CONTEMPLATION: Before her morning classes four days a week, graduate student Blanche Pyle walks the labyrinth at the University of St. Thomas.

One quiet morning this week, Blanche Pyle was a solitary figure walking the labyrinth at the University of St. Thomas.

She'd set off, slowly working her way around the circular path that ultimately lead to the center, where a rose paterned symbolized the Virgin Mary. 

In a loose-type position, she spent 10 minutes in prayer and meditation before beginning her outward journey.

Pyle, who is studying for her master's degree in theology, walks the labyrinth at the university four times a week before morning classes. She walks a fifth time on a labyrinth at Northwoods Presbyterian Church.

"It's a spiritual experience," Pyle said of the 20 to 30 minutes she spends on the labyrinth each day. "When I'm walking, I try to purge my mind of negative thoughts, and in the middle, I sit for a while and listen to the voice of God. On the way out, I try to assimilate what I have learned and apply it to my day. It definitely gives me a feeling of peace." 

The St. Thomas labyrinth is the latest addition to Houston's many labyrinths—a growing trend both locally and nationally. 

Located next to the Chapel of St. Basil, it was completed in May.

Others can be found at churches, hospitals, retreat centers, parks, gardens and even private backyards. Some groups have portable canvas ones. Most of the permanent labyrinths, like the one at St. Thomas, follow the 11-circuit design of the famous 13th-century labyrinth at Chartreuse Cathedral in France.

The Rev. Lauren Arrington, an Episcopal priest at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, Please see LABYRINTH, Page F10.
Labyrinth: Called a ‘medieval tool in a post-modern age’

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is credited with starting the American labyrinth movement in the early 1990s when she described the labyrinth as a “medieval tool in a post-modern age.” But it has an ancient history, dating back at least 4,000 years. The ancient Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur refers to a labyrinth on Crete.

Variations of the labyrinth appear in many cultures, including the medicine wheels of the Hopi, the mandalas of Tibetan Buddhism and the mystical Judaism of the cabala. Ancient turf labyrinths can still be found in England and Scandinavia.

In the Middle Ages, labyrinths were adapted by Christianity, said the Rev. Ted Baenzerger, who watched from his second-floor office as workers built the St. Thomas labyrinth of Texas sandstone and slate.

When several people at St. Thomas suggested it was a “New Agey” idea, he soon set them straight.

“Turf was a huge movement for pilgrimage to the Holy Land” in the Middle Ages, Baenzerger said.

But such a trip was difficult for most people, who instead made pilgrimages to cathedrals such as Chartres that had labyrinths inlaid in their floors.

By walking a labyrinth, “you get the impression of going on a long voyage with lots of twists and turns, getting closer then farther away and finally reaching your destination,” he said. “It’s a spiritual exercise.”

To Baenzerger, a French professor who has walked with students on pilgrimages from Paris to Chartres, the labyrinth symbolizes the universe and the individual’s attempt to get to the center of things.

But don’t confuse a labyrinth with a maze, he said. A maze has tricks and turns and is designed to confuse. Labyrinths have one way in and one way out.

Jennifer Embry, a Houston psychotherapist, walked her first labyrinth when Artriss visited Christ Church Cathedral in 1996.

“It opened up a place in me that I didn’t know before,” Embry said. “There is something in this ancient archetypal symbol, and it’s incredibly inclusive; anyone can do it. There is a movement from right to left, you go far out and come back in. It’s soothing and a stress reducer.”

Last summer, she accompanied Artriss to Chartres, where she trained to be a Veriditas labyrinth facilitator. Walking the Chartres labyrinth at night with candles was an experience Embry will never forget.

“Although being a part of a group, you feel the silence and the mystery of it,” Embry said, “not being here alone in the church.

As I walked, I thought, ‘If I could have a labyrinth in my own church, I could have a place to go for solace and to find myself.’”

Since then, she said she has led laby-

A WALKING PRAYER: Beverly Garcia, who built a labyrinth overlooking Canyon Lake after moving there from Houston, walks a portable canvas labyrinth she brought to First Methodist Houston - Westchase during the National Day of Prayer in May.

Clarity of Mind and Soul: The Rev. Ted Baenzerger, a professor at UST, emphasizes that labyrinths, which provide clear paths to their centers, are not mazes, which are designed to cause confusion.