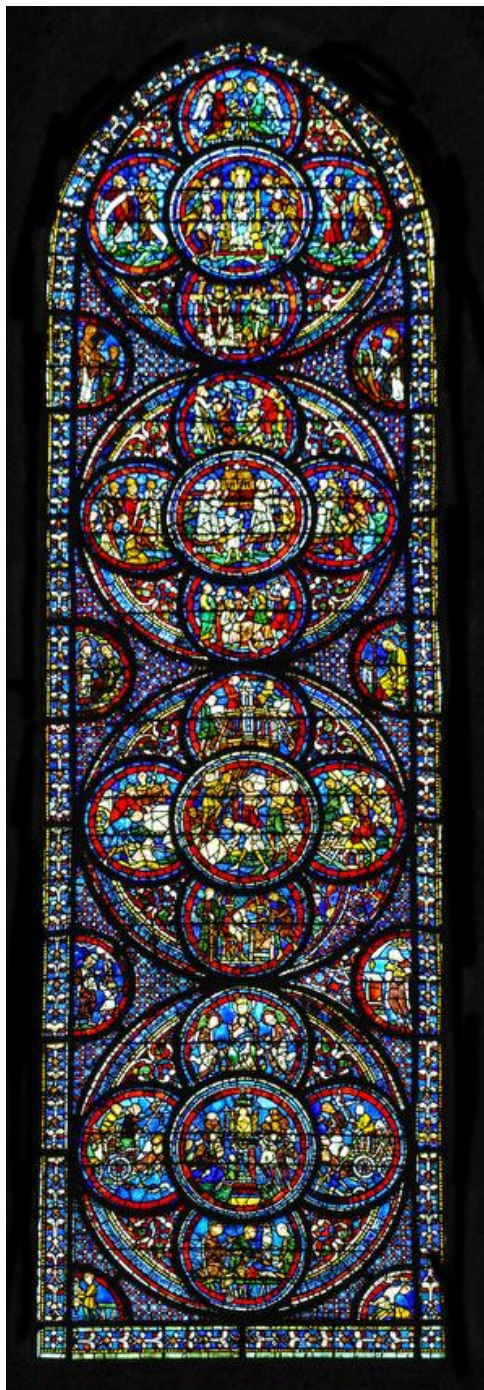
The image of a praying soul who is supported by angels is not only touching, but also may bring to mind and body familiar feelings, hopes, or experiences of those praying or walking in meditation on the labyrinth.



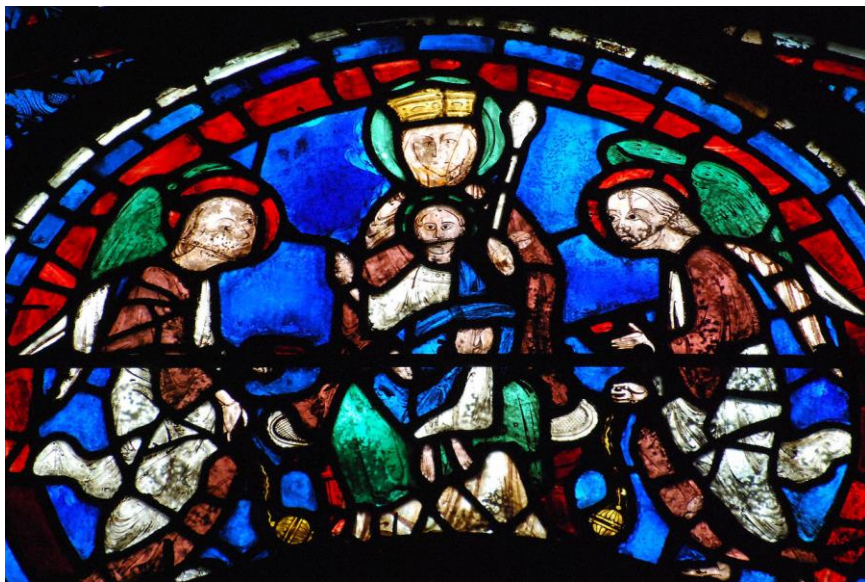
Mary's praying soul is being held by Christ who is blessing her

The Miracles of Mary window is further from the labyrinth, but still visible on the south side. Five more images of Mary are found in this window.

The Miracles of Mary Window



While the two images involving the medieval legend of Theophilus are not well known to modern viewers, the two images of Mary, Throne of Wisdom, with Jesus blessing and angels worshipping can be easily identified.



One of the two images of Mary, Throne of Wisdom and Jesus blessing

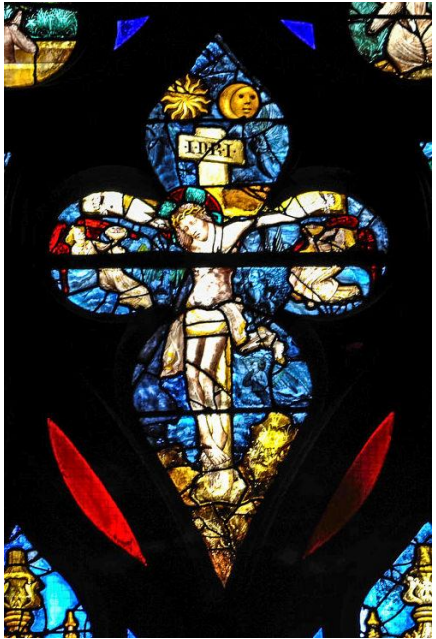
Images of pilgrims coming to Notre Dame de Chartres with gifts for Mary may remind pilgrims of themselves. Seeing other pilgrims who are praying, asking Mary for help, and being healed may also feel familiar to those walking on the labyrinth.



*Pilgrims on carts (left and right) come to pray
and make offerings to Mary (center)*

Three additional images are found in the fifteenth century window (1415) in the Vendôme Chapel. These images, placed much later than the labyrinth, can be understood as being meant to create confidence in Mary's close relationship with her son, and her ability to care for those who look to her for help. She is shown beneath the cross of Jesus, as she is depicted a number of times in the cathedral.

*Mary under the cross
(left side, Jesus's right)
with the sun and moon*



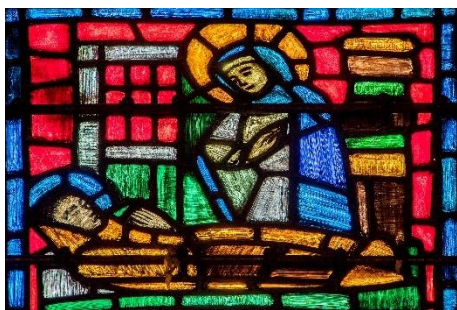
Secondly, she is shown as being crowned by Jesus, an image that is also found one window away near the top of the Death and Assumption of Mary window.



Finally, she is shown in the Vendôme Chapel glass as being present (and presumably helpful) at the raising of the dead in the last days.



One needs to look far, and be aware of what is being sought from the labyrinth, in order to see the last five images of Mary on the south side of the church. Two images are found in the modern window (1954) depicting the life of Fulbert. One relates to what is known as the Miracle of the Milk. This miracle involved a vision of Mary placing her milk on the tongue of Bishop Fulbert who was serving in Chartres from 1006-1028. Mary's milk is said to have healed his tongue and face which were withered by ergotism, or St. Anthony's Fire.



*Bishop Fulbert praying to Mary
from his deathbed before he was
healed*

Another image in this window shows Bishop Fulbert praying to Mary who stands holding Jesus in her arms.

*Veneration of Mary
by Bishop Fulbert*



Finally, far in the distance as one moves on the labyrinth one sees hints of the beautiful blue of the Blue Virgin Window, Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière. The Throne of Wisdom image is clearly one of Mary doing what she is best known for at Chartres, presenting her son to the world.



*Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière (The Blue Virgin)
with Jesus blessing from her lap*

The two images of Mary below show her interactions with her son at the wedding of Cana, reinforce this, as she first asks his help and then tells the two servants, “Do whatever he tells you to do” (John 2:1-11).



Images of Mary are also found to the north of the labyrinth. On the eastern edge of the north transept clerestory are three images in the Infancy of Christ window that are in desperate need of restoration. They depict biblical stories already seen from the labyrinth: The Annunciation, Nativity, and Adoration of the Magi. The images are barely decipherable, but will be easily seen once they are restored in the next few years.

On the north side of the nave, on the lower west side of the crossing in the Typological Passion Window are two more familiar Marian images already seen by labyrinth walkers, one of Mary below the cross, and the other at the deposition of Jesus's body from the cross.



Caption: Mary grieving her dead son, holding his hand to her face

The final two images of Mary overlooking the labyrinth are found in two rose windows from the north ambulatory clerestory high above the labyrinth.



Mary, Throne of Wisdom, Jesus blessing with two donors praying beside them

Experiencing any labyrinth can easily direct one's focus deep inside. For many pilgrims to the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth, walking or praying the labyrinth is so engrossing that they barely notice all that surrounds them. For those who have grown to know the cathedral, favorite themes found in the stained glass, sculpture, or architecture call gently as one moves around the nave on the labyrinth. As we have seen Mary's image can be spotted in all directions, both near and far. But there are many other interesting images and subjects to explore and experience as well.



Mary with Jesus and the gifts of the Spirit

For those interested in Marian subjects, the numbers of Mary related to the labyrinth would be a fertile ground for inquiry. The relationship between Marian flowers and the Chartres labyrinth is another. Studies should not be limited to Marian subjects, other ideas include images of angels around the labyrinth, biblical characters and themes seen while walking, important figures in the history of the church and the communion of saints viewed from the labyrinth, women shown in the windows surround the labyrinth, and more figuratively, consideration of colors, shapes, or circles influencing the experience of walking the labyrinth in Chartres. Themes of moving from place to place (walking) in the imagery around the labyrinth, or donors of windows around the labyrinth and how their work might relate to the experience of those walking the labyrinth could also be explored.

Please, come walk the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral, and then write about your experiences!

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Author Note:

Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion has recently published *Visions of Mary: Art, Devotion, and Beauty at Chartres Cathedral* (see page ** of this edition for details). She can often be found at Chartres guiding, photographing, and walking the labyrinth.

Jill at Chartres Cathedral
Photo: © Michelle Campbell

To learn more:

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*A tapestry kneeling cushion in the church of St. Mary the Virgin,
Saffron Walden, England*

Photograph by Jeff Seward, August 2016

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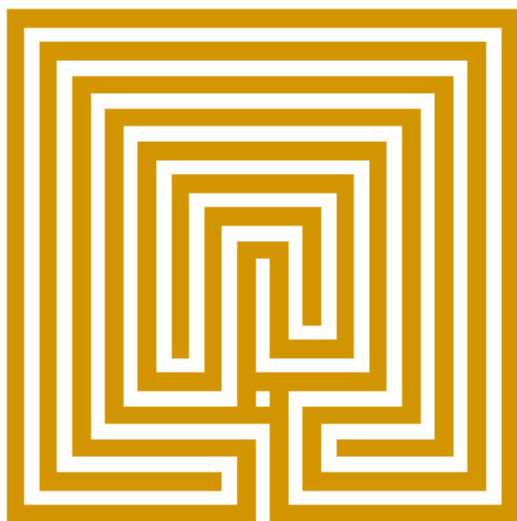
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Labyrinth Pathways is published annually

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in Spirituality
Health & the Arts*

*Established 2007
Published Annually*

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