



**“GO AND PROCLAIM THE KINGDOM OF GOD”**

JPIC in the formative process of Consecrated Life  
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**A FORMATION THAT GENERATES PASSION  
FOR CHRIST AND FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

The foundress of my community, St. Claudine Thevenet, has a saying that I love: *“It is a kind of miracle to change a human heart.”* I think that we all know how true that is, beginning with the experience of our own hearts. Whether I am trying to control or change my anger, or my anxiety, or perhaps my indifference to the poor, I often feel my helplessness. How then do we construct a formation that generates *passion for Christ, and for the Kingdom*, when we know, through our own experience and that of others, that it is a gift, something beyond our control?

This passion, this love for Christ and his mission, is indeed a grace, a free gift of God. Knowing this, we approach our task with humility. This grace is something I can only *receive*, not something I create. But, undoubtedly, it is a gift that God wants to give. So we approach our task with hope, with confidence and expectations. God is working to bring this about, to establish the reign of justice, mercy, and peace.

Dorothy Day, an American laywoman, and an untiring advocate for the poor, gave a powerful witness of this passion in a life that spanned much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her words tell us something of the nature of the gift. When she was asked by a journalist to write down a summary of what was most significant in her life, she offered this response:

*I was going to try and make a summary for myself, write what mattered most – but I couldn’t do it. I just sat there, and thought of Our Lord, and his visit to us all those centuries ago, and I said that my great good luck was to have had him on my mind for so long in my life.* (cited in Jn. Kavanaugh, *Faces of Poverty, Faces of Christ*, \_\_)

My “great good luck,” she says; my gift. He was always on her mind.

What helped to keep him on her mind? Somehow, the sight of the poor burned itself into Dorothy Day's consciousness, and lodged there in a way that she found impossible to ignore. Christ was always before her in them: *Jesus, in his distressing disguises*.

I once was in a town in Haiti, taking part in a parish feast. After celebrating the Eucharist, the invited guests were brought to a large shed, in the center of which was a table piled with food and drink. Simple fare, rice and beans, but very plentiful. One side of the shed was made up of sliding doors, which were open. As we, the invited, gathered around the table, many people from the town came near the open door. They did not ask for anything. They stood there quietly, and watched us fill our plates.

Though we knew that whatever was left would be given to them, we were intensely uncomfortable. So, we had a choice. We could leave the door open, letting in the only source of light, and feel their silent gaze. Or, we could close the door, and eat in the dark. We ate in the dark. We closed ourselves off from the hungry, to lessen our discomfort.

What we want, for ourselves and for those with us in mission, is the gift of the passion that is focused on Jesus, that sees him in his "distressing disguises," that does not turn away from that presence, however hard and unsettling to take in. How might we open ourselves, and help those in formation to open themselves to this gift? What choices can we make to become more vulnerable to God's transforming grace?

### **The Charism for Apostolic Life**

We use the word *charism* to name graces proper to particular Institutes. In the case of those communities where "apostolic and charitable activity is of their very nature" (PC, no. 8), that grace can be seen incarnated in their members: Francis is moved to embrace the leper; Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul vow to serve "the poor, our masters"; Don Bosco gathers street children, Mother Teresa bends over the dying woman or man in Calcutta's street. What do we see in them, in your own founders and foundresses? Where a need appears, where suffering exists, where injustice is present, there is a pull, an impulse to respond, a movement *toward*, rather than a shrinking away from.

This charism is a gift that transforms my spontaneity, and turns it toward others in freely offered presence and service, not in a spirit of grim duty. It is my VOCATION, described as an experience in which “a deep need in the world meets a deep gladness in myself.” It is something like what the Old Testament prophets experienced, according to Gerhard von Rad:

*Not just knowledge was given to the prophet, but the feelings in God's heart: wrath, love, sorrow, .... Something of Yahweh's own emotion passed over into the prophet's psyche and filled it to bursting point....* (The Message of the Prophets)

Our task, then, in the work of formation, is two-fold: to discern and verify the presence of this gift, and to foster its growth and development.

A piece of wisdom adapted from the native American tradition can illustrate the nature of that task. “There are two wolves inside of us,” an old woman tells her grandchild. “One wolf is filled with desires for comfort, honors and power. The other is passionate for justice, for the needs of others, for truth. They are locked in battle with one another.” “But Grandmother,” the child asks, “which wolf wins?” She answers: “The one you feed.”

How might we feed the good wolf? Here, I can only mention briefly some means that I have found to be useful. This is not an exhaustive list. From your own experience, as well as your community's charism, tradition, and apostolic priorities, you can judge the relative value of what I give here, and add to it.

I would see three things as foundational: first, practices that promote the development of self-awareness and self-acceptance; next, guidance in meeting the living Christ as revealed in the gospels; and finally, formative experiences with the poor. As further helps, I would name instruction in the social doctrine of the church, acquaintance with emerging voices in theology, and exposure to inspiring models of mission. Finally, I want to say something about the Eucharist.

### **The cultivation of self-knowledge and self-acceptance.**

It may seem strange to name first something that is so clearly introspective. But what we are looking to nurture and develop is the freedom that brings me to my truth before God. In my ministry as well as in my prayer, I want the “real me” to meet “the real Thou,” so that I am free to take in the reality of my brothers and sisters. “Only truth is useful; only truth can be built

upon.” Every formation program recognizes this value and addresses it, building in structures and practices meant to cultivate healthy self-awareness. One of the most effective of these, it seems to me, is wise accompaniment, the development of a relationship that offers a safe place in which my brother or sister can be guided and supported in recognizing and responding to God’s call to them. Charles de Foucauld describes this well: “Each of these brothers (and sisters) of ours is longing to meet someone who will listen to (them) at such a depth that they can stop being someone (they) are not.”

My truth before God must necessarily encompass two realities: that I share in humanity’s poverty and sinfulness as well as its dignity; and that I am God’s beloved one. From a deep realization of that paradoxical truth arises gratitude to the One who has loved and redeemed me: a passion for Christ. What follows, God willing, is a solidarity with all those who are so loved, and a compelling need to act on their behalf – passion for the Kingdom of God.

I read an anecdote that brought this home to me powerfully. An American priest was spending time in India, and had just completed a retreat, after which he went to serve in one of the houses for the dying of the Missionaries of Charity. His first assignment was to wash and care for an elderly man who had just been brought in from the street. He found himself overwhelmed by the dirt, the smell, the wretchedness. Midway through the task, he had to dash outside and smoke a cigarette. And things didn’t improve. Day after day he found himself repulsed by the condition of those he had come to serve.

One morning, before leaving for his work there, he was praying in desperation, and cried out: “O God, help me! I’m so cold, and so poor, and so alone.” That day, when he arrived at the house, the old man he had first tended saw him, and called out, “O brother, come to me! I’m so cold, and so alone!” “He’s just like me,” thought the priest. Or, ‘I’m just like him.’ And something heavy and dark lifted from his heart, leaving light and peace and a deep sense of communion with his brother and – passion for the Kingdom.

Dean Brackley, who worked in El Salvador, has written that “To some extent, we all hold reality at arm’s length – fending off intolerable parts of the world with one hand, and intolerable parts of ourselves with the other. The two go together.” In the order of grace, the effectiveness

of what I do for others may be measured by the extent to which I accept my own humanity, and see myself in kinship with those I serve.

### **Meeting Jesus in the Gospels**

We want to meet Jesus, to encounter the living Lord ever more deeply and vitally. We want those who have come to share our life and mission to have life-giving, life-changing encounters with Jesus Christ. The fruit of such an encounter, we believe in faith, cannot help but generate the ‘passion for Christ’ that we seek. Where might we go for this meeting?

Ignatius of Antioch, has a striking phrase in one of his letters: “I am clinging for refuge to the gospel message, as to the flesh of Christ.” Indeed, Vatican II’s document on the Liturgy speaks explicitly of Christ’s presence in the Word of God. All of Scripture can help us to meet the living God. But the gospels, those writings from the groups closest to Jesus’ followers, offer a privileged means of encounter with him.

- What is Jesus like? Read the gospel, and watch him in action.
- What does he offer me? What does he ask of me? Read the gospel, and listen to his teaching, his stories.
- What does Jesus think of me, of all of us? Read the gospel, and reflect on his choices.

In a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, John Meier speaks of “the bracing realism of the gospel.” The Jesus of the gospels cuts through our self-serving rationalizations, as well as our flawed self-assessments and our judgments of others. He explodes conventional wisdom about relating to enemies, forgiveness, about who is important. He invites me to a relationship that I need not earn, but simply accept. And he makes that towering assertion of his identification with ‘the least’ – “*I tell you, whatever you did to them, it was to me.*”

What can we do to help those in formation encounter this living Christ in the gospels? Here are three suggestions.

Exploit the **riches of modern exegesis**. There are studies that help us to a fresh and truer image of the person of Jesus, that uncover the power and force of his message. Seek out and use these resources to help your brothers and sisters break open the scriptures and feel the power of God’s Word. Let this Word, especially the gospels, be at the heart of your formation program.

Teach and encourage the practice of **Lectio Divina**, that immersion in the Word of God that proceeds from reading to meditating, to praying, and then, contemplation. This approach acts against our tendency to gobble down information, and gives us a structure whereby the Word of God can work on us, can work its way into us, can challenge and transform us.

Consider inviting others to the practice put forward by St. Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises. I'm speaking of **imaginative contemplation of the gospels**, whereby I take a scene from the gospel, and put myself into it, making it present through the use of the imagination. Ignatius of Loyola was convinced that, when he prayed in this way, "God was offering things to his imagination." I'm reminded of Joan of Arc's response at her trial when her interrogators asked: "Are not these voices you hear your imagination?" Her reply: "How else would God speak to me?"

In this approach to praying the gospel, we lend our imagination to God, so that God can present a truer vision of ourselves, and can help us to feel how God looks on our neighbor and our world. What might take place in such a way of entering the gospel?

One woman was praying over John 13, seeing herself and people from her present life in the scene where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. In her imagination, she was there, helping Jesus as he went from one to the other, and feeling very virtuous. Then, she and Jesus approached someone whose presence there shocked her – an old resentment toward this person surfaced, in all its original intensity. She found herself frozen in her antipathy, conscious of the contempt she felt for this "enemy." She felt Jesus' gaze on her, and she heard him say: "I can help you. If you ask me, I will help you with this." And there came the power to forgive, freedom from an old hatred, relief, consolation. A deep gladness.

God can offer things to our imaginations, as God did with Ignatius.

### **Experience with the Poor and Reflection on Experience**

"What the eye does not see cannot move the heart." So goes the Haitian proverb. When we send a brother or sister for what we call a formative experience, in the hope of generating a passion for the Christ and the Kingdom of God, what do we seek to accomplish? Not principally the development of certain pastoral skills, although that may be part of it. No, rather, we want to

know – *how stands your heart toward the poor? What thoughts, feelings, desires come when you are face to face with human need?*

We tend to accommodate ourselves to our world, as it is. Or, we can block out those aspects, those parts that distress us or make us uncomfortable. Years ago, a filmmaker made a long documentary called *SHOAH*, about the Jewish Holocaust. The film featured extensive interviews with dozens of people who had been involved: victims, former Nazis and guards, those who transported Jews to the death camps. One man had worked a farm whose fields were next to the Auschwitz camp. The interviewer kept pressing him: ‘didn’t he see the flames of the furnaces? Didn’t he hear the cries? Didn’t he smell the odor?’ The man kept responding evasively, until finally he admitted: “*Yes. I did. But I guess I got used to it.*”

What can help to shake us from passive acceptance of the things we have just ‘gotten used to’? All around us is evidence of the idea that some lives matter less than other lives. Have we “gotten used to” the reality that some feast at the table while others lie at the gate? In face of this, what might open a person to let in something of “the feelings in God’s heart,” and to be moved to action for justice, for peace, for the Kingdom of God?

We start with *presence*. If I am with you, I can come to know you, and to feel with you, to feel for you, and to learn something of God’s hopes for you. You come to matter more to me.

An American novice on an apostolic experience was traveling across the country by bus, and was shocked out of a sound sleep one night by a flashlight – a torch – shining directly into her face. The border police were searching for illegal immigrants. “You’re OK,” the policeman said to this blond, fair-skinned Irish-American woman. But all around her she is hearing, “Show me your papers. Get them out!” And to some: “Get off the bus. You’re coming with us.” People are pleading, children are crying. The woman with whom she had shared fruit is taken away. The novice is safe in her place. But now she knows something of what it feels like not to be safe, to have no place. And to be uneasy with her own assured place.

The “immigration problem” now has a face – Maria, who gave her half of her banana.

I once visited a home for children in Africa, stopping to visit with the children as I walked down the center aisle of several long, low buildings with beds on either side. Midway

through the 1<sup>st</sup> building, I felt something delicately brush my leg. It was a tiny little boy, painfully thin, sitting at my feet, holding up his arms. He could not walk, but had pushed himself along the floor to reach me. I picked him up, and kept him with me until we came to the door, and crossed to the next building. Midway through my visit there, I felt again that light, feathery touch. He had come, bumping along on his skinny little bottom, to be held again. He was content with just that – to be held. And, he did it a third time. “Don’t forget me. I’m still here.”

We must send our sisters and brothers to places where they can see and experience God present in ‘the least.’ We must help them, and one another, not to turn our gaze away, but to let the reality enter in, even if it breaks our hearts. “God pours God’s life out, wherever there is space.” (Iain Matthews, OCD) God can enter in that broken place to change our hearts, to help me see, not only my sister, but Jesus, in the woman who is taken away. To feel, not only the touch of my little brother, but the persistent urging of the Spirit, in the insistent reaching out.

How can we help one another to be more attuned to God’s presence and invitation in what is seen and experienced? To really see what God wants to show us? Here is a summary of what Ignatius of Loyola told his novices when he sent them out.

Take the time to listen and to see what lies before you he told them. Give your **attentiveness** to what is really there, i.e., letting that person become as genuinely herself/himself as can be.

**Reverence** what you see, giving acceptance, cherishing the difference; and this, before judging, or assessing, or responding.

Leaning to do this, you will gradually discover **devotion**, the way in which God works in that person or situation, revealing goodness and fragility, beauty and truth, pain and wisdom. (cited by Howard Gray, SJ, in a conference at Bethany Spirituality Center, NY, 1998).

Attention and reverence can lead to devotion, i.e., to love for the other that finds expression in self-donation, in action on their behalf.

*“I have seen the misery of my people...,”* Yahweh said to Moses. *“I have heard their cry...; I know their sufferings, and I have come....”* (Ex. 3: 7-8) We need to provide time and an atmosphere in which those in formation can reflect on their experiences, can express their



reaction, their perceptions, and insights; can name their feelings, and can also learn about the social context of the reality in which they have been immersed. What did you see? What did you feel? What have you come to know? And how do you want to respond?

Reflection on experience implies conversation about it, with intensive listening on the part of the formator. The atmosphere needed is one of acceptance that generates a feeling of safety, so that negative as well as positive feelings can be honestly shared. Recall the parable of the 2 sons in the Gospel of Matthew: one said ‘yes, I will go,’ the other said ‘no.’ Who went? If there is a ‘no’ in one’s heart, if there is insecurity, prejudice, hostility, let it be brought into the light, where its source can be discerned, its value weighed. There are healthy and unhealthy fears; there is a sorrow that leads to depression, and a sorrow that is part of compassion.

I once listened to a sister talk about her fear of returning to a mission in Haiti. She was American; Americans were being kidnapped for ransom, a possibility which terrified her. The language, Creole, was difficult for her. The needs were overwhelming. And, she admitted, “I like my comforts.” When I asked if she believed that these things should prevent her return, she quickly responded: “Oh, no. I can go. I want to go. But I needed to say this.”

Conversely, positive feelings, changing perceptions of oneself and others, new realizations, emerging desires and possibilities for service – there must be encouragement to reflect upon and to share all of these. The purpose in all this reflection is discernment of the endowment for mission, of how this person is being moved and shaped to love God and neighbor, of how we might support and foster the work of the Spirit in this apostle.

Similarly, we bring to this reflection study and analysis of the social context of our mission, in order to see more clearly. What is helping, and what is hindering the coming of the Kingdom, the reign of God? Many situations in our world are dependent on our blindness to their cause and our numbness to their cost: war, poverty, the marginalization of whole groups. Jesus penetrates the numbness by his compassion, and can bring us to share in it, and to act to change it.

The people I served in the hospital – why are they sick? Is it because someone bribed an official so that the water supply could be polluted? Why are these people so poor? Is it because their livelihood in fishing or agriculture has been ruined by the drilling of oil companies? The

children I was teaching – why is so hard for them to learn? Is it because their crumbling apartment flats are filled with the lead-based paint that can cause brain damage in the very young?

Dorothy Day famously said: *When I feed the hungry, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are hungry, they call me a communist.*”

We need to ask *why*, and we need to pose that question to those whom we are helping to form for mission. Our growing consciousness of the reality of social sin is surely God’s Spirit at work in the world, helping us to see those structures that hamper or deny the dignity due God’s children. There are tools available for this reflection, helps we can use to gain insight into the world to which we are sent.

Through **social analysis** we can obtain a more complete picture of a social situation by exploring its historical and structural relationships. **Theological reflection** is a method of integrating one’s faith tradition and ministry experiences. **Horizon analysis** is yet another process of inviting people to get in touch with their responses to the realities around them. You are probably familiar with these, as well as with other similar tools. If not, or if you want more information, there is an abundance of material on the web.

What other helps can we offer to those called to apostolic life today?

## **The Social Doctrine of the Church**

We can make instruction in the **Social Doctrine of the Church** a part of our formation program. Many of its riches have been brought together in the publication of the Vatican’s monumental Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. More than 50 years ago, Pope John XXIII, in Mater et Magistra, called us to “see, judge, and act,” that is, to observe reality, to analyze and evaluate it in the light of Catholic Social Teaching, and to respond with action. Ten years later, the Synod of Bishops issued the document that proclaimed: *“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or, in other words, of the church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”* (Justice in the World, no.6) Our novices and juniors and scholastics need to hear this, and your own charisma

and focus in ministry will dictate how to apply it in your ministry. The resources are there, to instruct and challenge us.

I met a missionary in Latin America who was there, she said, because one afternoon, she read Paul VI's Populorum Progressio. It galvanized her. She finished it, took up her pen (this was before e-mail), and wrote her Superior General to say, "I am available for the Latin American mission." Not long after, she left Europe for Bolivia, where she is today.

### **The Insights of Modern Theology**

Theology mediates between faith and culture; therefore, the context in which theology is done is important. And today, creative, innovative theologians, including lay women and men, are working from Africa, Latin America and Asia, as well as from Europe and North America. These women and men can help us to answer the question: what is the mission of the Church in this context, what does this have to say to my context? American Theology Professor recently noted the topics of some recent dissertation topics in his school: "*The Ecological Dimensions of Peace and the Church Mission from an African Perspective*"; "*Imagination, the Spiritual Exercises, and Korean Protestants*"; "*Theology, Church, and Economic Globalization.*"

Can we use these insights to broaden our vision, or to deepen our understanding of our world? Can they help us to regard our world and its people with greater attention, more reverence, and a devotion that finds expression in effective service?

### **Storytelling: Models that Inspire**

I once met with two young Haitian women who were asking to enter our community. "Why do you want to come to us?" I asked. "Because of your story," one of them said, while the other nodded. They were referring to the story of our foundation, one marked by violence and an extraordinary response of forgiveness that turned to service, a narrative that has particular meaning for them in the context of their own village and country.

Stories engage us. Stories of those filled with a passion for Christ and for the Kingdom of God can reach our minds and hearts in ways that don't easily get shaken off. We remember them; sometimes they have the power to move and change us.

Your community has its stories – stories that move and inspire, that capture our imaginations, stories of the past and also of the present. Put your newer members in touch with them, tell them, read them, share them. The stories of your own founders and foundresses embody the gifts for mission, the charism, in which you share. Those stories can help others to feel again, to experience what it was, in the world of our origins, that brought forth an enduring, inventive, compassionate love: the love in the heart of the One sent as God’s response to the cry of the poor.

Our own times have stories that show what passion for Christ and for the kingdom looks like: Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador giving a voice to the poor and Sister Rani Maria of India courageously advocating for them. This is what passion for Christ and the Kingdom can bring about: a young man in Los Angeles who has been helped to leave behind a life of violence and drug abuse, who says that now he comes home from work every day to supper with his children. “I don’t eat right away,” he says. “I watch them eat.” Then he adds: “It’s a Father thing.” Someone saw that within an angry boy there was a good man, a loving parent, and helped him to become that.

After hearing these stories, what do I want to make of my own story?

## **Eucharist**

We have, finally, a resource that gives us both an image of what we are seeking, and the grace that empowers us for mission. It is the Eucharist, named by Vatican II as “the source and summit” of our Christian life.

Here in the Eucharist is our daily reminder of how God loves our world, loves me: “this is my body, given for you, broken for you; my blood, poured out. Take it – it is for you.”

Here is the image of what God wants for our world: “Come to the feast; I want my banquet hall full! You – go out and bring them in!” Jesus’ vision of the world is here, in the Eucharist. “When Jesus looked out on the crowd, he saw his own body.”

We need a reminder of our own truth and need before God, and it is here, in the Eucharist, where we say: “I confess,” “I am not worthy,” and in the same breath proclaim: “I shall be healed.”

We need power and strength beyond our own resources to labor for the Kingdom, and they are here, in the Eucharist. “Become what you eat,” the Church Father tells us. And another says: “When you eat this bread, ask to be given Jesus’ own love for the neighbor; when you drink this blood, ask for a share in his faith in the one he calls *Abba*.”

Eucharist tells us who we are: loved, forgiven, called, and sent, and it invites us to a life congruent with our identity. Jim Forest, of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship writes:

*If I cannot find the face of Jesus in the face of those who are my enemies, if I cannot find him in the poor and defeated, how will I find him in bread and wine, or in the life after death? If I do not reach out in this world to those with whom he has identified himself, why do I imagine that I will want to be with him, and them, in heaven? Why would I want to be, for all eternity, in the company of those I avoided every day of my life?*

Margaret, a sister in my community, has a mentally handicapped younger brother named Larry. She was once confronted with a demand from the woman soon to be her sister-in-law, who asked that Larry be kept away from her coming wedding and reception, lest his behavior disturb others. Margaret was stunned by the request; momentarily speechless. Then she found her voice: “You and your family are hosting this celebration, and of course, you can choose the guests. But he’s my brother. I’m not coming without him.”

Why are we sitting down with refugees and trafficked women, why do we send one another to be with drug addicts and prisoners? Why are we working to give the poor a voice in public forums and choosing to be with them in their struggles? Because we want to be with Jesus, and he’s not coming without them. Because, when we meet him, he might ask: “Where is your sister? Where did you leave your brother?”

People are affected by what they do. If we are open to what we are doing in Eucharist, our imaginations can become shaped by the truths of Christ. Let us think of how we might make our daily encounter with Christ in the Eucharist an occasion of an ever deeper immersion into God’s vision of our world, of ourselves and our call. How can we celebrate Eucharist so as to make ourselves more vulnerable to God’s will to transform us?

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“There is only one question,” says the poet, Mary Oliver, “how to love this world.”

Not long ago, I watched a documentary film about a Jewish Downs Syndrome child named Lior, who was preparing with great enthusiasm for his bar mitzvah. The film included a comment by one of Lior's classmates. Referring to God by the Jewish title of 'Hashem,' this young boy said: *"We don't know, we don't understand what HaShem is doing. Why he made Lior the way he is.... But Lior is our test. HaShem is watching us, to see how we're treating Lior."*

God is watching us, to see how we're treating Lior, what we are doing for 'the least'. But we believe that God's very gaze is empowering: *"You looked with love upon me and deep within your eyes imprinted grace,"* John of the Cross says in his *Spiritual Canticle*. That gaze is on us, as well as on all those with whom we work in formation. Beneath it, we can work in confidence and hope. And we can say, with Bishop Romero: *"We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is...a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.... We are workers, not master builders. We are prophets of a future not our own."*

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