Keeping Faith in Practice

Aspects of Catholic Pastoral Theology

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Liturgical Theology: Experiencing the Presence of Christ

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This exploration of contemporary liturgical theology takes place in the context of Catholic theological debate in general, with a particular focus on the celebration of rites, on the renewal of those rites, and on how theology speaks of the experience of the faith we celebrate in our rituals. After setting out the map of post-Vatican II liturgical theology, I will explore issues raised by the document On the Way to Life, and will then offer an illustration of a recent development in liturgical theology.

There has been a great deal of debate about the renewal of the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council. In 2007, in the document Sacramentum Caritatis, Pope Benedict XVI drew attention to the view of the bishops at the Synod on the Eucharist (2005), during which there were ‘many expressions of appreciation’ for what had so far been achieved, and pointed to ‘the benefits and the validity of the liturgical renewal’. At the same time, the Pope noted that there was still much that needed to be done to achieve the necessary richness and growth in appreciation for and effectiveness of the renewed liturgy, and he called for a far-reaching appropriation of the ars celebrandi (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 38–43, 64, hereinafter SC). The development of the liturgy around the time of the Council and in the decade that followed indicated that a radical transformation took place in the experience of the Church as a whole in the public celebration of its sacraments. Emphasis was placed on the promotion of full, conscious and active participation by all of the people (SC 14), on the inculcation of certain aspects of the liturgy, particularly through the use of the vernacular (SC 36), and on a desire to simplify what had become overly stylized or complicated, whether in the prayers, in the liturgical styles, or in the symbols (SC 21, 50). Emphasis was also to be given to the communal celebration...
of the rites, as a preference over their private use (SC 26, 27). These changes were signs of the transformation, or even the discovery of the celebration of the liturgy as a central component of church life, from which a rich source of theology could be derived. The Church is made up of many parts, and the one body is to be found in both the head and the members. Christ is present in the Eucharist, in the mode of the transsubstantiated bread and wine, but is also present in the mode of the presider, the proclamation and preaching of the word, and in the assembly. On the wider plane, the Church opened its doors to the world to learn from and be enriched by the discoveries of the social, philosophical and other sciences. The exploration of historical texts, both liturgical and biblical, as well as developments in architecture, music and art, would all play some role in the renewal of the liturgy, as would a deeper appreciation of psychological, anthropological and developmental sciences, in addition to what was learned from pastoral experience and experimentation. One common recent element has been the assumption that the lex orandi and the lex credendi intertwine and influence each other. Several writers place the emphasis on the authority of the lex orandi. Yet they do not make clear what this lex orandi is, or how it should be understood in the wider context. Recently, some are questioning whether the phrase lex orandi lex credendi is still useful, since its application has become so diffuse, and its original meaning (within the context of early baptismal rites) is so far removed from how it is understood today; they advocate that it should be reformulated, reinterpreted or allowed to die out altogether.

Of particular interest has been the development in the grammar of theological language, together with the ways in which the pre-conciliar evolution of theology and the influence of the Liturgical Movement came together at the Council and thereafter led to further debate and development. This development was not simply a product of liturgical theologians in the West, but was also to be found in the writings of influential theologians of a more Orthodox orientation, such as the Melkite Catholic Jean Corbon, the Russian Orthodox scholar Alexander Schmemann (d. 1983) and John Zizioulas of the Greek Orthodox Church.

Scholars now look at the new ways of understanding symbol (Louis-Marie Chauvet, in particular) and of considering sacraments as events. They explore how the proclamation of the word in the liturgy is a mode of the presence of Christ and therefore, in some way, sacrament (Otto Semmelroth, and Paul Janowiak in particular). They argue about the radical significance of the call for 'full, conscious and active participa-

tion by all of the assembly' and about its consequences for the liturgy, particularly in the area of inculturation and the use of vernacular languages (Anscar Chupungco has been particularly influential in this area). They look at Karl Rahner's insights into the 'Liturgy of the World' and how the official liturgical rites relate to it. They reconsider the nature of presence, particularly eucharistic presence, and seek to update the notion of transubstantiation, with varied degrees of success (David Power and Nathan Mitchell have both published books and articles on the nature of sacraments and sacramental presence). They consider the radical consequences of understanding the necessary interactions between sacramental and liturgical theology, and the need to develop these in pastoral liturgical theology (Mark Searle made a significant contribution in this area, building on and reconsidering the approach of Romano Guardini and others). Sacraments are now seen as effective signs of grace, as encounters with Christ (Edward Schillebeeckx). They are symbolic actions of the Church, in the fullest meaning of the terms symbol, action and Church. They are symbols of human meaning at its very depth, and both bring about and are signs of the transformation of reality (Bernard Cooke).

Much of this shift in theological grammar has brought suspicion and defensiveness from those who would seek to maintain the theological hegemony that they assume was present before the Council. Groups both within and without the Church maintain that the theological bases for the reforms of the Council and afterwards were fundamentally flawed, and so the resulting changes to the liturgy were based on false preconceptions. These groups have refused to acknowledge that Paul VI's approval of the 1970 Rite replaced all prior Roman Rites, and they continue to be critical of the renewed rites. There have been repeated calls for (a) the full restoration of the pre-conciliar rite (that of 1962) or at least for (b) a 'reform of the reform'. More extreme groups reject Vatican II in toto. Several writers have developed an approach known as 'radical orthodoxy' to bring intellectual weight to what is, in essence, a somewhat elitist harking back to former ritualism.

The conversation now takes place in the context of a landscape of pluralistic languages, in which different meanings can be, and are, placed on once universal concepts, structures and vocabularies; however, the stakes are still high because not all approaches have equal value. Simply to allow whatever Roman Rite a particular person or group wants means that tradition is no longer regarded as an important aspect of the Church's self-understanding. The significance of the reforms of Paul VI rested on the assumption that new versions of the
rite replaced previous ones, just as the 1550 Rite of Pius V did in his time, and the rite of 1962 in the time of John XXIII. The truth of the matter is that tradition and creativity must go together for the life of the Church to be sustainable. Developments in sacramental theology respond to the challenge of postmodernity by showing that the Church continues to learn from its experience of God at work in the world. Creativity and genius are not enemies of tradition (Kennan Osborne is perhaps the most widely read scholar in this area).

Given this exploration of the shifts in theological grammar, begun before the Council and very much prevalent after it, the document *On the Way to Life* provides a significant example of how a more positive and less pessimistic (but no less realistic) account of the theological, cultural and philosophical landscape in Britain today can lead to beneficial insights about the nature of our liturgical and sacramental life and to proposals for future development and reform.

*On the Way to Life* was originally intended to provide an analysis of the landscape of contemporary culture, in order to assist in the provision of religious education and catechesis in Britain today. For the purposes of this present exploration of liturgy it provides in addition a useful means of opening up reflection on liturgical and sacramental praxis and theology today. I will treat these in the order that they occur in the document, commenting on the appropriateness of the insights of the document’s author for a reconsideration of contemporary Catholic liturgical theology.

**Part 1: Significant Elements in Contemporary Culture**

The first section, on contemporary culture, contributes to our understanding of what it means to be ‘the Church’ gathered into one, whose purpose is to celebrate liturgically and sacramentally.

Thus as well as the doctrines mentioned in the document, liturgical practice and its tradition offer one of the classic ‘grammars’ (p. 11) that serve to underpin believers’ understanding of their presence in their world (and in the Church). For Yves Congar, liturgy is one of his ‘monuments of tradition’, and so is an essential part of the self-expression and continued presence of the Church. From this perspective, the renewal of the various liturgical rites around 1970 may be understood as a powerful disruption of just such a deep grammar. On the other hand, we can also perceive, in the area of liturgy as in other areas, the destructive effects of nostalgia (p. 23) and its false memories, which continue to affect so many, including those born long after 1970.

The notions of equality and mutuality that are outlined in this first section can be related to post-conciliar movements that seek to reject liturgical and sacramental theological development. The question ‘Whose truth is it?’ (p. 15) can be applied directly to the present situation, with respect not only to those who maintain what they call ‘traditional’ liturgy, but more widely to those who reject the reform of the liturgy wholesale, in part through quasi-gnostic reasoning.

In addition, the ‘turn to the self’ in contemporary culture has important consequences for a liturgy and a liturgical theology that seeks to build an awareness of the reality of the gathered community. Pastoral issues arise frequently: ‘my child should have a right to express himself by kicking and screaming throughout Mass’; ‘I have a right to have my children confirmed in the 1962 Rite’; ‘we phone in advance to see if Fr X is saying Mass because he takes too long’; ‘the Sign of Peace is an unnecessary disruption’. These are but a few examples of the sort of attitude that arises from too much authority being given to the needs of the individual.

Section 5 of Part 1, entitled ‘A Spiritual Revolution?’ invites the Church to re-examine what it is doing through teaching and proclamation in a society whose ways of perceiving reality and of engaging in its own aggiornamento have changed. As the liturgy is itself (through its symbols, its gestures, its proclamation and its word) an experience of the Church’s life, theology and tradition, it needs to be examined as one of the primary modes of the *ecclesia docens* as well as *discens*, the teaching Church as well as the learning Church. The question arises: how effectively does the liturgical celebration of sacraments proclaim the wisdom of tradition and the ever-present saving power of Christ?

Section 6 in Part 1 of *On the Way to Life*, entitled ‘Frenetic Longeurs’, contributes a number of themes that are directly applicable to consideration of the liturgy. The seeming addiction to instant communication, in a remote-control society with a short attention span, can play a significant part in how people understand, experience and evaluate liturgical ceremonies: are they seen to be ineffective, or do they open people up to true mystical experience of the divine and an awareness of the presence of the Body of Christ in the community of faith?

Professionalization, with its ‘high expectation of performance and delivery’ (p. 24) is a less thoroughly explored problem, although it is an important issue for presiders coping with the *versus populum* orientation, where the presider faces the assembly across the altar. For those presiding at the liturgy, there can be a tendency to ‘move on to the next
bit' rather than to reflect and wait, with our minds and senses open to the voice of the Spirit. The practice of recent Popes to celebrate gigantic 'event liturgies' has the unfortunate consequence, particularly for the young, of a raising of expectations or a misdirecting of priorities in liturgical preparation and evaluation. The demand for the 'wow' factor leads quickly to the perception that Mass elsewhere is 'boring', and a solution is attempted that corresponds with the perceived needs of the remote-control push-button generation: easy songs with banal lyrics, little or no silence, constant movement. Here the attraction of the 1962 'usage' may be that it is different, strange, mysterious, and so it is, but it had serious problems that should not be ignored: unnecessary repetition, a theologically flawed structure, inappropriate emphases and so on. By making the liturgical signs much more perceptible to the senses, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council provided a significant opportunity to present the liturgical and ecclesial narrative in a new way: more direct, more immediate, more clear. The current rites are all of these things, but we should also continue to encourage beauty, prayerfulness and a real sense of the mystery at their heart. We need to rediscover the genius of the 'ordinary' in the liturgy; that which is day-to-day, that with which we become accustomed or comfortable, and thereby more open to the challenge or prompting of the Spirit. Our common narrative does not then simply go from liturgical event to liturgical event, but forms us as part of a worshipping community on a continuing journey of faith.

The liturgy then offers us the way to counteract the search for 'this-worldly transcendence' (p. 25) that is so much part of the Christian's response to the demands of late modernity and its 'turn to the subject'. Much of liturgical experience consists of the kenosis of one's own self-interest in the offering up to God of Christ's body, head and members. We become one with our brothers and sisters in the sacral koinonia of our giving thanks and praise. And in the celebration of the sacraments, those who experience adult baptism are offered a profound experience of dying to self and rising with Christ into new life.

Section 7 of Part 1 explores the new 'religious subject', the pilgrim and the convert, as studied by Danièle Hervieu-Léger (p. 26). For her, liturgical participants are either 'communicants', who are members of the Church in some ratified and institutional way (normally through baptism and the other sacraments) or 'pilgrims' who go from one place to another in the search for truth or some other form of validating identity. Those who are 'converts' have found what they are seeking; they abandon one form of religious faith and its expression to find authenticity in another (such as Anglicans who are received into the Roman Catholic Church); they reject the glamour of secularism for the narrow way of counter-cultural religious faith; they rediscover the faith and practice within themselves but from which they had lapsed (pp. 26–7). Liturgy is at the front line here, in offering the possibility of three modes of conversion. While continuing its primary function in offering praise and worship to God, it also opens the Church's arms to welcome those who are searching, those who are lost and those who have gone astray. The Church does this through the attitude of the community to newcomers, through the rendering present of Christ's salvific will in the proclamation of the word and the preaching, in the radical relevance of its prayers and texts, particularly in the vernacular, in the experience of Christ's presence in Eucharist. All this happens as a work of grace through which Christ enters into relationship with the person. The free will to change is 'an obedience to a call or a charge rather than an act of self-stylisation' (p. 27) and is given as a gift. This gift can be particularly evident in effective celebrations of the Church's sacraments. Liturgy again presents the key narratives of the interaction between God and humanity in the moments of profound transformation through which Christ, by the mysteries of his incarnation, his transfiguration, his passion, and his resurrection, not only takes our nature on himself but transforms it forever, making possible our own continued transformation into parts of his glorious Body. The liturgy waits to hear our response to these mysteries and to these transformations. Far from being an individual transformation only, the one becomes part of the many, and the community of faith receives the converted pilgrim as a great blessing. So liturgy is not seen as a commodity to which we look for some kind of aesthetic satisfaction, but the celebration of the community transformed by Christ, in which each person responds to the question, 'What gift can ever repay God's gift to me? I raise the cup of freedom as I call on God's name! I fulfil my vows to you, Lord, standing before your assembly' (Ps. 116, ICEL text). The experience of a community giving thanks and praise is the experience of faith offered to pilgrims as the place to which their journey is beckoning them. The Church, principally, but not exclusively, through its liturgical life, provides a sure road for these pilgrims on their journey. 'At the heart of this is the presence of Christ in whom all things “live and move and have their being”' (p. 29).
Part 2: The Theological Context

This part of On the Way to Life explores in greater depth the achievements of the Second Vatican Council, incorporating its retrieval of ‘tradition’ and its support for a Catholic theological modernity, recognizing Christ at the centre of the Church and his place in human history. Particular liturgical emphases are offered, such as the rediscovery of the Church’s history and tradition, which was a key part of the work and significance of the Liturgical Movement. The ability to understand the movements and changes in liturgical and sacramental theology through history, and in particular the reasons behind those changes, has situated the history of theology in a radically different context from what had been regarded as normative in previous centuries. There has been a significant development in the understanding of tradition, which opened up the way towards liturgical change and renewal, not as a challenge to tradition, but as a continuation of it. Yves Congar saw in these developments a correcting of mistaken notions about tradition, law and rubric:

The problem is that the norms should not become a sort of ready-made straitjacket, sufficient to itself and imposed on people without truly coming to life within them. This would be making man for the Sabbath... The Church is not just an establishment where past forms are preserved. It is Tradition [author’s capital letter], and true Tradition is criticism and creativity as well as the handing-down and preservation of identical realities. (Congar 1986, p. 55)

On the Way to Life speaks of the unique ‘profound adaptive movement within the community’ that the Second Vatican Council inaugurated (p. 36); this would be one lens through which to read the progress of inculturation as a serious aspect of the development of the liturgy. Developments such as the priest turning to face the people across the altar, the introduction of the use of the vernacular, the adaptation of contemporary musical forms, the use of styles of movement, vesture, sacred objects, and the design of churches are just some of the many elements through which communities around the world have responded to the tiny seed of adaptation and inculturation that the Council sowed.

Within this discussion of the Council, On the Way to Life explores the ‘Retrieval of “Tradition”’ (pp. 36–7) of which the liturgy is one of the essential ‘marks’. Section 1.3 dwells at length on the contemporary understanding of revelation and of the continuing presence of Christ.

Part 3: Resources and Responses

Central to Catholic liturgical and sacramental theology is the understanding that Christ is at the heart of the Church and that through the sacramental life he is both in relationship with us and the one who acts. Christ is free to be in relation with us in many ways, but the claim of Catholic theology is that the sacraments, particularly in their fullest liturgical celebration, provide specific, unique and profound experiences of the presence and action of Christ that are not available to us.
in any other way. The celebration of sacraments continues and deepens the 'personal relationship between God and God’s people' (p. 58), leading to a true communio with others within the body of Christ. Within the scope of this developing relationship, the liturgy not only acts as the voice of the Church and its people, but is also the primary and most effective means of communication whereby the Church discloses itself to others and to itself. Liturgical language, and the controversies that surround the appropriateness and ‘correctness’ of translations into the vernacular, are the neuralgic meeting point where ‘a process in which expression is also a self-becoming and self-disclosure’ (p. 61) takes place. Effective participation in the celebration of the Church’s liturgy involves an encounter with Christ through which ‘we become that which we confess’ (p. 61). The liturgy therefore is seen as the opportunity to experience the communio of the Church in all its fullness. Paul VI’s emphasis that the renewed liturgical rites were faithful to the tradition of the Church through the ages may be seen as his attempt to maintain the unity of the Church as a communion at a time of considerable change. Benedict XVI’s re-categorization of the Novus Ordo as one ‘usage’ of equal status with the pre-conciliar form is his solution to the considerable problems presented by the polarization of liturgical groups that have until now acted against true liturgical communion.

Liturgical theology will continue to explore serious questions about participation, communication and meaning. It will explore how Christ is present in ritual and in the life of the Christian community. It will consider aspects of the present age, drawing fruit where appropriate from developments in anthropology and other social sciences, to explore how the context of liturgy and its practice brings further insights. The connection between ethics and liturgy will continue to develop, as will the exploration of postcolonial liturgy, drawing on the genius of local cultures.

Eucharist as Gift-Exchange

As a concluding illustration of liturgical theology in practice, let us consider one aspect of the theology of Eucharist that has recently come to light thanks to an examination of its liturgical celebration. Recent scholars, particularly Louis-Marie Chauvet, have explored the common human ritual of gift-exchange as a meaningful symbolic act that helps us to understand the symbolic nature of Eucharist as we celebrate it in the Church of our age. In his article 'O Marvelous Exchange: A

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Consideration for Eucharistic Catechesis, Scott O’Brien, OP, further develops this insight, whereby gift-exchange can be read as a metaphor to deepen our understanding of Eucharist, to be added to such well-known images as sacrifice and banquet. This provides a contemporary way to round out scholastic catechism definitions, and builds on Catherine LaCugna’s important work on the Trinity, with her emphasis on God’s desire to enter into personal relationship with humanity:

God is no less mystery on account of God’s radical immanence in Christ. Indeed, the God who is absolutely other, absolutely transcendent but also absolutely near to us – this God is absolute mystery. The God of Jesus Christ does not withdraw into seclusion or isolation so that we are forced to speculate on a hidden God. Rather, the personal self-expression of God in Christ points to God’s ineffable personhood. The Spirit of God incorporates all creatures into the mystery of this divine life. (LaCugna 1994, pp. 323-4)

O’Brien posits the conclusion that the relationship into which God enters by becoming human in Christ is the relationship that God seeks to have with all humans:

The gift that lies at the heart of the mystery of God incarnate is exactly this: Jesus Christ was born into the world so that the world may live in communion with God and with one another. This gift is mediated in the Eucharist by the personal presence of the crucified and risen Christ. (O’Brien 2003, p. 25)

Gifts of peace, forgiveness, communion with God and others, are all made available through this presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Chauvet’s work on gift-exchange, principally in his major work Symbol and Sacrament, provides the anthropological and theological underpinning of O’Brien’s pastoral reflections. The gift given and received carries with it the expectation that the gift will be reciprocated, in one form or another. Indeed, the understanding that the giving of the gift represents the opening of some form of relationship, and that the acceptance of the gift signifies that some form of further exchange will take place, seems to be part of the nature of the meaning of the word ‘gift’, as commonly understood in most societies. For O’Brien:

The notion of the Eucharist as gift-exchange broadens and clarifies the often-used concept of sacrifice in approaching the death of Christ,
the Lord's Supper, and the Christian life. In fact, the use of metaphor of gift-exchange inverts the meaning and the literal application of the concept of sacrifice to the Eucharist by describing, first and foremost, the humble posture of a God who 'descended' into creation in order to offer us the way of peace. (2001, p. 26)

In the face of the overwhelming act of God in Christ, becoming human and offering himself in sacrifice to free us from our sins, our response is praise and thanksgiving, certainly, but also humble acceptance that without this we remain in our sin and in the death of sin. Christ's self-emptying act of love is the gift of freedom to us, and carries with it the expectation that we will respond in freedom and generosity of spirit. Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis shows us that liturgical sacramental theology along these lines is right at the heart of a true understanding of what Eucharist is about. Benedict reminds us that our full, conscious and active participation in the eucharistic liturgy must be seen in how we respond to the extraordinary gift of Christ in giving himself to us in the Eucharist. Communion is 'communion with God and communion with our brothers and sisters... And wherever we do not live communion among ourselves, communion with the Triune God is not alive and true either' (p. 76). Further, 'a Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented' (p. 82). In the same vein, our relationship to the Eucharist brings certain expectations about the quality of our life in general, particularly with regard to our promotion of the common good and 'a service of charity towards neighbour' (p. 88).

It seems clear, therefore, that Catholic liturgical theology includes this metaphor of gift-exchange as a way to understand what Eucharist is about, and also that the celebration of liturgy, whether it is Eucharist or some other rite, contains within it the possibility of transformation into the people Christ wants us to be.

The language of the liturgy, allied to the rituals that prayer speaks and enacts, has real power, in that it brings about the sacramental presence of Christ, and brings us into the realm of God's love. For O'Brien, 'in the Christian use of linguistic activity there is the hope that that narrative, symbol, and ritual truly position us to receive that presence that draws us into communion with the divine' (2001, p. 28).

The language, however, is not the totality, and neither is the gift. This is the emphasis of Chauvet, who reminds us that in this process, there is always the stage at which God is radically other. In Rahner's terms, God maintains incomprehensibility in order that we may continue to

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seek out the one who has loved us into life, and, yet more crucially, to remind us that we cannot own God or restrict God's own freedom. While it is Catholic faith that the symbols contain within them the reality that they express, this further development of theology reminds us that at the eschaton the fullness of grace and life will be ours, and that these elements of Eucharist are not a partial experience of the total reality of Christ in God. The liturgy reminds us too that Christ is present in his word, in the presider, and in the assembly, as well as in the sacramental symbols. The liturgical celebration of the sacraments within a community gathered faithfully together, therefore, is an opening to the full life of grace that God offers to us in Christ, and also an invitation to find Christ in one another.

Notes
4 Louis-Marie Chauvet, Symbol and Sacrament, also The Sacraments: Word of God at the Mercy of the Body. A thorough exploration of Chauvet's thinking and importance for liturgical theology is to be found in Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill (eds), Sacraments, Revelation of the Humanity of God: Engaging the Fundamental Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet.
5 See John F. Baldovin, Reforming the Liturgy: A Response to the Critics for a recent examination of the history of the renewal of the liturgy and on the Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum' of Benedict XVI.
6 See Congar, 1997, pp. 434-5: 'The liturgy acts according to the general manner of Tradition, and since it is endowed with the genius of Tradition, it fills Tradition's role in a supernumerive way. Speaking about the liturgy, and describing its activity, I have felt myself to be speaking of Tradition itself and describing its work.'
7 The arguments of groups opposed to the renewal of the liturgy after the
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Second Vatican Council take up much of the first part of John Baldwin’s recent volume, Reforming the Liturgy: A Response to the Critics.

8 Pope John XXIII introduced this hermeneutic of ‘bringing up to date’ along with ressourcement – the return to the sources – during the preparation for Vatican II.

9 Sacramentum Caritatis, 53: ‘The faithful need to be reminded that there can be no actus perniciosus in the sacred mysteries without an accompanying effort to participate actively in the life of the Church as a whole, including a missionary commitment to bring Christ’s love into the life of society.’

10 Considerable attention is given to the document in the importance of communio as a constitutive part of the retrieval of the Catholic sacramental imagination (pp. 62–4).


Bibliography


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