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Praying with Icons. By James H. Forest, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1998.

Jim Forest unfolds the meaning of “icons” as religious art in the Russian Orthodox Church, allowing the reader to understand how clothes, color and human features move us beyond human perception and provide us access to God. We see the icon as a pathway to God. We also see the icon as a mirror to ourselves, for the holy ones that they portray are of our own flesh and blood: the Christ, the Virgin and the saints of different time periods. This book outlines the history of the icon and gives a detailed description of the spirituality that underscores their creation. The author also seeks to clear up many misconceptions involving the use of icons and their purpose.

So what is an icon? This review will provide the reader with a better understanding of the use of icons and their history. Furthermore the author seeks to bring awareness to the importance of praying to icons, and hopes to dispel the mystical aura surrounding them.

The Book has 6 Chapters, but the bulk of the book consists of two parts devoted to brief commentaries on the icons of the Lord, and then on the Mother of God and the Saints. In the first part we read about the Image of God, in which Forest explains the history of icons, how an icon is made, “a work of prayer and meditation. Chapter 2 is titled “Prayer”, and is the backbone of this book and icons for Forest, are incarnation and remind us of both ours and Christ’s corporeality. In this chapter Forest provides many helpful suggestions on iconographic prayer. Forest see that in the West clocks have replaced crucifixes and the timepiece “can be seen as the principal religious symbol of the secular age (p.45).

In the second part of the book the author provides fourteen short chapters on Christ and “the Great Feasts”. Part four titled “The Saints contains eleven chapters. In each chapter Forest explains each and provides meditation on certain iconographic themes, many times with passages from Orthodox liturgy. At the end of the Chapter we read Prayers of the Day. Forest’s purpose of this book is to shed light about the struggles both believers and theologians continue to have in regards to idolatry and the making of images, inviting readers to be drawn deeper in to the mystery of faith. The implied audience for this book is for those actively concerned with daily worship in the Church, and is also recommended to anyone interested in prayer and the way God works ironically on earth and in heaven.

The author makes everyone feel at ease and comfortable while reading this book and seeks to end this confusion by many about icons. He writes “the Holy Spirit speaking to us through sacred imagery” (p13) and on goes on to as y on page 14 that icons are “theology written in images and color”. I found the author to be extremely convincing. He explains that icons are “bridges to Christ”, and links to the saints, and help us remember events in history about salvation

In summary Jim Forest shows us that icons are another tool that helps us get closer to Christ. Understanding that praying to saints is not worshipping them, and those icons can bring us to prayer.

This book can enlighten the reader who may have had past doubts or misunderstandings about the acceptable observances of icons. All practicing faith should read.