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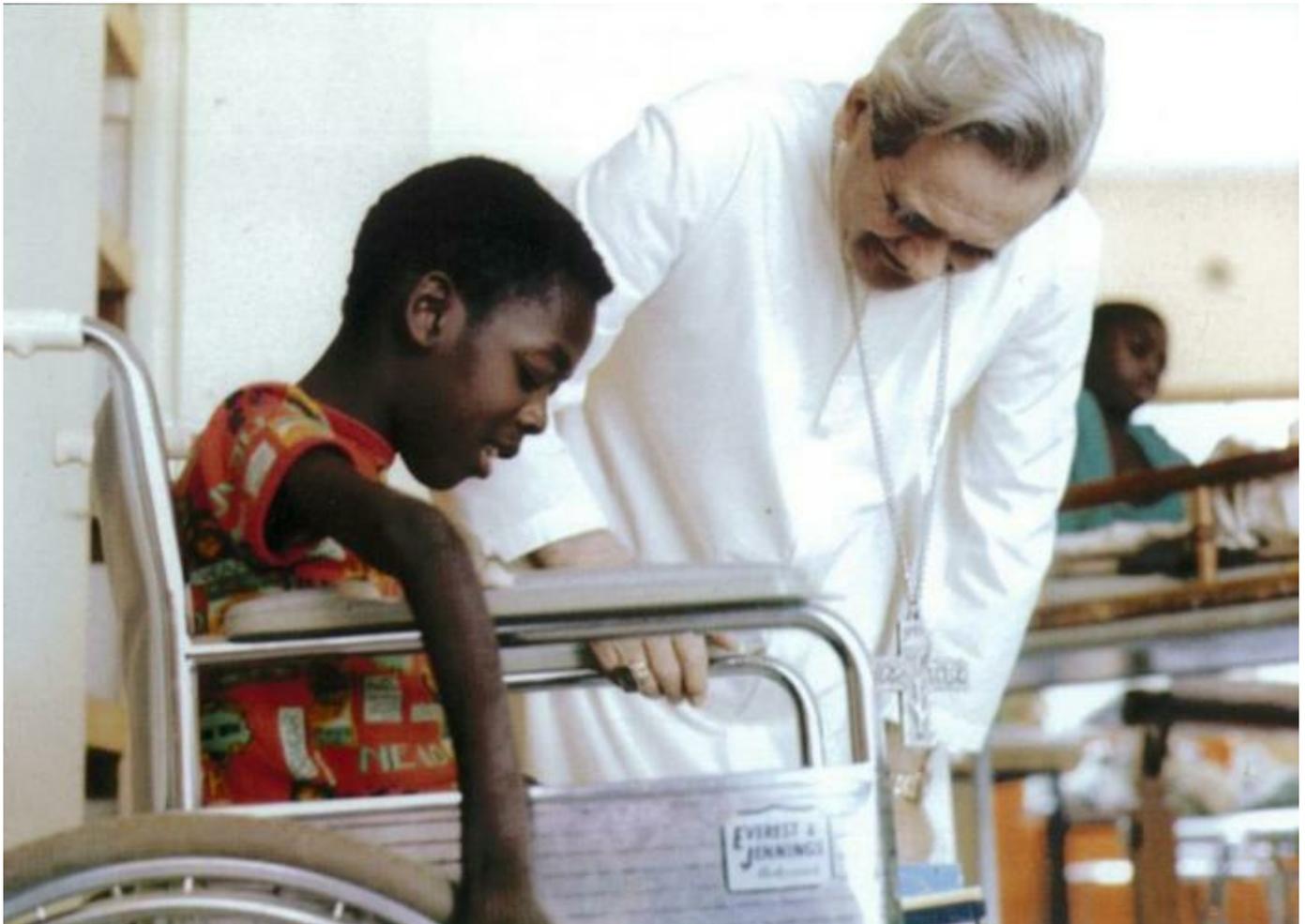
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World

Years after his death, Montreal's first cardinal remains controversial

By Philippe Vaillancourt

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Cardinal Paul-Emile Leger of Montreal is seen in this undated photo. He left his charge as archbishop in 1967 to become a missionary in Africa. By 1979 he helped develop clinics, hospitals, schools and orphanages in many African countries, including Cameroon. (CNS photo/L Oeuvre Leger via Presence)

MONTREAL (CNS) -- Cardinal Paul-Emile Leger is still a polarizing figure for Canadians, even 25 years after his death. For some, he was a pompous and narcissist "prince" of the church; for others, a visionary pastor and missionary. Historians and contemporaries are still debating the deeds and the legacy left by Montreal's first cardinal.

Born in St. Anicet, near Valleyfield, Quebec, and ordained in 1929, this former missionary in Japan and former rector of the Canadian College in Rome was named archbishop of Montreal in 1950. Three years later, he became Montreal's first cardinal. When he came back with his red biretta, he uttered what remains his most famous declaration: "Montreal, O my city, you've adorned yourself beautifully to greet your pastor and your prince."

Archbishop Christian Lepine, Montreal's current archbishop, was just a child when Cardinal Leger headed the local church.

"People told me lots of things about him. Personally, I've come to know him by the impact he's had (on our church)", said Archbishop Lepine.

"People have heard different stories about him. But I don't think this should cast a shadow on the man of prayer and solidarity he was," added Archbishop Lepine. "People often put at the forefront his famous 'prince' speech, sometimes with a wicked smile. Yet, I believe that this can obscure our view and deter us from appreciating the man he was, and everything he's given to us. Our limits and our greatness leave an imprint on our actions. I'm however sure of one thing: He was at the service (of his church), with his strengths and his weaknesses."

Archbishop Lepine's first contact with the Cardinal Leger came through the airwaves. In the 1950s, countless Catholic families listened to the cardinal pray the rosary on the air. At its height, this 15-minute program had 1 million listeners.

"A whole generation met the cardinal while praying with their parents," said Archbishop Lepine, adding he has vivid memories of these moments spent praying with his family.

Only later would he discover the charities created by the cardinal. "He was truly creative when he tried to reach out and display his solidarity with the sick and the poor. He was inhabited by his concern for (the needy)," said Archbishop Lepine.

The archbishop understands that his predecessor is still associated with the triumphalist church of the 1950s in Quebec.

"He bears the label of that era. Yet I do think his legacy transcends it. His concern for prayer and solidarity with the needy continued to be at the forefront by the time of his death, in 1991. His legacy stabilized itself and came to be associated with the values that inhabited him, as a man and as an archbishop. Especially his strong attachment to solidarity. This sober yet deep heritage left a strong imprint on people."

Father Robert Gendreau, director of the Liturgy Office at the Archdiocese of Montreal, is still amazed by the "absolutely outstanding" skills Cardinal Leger had when speaking publicly.

"I've never met anyone with such a gift. Speakers like him are out of the ordinary. There's one per country, per century. The speeches he delivered are still resonating in my head," said the priest.

But Father Gendreau remains critical about the "ambiguous and elusive" man that the cardinal was. He said the cardinal and his theological team put forward some progressive ideas during the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council. Yet, to Father Gendreau, Cardinal Leger remained a "Pius XII man," unable to get rid of a preconciliar mentality.

After the council, during Quebec's secularist Quiet Revolution, Cardinal Leger suffered from depression. Feeling he was no longer the right man for the job, he resigned as archbishop of Montreal and became a missionary in Cameroon.

Charles Mugiraneza, program manager in Africa for the Leger Foundation, said Cardinal Leger left an important international legacy, and he is thankful for what the cardinal achieved on the African continent. Cardinal Leger helped develop clinics, hospitals, schools and orphanages in different countries. Today, the

foundation is still active in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Quebec.

"He was a visionary. Back then, international cooperation basically meant assisting the poor. ... Nowadays, instead of giving people fish, we give them fishing rods. The cardinal already had that line of thought: He wanted to help people to take care of themselves," said the Rwandan-born humanitarian worker who has lived in Quebec for the past 26 years.

Mugiraneza said he has met Cameroonians, "either here or abroad, who told me: 'I went to school thanks to him,' or 'One of my relatives got medical attention because of him.'"

Mugiraneza is aware that Canadians still have an ambiguous relationship with the former archbishop of Montreal. He said the cardinal might have appreciated the prestige he gained from his work in Africa. Yet, he added, it was just another way he found to achieve his pastoral mission.

For Father Gendreau, the cardinal remains a major figure of the history of the church in Canada whose legacy must be appreciated, but not as the expense of historical truth.

"He showed that Quebec was able to achieve great things. When he left Montreal, the whole province was opening up to the world. He prepared us for that. And I respect him for that. We became adults with him. Yes, he was a man of his times, but not a visionary," said the priest.

Cardinal Leger's former secretary, retired Father Pierre Gonneville, worked with him from 1961 to 1963. He describes the cardinal as a generous and pleasant man, who treated him with a fatherly solicitude. Father Gonneville still believes that the Cardinal Leger was "a great man, and a great pastor."

"I've been able to see beyond his attitudes. I've seen the beauty of his heart. ... We visited the parishes, the social clubs, the prestigious hotels where he delivered speeches. Back then, he was a star. Maybe too much," said Father Gonneville, laughing, as he recalled the cardinal's nickname in the 1960s: "Kid Kodak."

"Young people barely know him now. Older people still associate him with the church of yore. ... He was colorful and omnipresent, but that's what people asked of an archbishop, back then. He (became) progressively withdrawn from public attention and became humbler," he added.

On Nov. 13, the 25th anniversary of his death, the Archdiocese of Montreal and the Leger Foundation -- the charity created by its namesake in 1948 -- organized a Mass at Mary Queen-of-the World Cathedral. The bishop's crypt was opened to the public.

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Vaillancourt is editor in chief of Presence info in Montreal.
