

# Migration crisis calls for Church action, conference told

The Church, with its long history of serving the poor and the persecuted, must play a key role in dealing with the global migration crisis.

That's one undisputed conclusion from interfaith leaders, theologians, researchers and migration workers who gathered in Toronto June 25-27 for The Church and Migration conference.

The conference came on the heels of last month's United Nations report that there are 68.5 million people around the world displaced by violence and persecution.

"It is migration that brings about the Church into existence," said Peter Phan, Ignacio Ellacuria chair of Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown University. "I'd like to say that outside migration, there is no Church."

He believes it is the mark of the true Church to serve the people who are displaced by war, persecution and poverty.

Phan was one of the opening speakers at the conference, hosted by the Dominican Institute of Toronto and the Toronto School of Theology.

Officially known as the 12th International Gathering of the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network, the conference tackled theological thoughts on Church outreach as well as grassroots initiatives driven by Church organizations around the world.

"We need, politically, a thoughtful response to understand these things," said Toronto city councillor Joe Mihevc. "And I can tell you from my experience at City Hall, when church people, people from faith communities, come to City Hall and speak truth to power, it makes a difference."

Many speakers agreed the rhetoric used when talking about the global migration crisis must change in order to protect the dignity of displaced people.

As co-ordinator of the refugee sponsorship program in the Archdiocese of Montreal, Alessandra Santopadre said sometimes mainstream media does not do a good job of describing the people her office serves.

"Last summer in Quebec, they described it as an invasion of asylum seekers," said Santopadre. "We have to use the right words when we speak of these people because it influences the way our society understands."

Throughout the conference, Pope Francis' 2018 message for the World Day of

Migrants and Refugees acted as a foundation to the Church's approach: "To welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate."

Santopadre said that as Catholics, we must protect the dignity of people. If migrants are only considered as numbers, policy change will not happen, she said.

"Our policy and what we do is we see the intersectionality of the human being," said Loly Rico, co-executive director of the FCJ Refugee Centre, which runs four houses in Toronto that serve "precarious migrants."

"We need to see their gender, their identity, where they are coming from, in a way that you can have better services for them," she said.