

Medieval prayer wheel presents a mystery to scholars

by [David Van Biema](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue

The directions are written on 1,035-year-old vellum: “The Order of the Diagram Written Here Teaches the Return Home.” Care to play?

Manhattan’s Les Enluminures Gallery, a dealer in medieval manuscripts, recently put a book on sale with a first page so rare that only five of its kind are known to exist. In fact, the book itself is rare, with a massive, ancient, carved-oak cover and sturdy clasps of worked copper. Dating back to ca. 980–1000, it contains just the four Gospels.

The volume appears to have been commissioned by a woman for women: an abbess in Liesborn, Germany, named Berthildis had it made for the highborn ladies who had left the medieval court for her convent.

But its true mystery dates more than a century later, when someone opened the book—which would have been used primarily for display and oath taking—to its blank first page, set a compass needle in the center, and began drawing concentric circles.

Call it the Liesborn Prayer Wheel.

The wheel’s outermost circle consists of the words quoted above in medieval Latin. The next is labeled “Seven Petitions” and contains seven quotations from the Lord’s Prayer (“Daily Bread,” “Will Be Done,” “Kingdom Come” . . .). In the third circle, seven “Gifts of the Holy Spirit” (wisdom, understanding, counsel. . .) run clockwise in red, interspersed with seven events in Christ’s life (incarnation, baptism, passion, day of judgment. . .) in black. The fourth circle contains seven groups blessed in Jesus’ Beatitudes (meek, poor in spirit, mourn. . .) and—opposite each—their rewards (“Inherit the earth,” “Kingdom of Heaven,” “Be comforted” . . .). Finally, at the center, surrounding the pinhole of the compass, is the word *Deus*, or God.

If much of life in the High Middle Ages seems foreign to us, the detailed workings of the wheel—along with four others like it that have survived to the present—are a real riddle. Schematic prayer guides were more common in later centuries, says

Lauren Mancia, a medievalist at Brooklyn College who has examined the Liesborn Wheel.

“Monks and nuns in the . . . Middle Ages often get a bad rap for unsystematic thinking—doing all this prayer by rote, mumbling and not caring about the sense,” Mancia said. “This diagram suggests that they’re not just mumbling, they’re using a mnemonic device to remember and internalize, or even to make an inner journey.”

However, the path of that journey is not obvious. The nun was supposed to find her way from the Lord’s Prayer to God, but how? Did she read her way around one circle and move in to the next? Or did she drill inward along each of the wheel’s spokes, and then start again on the next? Or were the seven events in Christ’s life the key to the diagram, connecting its prayers to the Gospels that make up the rest of the book?

Was it more of an instruction or a meditative aid? Was it a one-shot exercise or meant to be repeated again and again? And what to make of the black and red stipples that show up seemingly randomly on the diagram?

Perhaps some directions got lost. The book is missing its flyleaf, the protective page before the first page. Maybe the full instructions for prayer were inked there. Or maybe they were intentionally omitted. Medieval labyrinths included dead ends to make the experience more memorable and to stimulate further creative entry into the meditation.

Les Enluminures’s asking price for the book is \$6.5 million, but speculation on how to use the prayer wheel is free. —Religion News Service

This article was edited on June 9, 2015.