

From Donna B. Doucette, Executive Director: The following notes are from a presentation by Dr. Peter Phan at the June 2016 Assembly of the AUSCP.

Fr. Peter C. Phan from Vietnam emigrated as a refugee to the U.S. in 1975. He has three doctorates, in Sacred Theology from the Universitas Pontificia Salesiana in Rome, and in Philosophy and Divinity from the University of London. Currently he holds the Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. He has received numerous awards and honors for his writings, including the John Courtney Murray Award from the Catholic Theological Society of America for outstanding and distinguished achievement in theology.

As he began his presentation, Dr. Phan joked that it was the first time he was addressing an audience with more men than women. “I hope that next time ... it will be more gender balanced,” he said to applause and laughter from the 200 priests (and a dozen women) there.

Deus Migrator/God the Migrator: Migration of Theology and the Theology of Migration

“Since World War II, migration has become a phenomenon of unimaginable complexity,” Dr. Phan says. At the end of 2015, there were 65.3 million displaced people, refugees, increased from 59.5 million just 12 months earlier. “That’s 24 refugees per minute,” he added. So when asked what the topic of the next Vatican Council might be, he answers “migration.”

It is a dramatic phenomenon we cannot ignore, he continued. The United Nations and others study it; Pope Francis says “welcome”; yet anti-immigrant sentiment rises globally.

There are three points to consider, Phan says, that we must not ignore:

- ❖ The American Catholic Church does not exist except for migrants.
- ❖ Christianity as such itself would not exist without migration.
- ❖ Without migration, there is no God—God is the primordial migrant, on the move, not static.

Phan elaborated on each of these points.

The Church here must be seen as a migrant, he said, if we are to understand our own faith position. It was migration that brought Catholics into the New World, migration that increased their numbers. “The American Catholic Church would not exist except for migrants. We must make people aware of this.”

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He then defended the second point: that Christianity itself would not exist without migration. It's not just history about how Christianity spread, Phan said, but also about who spread it:

The first big migration of Christianity spread across the Silk Road, out of Palestine, by lay people and merchants. Not by the Apostles. Not to the West. To the East. Later they [asked] Palestine to send the bishops and priests.

It was the second big migration that went West, Phan continued, into the Mediterranean, but not until after Thomas the Apostle, in the year 57, went to India. It was only in the year 65 that Paul and Peter went to Rome, to the West, “yet we ignore the early migrants, who went East, and focus on Rome,” he noted. The spread to the West again was by migration.

The third migration moved the center of Christianity out of Constantinople—notice again, he said, that **the Church moved**; it was a migrant.

The fourth big migration came in the 6th and 7th centuries when Germanic tribes moved south and northeast. They encountered Christianity and then took it with them, so now the Church had “barbarians” in it.

The Church reached the New World during the fifth migration, but the sixth and seventh migrations, Phan said, involved refugees making their new Church together. World War I and then later World War II created millions of refugees, displaced peoples who had to work together to make faith communities in new places. The final wave of migration is today, as millions more—that 24 per minute—flee their native lands for safety elsewhere.

“Everything must be rethought in terms of migration,” Phan concluded. “Without migration there is no Christianity.”

This led him to his “final thesis”: Without migration, there is no God. God is the primordial migrant, always on the move,” always reaching outward, he concluded.

ADDENDUM: Fr. Phan's words inspired Svea Fraser the following day to imagine a revised sign of the cross with these words: “May God bless us all in the name of God the Migrant and of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and in the love of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

You can find the other keynotes from the AUSCP Assembly here: [Sr. Carol Zinn, SSJ, on Laudato Si: Caring for Our Common Home](#), and [Dr. Massimo Faggioli on Pope Francis and the Unfolding of Vatican II in Today's Church](#).