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Father Stan Chu Ilo, a professor at the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University in Chicago, and Meghan J. Clark, a professor of moral theology at St. John's University in New York, pose for a photo with members of a migrant family they interviewed in Juarez, Mexico, for the Vatican-coordinated project, "Doing theology from the existential peripheries" in May 2022. (CNS photo/courtesy Hope Border Institute)

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A Vatican office sent dozens of theologians and pastoral workers to refugee camps, prisons, shelters, street corners and markets in 40 cities and towns on every continent to listen to the faith experiences and, especially, the faith questions of people often tossed aside or ignored by society and even the Catholic Church.

"This type of listening has been a long-neglected, yet fundamental basis for rigorous critical thinking on theology, especially in the face of contemporary challenges," according to the project website of the Migrants and Refugees Section of the

Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

The project, "Doing Theology from the Existential Peripheries," was coordinated by Fr. Sergio Massironi, a staff member of the dicastery. He told Catholic News Service Nov. 1 that while it was done quietly through most of 2022, he was in constant contact with both the office of the Synod of Bishops and the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

It was not a listening exercise done for the synod, although the 508 people interviewed echoed many of the points bishops' conferences around the world reported from their local synod listening sessions.

In both the theological project and the synod sessions, he said, "if there was one thing that the 'sensus fidei' (the sense of faith of believers) understands in a unanimous way, it is that the church needs to be more hospitable."

"It is incredible how the official synodal process with the syntheses of the bishops' conferences and our project, which bypassed all the institutional structures and went out to listen to those on the 'outside,' arrived at the same conclusions," the priest said.

The prisoners and prostitutes and just about everyone else the project interviewed recognize that they are sinners, he said. They know church teaching. But they also believe they have a place in the church with all the other baptized who are seeking God, hoping for divine mercy, wanting to serve others and longing for support in living their faith more deeply each day.

Meghan J. Clark, an associate professor of moral theology at St John's University in New York and assistant coordinator of the project's North American working group, said that while many synod reports expressed sadness about people missing from the process, the theology project went out to find them.

"In the U.S. situation," she told CNS Nov. 2, "the most profound of those conversations were with LGBT Catholics, who are there in the parishes and yet still invisible to much of the church. And so sometimes going to the peripheries is going one pew over."

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Catholic theology often describes itself as "faith seeking understanding," she said, and it involves grappling with, researching and discussing the questions that arise about who God is, who human beings are and what the church is, but the way those questions are framed can change dramatically depending on who is asking.

As an example, she pointed to questions about suffering and God. The medieval theologians, and generations of theologians who followed them, asked if God could suffer. In an exercise of pure reason and philosophy, they considered how suffering involves change and since God is perfect, God cannot not change, so the conclusion was that God cannot suffer.

But in the wake of the Shoah, German theologians began asking new questions about God and suffering and so did theologians from communities where many people endured injustice and exclusion, she said.

"When they talk about does God suffer, what they are looking at and what is at stake is God's love and accompaniment for those who are experiencing oppression, injustice and horrific suffering," she said. It's not the same question as does God suffer and can a perfect God change.

"You miss something if you think it is just about the conclusion. It's actually about the different questions," she said.

As many theologians become more specialized or more focused on teaching, "we often forget why we are doing theology. It's not for us, but to serve the whole church," Massironi said.

Pope Francis' vision for the project was that it would give new life to "theological research on the questions normal Christians raise," he said. "Every Christian has questions and wants to understand revelation better, starting from the problems of everyday life. Theologians should gather these questions, this desire for meaning and for faith-based responses and find ways to respond."

"If the problems theology is grappling with are the problems of theologians and if the problems the church is grappling with are the problems of priests, the risk is that the life of the people of God is set aside," Massironi said. But if theologians are to serve the church, they must help those who are committed to living a Christian life even if they have many questions.