

# BOOK REVIEW

**MERTON & FRIENDS: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax and Edward Rice.** By James Harford. Continuum, NY, 2006. Reviewed by Jim Forest.

"Tell me what company you keep, and I'll tell you what you are." So said Cervantes.

Among Thomas Merton's closest friends were Bob Lax and Ed Rice. James Harford's engaging remembrance of this triangle of friends brings to light how much influence they had on each other and how so many others were affected by their friendship.

They met each other in 1936 at Columbia University in New York. All three were on the staff of the *Jester*, an irreverent magazine that had much in common with *The New Yorker* (on whose staff Robert Lax would later work as poetry editor).

In their *Jester* days, Ed Rice was the only one of the three who was a Catholic, though

Thomas Merton was in the thick of a religious quest that culminated in his Baptism at nearby Corpus Christi Parish in November 1938 with Ed Rice as his godfather and Robert Lax, a Jew, present as a witness. Three years later, Thomas Merton began monastic life at the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, yet his relationship with both Ed Rice and Robert Lax was to continue both through occasional visits and frequent correspondence.

The most obvious witness to the ties that bound them, and what their shared interests generated, was *Jubilee* magazine, a monthly journal edited by Ed Rice with collaboration from both Robert Lax and Thomas Merton plus a small, committed staff of talented, underpaid colleagues. The first issue appeared in 1953. It was unparalleled among religious magazines. Unfortunately, *Jubilee* finally drowned in red ink about 1967. Sadly, no publication has yet emerged to take its place. If I ever unearth a chest of gold coins buried in our backyard, I'd love to start it up again.

There wasn't a single issue of *Jubilee* that failed to be arresting—there were always impressive photo features plus some of the most striking typography of the time. The content was wide ranging—vivid glimpses of church life, portraits of houses of hospitality, profiles and interviews with remarkable people, and well-illustrated articles on liturgy, art and architecture. I doubt anyone involved with the *Catholic Worker* in those days let an issue of *Jubilee* go unread. It was a constant voice of encouragement to anyone who was drawn to Christianity's deeper waters.

I rejoiced several years ago, when visiting St. Bonaventure's University in Olean, NY, to discover a complete set of back issues of *Jubilee* in a library room devoted to Thomas Merton and Robert Lax. What I had forgotten in the decades since the last *Jubilee* was mailed out was the consistent interest the magazine took in the Orthodox Church. In the hundred or so issues I looked through, there wasn't a single issue that didn't have something in it about eastern Christianity. It might be a photo portrait of life in St. Catherine's monastery on the Sinai, a collection of stories from the Desert Fathers, or something as small as an ad promoting the sale, by *Jubilee*, of icon reproductions or recordings of Byzantine or Russian chant.

The exploration of the issues I looked through produced a question I could not answer at the time: What inspired *Jubilee*'s passionate engagement in what must have seemed to many readers in those days an esoteric form of Christianity? I was aware it had been a special interest of Thomas Merton's. Was *Jubilee* helping fuel Thomas Merton's interest in the Orthodox Church? Or was it mirroring his interest?

I remember how deeply moved Thomas Merton was by a set of photos of life in an Orthodox monastery that appeared in one issue of *Jubilee*, as I happened to be with him when he was looking through it. One of the photos showed a heavily-bearded Athonite monk who looked older than Abraham. He was standing behind a long battered table in the refectory, while in the background, as I recall, was a huge fresco of the Last Judgment. The monk's head was bowed slightly. His eyes seemed to contain the cosmos. There was a remarkable vulnerability in his face. "Look at him," Thomas Merton said. "This guy has been kissed by God!"

From James Harford's book, at last I know the answer to my question. It was not just an interest of Thomas Merton's that *Jubilee* was taking up, but a topic of long-running importance to all three of them. It seems that Ed Rice was first in line. He wrote in his journal in 1949, "Ever since I first discovered the Byzantine rite, my head has been filled with the memory of the music and the churches and the people: I want to tell everyone about them, bring everyone to the services.... But no one seems to care."



Tree of Life

Ade Bethune

In fact, there were those who did care, among them Robert Lax, who by then had become a Catholic, but with an eastward turn. In time, Robert Lax was to make his home in the world of Byzantine Christianity, living a solitary contemplative life in Greece, finally settling on the island of Patmos, location of one of the great Orthodox monasteries. Thomas Merton was another. Doubtless he would have gladly gone with Ed Rice to services at the churches he was attending, but by 1949 he was in his eighth year at the monastery.

A good deal of James Harford's book is devoted to *Jubilee* and the prophetic role it played during its fourteen years. Among the issues it addressed, one that cost it dearly as many parishes cancelled their bulk orders, was birth control. In 1962, one of the magazine's writers (Peter White, father of eleven) reported on a survey published in a French Catholic journal on the failure of the Second Vatican Council to address that issue: "Certain kinds of psychic imbalance, or nervous depressions, are frequently the result of pregnancies following one another too rapidly, or of continence heroically practiced...." At the time, for a Catholic publication to address the issue was to take a step onto very thin ice, yet *Jubilee* returned to it from time to time, never directly criticizing Church teaching, but stressing the damage caused in many marriages by those who attempted to practice what the Church was preaching.

*Jubilee* was not a voice of opposition so much as a journal searching for what was most vital in Catholic Christianity. It was something of a month-to-month miracle that it managed to carry on as long as it did despite chronic financial difficulties, its work being done in cramped quarters in rooms it rented on Park Avenue South.

In the early Sixties, I would occasionally drop by at the *Jubilee* office, at Robert Lax's invitation. I was part of the New York Catholic Worker community, then on Chrystie Street. *Jubilee* was within walking distance. Though Robert was often traveling (among other things, from time to time he was part of a circus troupe), he had a small office to himself with a desk and two chairs. Though one of the world's least chatty persons, Robert Lax was always ready to talk about things he loved. Poetry was at the top of the list. One element in his work in those days was the publication of a poetry broadsheet called *Pax*, no two issues of which were on the same paper size or using the same format. By this time, with the help of his friend, the artist and designer Emil Antonucci, Robert Lax's book, *Circus of the Sun*, had been published and there was even an off-off-Broadway stage production of the poem in one of Manhattan's smallest theaters. (Happily, "Circus of the Sun" is now back in print as part of a collection of all Robert Lax's circus poetry, *Circus Days and Nights*. This would be one of the books I would keep were my library limited to only ten volumes.)

Besides being a book about *Jubilee*, James Harford provides biographies of all three principals. The portrait of Thomas Merton struck me as the least complete of the three, offering a view of Thomas Merton that is most vivid in its treatment of his premonastic days. It's a portrait similar to the one that emerged in Ed Rice's book, *The*

*Man in the Sycamore Tree*—"Merton the Original Beat" who somehow landed in a Catholic Trappist monastery but who, in the end, might have been as happy, if not happier, in a Buddhist monastery—not the Thomas Merton who said the Mass daily, was devoted to the Rosary, and who missed the Latin liturgy even while sympathizing with its translation into modern languages. As James Harford knew Thomas Merton only through his books and his friendship with Robert Lax and Ed Rice, it's not surprising that the portraits of Robert Lax and Ed Rice are more compelling.

Ed Rice seems in many ways a tragic figure. He had wanted to be an artist, but this was strongly opposed by his parents. He went to Columbia rather than Harvard because his parents wanted him living not too far away, the better to keep an eye on him. After Columbia, the vision that led to *Jubilee* gradually took root but it took years to find the backing such a venture required, and in fact the magazine never stood on strong legs financially.

When *Jubilee* went under in 1967, it was a bitter defeat for Ed Rice. Afterward he focused his talents on photography and writing, producing a series of books, at least one of which was a best seller, a much-praised biography of Richard Francis Burton. But he seems rarely to have found inner peace in what he was doing. His first marriage ended in divorce, his second was cut short by the death of his wife in an auto accident. He was prone to dramatic mood swings and had long-running acrimonious disputes with various people, including his son. I was happy to discover, thanks to James Harford's book, that though Ed Rice had been estranged from the Catholic Church for a number of years, toward the end of his life he found his way back, drawing enormous strength from the Eucharist.

Robert Lax emerges as the happiest of the three. His poetry bears witness to the astonishing depth of his contemplative life. He was among the world's least ambitious people, not at all unhappy to be in the back of the line and last to be waited on. Like many hermits, he was a magnet to many people seeking advice and encouragement, which he provided with the utmost modesty. His retreat to the Greek Islands during the second half of his life saved him from far more visitors than would have found their way to him had he stayed in the US.

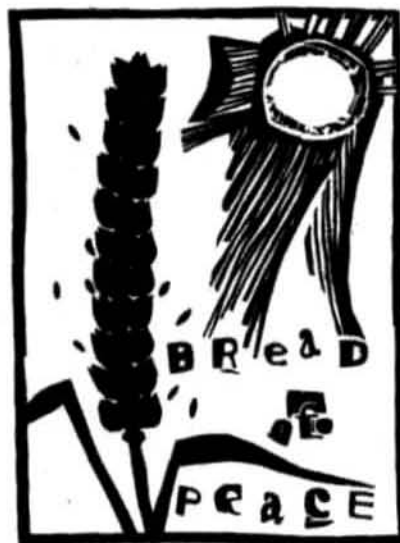
A true Franciscan in terms of material needs, he managed to get by on very little money, surviving mainly on the meager income that came to him thanks to his poetry and the occasional readings he gave in the US and more affluent parts of Europe. Many editors of poetry journals had little or no interest in publishing his poetry—too few words per page was a routine complaint—but Robert Lax seemed entirely untroubled. If you liked his poetry, fine, and if you didn't, that was also fine. Yet he was well published, even if in small editions—in the US by Emil Antonucci's Journeyman Press, in Europe by Pendo. He was a man at home in silence. He could spend many a quiet hour just watching the light on the water and the coming and going of fishing boats.

James Harford's book is not only about friends but is a testimony to the sacrament of friendship. ✦

## By Martyrs

ty of the population on our continent: unemployment, violence, social exclusion, and forced migration. We count on the collaboration of all the men and women of good will in the whole world. The relation of evangelization to liberation (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 30); of faith and life, are part of the Latin American and Caribbean ecclesial patrimony and characterize our struggle for justice in the construction of peace.

The Latin American and Caribbean Church, as People of God, is concerned about the future. Our faith looks to the Christian communities to find room for freedom, participation and responsibility. They look for incentives in their search for new paths of liberation and commitment. Our Christian communities, knowing that they are responsible for the life of future generations, feel committed to defend nature and preserve human, animal, plant and aquatic life. Without a new spirituality integrated with the struggle for ecological liberation, there will be no future and we run the risk of destroying the exact place where God made His alliance with humanity and with all of creation. (*Gen 9:9-17*)



Meinrad Craighead

The Latin American and Caribbean Church continues to follow Jesus on His path, strengthened by the witness of many martyrs: indigenous, blacks, bishops, priests, religious women and men, and laypeople, who, like Jesus, have spilt their own blood to defend life. Confident in the God of Life, Father-Mother of all people, we proclaim our faith in the Spirit Who conducts History on its way to the manifestation of the Kingdom of God, witnessed by Jesus of Nazareth and faithfully followed by our Mother, Mary, whom we invoke with the name *Aparecida*. ✦



Charles Lehman