Of Postcards, Pilgrims, and Prayer

Review of
Praying with Icons
by Jim Forest
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997
171 pages / $16.00 paperback

Reviewed by **Donna Kristoff, OSU**

Jim Forest's name remains linked to Thomas Merton's in the peace movement of the 1960s. They played complementary roles: Forest on the front lines, peace activist, sometimes jailed; Merton in a monastic underground, peace advocate, sometimes censored. Their friendship, cemented by mutual advice, criticism, challenge, and encouragement, is well documented in Merton's published letters and journals and Forest's biography of Merton (*Living with Wisdom*, 1991).

In his latest book, *Praying with Icons*, Forest not only reveals a new dimension to his Merton affiliation, but also demonstrates his preference for Merton's autobiographical approach to writing. In 1988 Jim wrote a journal, *Pilgrim to the Russian Church*, which serves as a prologue to the present book. There he chronicled three sojourns in Russia where the vitality of the faith and worship of the people absorbed him and ultimately led to his conversion to Russian Orthodoxy. Integral to his religious encounters was the icon - its beauty, its mystery, and its power of prayer. Here we can recall another "accidental" pilgrim in Rome in 1933 who found himself drawn to the Christ of the monumental mosaics of the great Christian basilicas he had once spurned in favor of pagan ruins. "The effect of this discovery," Merton himself wrote, "was tremendous. After all the vapid, boring, semi-pornographical statuary of the Empire, what a thing it was to come upon the genius of an art full of spiritual vitality and earnestness and power - an art that was tremendously serious and alive and eloquent and urgent in all that it had to say" (*Seven Storey Mountain*).

Jim Forest acknowledges his early indebtedness to his two mentors, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, for opening the way to his eventually discovering Eastern Christian spirituality. He received many icon postcards from Merton, but never regarded the images as significant, even to Merton himself. Little did he know that it was an icon that brought solace and peace to Merton's hermitage as he struggled to redefine his place in the Catholic Peace Fellowship following the suicide of Roger La Porte in protest against the Vietnam War. In December, 1965, Merton writes to Marco Pallis to acknowledge the gift of the icon:

> Where shall I begin? I have never received such a precious and magnificent gift from anyone in my life. I have no words to express how deeply

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> moved I was to come face to face with this sacred and beautiful presence granted to me in the coming of the ikon to my most unworthy person. At first I could hardly believe it. And yet perhaps your intuition about my karma is right, since in a strange way the ikon of the Holy Mother came as a messenger at a precise moment when a message was needed, and her presence before me has been an incalculable aid in resolving a difficult problem (*Hidden Ground of Love*).

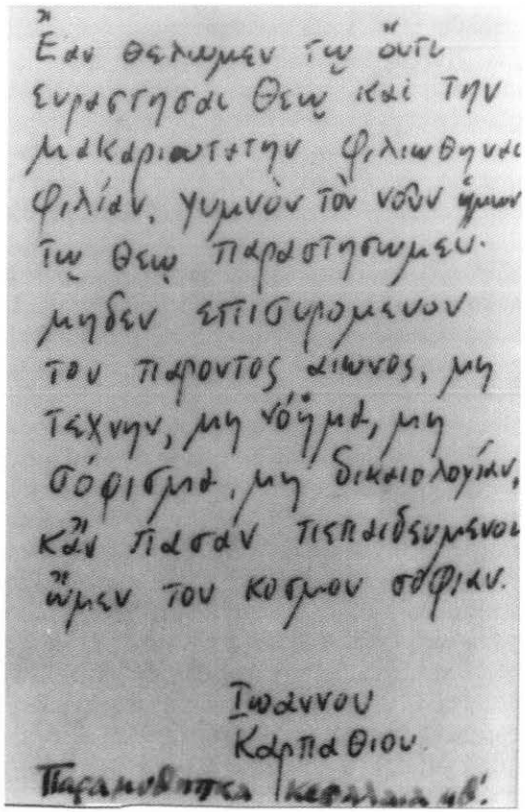
Among the current books on icons, *Praying with Icons* is unique in that it is written neither by a theologian nor by an art historian, but by one of the faithful from his own religious experience. Forest frames personal issues like the need for prayer and praying in body and soul within the setting of the history and theology of the icon, using the best sources in the tradition. His mood is warm and personal, never academic. His iconographer is a real flesh and blood monk, Father Zinon, who leads us prayerfully through the making of an icon. When he discusses the qualities of the icon, Forest literally reworks Merton's "Seven Qualities of the Sacred" from his unpublished book, *Art and Worship*. According to Merton/Forest, to be considered inherently sacred, a work of art must be hieratic, traditional, sincere, silent, pure, and revelatory of transfiguration.

Half of the book is devoted to specific icons. In the section addressing the liturgical meaning and iconographic symbolism of icons of the major feasts of the Church, Forest personalizes each of the brief entries with practical suggestions for prayer, recalled conversations, stories and tales from Russia, quoting Dostoevsky, Dorothy Day, John of the Cross, and even his daughter. The last part details devotion to the saints, most of whom are those usually associated with Russian Orthodoxy. The non-Orthodox reader may be struck by the presentation of the holy fool, whose only western counterpart might be a de-romanticized St. Francis of Assisi or a St. Benedict Joseph Labré. Jim Forest recounts his presence at the canonization of one of these *yurodivi* of the eighteenth century, Xenia of St. Petersburg: "These are people in whom Christ wears the disguise of madness" (136). Having no possessions, family, reputation nor ambition, fools for Christ speak and act boldly, their lives at odds with both civic and ecclesiastical society. Echoing Merton, Forest wonders aloud about the value we place on a sanity that found Adolf Eichmann to be "quite sane."

Forest finishes the book on a practical note: he includes a selection of inspiring prayers widely used in the Orthodox Church and offers a limited but useful directory for obtaining icons and prints.

Praying with Icons has, I believe, two drawbacks that the discerning reader can surmount. Both relate to the visuals used in the text. First, the quality of the color plates is uneven, the pages are unidentified, and their labeling is inconsistent and incomplete; another unfortunate oversight was not to include dates or country of origin when a contemporary iconographer's work was illustrated. Second, because of the autobiographical nature of this work, its weakness stems from its strength. There is a certain "old world" feel to the contents, heightened by the candid black and white photographs that depict only monks, nuns, priests, churches and monasteries of Russia. If Forest continues to develop in the spirit of his mentor, his vision will be challenged, as is ours, to stretch beyond where we find ourselves. When Thomas Merton died on his Asian journey, truly a monk in the diaspora, among his personal effects was a small icon of the Virgin (*see accompanying picture*). The inscription, written in Greek in his own handwriting on the reverse side of the

icon, points to our ultimate goal, beyond churches, beyond theology, and even, *beyond icons*: "If we wish to please the true God and to be friends with the most blessed of friendships, let us present *our spirit naked to God.* Let us not draw into it anything of this present world - no art, no thought, no reasoning, no self-justification - even though we should possess all the wisdom of this world" (John Carpathios, from the *Philokalia*).



Ἐαν θελωμεν τῳ ὄντι
ευαρεστησαι Θεῳ και την
μακαριωτατην φιλιοθεον
φιλιαν, γυμνον τον νουν ἡμων
τῳ Θεῳ παραστησωμεν.
μηδεν επισυρομενον
του παροντος αἰωνος, μη
τεχνην, μη νοημα, μη
σοφισμα, μη δικαιολογιαν,
κἂν πασαν τις παιδευσιν
ᾖμεν του κοσμου σοφιαν.

Ἰωαννου
Καρπαθιου.

Icon of the Virgin and Child, found with Merton's effects at the time of his death.