

UPF-Canada: Annual Montréal Meeting Recognizes Peace Ambassadors

Robert Duffy
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Montréal, Canada – April 18, 2026 was a bright, sunny spring day in Montréal, where UPF-Canada held its annual Ambassadors for Peace Recognition Luncheon at Hotel Ruby Foo’s, under the theme “Interreligious Dialogue, Interculturality, and Secularity: A Contemporary Perspective.”

More than 70 people attended, drawn by a theme that resonates both globally and within the Canadian and Quebec context, where such dialogue – and even more so intercultural and interreligious collaboration – has become essential to the survival of a free and harmonious society.



The event was moderated by **Ms. Chantale Viau** and **Ms. Brigitte Grenier**, who guided the gathering with great sensitivity, creating a calm yet dynamic and well-structured atmosphere.



Participants were primarily religious leaders from diverse faith communities (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, United Church of Canada, other Protestant denominations, Muslim, Latter-day Saints, Scientologists). Other attendees included leaders from community organizations working with children and families, international organizations, academics, and representatives from the political sphere.

Following the introduction of UPF – its foundational principles and its vision of a world of interdependence, mutual prosperity and universal values – by **Mr. Franco Famularo**, president of UPF-Canada, the assembly was greeted by **Mr. Aref Salem**, Montréal city councilor and member of its executive committee, who expressed support for UPF and its values as an ambassador for peace himself.



The keynote speaker, **Mr. Pierre LeBel**, an associate researcher at the Institute for Theological Study and Research in Interculturality, Migration and Mission (IERTIMM), developed the idea that a balanced secular society rests on mutual respect, an active spirituality engaged in the world, and openness to others. His approach is unifying and calls for a lived, applied faith rather than a static form of interreligious dialogue.

Ms. Louise Royer, director of the Office of Social Pastoral Care of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Montréal, and **Mr. Robert Duffy**, secretary general of UPF-Canada, were then invited to respond.



Ms. Royer expanded on Mr. LeBel’s presentation by linking it to Catholic social teaching, emphasizing deference in dialogue, participation, a “spirituality of indwelling,” and the welcoming of foreigners. She concluded by affirming that all are called to become peacemakers through respect, commitment and openness to others, placing human dignity at the center.

Mr. Duffy, for his part, resonating with the first two speakers, focused his response on the history of secularity, the tension between religion and the state in Christian history, and its current manifestation in the modern world, particularly in the province of Québec, referencing two government bills recently

passed to restrict public, and even private, displays of religiosity in places of work as well as in public spaces.

A question period followed, offering a dynamic exchange in which ideas were further clarified.

The program then turned to music, featuring a beautiful performance by **Ms. Christa Maria Abou Akl**, a highly talented young Lebanese-Canadian artist who places her gifts in the service of peace.

Two ambassadors for peace were then invited to share their personal journeys.



First, **Father Tiburtius Fernandez**, pastor of St. Augustine of Canterbury and St. Edward the Confessor, recounted 21 years of involvement with UPF in Montréal, beginning in 2005 through an invitation to interreligious dialogue. He emphasized the importance of encounters between people of different beliefs in building peace, despite a world marked by conflict. He reminded the audience that peace is both a personal and collective journey, illustrated through concrete examples of reconciliation. He concluded by invoking the figure of Kateri Tekakwitha, the first North American indigenous Saint of the Roman Catholic Church, who for him embodies this path: a life of faith, suffering, and peace that inspires continued commitment.

Next, **Dr. Denitsa Tsvetkova**, co-director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism and deeply engaged in interreligious dialogue, movingly shared how her motivation for peace stems from childhood, when her grandmother, who had lived through five wars, described to her the profound sadness and suffering they caused.



Seven new ambassadors for peace were then commissioned. These individuals are committed to building a world of interdependence, mutual prosperity and universal values:

- **Christa Maria Abou Akl**, a young Lebanese-Canadian artist engaged with youth
- **Efa Brillant Efon** and **Faith Efon**, senior pastors and founding missionaries of the international mission “Witness of the Truth”
- **Jean-Marc Jacques**, a seasoned expert in politics and public administration
- Lucas Magnus, an active member of the Focolare Movement
- Omar Messiou, a businessperson active in the community

- **Father Serge St-Arneault**, a missionary priest in Africa, now serving in the St-Roch neighborhood in Québec City, and advocate for the PolySeSouvient cause.

Christa Maria was invited to present a fundraising project she is organizing in collaboration with UPF to assist thousands of displaced people in Lebanon.



Following a photo session, the afternoon continued with a meal and networking – a valuable time for exchanging ideas, building partnerships, and deepening mutual understanding.

This annual event is central to the development of the ambassador for peace network in Québec and to its impact on the ground. Thanks were extended to the team that made this meaningful event a success.

