

SOCIAL JUSTICE QUARTERLY

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 4

PARISH COMMUNITY

“We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”

- Dorothy Day, Servant of God





*Comprehendere
et Doceo*

Editor

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Editor's Note

In our previous issue on the family, one of our authors discussed the sense in which society is built from the family. In a similar way, the parish is built from the families that comprise it. In the postmodern age when so much of our lives are spent online and community solidarity is at such a low point, it is perhaps difficult to conceive of a small society defined by geography as an important part of our lives. Yet this is precisely what a parish is.

As our regular readers may have noticed, the themes of the four issues of the inaugural volume of *Social Justice Quarterly* are intended to set the foundation for future discussions of the application of Catholic Social Teaching in our world today. Whether through policy or Catholic action, the implementation of Catholic Social Teaching will lead to a more just world and will further Catholic evangelism. We hope that this first volume has improved your understanding of the foundations of Catholic Social Teaching

The goal of this issue is to answer some important questions surrounding the notion of the modern parish and to provoke discussion among Catholics about its role. What is the purpose of a parish in our time? How has it changed through the past 2,000 years? How can we build solidarity in our parishes? I hope that this issue answers these and other questions for you and drives you to ask more!

The Leonine Institute is [now accepting submissions for our next issue](#). The theme is *Pro Family Policy*. Please consider contributing to our July issue!

A History of Parish Life

Alexander T. Brown

To write a concise, comprehensive, and systematic history of the Catholic parish and fit it into a magazine article would be absurd. Nevertheless, I will attempt to do so. It is absurd for two contradictory reasons. The first is that the parish has—in its essence—never changed. All parishes have shared the same mission and identity (and problems) as they have since their conception in the Apostolic Age. Yet, the accidental, external qualities of the parish building and parish life have developed throughout history so dynamically that a single essay cannot do it justice. Parishes have been all things to all people; a place of worship, a source of income, a rallying point in times of hardship, and a festive hall for all manner of celebration. In short, the center of Christian community. To this end, parishes have changed with the people to reflect their devotion or, as has unfortunately been the case, the lack thereof. In this article I will provide a brief overview of the history of parishes, highlighting some of the major turning points and demonstrating how its core identity is preserved.

The Apostolic Age

The New Testament provides a clear picture of what a parish ought to be right from the advent of the Church. A parish is to be a place of

communal worship and holiness (Matt 16:20, 1 Cor 14:26) focused upon the celebration of the Eucharist (Acts 2:42-43, 1 Cor 10:17, 11:23-26) to abandon vice and grow in virtue (Colossians 3:1-17) with a mission toward corporate works of mercy (Matt 25:31-46, Acts 6:1-7) under the guidance of presbyters (Titus 1:5-9). In other words, a parish is a community united by the gospel and person of Jesus Christ. At this time, the community was centered around private homes in which the Liturgy was celebrated, hymns and psalms were sung, and the Apostle's letters were read. Though it could be said that dedicated places arose as a necessity during the persecutions, it was really only after Constantine I issued the Edict of Milan that Catholics began building worship sites akin to modern parishes.

Interestingly enough, however, the word "parish" only appears in the New Testament twice and neither time does it directly refer to an ecclesial community. Rather "paroikia" (παροικία) means to "sojourn" or "to pilgrim." It is used by Luke in Acts 13:17, "the God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and exalted the people during their sojourn in the land of Egypt. With uplifted arm he led them out of it." And again, by Saint Peter in 1 Peter 1:17, "Now if you invoke as Father him who judges impartially according to each one's works, conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your sojourning." The term began to appear alongside the words "diocesis" and "ecclesia" by the 4th century as theology developed to understand that pilgrimage is also a fundamental part of the parish's identity.

Of Tenuous Legality

Early parish life was challenged immediately by a world which did not understand it, or perhaps by a world that did understand and hated it all the same. Persecutions and suppression would last from the church's conception (as witnessed by Saint Paul) to the Edict of Milan in 313. Violence against the church would be neither continuous nor of consistent severity, but it would shape parish life for the subsequent centuries. Parishes famously shifted from homes to worship within catacombs where the superstitious Romans would not go. Worship also gravitated toward martyr sites, where faith and devotion would be venerated. The most famous of the Roman persecutions were of course Neronian (AD 54-68), Decian (AD 250-251) and Valerian (AD 257-260), and finally Diocletian (284-305). Of the 249 years of persecution from Nero to Constantine about half were spent under legal suppression. Nevertheless, the histories and especially the martyrology testifies that the local churches did not shrink from their mission. While the precise number of martyrs is unknown the histories use words like "many" (Cassius Dio) and "a great multitude" (Eusebius) to surmise the victims. The faith in these two centuries demonstrates that, though the parishes were unconventional by modern standards, the communities never shirked in their apostolic mission nor in their faithfulness to the gospel.

A Gilded Age and the Beginning of Conventional Parishes

After the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine in the same moment became the Roman Emperor and the answer to the troubled Christian's prayer. In gratitude for the victory, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in AD 313 which granted the Catholic Church freedom to worship. As a

consequence, we see the birth of parishes which are almost identical to what they are today (sans a shift in architectural preferences). Immediately after the Edict of Milan dedicated and public Christian worship sites were built; including the oldest sites in Christendom, such as the Church of the Nativity (construction began in 325) Saint Peter's Basilica (AD 326), Cathedral of Trier (AD 340) Basilica of San Lorenzo (AD 364) to name a few.

Sixty-seven years after the Edict of Milan, Emperor Theodosius I passed the Edict of Thessalonica which made Catholicism the state religion of the Roman Empire. This, for obvious reasons, was a catalyst for the fledgling church and it accelerated the spread of parish sites. Furthermore, paganism within the Roman empire was experiencing a steady decline as a consequence of the Edict and the unique evangelizing efforts of Christianity. Then the temples in which the pagans had worshiped with such reverence that they killed benevolent pacifists en masse to preserve said worship suddenly didn't seem as important as all that. Christians, ever opportunists and divinely forgiving, commandeered said temples for their own liturgy. Historically, this is the first time modern parish buildings (a Christian building dedicated to public worship) were used. To this day, parish buildings still boast architectural qualities reminiscent of Greek and Roman temples, such as fluted columns, Ionic capitals, and dentil molding. All in all, parishes - both the community and the building - took a more prominent role in the life of the church, becoming a visible testament of community.

Outside the Roman Empire, however, paganism was decidedly not on the decline. Evangelization and mission efforts to the British Isles and

Germany solidified the parish structure that had already begun to materialize in the Roman Empire. In addition to bringing God to Ireland, Saint Patrick brought chapels and monasteries in 432 AD as bases for evangelization. Saint Augustine of Canterbury did the same to England in 597 AD, as did Saint Boniface to Germany in 690 AD. The original structures were wooden but near eternal stone structures were soon to follow such as Clonmacnoise, Ireland (c. 540) and All Saints Church, England (c. 670) which can both still be seen. Again, the importance of a parish is demonstrated as they were touchstones for the faith in these foreign lands.

A Growth Spurt

In the following centuries, parishes would grow in proportion to the growth of Christendom. No longer were they the tiny hubs of eccentric missionaries or ascetic monks, but rather the central point of a growing, devoted, and worldwide Christian community. By the 12th century, both mathematics and French influence were steadily advancing throughout Europe, both of which were instrumental in the rise of Gothic architecture. These larger than life structures often took generations to complete. The first hint of Gothic architecture reared its head in the Basilica of Saint Denis in 1135 AD, but the oldest completed Gothic structure is the French Sens Cathedral which was completed in 1176 AD. The English, however, were right on the French's heels, beginning the Gothic renovation on Canterbury Cathedral in 1174 two years earlier. Yet Canterbury was not completed until 1180, leaving the French to steal the prestige from the English much like the Angevin territory. Giants like Notre Dame (Gothic construction 1163-1345 AD) and Chartes Cathedral

(1194-1260) in France arose. Europe quickly became adorned with these gorgeous structures as basilicas and country parishes; each boasting flying buttresses, pointed arches, brilliant and impossibly tall stained glass, vaults, and budding stonework. The apexes of this period are Milan Cathedral (begun in 1386) and Seville Cathedral (1403-1511), the two largest cathedrals to stand in Christendom.

I include these dates for a general reference, but they are not (minding the pun) set in stone. All of these structures required continuous maintenance and constant renovation, some well into the 16th century leaving us to wonder if they are truly completed even now or if it is the Christian duty to work for their preservation. I also include them to show something key about parish life in this period. For all of the criticism of the Medieval Church, these larger than life structures show that the She never abandoned her parochial mission to be central in the life of the faithful community. Bearing in mind the life span in the medieval period, the quickest of these parishes was constructed over the lifespan of three generations. That means for three generations, the church provided work, income, community, and a corporal sense of purpose for the faithful. These projects fostered art, perpetuated craft, and gave duty to trade. Not to mention that once they were finished, these buildings often became famous pilgrimage sites, thus uniting the faithful in a larger sense and bolstering the local economy. We see in this period the Church, like a mother, encouraging her faithful in their talents and teaching them about the transcendent God in the same act. In other words, this is the Apostolic mission which was found in scripture realized in a timely way. Literally, building the parish created a parish community for hundreds of years.

The Reformation, Trent, and the Modern World

To say that there have been no advances or changes in parish life since the Medieval period would be untrue, yet as we approach the modern age it is increasingly difficult to discern what is and is not significant. The architecture changed but taught the same lessons until the mid-20th century, the mission parishes expanded into the New World and the Far East. Our understanding of parish was, like many other things, articulated and further developed at the Council of Trent in 1545 in response to the Protestant Revolt.

Trent articulated the duty of the bishop and priest to care for the faithful within his diocese and parish boundary, the manner of erecting new parishes, the duties of the parish priest, and designated the parish as the center point of sacraments. This, of course, was already held in the deposit of faith, but Trent articulated said belief for the modern world. Further articulations were made in 1917 when the church promulgated the Code of Canon Law which defined and qualified what a parish can, cannot, and ought to do. The Second Vatican Council then reinforced our understanding of the church community as the Mystical Body of Christ, making the parish a central part of said community and vital to our salvation.

The Lesson Learnt

Two thousand years is a lot of ground to cover in as many words. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive timeline, but I hope that it testifies to my two original points; parishes are always changing, and parishes

have never changed. In the first sense, they have grown, shrunk, hidden, and exposed themselves, being all things to all men. Parishes undoubtedly are a rich heritage. In the latter sense, parishes - be they truly parishes - have never changed.

We still are bound to the Apostolic mission which is laid out in scripture. We still are to make our parishes home bases in mission territory, they are still to be the object of our labor and talent. Most importantly, they are to be the places where we encounter the person of Christ, for He is in the midst of the two or three gathered in His name. Jesus Christ is the sole reason for parishes existing, everything else is history.

The Parish Cafeteria

Stephen Mikulasik

Catholics today live in a time of unprecedented choice. Thanks to numerous technological advancements and liturgical variety, the idea that your parish would be your nearest parish is no longer a norm many recognize. One might be drawn to a parish because of the liturgy they practice, community, charitable works, various programs, apostolates, or a multitude of other reasons. A sort of self-selection begins, whereby Catholics gather into like-minded communities, eroding the solidarity that the parish is supposed to provide. While it may be spiritually beneficial to some to find a parish that suits their preferences, there lies a danger in viewing a parish as something like a consumer choice rather than a community that one participates in. Through this selection process, the parish flattens and is reduced to a mere building.

Parish choice is not the historical norm for Catholics. [Canon 515](#) refers to the parish as a “community of the Christian faithful stably constituted...”. The use of the word “stable” here implies that the parishioners are not moving from place to place but are together in community. This stability gives rise to a place of encounter, where time can act as a gradual force building unity, while allowing for diversity. [Apostolicam Actuositatem](#), says of the parish, “it brings together the many human differences within its boundaries and merges them into the universality of the Church.” Here we can start to see that the essential nature of a parish is like a family, requiring stability, yet within itself lies

diverse individuals that are part of the greater whole of the Church, growing under its care. [Canon 518](#) states “As a general rule a parish is to be territorial, that is, one which includes all the Christian faithful of a certain territory.” Canon 518 also sees parishes based on other criteria such as rite, language, nationality, or other characteristics. It should be noted that the reasons given are not a matter of personal tastes, nor does the Church see parishes as items in a store, serving every individual or idea.

The parish is very much human, both physical and spiritual, with a composition like that of a family. A well-functioning, stable family naturally encourages solidarity between its members. The community, like any family, cannot be made up of a uniform person, coming together because of a particular taste, eliminating all differences between each other. In the parish, the good must come together with the bad, lending themselves to each other. This doesn't mean that their talents are perfect, or ideas agree, but that they are orientated towards each other in charity which they receive from Christ. This community of flawed individuals participate in the highest form of solidarity men can achieve: worship of God together through the Mass. We may very well find no other place in our modern society where peoples of different thought, socio-economic class, race, ideology, physical and mental ability can come together in such unity as through their participation in the Mass. It is through Christ that the divisions of Man are healed, and it is at Mass where we encounter Him most profoundly.

Despite a high ideal for the parish, it is clear something is wrong. Catholic self-selection is now multi-generational and ingrained into the

modern Catholic ethos. The suburbanization that emerged after World War 2 introduced an implicit self-selection among Catholics. For the first time in modern history the average person was able to choose to live in planned communities that were designed and marketed to cater to a particular demographic. The parish, being made up generally of those nearest, was now flat, being in a neighborhood inhabited by similar people. With the undesirable traits of the city now gone, Catholics would implicitly choose not to worship with the undesirables of society. A wound many did not realize was opened in the unity of the Church that is only being deepened in our present day.

During the 20th century the mechanisms that bound one person to their parish were deeply eroded. The improvements in transportation and communications have profoundly changed the relationship man has with physical distance. Canon law sees the norm of a parish to be territorial, yet it is clear to everyone that the traditional physical barriers that this norm is based on have been broken down over the past hundred years. Even the Congregation for the Clergy admits as much in 2020 saying [“As a living community of believers, the Parish finds itself in a context whereby the territorial affiliation is increasingly less evident...”](#). It no longer makes sense that when one moves, that they must move parishes because a commute has increased by a few minutes. A Catholic may also find that they now can easily frequent various parishes with some level of regularity without much additional burden. The parish is clearly being called for reform, but what the results will be is unclear.

It may be hard to see, but a tide is rising in the Church; a Church whose members are interconnected and no longer bound by space is emerging.

An incredible phenomenon is occurring where a Catholic can preach the Gospel to another person who may never have encountered a Catholic while they both sit in their own homes. This new form of evangelization and solidarity among Catholics carries with it the risk that the abstract nature of virtual spaces entails that when someone converts virtually they are never drawn into the physical reality of a Parish. A faith that is only virtual is only ideological, never able to fully encounter the Church and the living Christ.

These Catholics, in their self-isolation, will not see other Catholics as children of God, but as opponents, always pointing out how they fail, never concerned with the personal, but only creating uniformity. Digital echo chambers have emerged, pitting Catholics against each other, treating orthodoxy as ideology. The place where these digital walls can be brought down will be the parish, where encountering and journeying with others will soften their hearts. The parish must become a place of integration for Catholics, going beyond a model based around liturgical preferences and the most desirable events.

In the 21st century the Parish emerges from her weakened state through a synergy between the human, divine, physical, and virtual. This new Parish will once again, as she always has, be forced to reconcile the different people whom Christ invites into his Church. The space of the internet will introduce new converts who inhabit an online intellectual battlefield, already primed by pundits, ideologies and social media influences on their faith that will need to be integrated and reformed. They will need to accept that the Church is full of sinners, and the parish will need to accept this new challenge.

Parish Solidarity

Anthony M. Fernandez

The implementation of Catholic social teaching is a clear call to all of the Church's faithful. For more than 100 years the Church has taught Her members about their duties to their neighbors, how economic classes should cooperate rather than engage in class warfare, and how society ought to care for those most neglected. Still practical questions remain: How do we implement this vision for society? To whom should our charity be directed? And is this merely an individual responsibility, or something for us to do as a collective? As Pope Francis has been reminding us, no one is saved alone. So how are we to work together?

From the very beginnings of modern Catholic social teaching, Leo XIII taught us about how we are to strive for the ideals that he laid out. In *Rerum Novarum* he says:

[But the Church](#), not content with pointing out the remedy, also applies it. For the Church does her utmost to teach and to train men, and to educate them and by the intermediary of her bishops and clergy diffuses her salutary teachings far and wide. She strives to influence the mind and the heart so that all may willingly yield themselves to be formed and guided by the commandments of God. It is precisely in this fundamental and momentous matter, on which everything depends that the Church possesses a power peculiarly her own. The instruments which she employs are given to her by Jesus Christ Himself for the very purpose of reaching the

hearts of men, and derive their efficiency from God. They alone can reach the innermost heart and conscience, and bring men to act from a motive of duty, to control their passions and appetites, to love God and their fellow men with a love that is outstanding and of the highest degree and to break down courageously every barrier which blocks the way to virtue.

Pope Leo makes two points: first, he is informing us of a collective duty, not merely a call to individual conscience (though conversion is ultimately an individual phenomenon). We should not and cannot be content with merely hoping that others will take up the call while we refuse to take any positive action to compel it. No, we cannot be passive in the face of injustice.

We are not to be libertarians who permit every gross injustice while the poor are terrorized by the exploitation of the avaricious and usurious. Rather, we are called to address this injustice, using the means that are available to us as the Church. A special note should be made here that while the Church respects the right of private property, this does not entail a right to do as we ourselves see fit with our property without regard to the community. Leo continues:

[It is one thing](#) to have a right to the possession of money and another to have a right to use money as one wills ... But if the question be asked: how must one's possessions be used?- the Church replies without hesitation in the words of the same holy Doctor: "Man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation

when others are in need. Whence the Apostle with, 'Command the rich of this world ... to offer no stint, to apportion largely.'

And this gets to Leo's second point: we must use the means available to the Church to affect this change that we want to see in society.

And what are these means? Leo mentions the central figure: the bishop. Our bishop is not merely a figurehead, the pope's Vicar in our particular diocese. No, he is of himself a true successor of the Apostles and our spiritual leader. He is the head of a particular church in union with the pope.

[A diocese is a portion](#) of the people of God which is entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the cooperation of the presbytery. Thus by adhering to its pastor and gathered together by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative. Individual bishops who have been entrusted with the care of a particular church - under the authority of the supreme pontiff - feed their sheep in the name of the Lord as their own, ordinary, and immediate pastors, performing for them the office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing.

To the bishop we owe deference and submission. To him is the duty of converting the faithful to live more authentically the call of Christ. By him and with him are the means to reach our goal of an economy built on solidarity and subsidiarity.

To bishops, as successors of the Apostles, in the dioceses entrusted to them, there belongs per se all the ordinary, proper, and immediate authority which is required for the exercise of their pastoral office. ... The general law of the Church grants the faculty to each diocesan bishop to dispense, in a particular case, the faithful over whom they legally exercise authority as often as they judge that it contributes to their spiritual welfare ... They should set forth the ways by which are to be answered the most serious questions concerning the ownership, increase, and just distribution of material goods, peace and war, and brotherly relations among all countries.

And this is why the diocese is important. It is particularly the principle of subsidiarity, which requires that action be taken at the most local level that can competently perform it, that demands action at the diocesan level.

While individual families and even parish communities are crucial and indispensable for organizing the faithful and addressing the needs of one another, ultimately they alone are not powerful enough to combat the economic concerns of an entire diocese. A poor parish struggles to survive. It cannot meet the needs of its struggling parishioners. A diocese, however, can do this, composed as it is of both wealthy and poor parishes. Further, this is the proper domain of the diocese, as it is the basic unit of Church structure, as we are all ultimately led by our bishop, and not our particular parish pastor. As Pope Paul VI declares in *Christus Dominus*:

[Bishops enjoy the fullness](#) of the sacrament of orders and both presbyters and deacons are dependent upon them in the exercise of their authority. For the presbyters are the prudent fellow workers of the episcopal order and are themselves consecrated as true priests of the New Testament, just as deacons are ordained for the ministry and serve the people of God in communion with the bishop and his presbytery. Therefore bishops are the principal dispensers of the mysteries of God, as well as being the governors, promoters, and guardians of the entire liturgical life in the church committed to them.

And what can be accomplished through a bishop is not merely higher scale economic cooperatives. To the bishop belongs the disciplinary means of the Church. These are penalties like interdict and excommunication which, while seldom used, can and should be means by which the Church strives to reach the goals of society. Today, no penalties are levied against wealthy Catholic influencers who use their treasure to undermine Catholic social teaching. Some of them have built their fortunes on the worst forms of usury and predation. They use these means to push for their vision of society which marginalizes the consistent teaching of the Church. We as individual Catholics and even parishes are unable to combat such a pernicious evil.

The diocese, however, not only can punish the sinner in the hope of his repentance, but can even propagate a competing message that is faithful to the call of the Church. And this ultimately is the only way that this can

happen. Without the cooperation of the diocese, our endeavors become immensely more difficult.

This essay began with Pope Francis' reminder that none of us are saved alone. We are responsible for our brothers and sisters, and we cannot neglect our duty to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. But we must always remember that our community is the diocese, not just our particular parish. Under the bishop is established a true autonomous Church, and if we are to combat the organized evil that is prevalent in society, we must do this as a Church, as the body of Christ, which is infinitely more powerful than the deceit of Satan.

Economic Solidarity Via the Parish

Levi A. Russell

One of my favorite scenes in Scripture is [John 2:14-16](#) in which Christ, upon seeing people selling livestock and lending money in the temple, fashions himself a whip and drives them all out. He tells those selling pigeons not to “[turn my Father’s house into a place of barter.](#)” This story is a powerful reminder for us to focus on Christ when we are at Mass and to receive the Eucharist reverently and in a state of grace. At Mass we should be focused on eternal things.

However, the parish church grounds are not simply a place for Mass. Our priests live there. Our children are educated there. It is a place of fellowship and, sometimes, work. In a fallen world, these activities require the time and treasure of those who live in the parish to be effective.

In the modern world, commerce is the primary means by which we obtain the things we need to live. Is commerce an individual activity? Certainly some people would have us think so. In this view, adults should not rely on each other. Only children are dependent. Once we turn 18 (or perhaps 22 for those attending college), we are expected to be on our own financially. Even marriage is not a guarantee of financial dependence of one person on another. Divorce is commonplace, so it’s best to maintain your own career and bank account should the marriage not work out. In this view, the only sense in which commerce is

cooperative is that it is a series of transactions. The focus is individual freedom; freedom in the liberal sense.

In contrast, a Catholic parish ideally fosters solidarity among its members through explicit cooperation. Worship, fellowship, and working together to achieve the common good of the parish. As part of this, the commercial activity of the parishioners is brought to bear. Financial contributions come to the parish from the wages of some of the members and from investment income or in-kind contributions of business owners. These contributions are used to pay parish employees, maintain the buildings and grounds, and otherwise further the mission of the parish as an educational and evangelical institution in the broader community.

But there is a specific way in which commerce is tied to the parish that I believe should be expanded. On the back of every weekly parish bulletin I've ever seen is a mosaic of advertisements for local businesses run by the parishioners. Are these advertisements particularly profitable, or are they primarily a means of contributing to the parish? Are most parishioners aware of those in the parish who own successful businesses in the community? In my mind, it is an open question whether these ads are useful, and some might question whether it is ethical to advertise in a parish bulletin. Didn't Christ admonish the pigeon-sellers to avoid turning His Father's house into a place of trade and commerce?

My position is that these advertisements are certainly ethical. They do not direct the focus of the parishioner away from the worship of the Almighty in the Mass. The bulletin on which they are printed is explicitly

a means of communication for the whole parish, so advertising parishioners' businesses and other Catholic organizations is certainly appropriate.

The problem, as I see it, is that the back of the bulletin is not nearly large enough to truly foster solidarity-enhancing commerce in a parish. A young parishioner might be looking for a job in a certain industry. Wouldn't he be well-served if he could find a job working for one of his fellow parishioners? A family looking for a physician might benefit from a list of Catholic physicians in the parish, or in nearby parishes. The possibilities for a family to find the goods and services they need through commerce with other parishioners is only limited by the number of people in the parish. Surely the possibilities deserve our attention. Surely in our technological age we can devise a more suitable platform to support this economic activity. Perhaps we will.