

TÉMOIN – WITNESS Transcription December 1, 2020
Host, Fr. Thomas Rosica CSB

Fr. Rosica

Archbishop Christian Lépine, seeing you here today reminds me of the good old days at the Canadian college where we first met. You started there before me, in 1986, and I arrived in 1987, and from that time forward we have had a great friendship and have worked together very well. And now, with you as archbishop of Montreal and me as CEO of Salt + Light Catholic Television, we are working together again.

Tell me something about your journey and your vocation. You are very well known among our viewers, but share with us what your path has been.

ML

Well, I was 25 years old when I first thought about becoming a priest. I have always been a believer, but in my childhood, when I thought about Jesus Christ, when I thought about faith, being born in a Christian family, I would think more about holiness. I loved reading comic books about the lives of the saints and reading the Bible in comic book form.

FR

Who was your favourite saint?

ML

I remember Don Bosco. Certainly Don Bosco made a big impression on me. I have this image in my mind... You know, sometimes our childhood memories are not a complete series of events, but isolated images. And I have this image of Don Bosco sharing his bread with a poor man. I have the image of St. Francis of Assisi, of course — the classic image — who was a great disciple of Jesus Christ. A few images of the saints remained with me. But I also read the Bible as a comic book. I can say I read the entire Bible, which doesn't happen often for a Catholic.

FR

Oh, my!

ML

But I cheated, since I read it as a comic book. I still remember some of those images. I was 8 years old when I read the entire comic strip Bible.

So, faith was a part of my life, but I thought more about holiness than about becoming a priest. And later, in my adolescence, I always believed in God, I started seeking a purpose for

my life. It wasn't so much a search for the meaning. I was immersed in my faith, the Christian faith. I was searching for the purpose of my life. And it was a long process. It was a long time before it took shape at 25 years of age. So, I studied. I was at the Royal Military College Saint-Jean. I went to the polytechnic; I studied political economics at the University of Montreal. And in each case, I guess we can say I was a dropout, even before the term came into use, in the sense that I was kept looking elsewhere. It's not that I didn't enjoy what I was doing. I really liked each place. But each time, I realized I was searching for something else, and that led me to keep looking. And finally, when I was 25, the Lord had mercy on me.

FR – (Laughs)

ML

I was in my rocking chair and I started thinking about becoming a priest. It was Christmas 1976. I started to desire to become a priest. And I said to myself, "How is it that I'm starting to think about becoming a priest?"

FR

That was the year of the Olympics in Montreal.

ML

I had never thought of the priesthood before; I would think about God and about life, but it was in view of finding a purpose for my life, not so much for the meaning of life. And then, all of a sudden, this desire emerged in me. It was a strong desire, and after two weeks of feeling this way continuously — each I sat in my rocking chair, I would think about becoming a priest, I was living with my parents at the time — I said to myself, "If I am still thinking about this in two months, I will visit with my uncle," who was a priest, Philippe Lépine, a priest of the Congregation of the Blessed, who was a pastor in Quebec City, and I said to myself I would visit him. But then, after about two or three weeks, I had stopped thinking about it. I was planning a trip to Africa at the time.

But the desire returned at the start of Holy Week, at the start of the Easter season, and much more intensely. It was as if at Christmas a small crack was made in my wall. I imagine I had a wall up, a certain resistance that I had to God within me, even though I believed in Him. And through this small crack, this door that had opened slightly at Christmas, I began to desire to devote my life to making God's love known. It was very intense. I would say it took me about ten days... It's very intense to be seized by the love of God, to want to make God's love known. I still remember that it was at Easter 1977. It was the year the film "Jesus of Nazareth" came out. I had watched it on Palm Sunday on television...

FR

Zeffirelli...

ML

I think it was on NBC. I watched it on NBC. It lasted three hours and then another three hours on Easter Sunday. I watched it straight through with great focus. I was overcome. I was nourished by this film, and I was ready to say, "Yes," but I said, "Lord, there is also the issue of celibacy. You know it's been several years that I have been hoping to get married, but now you ask me to be a priest and to be celibate, and I can't say that I quite understand why you are asking this of me."

It was clear to me that He was asking me to be a priest, but to be celibate? So, I asked myself, "Why should I be celibate? And why should I be a celibate priest?" Three days later, I still had not found the answer, so I said to God, "Lord, you are asking me to be a priest. You are asking me to be a celibate priest. I don't understand the why, but You understand why. You know. So, I am going to trust you, and I say yes." And after saying yes, it was like a thread and needle. I enrolled straightaway at the Grand Seminary of Montreal.

FR

And why the Archdiocese of Montreal? Why not a religious community? There are many religious communities in Montreal. Your uncle was a religious priest, too. Why the archdiocese?

ML

From the very start, I must say I was led to the Grand Seminary. I did not choose the seminary. At the outset, I said to myself, "What do I have to do to become a priest? I think I need to study theology." So, I enrolled in the theology program at the University of Montreal. In the first week in the faculty of theology at the University of Montreal, I met seminarians who were studying there. One of the professors asked, "Are there any among you who want to become priests?" Some of us raised our hands. We met at the break, and we were invited to the Grand Seminary. I met the rector, and he tells me, "I'll call you on Friday." It was a Monday. On Friday, he calls me Friday and says, "You can enter seminary." So, it happened all on its own.

FR

That was fast.

ML

I had a great thirst for prayer. My thirst for prayer was greater than my thirst for study. And when I met with the rector, he told me that the first year of seminary was focused on spirituality, on prayer and learning how to pray. That really resonated with me. I had a great thirst for prayer and it allowed me to find a way to satisfy this thirst. And that is how I entered the Grand Seminary.

FR

Several years later, you became auxiliary bishop and then archbishop of Montreal, so you share in the life of the episcopate. You work a lot with the bishops. But who was...? Speak to me about the bishops in your life, the bishops who left an impression on you, your bishops and archbishops, who you looked up to as a young seminarian. What is it about these bishops that marked you?

ML

There are bishops we encounter in our lives: Archbishop Grégoire was a very humble bishop and a great man of faith, and he was the bishop who ordained me as a priest. Bishop Turcotte, who was to become Cardinal Turcotte, was the auxiliary bishop who ordained me a deacon. So I knew Cardinal Turcotte very well. I knew Cardinal Grégoire very well. I was studying in Rome when he was named a cardinal, so I was present in Rome for that event. What's surprising is that when we study in Rome, we are sometimes more likely to meet people from our diocese than when we're at home in your own diocese. Because people come to Rome, so we meet up.

So, those were two key moments, two important moments. I would also mention Bishop Jude Saint-Antoine, who is now auxiliary bishop emeritus of Montreal...

FR

He lives with you in the residence.

ML

He lives with us. He is a faithful servant, who never ceases to provide a presence at the Cathedral, offering his care. He is now more than 85 years old, but he is always present, faithful and dedicated. So, he was a very important model of devotion. Bishop Saint-Antoine, is a great model of dedication and prayer and a great model of wisdom.

FR

Tell me about the popes in your life because, after all, you had the opportunity to work very closely with the popes of your time. Who are these popes, and what did you learn from these popes? What did you take from them?

ML

The first pope I met was John Paul II. He was pope for a very long time, for almost my entire life.

FR - (Laughs)

ML

When I entered seminary, in my first year, Paul VI was Pope. I hadn't been to Rome yet, but I subscribed to *L'Osservatore Romano*, and that was how I followed what he did, what he wrote and his pastoral life. Then there was John Paul I, whom I followed, but that was somewhat brief.

ML

And then John Paul II was elected pope. I followed him during practically my whole life as a seminarian, then as a priest. He was pope during my studies in Rome. And with numerous brother priests, many times, we would concelebrate Masses or participate in Masses at St. Peter's Basilica and other events where the pope was present. And, during the Synod on the Laity, I had an "opportunity" to be a secretary for the Synod on the Laity. This allowed me to participate in the Synod. One month prior to the Synod, I worked with the Secretariat on the Synod. Then, during the Synod — I was present for the entire Synod — I was secretary (with a very small "s") to Pope John Paul II for a month. I was the one who placed the pencils and paper on his desk and brought him a glass of water...

FR

...nevertheless important...(laughs)

ML

Those were my tasks, but they allowed me to be present for all of the deliberations. So, it was a very beautiful experience of the Church, both of the Diocese of Rome and with the pope, but also of the universal Church, because we were in contact with all of the bishops from around the world.

FR

When we met in 1987, we were both studying. You were at the Gregorian, and I was at the Biblical Institute. Tell me about your studies at the Gregorian; what was your specialization in theology?

ML

Well, I have always tried to be a generalist, in a certain sense. I wanted to study theology and Archbishop Grégoire, my archbishop, told me, “No, I’m sending you to study in philosophy.” So I said, “Very well, I’ll study philosophy.” I’m a priest above all to serve the Lord through my service to the bishop. We say, “yes” to the bishop when we are ordained. Therefore, I studied philosophy. And while in philosophy, I met — because we were assigned a mentor to accompany us — Peter Henrici, who was a Jesuit and the cousin of Balthasar, Hans Urs von Balthasar, whom I had read extensively. I read the entire collection of Von Balthasar. And Father Henrici was a philosopher, who had a magisterial knowledge of all contemporary and modern philosophy. He was a truly wise man, who could guide us in our discernment, our reflection in order to understand the world we live in, but at the same time in preserving a spirit of discernment that includes an openness to God, to transcendence, to Jesus Christ, and how to hold a dialogue with modern culture. Consequently, my study focused on the relationship between philosophy and faith. This was my specialization in philosophy, so to speak. At the time, it was called Christian philosophy. It was a licentiate in Christian philosophy, and it was Father Henrici himself who had piloted this program. So, a study of philosophy in a dialogue with faith.

FR

After your studies, you returned to Canada and took on several important roles as pastor, parish priest and assistant. And then you returned to the Vatican for a few years. That meant a great deal of change in your life, but you always remained in positions of service. The parish experience had a deep effect on you. Tell me a little about the parish. What is the importance of the parish?

ML

Let’s say, I’ve been on a journey. You asked me earlier, why I entered seminary, why not religious community. Why a secular priest? Well, I was led to the Grand Seminary, and in time I asked myself about joining the Jesuits. I had thought of the Jesuits, I had thought of the Carmelites, in discovering St. Ignatius Loyola and St. John of the Cross. But in the end, I was always led back to the diocese and rediscovering the parish: rediscovering the parish as a place for community, as a place centred on Christ, as a real setting for community life, for

commitment and for real engaging that can be a beacon of light in outreach to society. And my life as vicar, my life as priest, my life as pastor, my life as a shepherd instilled in my heart the joy of participating in building a community. And I truly believed, and I continue to believe, that the Christian community is important. For me, there is nothing more important in a certain sense in relation to my vocation, which is to dedicate myself to the Christian community, and work its openness to Christ, and its rootedness in Jesus Christ; and at the same time to dedicate myself to the life of the community and its witness and contribution to society. This has been very important.

Parallel to that, the flexibility of the academic calendar, enabled me to study and to teach at the Grand Seminary of Montreal. And I must say that to be teaching and doing pastoral work was one of the great blessings in my life. In teaching, I would always think about pastoral work and how I could make the material concrete for pastoral work. Pastoral work consists of forming Christians for our day, forming lay people but forming future priests. Then, in my pastoral work, I would think about which theological reflections I could introduce in my teaching? This forced me to be always in action mode, but also to reflect, to reflect theologically, relating on to the other. And that really formed me, this twofold challenge of holding the two together — pastoral work and the academic life — and, of course, accompanied by prayer.

FR

You live in Quebec, and we are aware of the great challenges in Quebec, but you face these challenges, especially in your diocese, which is very cosmopolitan. So, as archbishop of Montreal, which is a very important diocese in North America and the world, what are the great pastoral challenges in your life today, as archbishop and shepherd of this great and beautiful Church?

ML

Let's say that the challenge... there is something common throughout the West. Secularism is part of the West, though we could say we experience it in a particular way in Quebec. But secularism is common, so we are able to learn from what has occurred elsewhere. But my perception, rather my conviction, is that, even though in the world officially, at least for among some of the major voices in politics, academia, media, economics, it is as though God does not exist — we don't always think against God, but rather it is without God — what I discover on the ground when I meet people and families is that there is a thirst.

FR

A thirst for what?

ML

In 1990, I would have said there was a thirst for the Absolute, or what I perceived as a thirst for the Absolute, that would not always name God. Certainly it was a thirst for happiness, always a thirst for happiness, which would continuously increase, becoming a thirst for the absolute. In 2000, the thirst I encountered was one that much more readily identified God, it was truly a thirst for God, and even more so in 2010. And today, I would say this thirst is for Jesus Christ. When I am among Catholics, there is certainly a thirst to discover Jesus Christ. And even among people who never knew Jesus Christ, there is certainly a thirst for God and an openness of heart to hearing about Jesus Christ. In other words, our social or cultural climate does not always make room for God. We need to nuance that, since sometimes it does, but not always. But when I meet people, there is always a thirst for the Absolute, and often a thirst for the Absolute that identifies God or Jesus Christ. So for me, the situation is hopeful. Sometimes I joke, I have a personal bias. I admit it. I confess. It's that I see God everywhere.

FR

You're not mistaken!

ML

Therefore, I see God at work in people's hearts.

FR

That's very Jesuitical of you.

ML

Possibly. So I see God at work in people's hearts and I would say, in a certain, sense my "suffering" is my lack, because God is working so much in people's hearts, that I ask myself, "What more can I do to respond to the thirst he places in these hearts?" Because the thirst is always present, but I am not tuned into the moment. I am not always available. We are limited — as individuals and also as a Church. We have weaknesses and limits, but at the same time, God is at work. For me, it's about restoring trust that God is at work, of sharing this news that it is worth the effort to go to the peripheries, as Pope Francis says, and open doors as well, as he also invites us to do, because there is a thirst for God. God is at work, and in that sense, our service is not offering an encounter with ourselves, but rather an encounter with God, with Jesus Christ.

FR

We have been following you since the moment you first arrived in Montreal and, if I may summarize your episcopacy up until this moment, it is truly an episcopacy focused on teaching. We follow your great teaching great moments in the cathedral, through the lectures, through the catechesis you offer, the Mass for vocations. Yours is the presence of a bishop, who teaches. Why is teaching so important to your episcopal ministry?

ML

Essentially, in teaching — because many people teach — but as a bishop and in my priestly responsibility, my goal is to speak of Jesus Christ through teaching. My objective is to speak about Jesus Christ by way of teaching, to attract people to Jesus Christ. This can occur through the various mysteries of the faith, but it is always centred on Jesus Christ.

FR

And who is this Jesus for you, the person of Jesus? There is the theological Jesus, the historical Jesus. But who is this person? How did this Jesus so impress himself on you, so mark you that you are unafraid to proclaim Him? Who is He?

ML

St. Teresa of Avila has that magnificent expression. She wrote a great deal, and I don't remember everything she has said. But one thing I remember is this: If it were possible for us to feel all the love that God has for us, we would perish, so great is His love. So, for me, the love of Jesus Christ is so great that... and I have... How shall I say this? I believe in it, but also, at a certain point, I experienced the power of Jesus Christ to pacify me, transform me, guide me. And I cannot live being the only one to know this love of Jesus Christ. I want the entire world to experience the love of Jesus Christ. It is my desire, it is my hope. So certainly, I have a personal experience of this love. When I was speaking a moment ago about what a foundational personal experience ... My childhood experience in the faith is vast. Faith was in the air I breathed. It was normal for me. It wasn't forced. It was natural. It was never imposed on me. And at the same time, I always believed.

But in that rocking-chair, when I began to desire to become a priest, when suddenly this desire surfaced in me, my first reaction was: "Where is this desire coming from? It seems to me this is not what I was thinking about!" I was in the midst of making career plans and suddenly I had the desire to become a priest. It was accompanied by, let's say, a light, a light by which God revealed His love to me, not all His love, because that would have killed me, but he revealed enough for me to say, "I must dedicate my life to making this love known."

This has always stayed with me and it was confirmed later, having experienced Jesus Christ and also through my experience of seeing it in the lives of others. Therefore, Jesus Christ is the love of God, who not only loves us, but has the power to touch our lives, to touch my life, to touch the lives of others, who has the power to transform my life and the power to transform our lives, so that there may be to bring more truth, more goodness, more beauty, more unity into our lives. Therefore, for me, Jesus Christ is truly, to speak from a Christocentric point of view, the point from which everything flows.

FR

Over the past few years, you have succeeded in seizing several important opportunities for the Church. First, there was the anniversary of the City of Montreal, which you transformed from a mere 'Happy Birthday, Montreal' celebration to a moment of religious significance, in addition to the Year of Mercy. And I know that these two great moments very much encouraged your evangelizing efforts. Talk about the anniversary of Montreal. What did it mean for you?

ML

The 375th anniversary of the founding of Montreal was for me, since I was invited to speak about the founding of Montreal and about its founders...

FR

You had many speeches, yes...

ML

It led me to... as always, I have this scholarly need to do my homework, so I could say that the person who benefited most from this experience was myself. It allowed me to rediscover Maisonneuve, Jeanne Mance, Marguerite Bourgeoys, Marguerite d'Youville, and to rediscover what I call this "constellation of holiness" that was at the origins of Montreal, and to speak even more precisely, at its origins in France, with Jérôme Le Royer, who conceived of Montreal, who never came here, but who carried this project, that was Montreal, in prayer and received the inspiration for Montreal through prayer. Therefore, this spiritual dimension of the founding of Montreal was a source for me to rediscover what the Diocese of Montreal is. The blessing it offered me in my life was the opportunity to rediscover the actors who were there at the heart of the founding of Montreal. And they were truly "a constellation of holiness." Among them, some have been beatified, others have been canonized, others we don't know and only learn about when we read the history, but they were people who were truly motivated by faith and who wanted to bring Jesus Christ to New France and to the land called Canada. And Jean-Jacques Olier would say...

FR

Founder of the Sulpicians...

ML

Yes, the founder of the Sulpicians, who was a member of this group that sent people over to found Montreal, such as Maisonneuve and Jeanne Mance. He said, "A desert is a place where Jesus Christ is not known," where Jesus Christ has not been proclaimed. And their sense of mission really spoke to me. And another thing that spoke to me was the fact that, when they were intending with Jerome Le Royer to found Montreal, Ville-Marie, the intention was not to found a French colony; it was to have a city, which would begin as a village, of course, but to have a city where the French and the Indigenous Peoples could encounter each other. This was before the expression "living together" existed, so to speak. It was the city of "living together." And from that beginning, of course there was the Hôtel-Dieu, which was founded out of solidarity with the sick and the poor. Therefore, the spiritual life, community life, this "living together," a life committed to solidarity with the poor and the sick, are part of Montreal's genes, part of the diocese's genes. It is part of our history, one of the beautiful aspects of our history that that we would benefit from rediscovering, whether or not we share the faith. It is part of something beautiful, that is profoundly human.

FR

The Year of Mercy, What an intuition of John Paul II... actually not John Paul II. Though his mercy and, of course, his great devotion for Sister Faustina, which he shared with the world. And then comes Pope Francis, who teaches us how to put it into practice. So how did you carry out the Year of Mercy in Montreal?

ML

I think it was a stroke of genius, I believe, spiritual genius on the part of Pope Francis, to institute the Year of Mercy. What struck me is how much it touched people.

FR

How? Give us some examples.

ML

To start, there was the Door of Mercy. It could have done only in Rome, at the Vatican, but he wanted it to be in every diocese. It could have been just in the cathedrals, but he "opened the door," as it were, so that shrines, which would be prepared with teams to welcome pilgrims, could have one. In the Diocese of Montreal, the cathedral had a Door of Mercy, but all the

shrines that wanted to do so could also have a Door of Mercy. And the shared experience was that many people came to collect themselves and some people rediscovered their faith. It was the Holy Spirit who led them. I remember two people, a man and a woman, a couple of a certain age, who were walking by the Door of Mercy at the cathedral. They came to see me after the liturgy, and the man said, “When my wife and I walked through that Door of Mercy, we felt a peace that we had never felt before in our lives. We have lived through some difficult times, but we experienced such peace, and we give thanks to God.” They gave their testimony, and others gave theirs. But it was truly a year of grace to rediscover the mercy of God, who soothed so many people’s hearts.

FR

One last question. You are in a complicated situation in Quebec, as everyone knows. But you are a man of hope. What is that hope that keeps you moving forwards on this path? What is in the heart of Christian Lépine that says, “This is worth the effort; I will carry on and keep walking in this path”?

ML

Well, in addition to my faith in Jesus Christ, since I have been archbishop, I have visited – I teach, but I also visit...

FR

The great visitor!

ML

And I continue to visit. Every weekend, literally, at least two parishes and sometimes four, every weekend. Four depends on my energy level...

FR

How many parishes do you have in the diocese?

ML

About 200. So, I make the rounds, and I have seen many movements, many parishes. Last Sunday, I was at a hospital, Santa Cabrini Hospital, in Montreal. I really do go everywhere. There are two things that strike me. The first is that people are under the impression that they are alone in the faith. I meet a family that believes in Jesus Christ and they think they are the

only family with faith. I visit a parish, a vibrant parish, but they think they are the only vibrant parish.

But many people have faith, a great number of people have faith, but each person thinks he or she they are alone in the faith. So the question this raises for me is: What can I do — and I really don't have the answer yet, I need help — what can I do, or what can we do together, to dispel this impression that we are alone in the faith here in Quebec? So many people have faith in Quebec, and God is truly at work, and people are responding in small communities or in large communities. For me, the important question would be, first of all, how to break out of this impression of solitude, that we are alone in the faith because, even as we speak, many are touched by the love of God and believe in God.

FR

What I admire in what you just said is that you do not yet have the answer yet, but you persevere in finding one.

ML

Absolutely.

FR

And that is what is most important.

Archbishop Lépine, we are good friends, so permit me to take this moment to thank you, because our presence in Montreal, the presence of Salt + Light, is thanks to you. We have the privilege of finding another home within your house. And your generosity is a model and an example for all the other bishops and churches. You have my heartfelt thanks, and may we continue in friendship and collaboration.

ML

It is a great synergy.

FR

It is a magnificent synergy. Thank you very much for coming to Toronto in the Advent Season, and we are very happy to have you with us.

ML

It has been a joy. Thank you, Father Rosica!

Subsequent Frame:

This interview was held in the Salt + Light studio in Toronto, Canada, Nov. 27, 2017. Witness.

(Credits not translated.)