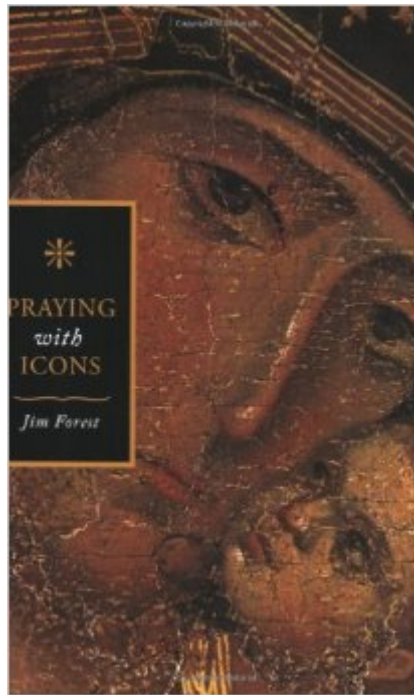


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# Praying With Icons



## Synopsis

In this beautifully illustrated book Jim Forest explains the use of icons in prayer to the uninitiated. Icons are not just "art" but a powerful aid to prayer and contemplation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Prayer...the light that leads us down the narrow path into the quiet place where we come into the presence of the Holy One. Prayer...descending with the mind into the heart and listening for that still, soft voice. Prayer...the language that we must use in developing our love relationship with the Savior. Jim Forest's book, *Praying With Icons*, talks a lot about icons and the art of iconography, but it is mostly about prayer. I stumbled into this book. The library I use most often has very few books in its "religion and philosophy" section. I have read most of them. This book has kept staring at me from the shelves. I did not pick it up because I thought of it as an "art" book. You see, although I come from a family of artists, I am not one of them-you might say I have an art "allergy". However, this book has been persistent. Every time I have gone to the library...there it is on the shelf (especially since it has only been checked out three times in the three years it has called the library home-me being number three). I am glad I finally caved and read it. I am in many ways ignorant of the traditions of the Orthodox Church. One of the great things about this book is Mr. Forest's ability to put Orthodox concepts and traditions into very understandable terms. He begins the book with a short history of icons. He then briefly outlines the qualities of icons, what it takes to be an iconographer, and ends Part I with a very brief but fascinating discussion of the use of color in iconography. The section on color really intrigued me. Each color represents some spiritual

quality-for instance: "Blues are associated with heaven, mystery, and the mystical life", while "Red, the color of blood, suggests life, vitality, and beauty". In Part II Forest discusses prayer. He starts with a discussion of how human beings were created with a need to pray. This need expresses itself in a multitude of ways depending on the person, what they believe, or what kind of culture they live in. Forest argues that in spite of all these differences, the need to pray in some form-even if the person does not believe in prayer-is universal. He then goes on to explain the traditional Orthodox way of prayer. This section is most useful for those interested in the many faceted jewel of prayer. Forest speaks eloquently of what some call stillness. As I read more and more on prayer, and as I begin to experience more and more of prayer, I am struck by what an awesome privilege it is to enter into the quiet of God's rest. Forest is succinct and lucid (as only one with experience of this kind of prayer can be) while discussing this kind of prayer. Parts III and IV focus on explaining different types of icons and their spiritual significance. This part was not only very interesting, but it changed my view on icons and iconography as a whole. Prior to reading this book I was unimpressed with icons. I thought of them as primitive pieces of art that bordered on idolatry. How wrong I was! I now see the silent beauty of these masterpieces. They are truly prayers in a visual medium. Part V is a listing of prayers that are commonly prayed in Orthodox services. This part is also very useful for understanding the Eastern Church. This book is fully worthwhile. I cannot recommend it enough.

I read Jim Forest's Praying with Icons a few years ago when it first appeared. I just finished re-reading it, and am even more impressed this time around. Anyone familiar with Forest's other books knows how comfortably fluid his style is, and how insightful his ideas are. Both of these qualities make this the single best introduction to icons I know. To my mind, there are three different but interrelated aspects of this book that are especially worth noting. The first is Forest's argument that "beauty bears witness to God," and that in depicting holy things beautifully, icons enhance our relationship with the Divine. This is a point well worth considering. Too often, I fear, beauty in the context of worship is either dismissed as irrelevant (all that matters is the word), venerated for its own sake (high church preciousness), or overdone and distractingly gaudy. But Forest reminds us that the beauty of icons is intended to aid in the transfiguration of those who pray before them. Icons are images of the wholeness of God, and they convey and impart some of that wholeness to us through their beauty. It takes a great deal of artistry to manifest that kind of beauty. The second point worth noting is Forest's observation that the writing/painting of an icon is in itself an act of worship and service, entered into reverently and prayerfully. There are traditions that dictate how the wood is

prepared, how the colors are selected, what they represent, and so on. The care and love with which icons are made is a good reminder that all work with God's creation is, or ought to be, mindful and reverential. The fruits of all our mental and physical labor are, in one manner of speaking, iconic. The third especially noteworthy aspect of Forest's treatment is his tie-in of prayer with icons. It might seem that the connection between the two is obvious, but I'm not sure this is the case, at least not in the contemporary U.S.. I've been in many homes where icons are displayed as curiosities, by totally secular hosts, on the walls right next to African masks and Peruvian weavings. Forest's reflections on prayer--that it involves the whole person, not just the intellect, that it requires the cultivation of stillness and silence, that a good prayer life is one that requires a great deal of deliberate discipline, and that the goal of our prayer life is theosis--are wonderful. In addition, as earlier reviewers have pointed out, the last 150 pages of the book discuss specific icons--Christ, Mary, the saints, the Transfiguration, etc--pointing out their language, their significance, and their histories. Readers of Forest's book will be well prepared to begin praying with icons, and to move on to other reflections on icons such as John of Damascus' *On the Divine Images* or Leonid Ouspensky & Vladimir Lossky's *The Meaning of Icons*. Finally, the illustrations, in color as well as black-and-white, are fabulous. A book to read and re-read.

Jim Forest, author of several books and a member of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship and other reconciliation and peace programs, has written a masterful work on icons and prayer. There is much in the political realm where Mr. Forest and I disagree, but putting differences aside, his book here is a wonderful work. His introduction page, about him and his wife receiving a rare and beautiful icon of Mary and their reverence in opening it grabs the faithful reader immediately. One wants to discover what makes icons so special. As an Orthodox Christian, I found his opening statements to be reverent and exciting. He brilliantly gives a concise but needed history on icons since many people have no idea why there are icons. He writes about how icons are a "transmission of Christian tradition and faith" and how they are "an aid to worship." The reader will further learn how icons are made, the prayer of the iconographer and the importance of icons in the life of the Christian faith. The pictures in the book of various icons are a great aid and are intertwined nicely in the text (some color and some black and white photos). A great buy for any Christian and in particular the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faithful.

For someone just getting into Orthodoxy, this book has been priceless. Icons are very special in Orthodoxy, and I felt it essential to know more about them. There are wonderful pictures of icons,

windows into heaven. So captivating! Although there is sufficient information on icons, the book focuses on prayer of The Orthodox using icons. A great addition to any Orthodox or Christian library!

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