

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 26, 2013 at 11:00am

Jesus' universal nature is an inspiration to make the church universal

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Harwich, Mass. — For both personal and professional reasons, I've been blessed to travel a substantial amount both in the United States and abroad.

As this column posts, I'm just arriving here at one of my sisters' summer home on Cape Cod, having spent time last week with my wife's family in Vermont. And I'm about to head to Hartford, Conn., for the annual conference of the National Society of Newspaper Columnists, which once had me as its president.

This current travel comes after spending the last week in May north of Vancouver, British Columbia, with good friends -- three Presbyterians, four Episcopalians, two Jews (one a convert), a Methodist and a Catholic. We spent very little time talking religion. Mostly we lived into the religious values of love and deep friendship, which included one of our Episcopalian friends sharing with the rest of us the 29.5-pound salmon he caught one drizzly morning.

So far in my journeys, I've missed only three states: Alaska, Montana and Idaho. I've been able to travel to about 35 countries.

Seeing the world -- and especially having the opportunity to live in India for two years of my boyhood as my father helped with the Green Revolution -- has made me appreciate the wild diversity of the people on this planet as well as their common humanity.

But it also has increased my appreciation for the global impact Jesus has had over 20 centuries even though his whole life, save for the time his family fled Herod for Egypt, was spent walking a small corner of land on the eastern Mediterranean.

Arthur Blessitt (love the name), who has spent 44 years walking through more than 300 countries while carrying a 12-foot cross, has estimated that in Jesus' lifetime, he walked almost the distance around the world at the equator.

So maybe Jesus was the founder of the movement to get your pedometer to click off at least 10,000 steps a day.

But despite his geographical limitations, what Jesus said, did and advocated was not parochial in its scope. It was universal, which is one big reason geography could not restrain the word about the Word, even though Jesus' daily language was one hardly anyone speaks today: Aramaic.

The universal nature of Jesus is a good reminder to the church universal that it always must be aware of its global context and should work to make sure it doesn't become isolated. It's one reason I and so many others cheered the election of Pope Francis. It emphasized the global nature and reach of the church, which finally chose someone from South America.

The answers to the questions of how and why the church universal becomes narrow in its scope will differ for Catholics and Protestants, given that Protestants don't have a centralized hierarchy based in its own sovereign land.

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But the temptation is especially strong for American Protestants and American Catholics to limit their vision to their own parishes or, at most, to the United States. It's so much easier that way. Let the world go away. We've got enough to deal with right here.

But such an attitude violates the universal appeal of Jesus and eventually puts us out of touch with the broader sweep of change affecting the church universal.

As such scholars as Phillip Jenkins and Mark Noll have told us in recent years, Christianity is growing in the Southern Hemisphere and in Asia, not in North America or Europe. Indeed, Christians in the latter two areas have become minority voices in Christianity. And the Christianity that's growing in Africa and Asia tends to be more theologically conservative than what's left in the First World.

So if we want to be part of the conversation about Christianity's future, we are obliged to remember why Jesus is so appealing to people around the planet and not just to folks in our individual congregations.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for the *Star's* website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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