This is a short, readable, but not at all superficial book. Sister Wendy is well known as a self-taught art expert who has shared her enthusiasm through many books and television appearances. Her subject this time however is specific, and of particular relevance to all concerned with the spiritual life. It is not those regulated icons from the era that followed the 'Triumph of Orthodoxy'. Rather, it is the rare early images which somehow survived the two centuries of destruction, the 'Iconoclasm' which began in the year 726. Sister Wendy had previously gone on pilgrimage to seek out eight particular 'Virgins' from this era (Encounters with God, Continuum, 2009), but as she did so she became aware of other icons that deserved our attention. She found them across the world, but principally in the great treasure house that is St Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai.

Her almost continuous prose, broken up by just a few headings, speeds us along from image to image, explaining something of the history and context, making the connections, leading us around the corner to something new on every page, with the icons themselves, though uncaptioned, usually appearing on cue as the text mentions them.

In the end, Sister Wendy is self-effacing about what she has achieved: she might be able to teach us something about the Old Masters but there is no way of 'opening icons up to a viewer'. An icon is 'as functional as a pen or a bicycle', only working when put to personal use, and that use is prayer. Yet she has succeeded in bringing to life not only the vivid faith of the early Christians who made and prayed with these icons but also the possibility today of an encounter with a kind of Real Presence of Christ through these images.

Desmond Alban SSF