

GOD & I: Steve T. Georgiou

An American writer and educator on religion and spirituality talks about his Christian faith and poet Robert Lax, his remarkable mentor

By Mario Conte, OFM Conv.

YOU CONSIDER the poet Robert Lax, whom you met in 1993 when you visited the Greek island of Patmos, your mentor. What can you tell us about Lax, who is best known as having been the closest friend of Trappist monk Thomas Merton?

There is so much to say about Lax, who passed away in 2000. He met classmate Thomas Merton at Columbia University in New York and they kept in touch ever after. Some time after Merton became a monk, Lax became a hermit. Merton writes in his famous book *The Seven Storey Mountain* that Lax had an ‘inborn direction to the living God, to Christ.’

Robert Lax was a Jew by birth, a Reform Jew who became a Catholic shortly after Merton converted to Catholicism. His philosophy of life echoed that of the Desert Fathers, that is, he valued peace, patience, and the way of the heart. He strongly believed in love, and later identified this love with Jesus. I believe that Lax, as a result of his close-knit family life, spiritual-creative gifts, diverse occupational background, and world travel experiences indeed developed an ‘inborn direction to God’ that ultimately led him to Christ. In 1965, he settled on the Greek isle of Patmos, a popular place of pilgrimage associated with the Revelation according to St John.

Robert Lax was a foundational

minimalist poet. He concentrated on simplicity and on making the most out of the fewest words. He was a pioneer of literary minimalism. Some of his poems can go on for several pages using no more than a few words. He thought of these poems as songs, prayers, creative invocations to God.

What specifically did Robert Lax teach you?

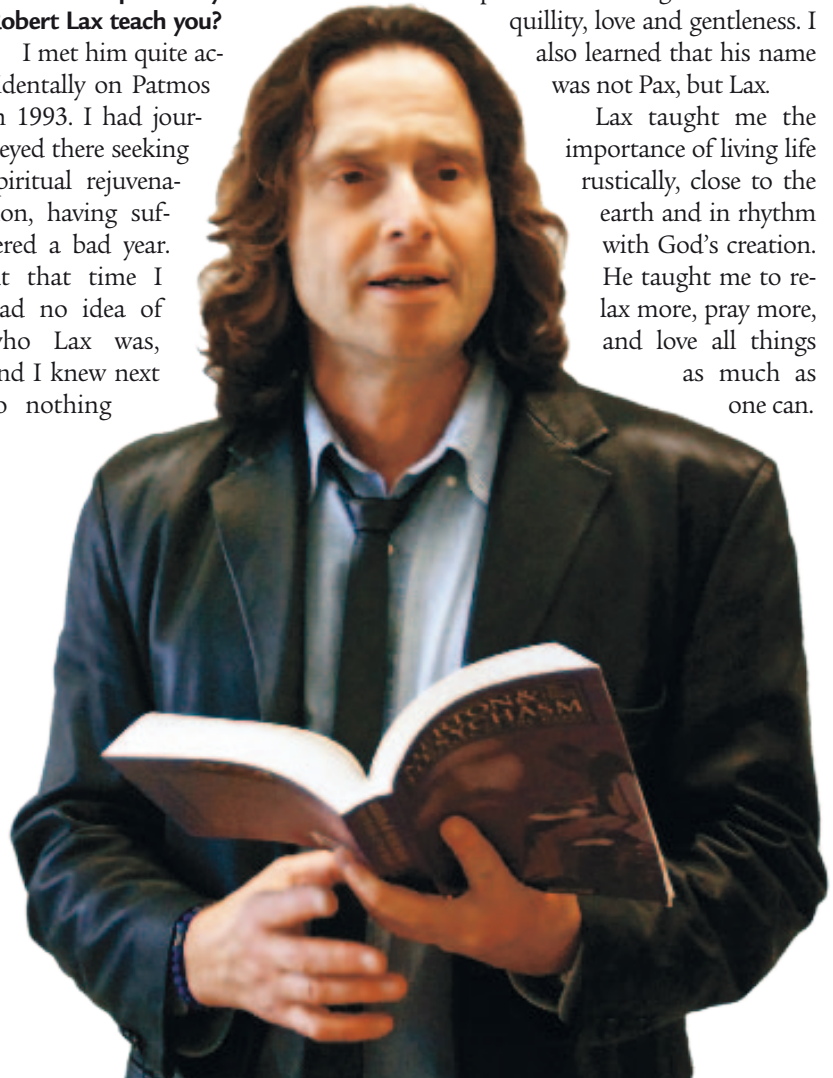
I met him quite accidentally on Patmos in 1993. I had journeyed there seeking spiritual rejuvenation, having suffered a bad year. At that time I had no idea of who Lax was, and I knew next to nothing

about Merton. But I did know that a famous Greek Orthodox monastery was on Patmos, and being Greek Orthodox, I travelled to the holy isle on a kind of personal retreat.

Shortly after arriving, I was walking along the shore one night and was approached by a young Greek. After a brief exchange, he suggested that I meet a poet of the island called ‘Pax’. Of course, Pax literally means ‘peace’ in Latin, and I had, in fact, gone to Patmos to find peace.

The stranger directed me to a distant house atop a hill. When I met the poet I felt a strong sense of tranquillity, love and gentleness. I also learned that his name was not Pax, but Lax.

Lax taught me the importance of living life rustically, close to the earth and in rhythm with God’s creation. He taught me to relax more, pray more, and love all things as much as one can.



I visited Lax over a period of seven years; we spent quality time together. We would walk and talk along the shoreline, visit friends, eat together at his home. He taught me through examples, through stories, through meeting people; every day was a sort of spiritual blessing. He demonstrated how the holy can oftentimes be seen in ordinary things around us, and that if we live a life grounded in love we will better sense that holy love.

When did you start writing?

I wrote my first poem when I was around 12. Of all things, it had to do with the terrors of hell! My first book pertained to matters of the spirit, *The Last Transfiguration*, and was on St Augustine. It was based on my Humanities master's thesis at St Francisco State University. It had to do with metaphysical ideas about light, precisely the integrated symbolism of light in the saint's writings, especially in his *Confessions*.

Can you cultivate writing or is it a divine gift?

Both are true. Creativity is innate in us. Each of us is born with a creative gift that helps us to find God. We are called to be co-creators with God. I think the best way to cultivate our gifts, be it writing or anything else, is to link the mind with the heart. Inspiration is then better processed, formulated and directed. We best develop our talents when we return to our divine source.

Your latest book *The Isle of Monte Cristo: Finding the Inner Treasure* has been defined as "an inner pilgrimage of faith, hope and love". Who is the book aimed at, and what do you think it can offer readers?

The book is the last of a spiritual trilogy grounded in the wisdom of Robert Lax (the first two books are *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*

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Georgiou's areas of teaching and study include the Interdisciplinary Humanities, Comparative Religion, Iconography, Thomas Merton and Robert Lax Studies, Desert Monasticism, Native American Humanities, and Spirituality and Healing.

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He is the author of *The Last Transfiguration: The Quest for Spiritual Illumination in the Life of St Augustine* (Phanes, 1995), *The Way of the Dreamcatcher: Spirit-Lessons With Robert Lax* (Novalis, 2003; Herder-Spektrum, 2006; Templegate Publishers, 2010), and *Mystic Street: Meditations On A Spiritual Path* (Novalis, 2007).

His most recent book is *The Isle of Monte Cristo: Finding the Inner Treasure* (Novalis, 2010) which received a 2011 Catholic Press Association Award. Author website: www.spiritcurrents.com



and *Mystic Street*). The book is aimed at anyone who wants to break free from the shackles of a passing, self-obsessed world and live a transcendent life.

The symbolism of *The Isle of Monte Cristo* is derived from Alexandre Dumas' famous novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*. In that novel the protagonist, Edmond Dantes, is wrongfully imprisoned, and when he escapes 14 years later he finds an enormous treasure hidden on an island called Monte Cristo, which means 'Mountain of Christ'. Edmond then uses this treasure to exact vengeance on those who wronged him, but he gradually perceives how his plans also have devastating effects on the in-

nocent as well as the guilty. He then realizes that all vengeance must be left with God. The best thing he can do is to love, pray, and patiently wait on God's ultimate justice and mercy.

Life's real treasure is thus found in the inner isle, the 'Monte Cristo of the heart'. That's why the subtitle of the book is *Finding the Inner Treasure*, and that treasure has to do with establishing a fruitful relationship with Christ. The real adventure in life is interior. In a sense, where *The Count of Monte Cristo* ends, *The Isle of Monte Cristo* begins.

In your opinion, what are the most difficult obstacles in the way of spiritual growth?

Desperation, dark nights of the soul, and loneliness can undermine spiritual progress, particularly if faith in God is weak. Depression is rampant in the modern world, partly brought on by computer technology (which eliminates human interaction)

and a media that tends to focus on non-stop violence and sensationalism. That's why the Desert Fathers left the hustle and bustle of city life to experience peace and quietness in deserted places,



Georgiou's trilogy is released by Canadian Publisher Novalis

because in quiet God speaks to all hearts. Too much noise, too many flashing lights and running around prevent us from finding our centre, the 'still small voice of God' mentioned in Scripture.

What is the driving force in your life?

I was blessed to be born into a caring family. My mother and father have been very supportive throughout my life journey. You really need family support and good, wise friends. And church has kept me rhythmically centred, as have regular forays into nature. I am thankful to live near the ocean where I often walk, reflect, and pray.

Could you share with us your idea of God?

God is both *apophatic* (a divine mystery) and *cataphatic* (incarnate as

In addition to teaching and writing Georgiou creates icons in a style he has termed Neo-Byzantine Folk Art



the Christ). I respect the holy mystery of the Divine, but I also know that this mystery is expressed in the person of Jesus, the God of Love. I trust in the God of Love, a love that catalysed life and calls us to live compassionately, both now and for eternity.

What do you think is the greatest sin in modern society?

Not valuing the holiness of creation. Ours is a very fast paced world; we throw away a lot of things, we forget that there is a divine foundation in everything that has emanated from God. If we realized that everything is sustained by a higher holy energy, if we saw how all things have a unique relationship with Christ, then we would be more trusting, faithful, patient, and loving people.

The authors of New Age books, who focus more on a feel-good, rose-tinted worldview, reap great success nowadays; what makes a Christian writer different?

There is a simple answer to that: the way to Christ is through

the Cross, which leads to the Resurrection. So-called 'New Age authors' tend to sell the illusion that God can be found by bypassing inner struggle. Jesus, however, tells us that unless a grain of seed falls to the ground and dies, it cannot be reborn. One has to die to one's egoistic self to blossom in the greater glory of God. One has to discard the false sense of self if one wishes to find God. This is very hard to do, it is painful, but it cannot be avoided if one wants to become part of the greater body of the Lord.

Scripture tells us the way to God is not only through the joyful appreciation of life and the beauty of creation, ('Praise God!'), but also consists of lifelong obedience and humility. As Thomas Aquinas said, "we learn theology on our knees". Hence the saying of the early Church fathers: *Give blood and receive the spirit.*

Do you think people are becoming more aware of spiritual realities?

In the last 20 years many books have been published on different ways of faith. Religion and spirituality have become popular talk-show topics on radio and TV. Every month the front covers of widely read magazines predominantly feature religious stories.

Young people especially are looking towards the spiritual because this world is too fast paced; they are looking for an anchor in a very restless sea. I teach Comparative Religion and the Interdisciplinary Humanities at local colleges, and the courses in religion have the most enrolment.

If religion is taught in a thorough, balanced way, it will help to calm students down. Many are seeking peace. They innately understand that there is something more than the worldly nature of existence.

Where does the message of Christianity fit in with all of this? If Christians live in love, *real love*, then people will want to know more about them, and will ask, "What religion do you practice?" The world is ever in search of people who are gentle and loving, who in the depths of their hearts know that this life has a merciful and all-compassionate Lord. ♦