

Unfortunately, such small-mindedness abounds in our Church. These people cannot see that the Church in Albania is connected to the Church in America. We are one Church with the mission churches in Africa, in Indonesia, in Mexico, because we all are part of the “one, holy catholic and apostolic Church.” We can never view it as “us and them.”

I remember when I lived in Kenya. At times, I would travel to villages that rarely if ever saw a white person. In most places, the children would flock around this *wazungoo* (this white man), but in some cases, little children who never had seen a white person before would start crying because they thought I was a ghost! Anyway, one day, a friend of mine put my arm next to his and asked, “Do you know what the difference is between you and me?” Then he pointed to the color of my skin and then his and said, “Only this color. What is in our hearts, what is in our souls, what is in our minds, is the same. We are brothers.” And truly we are!

When people ask us why my family and I left our homeland and our loved ones, I now answer “Because we felt that we were not only fulfilling St. Paul’s command to be “ambassadors of Christ,” but we understood that the Orthodox Church in America also needed to send ambassadors into the world, and therefore, we are your representatives!

Please understand, in order to be faithful Orthodox Christians, each of us should be asking ourselves, “How am I helping to fulfill God’s universal vision?” When we hear about someone interested in becoming a missionary, are we saying, “Why are you going to Albania, or Africa,

or elsewhere?” when we should be saying, “Great! You can be our representative there. We will be behind you, with our prayers, with our finances, with our encouragement! Godspeed!”

Are we thinking, “You should stay here because there are many needs in this country,” instead of responding, “That’s great that you are going over there and will be a witness of God’s love. You go there, and I’ll stay in this country and offer my witness of God’s love to all the people here. Together we’ll make a great team!”

“The parish is my universe?” Hopefully not for many of our parishes.

“The universe is my parish!” This is our calling, and I pray, that many of our communities will fulfill this vision!

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Missions in the Local Church

THE UNIVERSE IS OUR PARISH

Fr. Luke A. Veronis

St. John Chrysostom preached, “There are two kinds of bishops. One bishop is a pastor who says, ‘My parish is my universe.’ While the other bishop says, ‘The universe is my parish.’”

One of the most common, yet subtle, dangers – I may even say heresies – that has plagued the people of God from the time of ancient Israel until today, is the illness of parochialism in its individual and communal forms. “My parish is my universe” is what so many faithful still believe today.

Instead of a worldview where God the Creator is at the center, a view where all creation points to God and gives Him glory, slowly the ego – whether the individual ego: I, me, my, mine; or the communal ego: my people, my parish, my language, my culture – gradually takes over and this self-centered mentality distorts an authentic Orthodox worldview.

Our Triune God has a love and vision for all. In the Old Testament, we may remember how God chose a certain people as his prized possession, but we often forget why he chose them. When God called Abram in Genesis, he said, “Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, SO THAT you will be a blessing... And all the families of the earth shall find blessing in you.”

This central verse of the Old Covenant reveals God's overarching plan of salvation for all. Abraham was called to leave what was familiar, to leave his own, to depart from his tiny ego, and to follow God in faith, so that he would be blessed by God, and, SO THAT he and his nation would become a blessing for ALL the families of the earth!

"The universe is my parish!" That is the mentality that God wanted us to have from the beginning, and this represents an authentic Orthodox worldview.

Unfortunately, we see time and again how God's people forget, ignore, and even deny their universal calling, and choose instead to become a closed, parochial, often ethnocentric community.

Jesus Christ, the supreme example in the New Testament, made abundantly clear that no boundaries could limit His unconditional love for all people. Whether it was a heretical Samaritan, a Roman centurion, a foreign Syrophonecian woman, a corrupt tax collector, or an immoral adulteress, Christ saw each and every person as a beloved child of his. He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "Although a mother may forget her child, I can never forget you. I have carved you on the palm of my hand."

The whole meaning of Orthodox Christianity has to do with looking outward, remembering the other! The Philokalia teaches, "Blessed is the one who rejoices in his salvation, but even more blessed is the one who rejoices in the salvation of the other."

St. John Chrysostom said a similar message, "I do not believe in the salvation of anyone who does

not try to save others." *'My parish is my universe?' or 'The universe is my parish!'*"

Our Church Fathers represented a truly ecumenical, universal and missionary spirit that we need to practice today. Why is it that so many of our local churches and leaders too often lack a vibrant worldwide vision and outreach? Why are we, as individuals, so weak in cultivating this universal spirit in our own spiritual journeys?

The answer is simple, because it is a problem that has plagued humanity since Adam and Eve. The ego. Our little ego continually limits our worldview, poisoning not only our perception of self, but corrupting our understanding of the Church and the world around us. Our spiritual journey becomes a self-centered pursuit for individual happiness, comfort, pleasure, and self-fulfillment – an idea completely foreign to the theology of the Great Fathers.

Even many of today's Churches reject the universal vision and become nothing more than proud, closed, social clubs. For example, how many of our communities will spend 95% of their church budget on themselves! Even if we are spending all our money on something good – like catechetical work, youth ministry, and beautification of a Church, we still have to ask ourselves, what percent of the Church's money and time goes outside her own people?

Surely, a Church and her pastoral team must take care of their own people! But simultaneously, the Church community must remember that she is called to be yeast within the general society where we live, she must be a light to the non-Orthodox and secular people around her in America, as well as participating in the overall

witness that is needed throughout the entire world! What a terrible distortion of God's vision when a community focuses only on its own! Archbishop Anastasios of Albania says, "The opposite of love is often called hatred. But its real name is egoism. This is the denial of the Triune God who is a *koinonia* (a communion) of love. Christian life means continual assimilation of the mystery of the cross in the fight against individual and communal selfishness."



We must recover this life of asceticism and self-sacrifice. We must make every effort to flee from our self-centered wills, and enter into the "mind of Christ." Through this struggle, we can overcome our destructive egos, rejecting the parochial view of "the parish as the universe," and united to Christ, developing a worldview of "the universe as the parish."

This is the reason why my family and I left America ten years ago to serve the Church in Albania. Yet, over the years, so many people have questioned us, "Why did you leave America? You should have stayed here. There are so many needs in our own country!"

Some even think the whole idea of mission is just downright wrong. A while ago on a six month sabbatical at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Theological School, the President of the school told me that someone complained to him about us living on campus. This person grumbled, "Don't you think it's dangerous to have Veronis living among the students, because maybe he will influence some of them to become missionaries."