

MISSIO IN THE TRINITY: ORIGIN OF THE *MISSIO* OF THE CHURCH

The theme of mission is obviously quite extensive and complex, especially in today's cultural context. For this reason, we want to consider it especially from the point of view of *missio*, with particular reference to the Second Vatican Council. The Council, in fact, dedicated its attention to this topic in its Decree *Ad Gentes*. This document must be read in the broader context of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, since it is only in the light of a reflection on the Church's essence that one can truly understand its missionary task. Joseph Ratzinger expressed this as early as 1967, when he wrote that "the central text of the Council on the essence, duty, and method of mission, which supports all the other conciliar texts on mission, including its full document on mission, and provides the starting points, is found in sections 13 through 17 of the Constitution on the Church."²⁶ A glance at that text helps us to understand first of all the universality of the call to be part of the People that is the Church (see LG 9): God wants all people to be saved, to participate in the redemption that Christ won for us with his death and resurrection, through the action of the Church, the universal sacrament of salvation (see LG 1).

This universality, or catholicity, does not mean, however, the limitation or exclusion of the identity of anyone, nor does it mean identification with a lived form of faith, but rather it indicates the gift and the task, the grace and the duty, the already and the not yet of a call that the Church is obliged

²⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, "Konzilsaussagen über die Mission außerhalb des Missionsdekrets," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7/2 (Freiburg 2012), 920ff.

to offer in the service of all people and, I dare say, of all creation. And so in the reflections that follow, after a brief description of mission in our day, we will consider, through the lens of the conciliar text, the Trinitarian origin of mission and delineate its fulfillment in Christ and in the Church.

1. The situation of mission today

What exactly do we mean by “mission”? This question is extremely relevant in the context of our constantly changing world. In theology, the term “mission” is not univocal; this is clear when we recall that, from the semantic point of view, the Church’s mission has become synonymous with its purpose. While the conviction that *mission* is the true purpose of the Church lies behind this evolution of terminology, we can also say that this identification has allowed us to lose the specific connotation of mission as a proclamation of faith in the crucified and risen Christ Jesus. This is the understanding of the missionary mandate provided by the Council: “The mission of the Church, therefore, is fulfilled [*missio ergo Ecclesiae adimpletur*] by that activity which makes her, obeying the command of Christ and influenced by the grace and love of the Holy Spirit, fully present [*pleno actu*] to all men or nations, in order that, by the example of her life and by her preaching, by the sacraments and other means of grace, she may lead them to the faith, the freedom and the peace of Christ; that thus there may lie open before them a firm and free road to full participation in the mystery of Christ” (AG 5). The Council’s Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (17) and its Decree *Ad Gentes* (6) both also point out that this mission is fulfilled especially through preaching, from which new churches are born, upon whom the duty to continue the work of evangelization, proclaiming the Gospel for the salvation of the listener, is incumbent.

But is the concept of *ad gentes* – the call to proclaim Christ to all peoples and nations – still relevant? More than fifty years have passed since the

historical phase of the Council, during which the Church has effectively reached all the ends of the earth and has established its presence in every place through a local hierarchy and various institutions. Is the call to mission *ad gentes* still valid? A glance at the reality of the Church and the world today reveal not only its relevance, but an ever greater need for it. We can therefore distinguish at least four levels of this *missio ad gentes*.

The first level is the classic meaning of Christian proclamation in mission lands, which are still far from being fully evangelized. John Paul II affirmed in 1995, during World Youth Day in Manila, “As the dawn of the Third Millennium draws near, it is particularly in Asia, towards which the Church’s mission *ad gentes* ought to be chiefly directed.” Among almost five billion Asians, only 300 million are Christians. This missionary horizon is still wide open.

Second is the continuation and completion of the evangelization of the mission territories, through a still unfinished *implantatio Ecclesiae*, which means above all an ever-deepening adherence to Christ by the individual faithful, as well as an inculturation of the faith, in the sense that faith becomes culture, transforming a people’s ways of living, thinking, and relating.

Third – and ever more necessary – is mission understood as the proclamation of the faith for the first time in the continents of ancient Christian culture, where the number of those who do not know Christ, especially among the young, grows ever greater.²⁷ Secularization has thoroughly taken root in the vital substratum of our Western civilizations, which is demonstrated not only in the decreasing numbers of those who associate themselves with the Church, but especially in the widespread lack of religious culture and knowledge. The phenomenon of the growth of paganizing rites highlights the religious void that has been created over the past fifty years

²⁷ According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center, published on May 29, 2018, in Western Europe only 27% of those surveyed believe in the God presented to us in the Bible, while 38% simply believe in a higher entity and 26% do not believe in any higher power.

in the countries of ancient Christian tradition. It is not surprising that already in 1943 H. Godin and Y. Daniel published the famous book, *La France, pays de mission?* [France: Mission Country] and in 1958 J. Ratzinger drew criticism from many with his prophetic article, “Die neuen Heiden und die Kirche” [The New Heathens and the Church]. These two texts anticipated the troubling process of the shrinking of the Church that had already begun in the West – the first by taking note of the huge numbers of workers who had lost contact with the Church, the other by drawing attention to the new consumerism that was widely imposing itself.

A fourth level of the *missio ad gentes* is the presence in the lands of ancient Christianity of populations of other cultural and religious contexts that are alien to the Christian faith.

All the phenomena listed here show that, far from being complete, the *missio ad gentes* remains relevant today.

When, in the sixteenth century, the discovery of new continents raised the question of evangelization of previously unknown peoples, Pope Gregory XV founded, in 1622, the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*. An explosion of missionary zeal in the nineteenth century led to the foundation of countless missionary institutes and societies. At that time, much missionary activity went hand in hand with colonization, so much so that a colonial power determined, in principle, the religious identity of the people it colonized. Benedict XV opposed this in 1919 with his Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, in which he outlined a clear distinction between national interests and ecclesiastical interests. In 1957, Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical *Fidei Donum*, promoted missionary efforts, inviting priests of dioceses with numerous clergy to dedicate themselves to mission. This document was the occasion of a great, new missionary impulse in the Church. The Second Vatican Council’s Decree *Ad Gentes* arose in this same context of urgent commitment to mission.

It is important to recall these historical landmarks of the *missio ad gentes*, albeit briefly, because today we are experiencing a crisis of mis-

sionary thought that strongly opposes the evangelizing impulse that the Church has known over the centuries. How did this come about? Why has there been a marked decline in vocations to missionary activity? Why is mission no longer considered interesting, and often reduced to a mere diffusion of the so-called values of the Kingdom of God or even to mere cooperation in development? Obviously, the reasons are many, but we can mention a few.

From a philosophical and social point of view, a major reason is that religion is increasingly relegated to the margins, as if it were irrelevant to the lives of individuals and of society, if not a barrier to the peaceful coexistence of peoples. The Rousseauian concept of the *homme sauvage*, which suggests that the human person lives best when separated from any society, culture, and religion, remains strong. However, there are also reasons rooted deeply in the Catholic Church itself. There is still an inadequate understanding of the Church's relationship with other religions, as well as a need for a fuller synthesis of mission, a theological understanding of religions, and interreligious dialogue. But more profoundly, the understanding of Jesus as the universal mediator of salvation leads to a simple but significant question: Does humanity need the Gospel? We can't go into great detail on these questions here, but mentioning them helps us to place mission in a broader and more critical context.

Faced with these problems, however, the magisterium has consistently and vigorously emphasized the importance of mission. John Paul II wrote in *Redemptoris Missio* (n. 2) that the crisis of mission is a crisis of faith, thus indicating the intrinsic relationship between faith and mission: they mutually enrich, nurture, and strengthen one another. *Simul stant et simul cadunt*. Reminding Catholics of the missionary essence of the Church reaches a particular intensity in the current pontificate of Pope Francis. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), he presents missionary activity as the paradigm of all the Church's work (n. 15) and he appeals to us: "Throughout the world, let us be 'permanently in a state of mission'" (n. 25).

This invitation has a programmatic significance for Pope Francis. The Church is not an end in itself; a courageous missionary option is needed which is “capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself” (EG 27).

This theme is central, then, in the current pontificate. From here, we can turn to consider the Church’s mission in light of its true origin in *missio*, taking up again the approach of the Council, which reconnected the task of mission to its Trinitarian origin.

2. *Missio* in the Trinity

At first glance, the theme of mission seems purely pastoral, having nothing to do with speculative Trinitarian theology. However, more careful observation shows us that exactly the opposite is the case. The Church, in its origins, is born of mission and experiences itself as driven by a missionary dynamic; there can therefore be no purely pastoral understanding of mission. Instead, the concept of “*missiones*” expresses how the Trinity opens itself up to the world from within, with the sending of the Son and the Spirit.

It was the great Protestant systematic theologian Karl Barth who, as the first theologian of the modern age, recalled this original Trinitarian root of the concept of “mission.” He wrote in 1957, “Isn’t it important that the most faithful missionary or the most ardent supporter of the

missions is aware of the fact that in the early Church the term *missio* is a concept derived from the doctrine on the Trinity, the term for the sending of God's own self, through the sending of the Son and of the Spirit, into the world?"²⁸

Barth strived to show that the origin of mission is not in humanity, nor in the Church, but in God himself. He wanted to point out that the foundation of the missionary effort lies in the deepest dimension of the divine being, that is, in the sending of the Son into the world, which is the source, archetype, and model of all mission. The lesson inherent in this theological reconnection is that mission, therefore, is not a human work but a divine one.

In the Catholic context, Trinitarian theology developed a few years later, particularly by Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose theological work gives ample attention to the Trinity.²⁹ His whole Christology is based on the concept of sending, of *missio*.³⁰ He deals in an original way with the highly speculative themes of scholasticism, in which the divine processions, the so-called "*processiones*," continue in the "*missiones ad extra*," that is, the generation of the Son in the Incarnation/Easter and the sending of the Holy Spirit into the world. Balthasar restores space and life to the theological-Trinitarian themes by constantly insisting that the "mission" of the Son is founded on his internal procession from the Father.³¹

The achievement of Balthasar and other Trinitarian theologians of the modern era (Klaus Hemmerle, Walter Kasper, Gisbert Greshake, Leo Scheffczyk, and Joseph Ratzinger) is to have understood the Trinity as a dynamic relational structure of the one and only divine Being. The Trinity

²⁸ K. Barth, "Die Theologie und die Mission in der Gegenwart," in *Theologische Fragen und Antworten: Gesammelte Vorträge*, vol. 3 (Zollikon 1957), 125ff.

²⁹ Obviously, Balthasar was not the only one. A similar feature is found in the work of Klaus Hemmerle, whose Trinitarian theological heritage persists in the Focolare movement. Karl Rahner wrote several fundamental works on the topic. Finally, Walter Kasper, Gisbert Greshake, and Leo Scheffczyk must also be mentioned.

³⁰ Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Theodramatik* II/2, 136-238; Id., *Theologik* III, 22; Id., *Schleifung der Bastionen*, 17; Id., *Theologie der drei Tage*, 21; and several other of his works.

³¹ Cf. Id., *Theodramatik* II/2, 140; *Theodramatik* III, 332; Id., *Homo creatus est*, 35.

represents the dynamic communal foundation of God himself, which allows his opening *ad intra* and towards the world. If the Son's "*missio*" is actually an expansion into the world of the divine "*processio*," then the whole history of salvation can be seen as the place in which the dynamics of the eternal Trinity unfold. In this view, Trinitarian thought is never merely theoretical and speculative, and certainly not far from the world; rather, it is a guide to practical action for the Church and every Christian. Just as in God the *Logos* receives everything from the Father, and then returns everything back to the Father through his being sent for the salvation of the world, so there is no true Christian apart from this dynamic of giving everything back to the Father. Christ manifests his gratuitous love of the Father, makes the invisible Father visible, thus opening access to the Trinitarian life. Christ, then, is the first and greatest "missionary," because he reveals to us the greatest mystery: who God is and who (in light of this) humanity is.³² This provides a profoundly richer understanding from the theological-missionary point of view, since here God is much more than a sort of "external client" for the missionary conquest of the world. The trinitarian God himself flows towards the world, to open for us the way to salvation.

3. The *missio* of Christ

This consideration of the intra-Trinitarian origin of mission points to another theme, which is more important than ever today: that of fullness and universality. Since, just as the fullness of the one and only divinity within the Trinity is "constituted" by the generation of the Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit, so the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the world take place in order to make all people participants

³² Cf. W. Löser, *Kleine Hinführung zu Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Freiburg 2005), 110.

in this fullness of divine love. “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10b). Christ, the one sent by God, therefore the “first missionary,” does not come, in his work of salvation, for some but for all. God “wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). For this reason, his sending is prolonged in the sending of the Church through the Holy Spirit, who in turn has a central role in the incarnation of Christ. The Church is intended to fruitfully carry on the dynamic of the sending of Christ.

On the eve of his passion, Jesus describes an essential characteristic of this sending of the Church when he says, “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain” (Jn 15:16). This means, on one hand, that the origin of the mission of the disciples is inherent in God himself and that, consequently, God is the source of the grace of their fruitfulness.³³ What we know of God we learn thanks to the revelation of Christ and to the work of his Spirit in us. He was sent into the world by the Father to save the world. This self-awareness that Christ has and reveals is expressed repeatedly in the Gospels: he comes from God, who is his Father, to fulfill his will, that is, to offer his life for the redemption of humanity. The sending of the Son in the flesh of a human being allows humanity to participate in the fullness of divine life. In fact, it is that Son who in turn sends the Church to bear fruit.

However, the Son sent by the Father through the Spirit manifests the one and triune God from the origins of creation. It is significant that first the book of Wisdom in the Old Testament and then both John and Paul in the New Testament all underline the ontological link between creation and Christ. In the book of Wisdom, it is said of divine Wisdom that “she spans the world from end to end mightily and governs all things well” (8:1), and asks, “who in the world is a better artisan than she?” (8:6). The wisdom of God, his *Logos*, in which everything finds order, permeates everything that

³³ Cf. H. Merkelbach, *Propter Nostram Salutem: Die Sehnsucht nach Heil im Werk Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Berlin 2004), 224.

exists. John writes at the beginning of his Gospel, “He [the Word] was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be” (Jn 1:2-3). Paul tries to describe this thinking from the point of view of creation when he writes, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:17). The Spirit that hovers over the waters (see Gen 1:1) takes on divinely revealed consistency in this design of love of his will that holds together creation and redemption.

This universal presence of Christ as the Father’s wisdom, his creative mediation, means there is an intelligibility to everything. It also means that the universe itself is incomprehensible apart from Christ and has always been destined for redemption in the blood of the Son (see Eph 1:7-10). Saint Gregory of Nyssa writes, “The world is a good thing and everything in it is invisibly ordered with wisdom and artfulness. Everything, therefore, is the work of the living and substantial Word, because it is the Word of God.”³⁴ This also means that everything that exists manifests – in its own way – an internal logic that yearns for him, since he is “fullness.” Creation has a sort of longing for the one in whom and for whom it was created. The *semina Verbi* not only indicate that wisdom leaves its traces everywhere, but also that such a seed would sprout into complete knowledge of the truth, which is Christ. It is no coincidence, then, that St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans refers to the expectation of all creation: “Creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:19-21).

It is a great and fascinating sense of the meaning of all creation that sees in Christ the key to understanding of its full realization. Mission is therefore indispensable if the Church intends to open to all the reality of its true meaning and so “as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in

³⁴ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *La grande Catechesi* (Rome 1990), 40.

Christ, in heaven and on earth” (Eph 1:10). We can therefore say that the root of that catholic (that is, universal) call that we referred to above is to be found in the universal wisdom in which everything has been created, Christ. This call is generally realized in the Catholic Church. Henri de Lubac, in this regard, compares the human person to an organ. He writes, “The Church can play on this organ because, like Christ, she ‘knows what is in man,’ because there is an intimate relationship between the dogma to which she adheres in all its mystery and human nature, infinitely mysterious in its turn. Now by the very fact that she goes to the very foundation of man the Church attains to all men and can ‘play her chords’ upon them.”³⁵

4. The *missio* of the Church

Even from these brief considerations, it becomes clear that the Church is not self-referential, but rather looks fundamentally outside itself. It is a Church *ad extra* and therefore is missionary by nature, no matter where it is located. Mission is essential to the Church, since the Church opens itself to all people, even to all of creation. The mission of the Church determines, through its Gospel mandate and its sacramental collaboration in the divine work, the form, in its historical and dynamic realization, of all creation.

In this regard it seems opportune to refer to the unchanging three-part division of the Church’s life: Word, Sacrament, charity. This was authoritatively reaffirmed by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (n. 25). This tripartition is directed, so to speak, within and articulates the activity of the Church even as it is to be lived in its smallest community. Such an articulation does not simply serve the self-preservation of the Church and must not lead us to confine our task to within our own walls. The Church proclaims, celebrates, and loves by orienting itself outward,

³⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco 1988), 49-50.

with a missionary vision, so as to be able to remain truly a sacrament, or sign and instrument of salvation for all. Even, so to speak, from the outside, ecclesial life must be a sign, a testimony. This gives the Church vitality, because it brings together its fundamental functions in a higher unity, towards which the Church is oriented, that is to say, the salvation in Christ of humanity and of all creation.

In an article entitled “*Deus caritas est* - Programmschrift für eine missionarische Kirche” [*Deus Caritas Est*: Program for a Missionary Church], Professor Klaus Baumann of University of Freiburg develops this thought specifically with regard to the Church’s ministry of service. In a paragraph with the eloquent heading “Charity for the love of the mission, or mission for the love of charity?”, Baumann asserts, among other things, that Benedict XVI’s encyclical is clearly in line with *Ad Gentes*, Pope Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Missio*. He concludes, “The work of charity is not carried out in the name of mission, but on the contrary, mission can only be done in the name of charity.... If one wonders what the missionary program of the encyclical is, the obvious answer appears in the Pope’s proposal for a credible witness of life by the faithful and by the Church as a basis for mission.”³⁶

Another significant paragraph of the same article, in which the author describes the methodology of Pope Benedict’s encyclical, helps us take another step. The Pope begins with a direct proclamation of the divine message of faith and charity and then seeks to plausibly articulate this message in the context of a plurality of opinions, confident in the free acceptance of the listener. Professor Baumann asks, “Does the Pope in this way perhaps abandon the dialectical-theological method, so elementary for missionary activity, in order to reconnect with what the human person already bears within himself, to address contemporary humanity and its

³⁶ K. Baumann, “*Deus Caritas est* – Programmschrift für eine missionarische Kirche,” in J. Kreidler, Th. Broch, D. Steinfort, *Zeichen der heilsamen Nähe Gottes. Auf dem Weg zu einer missionarischen Kirche* (Ostfildern 2008), 462-463.

desire? Or does he, rather, follow this method precisely, in the conviction that faith comes from hearing, since the Christian message corresponds to a predisposition that is inherent in humanity, having been created in the image and likeness of God?³⁷

Here we touch upon a feature that is also strongly present also in the teaching of Pope Francis and that is becoming more and more decisive for mission today. Since faith consists of a personal encounter with God, the message must bear in mind the concreteness of the human person. This focusing on the anthropological dimension does not mean reducing the Christian message to a human reality, but rather that we must maintain an awareness of the questions that humanity asks and where its empty places lie; it means understanding what humanity longs for and what needs liberated and saved.³⁸ This is not a matter of calling into question the heritage of faith or the institution as such, but of understanding that, with the dissolution of the *Christianitas* and of a commonly accepted anthropology, the anthropological question becomes more and more vital, and with it the question of meaning. It is a question by which today's culture, however anthropocentric, is rather intimidated. Who is the human person? And why does humanity need the gospel?

This starting anew from the anthropological question – that is, the return to a healthy anthropology and theology of creation and, further, to an awareness of the likeness of the human person to God and to the wisdom by which humanity was created – can help us to rediscover the connections between the Christian message and the longings of humanity. From this emerges the eternal modernity of the Gospel. Decades ago, Josef Pieper wrote in a small work entitled *The Christian Idea of Man*, “The essence of moralism, which many think is something specially Christian, consists in the violent separation of being and duty from one another and in proclaiming something as obligatory without seeing and making visible its link to

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 455.

³⁸ Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 2.

being.”³⁹ What Pieper says here regarding ethics can be easily applied to our efforts at evangelization and to mission: the proclamation of the Gospel is addressed to the human person who, by his very essence and constitution, having been created through the Word of God, can only find his own fullness through it. Humanity, from the heart of its being, yearns for fullness in Christ, and after sin, for redemption, and this fullness and redemption in Jesus Christ represent the center of the Church’s mission. Christianity is not a moralism that is grafted in some way onto an already existent human being; it is the proclamation of a message in which humanity rediscovers what it has been seeking and continues to long for.

Today, missionary activity must reappropriate this understanding of humanity, that is, of the conviction that every person finds his or her fullness in the message of Christ. But where does the absence of such fullness in humanity come from? And why, despite all the signs of humanity’s unfulfilled longing, does one sometimes get the impression that Catholic theology struggles to identify this deep wound that continues to bleed in our hearts? A healthy anthropology – and therefore the Christian message – can never disregard the consideration of original sin. This truth that the Church has always presented, and that the Catechism of the Catholic Church has confirmed (CCC 396-403), deserves more attention. In fact, it is in the light of the sin of humanity and the suffering that this sin produces that the sending of Christ by the Father and the sending of the Church by Christ is fully understood. Christ came to cancel the sin of humanity, and the mission of the Church is to announce the end of humanity’s suffering through the victory of the risen Christ. The mission is universal, and therefore addressed to every person, precisely because every person must be reached by the merits of Christ who liberates her. A recent document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith points out, “The Faith confesses that we are saved by means of Baptism, which seals upon us the

³⁹ J. Pieper, *The Christian Idea of Man*, tr. Dan Farrelly (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011), 15.

indelible character of belonging to Christ and to the Church, from which derives the transformation of the way of living our relationships with God, with other men and women, and with creation (cf. Mt 28:19). Thus, purified from original, and all other sins, we are called to a new existence conforming to Christ (cf. Rom 6:4)” (Letter *Placuit Deo*, 13).

This anthropological starting point can become in our day an important element of mission. From it also offers a method that takes humanity seriously and involves humanity directly. Pope Francis embraces this understanding of the *kerygma* in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: “All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the *kerygma*, which is reflected in and constantly illumines, the work of catechesis, thereby enabling us to understand more fully the significance of every subject which the latter treats. It is the message capable of responding to the desire for the infinite which abides in every human heart” (n. 165).

As President of the Pontifical Mission Societies, I cannot but reaffirm that it is in this broad context of a missionary Church that the work of our organizations finds its place. As a network of faithful Christians who help the Pope to keep alive and support the missionary zeal, we wish to help every believer to rediscover the missionary dimension inherent in baptism. The gift received is a gift to be shared.

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