

ON SEVEN WAYS
OF HOLY LOVE

On Seven Ways of Holy Love

by Beatrice of Nazareth



Middle Dutch text with
English, Dutch, and French translations

WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

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Portrait of Beatrice in Stained Glass

St.-Gummarus Church in Lier.
Created by Michel Martens in 1958.

Preface

The study of Beatrice of Nazareth, the thirteenth-century Cistercian mystic and prioress of Nazareth near Lier, has long belonged to my inquiry into the relation between knowledge and mysticism.

In 1983, I studied *On Seven Ways of Holy Love*, her short but extraordinary treatise on *minne*, under Dr. Joseph Alaerts, s.j., a Jesuit Ruusbroec scholar and one of the finest readers of Middle Dutch mystical texts.

Between 1986 and 1990, as a scientific collaborator at Ghent University, Faculty of Logic and Epistemology, I investigated the cognitive aspects of mystical experience. Beatrice's text became central because of its concentrated beauty and its rare precision. Its language is simple, but its movement is profound. It does not merely express devotion. It shows how holy love awakens, purifies, wounds, liberates, and transforms the soul.

In 1994, I wrote *Kennis en Minne-Mystiek*. That study explored the cognitive structures active in mystical experience and defended a *mysticology* : the critical study of the epistemological and phenomenological features of mystical experience (Staal, 1978). Beatrice's treatise served as the hermeneutical object there. But much of that earlier work needed revision, especially after recent crucial publications on Beatrice (Huls, 2002 ; 2013). A fuller and more mature treatment of these questions is offered in *The Mind of Love Mysticism* (2026), where Beatrice's text is examined in greater historical, philological, epistemological, and mysticological detail. The present book is shorter and more accessible, but it rests on that later investigation.

Two distinctions guided that inquiry and still guide this book. The first is the distinction between the *substructure* of mystical experience and the *superstructure* through which that experience is understood, expressed, authorized, remembered, and transmitted (Staal, 1980). By superstructure, I mean the *acquired framework* of language, doctrine, image, discipline, community, theology, and interpretation by which the mystic and her readers try to make sense of what has happened.

The second distinction, learned from Alaerts (1986 ; 1988), is that between *direct* and *indirect* registers. The direct register contains words, phrases, images, and motifs standing closest to the reported experience of the Divine. The indirect register contains the explanations, theological orderings, doctrinal protections, and inherited concepts by which that experience is interpreted. Neither register gives us the experience itself. We never smell the flower by spelling R.O.S.E. Yet without words, images, and concepts, the experience could not be remembered, shared, or examined.

The task is not to remove every presupposition, for this cannot be done. The task is to identify the assumptions at work and choose the most careful available framework. Mystical experience should be isolated as far as possible from the explanations that surround it, not in order to deny those accounts, but in order to see what they add, protect, distort, clarify, or conceal.

In Beatrice's case, we ask what belongs to holy love as *lived transformation*, and what fits the biblical, Christological, Cistercian, bridal, ecclesiastical, and eschatological world through which she speaks.

This is especially important in reading *minne*.

In Beatrice, *minne* is not love in general. It is *holy* love, i.e., Divine love as it awakens desire, calls forth service, exposes the ego's impotence, gives sweetness, wounds the heart, establishes inward freedom, and finally draws the soul toward eternity. Yet *minne* reaches us through a medieval Christian superstructure. A critical reading must neither swallow the experience into doctrine nor dissolve it into psychology.

It keeps both together and refuses to confuse them.

In my later work, participant observation and lived spiritual practice taught me that hermeneutical analysis alone is insufficient. Texts must be read carefully, but spiritual life is *not* lived as a commentary. Experience has rhythm, resistance, repetition, crisis, error, surrender, embodiment, and radical change. Beatrice's treatise is valuable because it shows this with *unusual compression*. It is not a system. It is a map of holy love as it works in the soul.

This little book contains my English, Dutch, and French translations of the Middle Dutch text, together with a short commentary and critical mysticological comments on each way. It is meant for readers who do not need specialist training in medieval studies, but who are willing to read slowly.

Beatrice does *not* offer easy consolation. She shows that holy love is tender and severe, sweet and wounding, intimate and transcendent. Above all, she shows that the soul is not merely moved by love. It is remade by it.

By light, we learn the customs of Love and know her well under all its forms : of the human, just like the Divine. By the coal of life, Love sets the two aflame. By the fire, she burns them in the Unity, just as in the fire of the salamander, the phoenix burns to ashes and metamorphoses itself.

Hadewijch : *Love's Seven Names*, 181 – 188.

Situating The Seven Ways

Beatrice of Nazareth was born in Tienen in 1200 and died in 1268 as prioress of the Cistercian abbey of Nazareth near Liege. She belonged to a world very different from ours : the world of monasteries, Latin prayer, liturgy, obedience, spiritual direction, and an intense desire for God.

Yet the small work known as *On Seven Ways of Holy Love* still speaks with surprising freshness. It is short, sober, and concentrated. It does not tell stories. It does not give visions. It does not argue like a theologian. It does something more delicate : it describes *how holy love moves* within a human being. The treatise, identified as Beatrice's work in 1925, is usually known by the Middle Dutch title *Van seuen manieren van heileger minnen* : *On Seven Ways of Holy Love*.

The word *minne* is crucial. It does *not* mean love in the vague modern sense. It is *not* romance, sympathy, attraction, kindness, or emotional warmth, although it may touch all these human capacities. In Beatrice's text, *minne* is holy love : Divine love as it awakens desire, wounds the heart, purifies intention, gives sweetness, takes away self-possession, and draws the soul *beyond itself toward the holy*. This is not merely something the soul feels. It is also the power that *moves* the soul. For this reason, holy love is both the *path* and the *guide* along it.

The seven ways are *not* seven moral rules. They are *not* seven steps by which someone climbs neatly toward perfection. They are *not* a ladder where one leaves the first rung behind in order to stand securely on the next.

Beatrice calls them *ways* or *manners*, and this matters. A way is a form in which *minne* shows itself. A manner is a *face* of holy love, a *style* of its action, a *mode* of its presence. There is movement in the text, and *the order is not accidental*, but the seven ways are *not* mechanical stages. *Minne* may return to what seemed prior. Desire, service, frustration, sweetness, storm, freedom, and longing may appear again and again. The journey has direction, but not the simplicity of a timetable.

This is one of the first reasons why Beatrice is still worth reading. She knows that the inner life is not straight. A human being can be deeply touched by the holy and still remain confused. One can desire God and still seek oneself. One can serve love and still want a reward. One can receive sweetness and then be thrown into pain. One can be freed from oneself and still be drawn beyond every known form of freedom. Beatrice does not flatten this movement. She lets holy love remain living, unpredictable, and always stronger than the soul's own plans.

The text probably comes from the middle of the thirteenth century. Beatrice was educated, knew Latin, and lived inside the Cistercian tradition, but she wrote this treatise in Middle Dutch. That choice is important. She did not write in the learned language of clerics, but in the living vernacular of her region. This does not make the text simple in the shallow sense. It is spiritually demanding. Yet it also means that she wanted mystical experience to be expressed in a language closer to *lived life*, closer to the speech of women and men who were *not* professional theologians. She helped make the vernacular capable of speaking *about the deepest movements of the soul*. And this is not because she was not a learned woman ; on the contrary, Beatrice knew Latin.

Her world was Christian through and through. She prayed in the rhythm of the Church, lived under a rule, and breathed the atmosphere of Scripture, Cistercian spirituality, and bridal imagery. Yet her treatise is not a textbook of doctrine. It rarely names Christ explicitly. It does not explain the sacraments, the Trinity, ecclesiastical authority, or monastic discipline. These realities form the *background*, not the foreground. The latter is the work of holy love in the soul. Beatrice's Christian language is therefore not a cage placed around experience from outside. It is the symbolic world through which she can recognize, remember, and communicate what *minne* has done.

This distinction is crucial. We never *directly* possess Beatrice's experience. We have a text. This is already memory, language, selection, interpretation, and spiritual teaching. Around the experience stands a whole structure of meaning : Scripture, Cistercian formation, monastic obedience, images of bride and bridegroom, ideas of purity and nobility, the authority of the Church, and the expectations placed on 'holy' women. These elements must be respected, but they must not be confused *with the experience itself*. Beatrice's report is mediated. That does not make it false. It makes it human.

The Latin *Vita Beatricis*, written after her death, gives us much of what we know about her life, but it must be read carefully. A medieval *Vita* is not a modern biography. It wants to edify. It shapes a life into an example. It presents holiness in a recognizable form. The Beatrice of the *Vita* is a historical woman seen through a *hagiographic lens*.

The Beatrice of *The Seven Ways* is different. Here, she does not mainly appear as an exemplary nun but as a *teacher* of holy love. The treatise is less interested in

outward virtue than in the *inner transformation* by which *minne* becomes the soul's life, wound, knowledge, and freedom. This does not mean the outer life is unimportant. Her mystical language presupposes discipline. It assumes prayer, self-examination, obedience, humility, and a life turned toward God. But she does not begin with moral effort. She begins with *desire*.

The first way is a desire *born of minne itself*. This is decisive. The soul does not *invent* the path. It is *awakened*. Before the soul seeks God, holy love has already touched it. Before the person chooses love, love has already chosen, moved, and disturbed the person. The spiritual life begins, not in self-improvement, but *in being drawn*, in being *touched*.

From there, the ways unfold. The second way shows the soul wanting to serve love without reward. This is not servility. It is the joy of serving what is loved because it is loved. The third way exposes the painful truth that the soul cannot satisfy *minne* by its own strength. The desire is greater than the person. *Minne* asks more than the self can give. The fourth way brings sweetness : holy love touches the heart directly and fills the person with a joy that seems to come without human effort. The fifth way turns sweetness into storm : the same *minne* now wounds, overwhelms, and strips the soul of control.

The sixth way opens a new freedom : after the storm, *minne* no longer seems to attack only from beyond but becomes the space in which the soul moves. Passing states are now gathered into a *firmer station*.

The sixth way is especially important. It should not be treated as a simple final union. It is better understood as a *first stable plateau* of mystical life, a condition in which the soul has been *deeply reorganized by love*.

The person is no longer merely *trying* to love God. *Minne* itself has become the soul's center of movement. Beatrice expresses this with images of freedom : the fish in the water, the bird in the air, the house ordered from within by holy love. These images do not abolish the human person. They show a person whose life has become transparent to a deeper source. The soul is not destroyed as a creature. It is freed from the cramped rule of self-will.

Yet Beatrice does not stop there.

The seventh way prevents premature closure. It says, in effect, that even the deepest freedom known in this world is *not the end*. It carries longing *beyond* earthly rest : indeed, freedom is not final while the soul is still *bound to time*. Holy love still longs *for more*. The soul has tasted something real. It has been changed, but it has not *mastered the mystery*. This is why the text ends in longing for eternity. To modern readers, this may sound like an escape from the world. In Beatrice, it is better read as the *pressure of infinite love upon finite life*. The soul has been opened beyond its own measure, and therefore no earthly form can fully contain what has been awakened in it.

The language of wounding, storm, burning, dying, and being reduced to nothing can be disturbing. It should not be romanticized. It should not be turned into a cult of suffering. Nor should it be dismissed as an unhealthy emotion. Beatrice is describing what happens when the ordinary self, with its need for control, reward, certainty, and possession, is confronted by a love that exceeds it. The pain belongs to the *breaking of the enclosure*. The wound is not valued because pain is good. It is meaningful because *minne* prevents the soul from remaining closed within itself.

This is why *The Seven Ways* is not psychology, although it contains deep psychological insight. It is not theology alone, although it is Christian in every fiber. It is not metaphysics, although it speaks of God. It is not an autobiography, although it likely arises from lived experience. It is a small mystical treatise in which experience, language, doctrine, memory, and guidance meet. Beatrice writes as someone *who knows the path from within*, but also knows that it must be spoken in a way *others can recognize*.

For present readers, no monastic background is required, but some humility is. The text asks us not to reduce *minne* to feeling, God to an idea, mysticism to emotion, or spiritual transformation to psychological self-development. It asks us to consider a more demanding possibility : that the deepest love is not first something we produce, but something that *acts upon us* ; that desire may come from *beyond* the ego ; that the pain of not being satisfied may be part of a larger purification ; that freedom may mean living from *minne* rather than from self-possession ; and that knowledge of God, if it occurs, is not the possession of an object, but leads to an intimate transformation of the one who knows.

Read in this way, *The Seven Ways* becomes more than a medieval document. It becomes a clear and searching *map of holy love*. Not a map that replaces the journey. Not a system that controls God. Not a proof that mystical experience gives transparent access to ultimate reality. Rather, it is a disciplined testimony to what holy love can do in a human life when desire is awakened, purified, wounded, freed, and drawn beyond itself. Beatrice's gift is that she gives language to this movement without diminishing it. She lets love remain holy.