

## First and Lasting Impressions

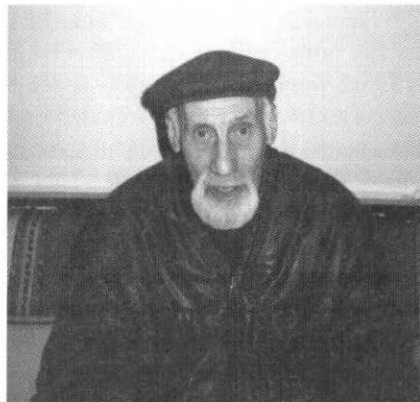
**Patrick Hart, OCSO**

I first met Robert Lax at the time of the Jacques Maritain / Thomas Merton Symposium held in Louisville in the fall of 1980. Since he traveled only by boat, bus or train, it took him some weeks to arrive. We felt privileged to have him stay with us at Gethsemani in our guest house for about a week at the conclusion of the symposium.

After these days together I could easily understand why Merton considered Bob Lax his closest friend. He simply radiated goodness and peace and joy to all he met. That was my first and lasting impression. I can recall those days walking in the woods here at Gethsemani, and my asking him among other things about his entrance into the Catholic Church from Judaism. His response was deeply moving. He said that a year before he actually entered the Church he told his mother about his burning desire, that he had prayed over it, and felt he must do this. She had only one request: "Bob, do me a favor and delay your entrance into the Catholic Church for one year. During that time promise me to live your Jewish faith as fully as you can." This he promised, and said he wore the black hat, and phylacteries, and all the rest. When the year was up

he again spoke to his mother about his great desire to become Catholic. At this point, she said to him: "Bob, you go now with my full blessing." With this Bob flashed his angelic smile.

Twelve years later, in the spring of 1992, while working on the first volume of the Merton journals, I had the good fortune of spending a week with Bob Lax on the island of Patmos where he lived in self-imposed exile. I realized once again how his quiet, gentle presence was recognized by



**Robert Lax**

his Greek neighbors who considered him their own hermit, their poet, their “holy man.” Everyone we met on the narrow streets leading up to his hermitage greeted Bob with a few words and some laughter. He spoke their language; he was one of them.

I can still see him waving me goodbye as I walked up the gangplank of the ship that took me back to Athens. But the letters continued to come, not as frequently as before, since he was trying to get his papers in order. Fortunately, this work was completed shortly before his health deteriorated so that the decision was made to return to the States. How providential that he should return to his childhood home and die with his family close to St. Bonaventure’s which he also considered home. He now lies buried in the Friars’ cemetery, not far from the pasture, now called “Merton’s Heart” and the statue of St. Thérèse where both Lax and Merton meditated and prayed in those summers of 1939, 1940 and 1941. May his gentle spirit intercede for us as we continue our journeys to our true home.

---

**Brother Patrick Hart** served as general editor of the Thomas Merton Journals.