

Communication Leads to Communion

Review of

*Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton,
Robert Lax, and Edward Rice*

By James Harford

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Reviewed by **Mary Anne Rivera**

Jubilate Deo, omnis terra! “Rejoice in the Lord, all the earth!” This is the message that James Harford effectively proclaims in his text, *Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax and Edward Rice*. This is also the reason that Harford, an honorary “beat,” has chosen to tell the tale of these exemplary twentieth-century men of God – Merton, Lax, and Rice – and the impact that they had on American Catholicism. As the last surviving beat, this consummate storyteller skillfully weaves together the lives of these three men highlighting their contributions to the Church, society and the world. In doing so he tells a tale of how we, as People of God, can learn to live in right relationship with God, self, others and the world. Guided by the wisdom of Merton, Harford enables the reader to celebrate the truth that “communication leads to communion.” It becomes easy then for the reader to follow the three as they enter the world with a passion and purpose to celebrate the truth that God is love – and celebrate they did!

In the first chapter, “Seeds of Unorthodoxy,” Harford identifies the relationships that were to serve as the foundation for much of what these men, both individually and collectively, accomplished throughout the rest of their lives. Established in this first chapter is how “Lax a small-town Jew, Merton a worldly Protestant, [and] Rice a big city Catholic” (vii) eventually find themselves in God and in one another. With ample detail that unfolds before the reader’s eyes, Harford never loses sight of what Lax, Merton, and Rice shared in common – their “fierce creativity” (5). This creativity was publicly manifested in their role as editors-in-chief of Columbia’s college magazine, *Jester*. Harford deftly describes their years at Columbia College; their roles as editors, academicians, activists, and poets; and the influence of such notables as Mark Van Doren, Aldous Huxley and Mahanambata Bramachari. Knowing the details of these formative years is key to understanding these three men and their “quest for spiritual enlightenment headed toward serious Christianity” (21).

As the next chapter unfolds Harford continues to paint a vivid picture of three “spiritual hippies” who wrote, drank, read, went to movies, played jazz and . . . well you know! According to Harford “such goings-on characterized most of the summers of both 1939 and 1940 at the Olean cottage” (24) – where Merton demonstrated his “strong secular inclinations” – “mainly about

girls, 'larfing,' and champagne. He wasn't quite ready for the cloth" (25). In June 1939, with "reading material aplenty," Lax, Merton and Rice read and wrote, caroused and prayed their summers away (26). The reader is left with an appreciation for how real, frail, and personable these men really were.

In the next two chapters Harford walks through the life-changing years surrounding World War II. The author tells how the war impacted the three men of draft age and of how their spiritual journeys took a fundamental turn, leading Merton to Gethsemani, Lax to *The New Yorker*, and Rice to his role as godfather to both. Merton, wondering what kept the universe together with "nothing but wiseguys and gyps and crooks" (47), went off to Gethsemani, found it "mind-blowing," and was now ready to "give God everything" for the opportunity "to be completely quiet in front of the face of Peace" (53). Lax, influenced by his study of Thomas Aquinas and letters from Merton the monk, decided to become Catholic in 1943, with his godfather Rice by his side. For Merton, Lax, and Rice, 1940-1948 were filled with dark nights of contrasting moods of gloom, misery and despair which brought forth great literary fruit – *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *Circus of the Sun* and *Jubilee*.

With the fifth chapter, Harford makes the appropriate decision to devote an entire chapter to *Jubilee*. In a manner that is both informative and inviting, he reminisces about the "powerful impact *Jubilee* magazine had on those itching for a change in the pre-Vatican II 1950s – lay and religious alike" (90). Harford's skillful writing conveys how one could believe that *Jubilee's* impact was really a twentieth-century intervention by the Holy Spirit. And what a Spirit it was – a spirit that inspired a generation of believers who came to understand that God is love, is friend, is life. It was this life-giving message that filled 16 volumes of the award-winning *Jubilee: A Magazine of the Church and Her People* (1953-1967). Into the homes of tens of thousands of Catholics and non-Catholics alike came the prophetic message of *Jubilee*. Its tone was friendly and fair. It attended to the problems that marked the time and it introduced new faces, new people and new places through its "wonderful pictures, taken by top-notch photographers, marvelous art layouts, beautifully written stories about Catholics and non-Catholics living extraordinary lives in ordinary situations" (90). It was a magazine that faithfully focused on one fundamental question, "What does it mean to be Catholic in the twentieth century?" With Rice as editor, managing editor, art editor and production editor, Lax as the roving editor (in recognition of his peripatetic travels), and Merton as author and constant promoter of the magazine, *Jubilee's* readers were able to enjoy the views of an eclectic audience of scholars such as Daniel Berrigan, Henri de Lubac, Ernesto Cardenal, Jean Daniélou, Dorothy Day, Jacques Maritain, and Sister Corita Kent (to name a few). Moreover the reader of *Jubilee* could experience first-hand Edward Rice's own spiritual journey born of his desire to live a Christian life in a secular world. James Harford, then an active member of *Jubilee's* advisory board, has insights and experiences to share. He speaks of *Jubilee* as only an eyewitness can. Harford gives his reader a glimpse into the many adventures of the staff, volunteers, and guests (including a young Yugoslavian nun, Mother Teresa of Calcutta.)

For anyone who wants to know *Jubilee's* often prophetic and usually poignant interpretation of Vatican II, it would be helpful to see Harford's sixth chapter. With his storytelling skills still present, the author reveals the ability of the magazine to name the "aching issues" that "faced all Catholics at the start of the 1960s" (118). *Jubilee* seemed prepared to address these difficult but real issues. The question remained, was the Council? How would it address the moral question

of a Cold War? The possibility of nuclear annihilation? What about the behavior of the Church hierarchy with respect to such matters? Oona Sullivan, *Jubilee's* managing editor, described its staff as “extremely bizarre Catholics who loved the Church” (119). They were committed to their readers and inspired by the fact that their magazine had a profound impact on American Catholicism. In the pages of *Jubilee*, the writers addressed the Cold War, nuclear annihilation, abortion, birth control, race relations, celibacy, the status of women, lay participation, government policy toward the poor, the Third World, environmental degradation, and ecumenism. They did so tirelessly, hoping that the council would do the same and fearful that it would not. Regrettably, according to Harford the “pessimism proved to be warranted when what emerged over the years after the council was much dousing of fresh ideas, as well as a virtual shutdown of talks about such crying issues” (129).

As a faithful storyteller Harford historically documents the life and loves of the aging “beats.” He comments on Merton’s relationship with his nurse (148), notes Lax’s fascination with “a very handsome island girl” (145) and marks the death of Merton’s enchantment with Catholicism on the one hand and how the death of many of their “beat” pals (as well as the death of a cashless *Jubilee*) impacted Lax, Merton and Rice on the other.

By tracing the long wandering journeys of all three protagonists Harford gives reason to see how the 1960s shaped all three men. The decade brought an intensified desire to study the culture, religions and mystics of the East. Lax passively studied and meditated; Rice traveled and documented his interests in the pages of *Jubilee*; while a mentally, spiritually weary and disillusioned Merton studied, produced and published a warning. It is a warning that Harford reminds us is all too relevant today: “The human race is facing the greatest crisis in its history, because religion itself is being weighed in the balance. The present unrest in five continents, with everyone fearful of being destroyed, has brought many men to their knees” (165-66).

Within chapters nine, ten, and eleven Harford honors *Merton & Friends* and conveys how a very public Merton, the man and the myth, becomes a legacy that lives on in text and film, in memory and meeting. The reader can especially see what this means because of Harford’s decision to document what he terms as “the explosion of Mertoniana in the 1980s.” In the 1990s the posthumous recognition for Merton continued, and Lax remained productive on Patmos. Rice, too, had successes but experienced serious setbacks as well. The whole world, or so it seemed, memorialized Merton, with Lax the prophet garnering appreciably more attention. Rice enjoyed sweet success in 1990 with his “first-class” (249) telling of the tale of *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton: The Secret Agent Who Made the Pilgrimage to Mecca, Discovered the Kama Sutra, and Brought the Arabian Nights to the West*. These detailed accounts of this “Columbian Trinity” is done so well that Harford provides a deep insight into their lives that can be provided by few others.

In his final chapter, “Legacy: Impact of All Three on a Troubled Catholicism,” Harford asks three important questions: What of the overall legacy of these three men? Who is listening these days to what they had to say about their Church? What impact have their writings had on American Catholics and on the general populace? Harford effectively leads the reader to the worthwhile answers. Having devoted three years of my own research to these questions I was intrigued and delightfully surprised at the thought-provoking answers Harford provided for his conclusion.

Harford, as a classical story teller, comes from within the community and is recognized by

the community as having the charism to authentically present and effectively communicate the story. Lax affirmed this vocation, saying to Harford, "You're one of the few people I've met since college that I think would have been part of our gang at college" (274). He had been recognized as one of them and confirmed as a member of the group. Shortly after that commissioning, Lax died and soon after Rice would, too. As the last of the surviving "beats" he felt compelled to tell the story, assuming for himself the two roles of both the story teller and a protagonist.

In this book, one sees Harford weave in and out of the story in a way similar to the way he weaved in and out of the lives of Lax, Merton and Rice. He is able to share with the reader their lives "that were exemplary in their friendships with one another over decades, and in their prioritization of simple values, love of God and fellow man, and high standards of beauty, intellect, and tolerance for their church" (vii). One can see him fulfilling his role of authentically telling the story to ensure that their legacy lives on.

Perhaps it is here that one encounters a possible weakness of his writing. In some sense there may be a critical distance missing here. In his days as a member of the advisory board of *Jubilee* Harford was required to maintain a certain objectivity. If that happened then why may it be less prominent now? His work invites the reader to see how *Jubilee* is contemporary. But is it contemporary because he "owned" it? Would it be meaningful at all for people who have not participated in that history? Despite this criticism, I think that Harford has a significant reason to invite people to revisit *Jubilee* because it is meaningful to our very *contemporary* life. But it is important to see it as a significant piece of Catholic tradition located in a particular historical context, a tradition that spans 1953-1967, and to recognize what significance that conversation has for our contemporary understanding of what it means to be a Catholic in the twenty-first century. As someone who has researched the magazine *Jubilee* in great detail I think that Harford's focus on *Jubilee* is justified. The magazine is still pertinent because *Jubilee* sought the answers to those very important questions and believed the Council had satisfied the questions. But even Harford notes that those answers were lost along the way. The wonderful promises were not followed through and have yet to be realized. I recognize the value of Harford's contribution to American Catholic life and thought and celebrate his commissioning as both a story teller and an inside man!

This work is clearly written making it accessible to its readers. I believe that it is helpful to know that a non-specialist would gain from the reading, but may not fully appreciate all its references. Graduate students, scholars and professionals also will find the text's original approach, as well as its comprehensive scholarship, valuable. Yet anyone who is genuinely interested in guiding the future directions of American Catholicism would do well to read this book.