NOTES ON THE CORRECT WAY TO PRESENT THE JEWS AND JUDAISM IN PREACHING AND CATECHESIS IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews

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Preliminary considerations

On March 6th, 1982, Pope John Paul II told delegates of episcopal conferences and other experts, meeting in Rome to study relations between the Church and Judaism:

"'you yourselves were concerned, during your sessions, with Catholic teaching and catechesis regarding Jews and Judaism' We should aim, in this field, that Catholic teaching at its different levels, in catechesis to children and young people, presents Jews and Judaism, not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudices and without any offences, but also with full awareness of the heritage common" to Jews and Christians.

In this passage, so charged with meaning, the Holy Father plainly drew inspiration from the Council Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, 4, which says:

"All should take pains, then, lest in catechetical instruction and in the preaching of God's Word they teach anything out of harmony with the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ"; as also from these words: "Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred Synod wishes to foster and recommend mutual understanding and respect".

In the same way, the *Guidelines and Suggestions for implementing the conciliar declaration Nostra Aetate* (4) ends its chapter III, entitled "Teaching and education", which lists a number of practical things to be done, with this recommendation:

"Information concerning these questions is important at all levels of Christian instruction and education. Among sources of information, special attention should be paid to the following:

- catechisms and religious textbooks;
- history books;
- the mass media (press, radio, cinema, television).

The effective use of these means presupposes the thorough formation of instructors and educators in training schools, seminaries and universities" (*AAS* 77, 1975, p. 73).

The paragraphs which follow are intended to serve this purpose.

I Religious Teaching and Judaism

1. In *Nostra Aetate* 4, the Council speaks of the "spiritual bonds linking" Jews and Christians and of the "great spiritual patrimony" common to both and it further asserts that "the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to the mystery of God's saving design, the beginning of her faith and her election are already found among the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets".

2. Because of the unique relations that exist between Christianity and Judaism - "linked together at the very level of their identity" (John Paul II, 6th March, 1982) - relations "founded on the design of the God of the Covenant" (*ibid.*), the Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis: their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated.

3. This concern for Judaism in Catholic teaching has not merely a historical or archeological foundation. As the Holy Father said in the speech already quoted, after he had again mentioned the "common patrimony" of the Church and Judaism as "considerable": "To assess it carefully in itself and with due awareness of the faith and religious life of the Jewish people *as they are professed and practised still today*, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church" (underlining added). It is a question then of *pastoral* concern for a still living reality closely related to the Church. The Holy Father has stated this permanent reality of the Jewish people in a

remarkable theological formula, in his allocution to the Jewish community of West Germany at Mainz, on November 17th, 1980: "the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked".

4. Here we should recall the passage in which the *Guidelines and Suggestions* (I) tried to define the fundamental condition of dialogue: "respect for the other as he is", knowledge of the "basic components of the religious traditions of Judaism" and again learning "by what essential trait the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience" (Introd.)

5. The singular character and the difficulty of Christian teaching about Jews and Judaism lies in this, that it needs to balance a number of pairs of ideas which express the relation between the two economies of the Old and New Testament:

- Promise and Fulfilment
- Continuity and Newness
- Singularity and Universality
- Uniqueness and Exemplary Nature.

This means that the theologian and the catechist who deals with the subject needs to show in his practice of teaching that:

- promise and fulfilment throw light on each other;
- newness lies in a metamorphosis of what was there before;
- the singularity of the people of the Old Testament is not exclusive and is open, in the divine vision, to a universal extension;
- the uniqueness of the Jewish people is meant to have the force of an example.

6. Finally, "work that is of poor quality and lacking in precision would be extremely detrimental" to Judaeo-Christian dialogue (John Paul II, speech of March 6th, 1982). But it would be above all detrimental - since we are talking of teaching and education - to Christian identity (*ibid*).

7. "In virtue of her divine mission, the Church" which is to be "the all-embracing means of salvation" in which alone "the fulness of the means of salvation can be obtained" (*Unit. Red.* 3); "must of her nature proclaim Jesus Christ to the world" (cf. *Guidelines and Suggestions*, I). Indeed we believe that is is through him that we go to the Father (cf. *Jn.* 14:6) "and this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (*Jn*17:33).

Jesus affirms (*ibid.* 10:16) that "there shall be one flock and one shepherd". Church and Judaism cannot then be seen as two parallel ways of salvation and the Church must witness to Christ as the Redeemer for all, "while maintaining the strictest respect for religious liberty in line with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*)" (*Guidelines and Suggestions*, I).

8. The urgency and importance of precise, objective and rigorously accurate teaching on Judaism for our faithful follows too from the danger of anti-Semitism which is always ready to reappear under different guises. The question is not merely to uproot from among the faithful the remains of anti-Semitism still to be found here and there, but much rather to arouse in them, through educational work, an exact knowledge of the wholly unique "bond". (*Nostra Aetate*, 4) which joins us as a Church to the Jews and to Judaism. In this way, they would learn to appreciate and love the latter, who have been chosen by God to prepare the coming of Christ and have preserved everything that was progressively revealed and given in the course of that preparation, notwithstanding their difficulty in recognising in Him their Messiah.

II. Relations between the Old* and New Testament

1. Our aim should be to show the unity of biblical Revelation (O.T. and N.T.) and of the divine plan, before speaking of each historical event, so as to stress that particular events have meaning when seen in history as a whole Y from creation to fulfilment. This history concerns the whole human race and especially believers. Thus the definitive meaning of the election of Israel does not become clear except in the light of the complete fulfilment (*Rom* 9-11) and election in Jesus Christ is still better understood with reference to the announcement and the promise (cf. *Heb* 4:1-11).

2. We are dealing with singular happenings which concern a singular nation but are destined, in the sight of God who reveals his purpose, to take on universal and exemplary significance.

The aim is moreover to present the events of the Old Testament not as concerning only the Jews but also as touching us personally. Abraham is truly the father of our faith (cf. *Rom* 4:11-12; Roman Canon: *patriarchae nostri Abrahae*). And it is said (*1 Cor* 10:1): "*Our* fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea". The patriarchs, prophets and other personalities of the Old Testament have been venerated and always will be venerated as saints in the liturgical tradition of the Oriental Church as also of the Latin Church.

3. From the unity of the divine plan derives the problem of the relation between the Old and New Testaments. The Church already from apostolic times (cf. *1 Cor* 10:11; *Heb* 10:1) and then constantly in tradition resolved this problem by means of typology, which emphasises the primordial value that the Old Testament must have in the Christian view.

Typology however makes many people uneasy and is perhaps the sign of a problem unresolved.

4. Hence in using typology, the teaching and practice of which we have received from the Liturgy and from the Fathers of the Church, we should be careful to avoid any transition from the Old to the New Testament which might seem merely a rupture.

The Church, in the spontaneity of the Spirit which animates her, has vigorously condemned the attitude of Marcion** and always opposed his dualism.

5. It should also be emphasised that typological interpretation consists in reading the Old Testament as preparation and, in certain aspects, outline and foreshadowing of the New (cf. e.g., *Heb* 5:5-10 etc.). Christ is henceforth the key and point of reference to the Scriptures: “the rock *was* Christ” (*1 Cor* 10:4).

6. It is true then, and should be stressed, that the Church and Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the event of the dead and risen Christ and that on these grounds there is a Christian reading of the Old Testament which does not necessarily coincide with the Jewish reading. Thus Christian identity and Jewish identity should be carefully distinguished in their respective reading of the Bible.

But this detracts nothing from the value of the Old Testament in the Church and does nothing to hinder Christians from profiting discerningly from the traditions of Jewish reading.

7. Typological reading only manifests the unfathomable riches of the Old Testament, its inexhaustible content and the mystery of which it is full, and should not lead us to forget that is retains its own value as Revelation that the New Testament often does no more than resume (cf. *Mk* 12:29-31). Moreover, the New Testament itself demands to be read in the light of the Old. Primitive Christian catechesis constantly had recourse to this (cf. e.g., *1 Cor* 5:6-8; 10:1-11).

8. Typology further signifies reaching towards the accomplishment of the divine plan, when "God will be all in all" (*1 Cor* 15:28). This holds true also for the Church which, realised already in Christ, yet awaits its definitive perfecting as the Body of Christ.

The fact that the Body of Christ is still tending towards its full stature (cf. *Eph* 4:12-19) takes nothing from the value of being a Christian. So also the calling of the patriarchs and the Exodus from Egypt do not lose their importance and value in God's design from being at the same time intermediate stages (cf. e.g., *Nostra Aetate*, 4).

9. The Exodus, for example, represents an experience of salvation and liberation that is not complete in itself, but has in it, over and above its own meaning, the capacity to be developed further. Salvation and liberation are already accomplished in Christ and gradually realised by the sacraments in the Church. This makes way for the fulfilment of God's design, which awaits its final consummation with the return of Jesus as Messiah, for which we pray each day. The Kingdom, for the coming of which we also pray each day, will be finally established. With salvation and liberation the elect and the whole of creation will be transformed in Christ (*Rom* 8:19-23).

10. Furthermore, in underlining the eschatological dimension of Christianity we shall reach a greater awareness that the people of God of the Old and the New Testament are tending towards a like end in the future: the coming or return of the Messiah - even if they start from two different points of view. It is more clearly understood that the person of the Messiah is not only a point of division for the people of God but also a point of convergence (cf. *Sussidi per l'ecumenismo* of the diocese of Rome, n. 140). Thus is can be said that Jews and Christians meet in a comparable hope, founded on the same promise made to Abraham (cf. *Gen* 12:1-3; *Heb* 6:13-18).

11. Attentive to the same God who has spoken, hanging on the same word, we have to witness to one same memory and one common hope in Him who is the master of history. We must also accept

our responsibility to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah by working together for social justice, respect for the rights of persons and nations and for social and international reconciliation. To this we are driven, Jews and Christians, by the command to love our neighbour, by a common hope for the kingdom of God and by the great heritage of the Prophets. Transmitted soon enough by catechesis, such a conception would teach young Christians in a practical to way cooperate with Jews, going beyond simple dialogue (cf. *Guidelines*, IV).

III. Jewish Roots of Christianity

1. Jesus was and always remained a Jew, his ministry was deliberately limited "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (*Mt* 15:24). Jesus is fully a man of his time, and of his environment - the Jewish Palestinian one of the first century, the anxieties and hopes of which he shared. This cannot but underline both the reality of the Incarnation and the very meaning of the history of salvation, as it has been revealed in the Bible (cf. *Rom* 1:3-4; *Gal* 4:4-5).

2. Jesuss relations with biblical law and its more or less traditional interpretations are undoubtedly complex and he showed great liberty towards it (cf. the "antitheses" of the Sermon on the Mount: *Mt* 5:21-48, bearing in mind the exegetical difficulties; his attitude to rigorous observance of the Sabbath: *Mk* 3:1-6, etc.).

But there is not doubt that he wished to submit himself to the law (cf. *Gal* 4:4), that he was circumcised and presented in the Temple like any Jew of his time (cf. *Lk* 2:21. 22-24), that he was trained in the law's observance. He extolled respect for it (cf. *Mt* 5:17-20) and invited obedience to it (cf. *Mt* 8:4). The rhythm of his life was marked by observance of pilgrimages on great feasts, even from his infancy (cf. *Lk* 2:41-50; *Jn* 2:13; 7:10 etc.). The importance of the cycle of the Jewish feasts has been frequently underlined in the Gospel of John (cf. 2:13; 5:1: 7:2.10.37; 10:22; 12:1; 18:28; 19:42; etc.).

3. It should be noted also that Jesus often taught in the Synagogues (cf. *Mt* 4:23: 9:35; *Lk* 4:15-18; *Jn* 18:20 etc.) and in the Temple (cf. *Jn* 18:20 etc.), which he frequented as did the disciples even after the Resurrection (cf. e.g., *Acts* 2:46; 3:1: 21:26 etc.). He wished to pu tin the context of synagogue worship the proclamation of his Messiahship (cf. *Lk* 4:16-21). But above all he wished to achieve the supreme act of the gift of himself in the setting of the domestic liturgy of the Passover or at least of the paschal festivity (cf. *Mk* 14:1.12 and parallels; *Jn* 18:28). This also allows of a better understanding of the "memorial" character of the Eucharist.

4. Thus the Son of God is incarnate in a people and a human family (cf. *Gal* 4:4; *Rom* 9:5). This takes away nothing, quite the contrary, from the fact that he was born for all men (Jewish shepherds and pagan wise men are found at his crib: *Lk* 2:80-20; *Mt* 2:1-12) and died for all men (at the foot of the cross there are Jews, among them Mary and John: *Jn* 19:25-27, and pagans like the centurion: *Mk* 15:39 and parallels). Thus he made two peoples one in his flesh (cf. *Eph* 2:14-17). This explains why with the *Ecclesia ac gentibus* we have, in Palestine and elsewhere, an *Ecclesia ex circumcisione,* of which *Eusebius* for example speaks (H.E. IV, 5).

5. His relations with the Pharisees were not always or wholly polemical. Of this there are many proofs:

- It is Pharisees who warn Jesus of the risks he is running (Lk 13:31);
- Some Pharisees are praised w e.g., "the scribe" of Mk 12:34;
- Jesus eats with Pharisees (Lk 7:36; 14:1).

6. Jesus shares, with the majority of Palestinian Jews of that time, some pharisaic doctrines: the resurrection of the body; forms of piety, like alms-giving, prayer, fasting (cf. *Mt* 6:1-18) and the liturgical practice of addressing God as Father; the priority of the commandment to love God and our neighbour (cf. *Mk* 12:28-34). This is so also with Paul (cf. *Acts* 23:8), who always considered his membership of the Pharisees as a title of honour (cf. ibid. 23:6; 26:6; *Phil* 3:5).

7. Paul also, like Jesus himself, used methods of reading and interpreting Scripture and of teaching his disciples which were common to the Pharisees of their time. This applies to the use of parables in Jesus' ministry, as also to the method of Jesus and Paul of supporting a conclusion with a quotation from Scripture.

8. It is noteworthy too that the Pharisees are not mentioned in accounts of the Passion. Gamaliel (*Acts* 5:34-39) defends the apostles in a meeting of the Sanhedrin. An exclusively negative picture

of the Pharisees is likely to be inaccurate and unjust (cf. *Guidelines*, Note 1; cf. *AAS*, loc. cit. p. 76). If in the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament there are all sort of unfavourable references to the Pharisees, they should be seen against the, background of a complex and diversified movement.

Criticisms of various types of Pharisees are moreover not lacking in rabbinical sources (cf. the *Babylon Talmud,* the *Sotah* treatise 22b, etc.). "Phariseeism" in the pejorative sense can be rife in any religion. It may also be stressed that, if Jesus shows himself severe towards the Pharisees, it is because he is closer to them than to other contemporary Jewish groups (cf. supra n. 17).

9. All this should help up to understand better what St Paul says (*Rom* 11:16 ff) about the "root" and the "branches". The Church and Christianity, for all their novelty, find their origin in the Jewish milieu of the first century of our era, and more deeply still in the "design of God" (*Nostra Aetate*, 4), realised in the Patriarchs, Moses and the Prophets (ibid.), down to its consummation in Christ Jesus.

IV. The Jews in the New Testament

1. The *Guidelines* already say (note 1) that "the formula "the Jews sometimes, according to the context, means "the leaders of the Jews' or "the adversaria of Jesus', terms which express better the thought of the evangelist and avoid appearing to arraign the Jewish people as such".

An objective presentation of the role of the Jewish people in the New Testament should take account of these various facts:

A. The Gospels are the outcome of long and complicated editorial work. The dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum,* following the Pontifical Biblical Commission's Instruction *Sancta Mater Ecclesia,* distinguishes three stages: "The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explicating some things in view of the situation of the Churches, and preserving the form of proclamation, but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus" (n. 19).

Hence it cannot be ruled out that some references hostile or less than favourable to the Jews have their historical context in conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community.

Certain controversies reflect Christian-Jewish-relations long after the time of Jesus.

To establish this is of capital importance if we wish to bring out the meaning of certain Gospel texts for the Christians of today.

All this should be taken into account when preparing catechesis and homilies for the last weeks of Lent and Holy Week (cf. already *Guidelines* II, and now also *Sussidi per l'ecumenismo nella diocesi di Roma,* 1982, 144 b).

B. It is clear on the other hand that there were conflicts between Jesus and certain categories of Jews of his time, among them Pharisees, from the beginning of his ministry (cf. *Mk* 2:1-11.24; 3:6 etc.).

C. There is moreover the sad fact that the majority of the Jewish people and its authorities did not believe in Jesus - a fact not merely of history but of theological bearing, of which St Paul tries hard to plumb the meaning (*Rom* chap. 9-11).

D. This fact, accentuated as the Christian mission developed, especially among the pagans, led inevitably to a rupture between Judaism and the young Church, now irreducibly separated and divergent in faith, and this stage of affairs is reflected in the texts of the New Testament and particularly in the Gospel. There is no question of playing down or glossing over this rupture; that could only prejudice the identity of either side.

Nevertheless it certainly does not cancel the spiritual "bond" of which the Council speaks (*Nostra Aetate*, 4) and which we propose to dwell on here.

E. Reflecting on this in the light of Scripture, notably of the chapters cited from the epistle to the Romans, Christians should never forget that the faith is a free gift of God (cf. *Rom* 9:12) and that we should never judge the consciences of others. St Paul's exhortation "do not boast" in your attitude to "the root" (*Rom* 11:18) has its full point here.

F. There is no putting the Jews who knew Jesus and did not believe in him, or those who opposed the preaching of the apostles, on the same plane with Jews who came after or those of today. If the responsibility of the former remains a mystery hidden with God (cf. *Rom* 11:25), the latter are in an entirely different situation. Vatican II in the declaration on *Religious Liberty* teaches that "all men are to be immune from coercion" in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor "restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs" (n. 2). This is one of the bases - proclaimed by the Council - or which Judeao-Christian dialogue rests.

2. The delicate question of responsibility for the death of Christ must be looked at from the standpoint of the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*, 4 and of *Guidelines and Suggestions*(III): "What happened in (Christ's) passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living without distinction nor upon the Jews of today", especially since "authorities of the Jews and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ". Again, further on: "Christ in his boundless love freely underwent his passion and death because of the sins of all men, so that all might attain salvation" (*Nostra Aetate*, 4). The *Catechism* of the Council of Trent teaches that Christian sinners are more to blame for the death of Christ than those few Jews who brought it about - they indeed "knew not what they did" (cf. *Lk* 23:24) and we know it only too well (Pars I, caput V, Quaest, XI). In the same way and for the same reason, "the Jews should not be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the holy Scriptures" (*Nostra Aetate*, 4), even though it is true that "the Church is the new people of God" (ibid.).

V. The Liturgy

1. Jews and Christians find in the Bible the very substance of their liturgy: for the proclamation of God's word, response to it, prayer of praise and intercession for the living and the dead, recourse to the divine mercy. The Liturgy of the word in its own structure originates in Judaism. The prayer of Hours and other liturgical texts and formularies have their parallels in Judaism as do the very formulas of our most venerable prayers, among them the Our Father.

The eucharistic prayers also draw inspiration from models in the Jewish tradition. As John Paul II said (Allocution of March 6th, 1982): "the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practised still today, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church. Such is the case of liturgy".

2. This is particulary evident in the great feasts of the liturgical year, like the Passover. Christians and Jews celebrate the Passover: the Jews, the historic Passover looking towards the future; the Christians, the Passover accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ, although still in expectation of the final consummation (cf. supra n. 9). It is still the "memorial" which comes to us from the Jewish tradition, with a specific content different in each case. On either side, however, there is a like dynamism: for Christians it gives meaning to the eucharistic celebration (cf. the antiphon '*O sacrum convivium*), a paschal celebration and as such a making present of the past, but experienced in the expectation of what is to come.

VI. Judaism and Christianity in History

1. The history of Israel did not end in 70 A.D. (cf. *Guidelines*, II). It continued, especially in a numerous Diaspora which allowed Israel to carry to the whole world a witness - often heroic - of its fidelity to the one God and to "exalt him in the presence of all the living" (*Tobit* 13:4), while preserving the memory of the land of their forefathers at the hearts of their hope (Passover *Seder*).

Christians are invited to understand this religious attachment which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship (cf. *Declaration* of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 20, 1975).

The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.

The permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design. We must in any case rid ourselves of

the traditional idea of a people *punished*, preserved as a *living argument* for Christian apologetic. It remains a chosen people, "the pure olive on which were grafted the branches of the wild olive which are the gentiles" (John Paul II, 6th March, 1982, alluding to *Rom* 11:17-24). We must remember how much the balance of relations between Jews and Christians over two thousand years has been negative. We must remind ourselves how the permanence of Israel is accompanied by a continuous spiritual fecundity, in the rabbinical period, in the Middle Ages and in modern times, taking its start from a patrimony which we long shared, so much so that "the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practised still today, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church" (John Paul II, March 6th, 1982). Catechesis should on the other hand help in understanding the meaning for the Jews of the extermination during the years 1939-1945, and its consequences.

2. Education and catechesis should concern themselves with the problem of racism, still active in different forms of anti-Semitism. The Council presented in thus: "Moreover, (the Church) mindful of her common patrimony with the Jews and motivated by the Gospel's spiritual love and by no political considerations, deplores the hatred, persecutions and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source" (*Nostra Aetate*, 4). The *Guidelines* Comment: "the spiritual bonds and historical links binding the Church to Judaism condemn (as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity) all forms of anti-Semitism and discrimination, which in any case the dignity of the human person alone would suffice to condemn" (*Guidelines*, Preamble).

Conclusion

Religious teaching, catechesis and preaching should be a preparation not only for objectivity, justice, tolerance but also for understanding and dialogue. Our two traditions are so related that they cannot ignore each other. Mutual knowledge must be encouraged at every level. There is evident in particular a painful ignorance of the history and traditions of Judaism, of which only negative aspects and often caricature seem to form part of the stock ideas of many Christians.

That is what these notes aim to remedy. This would mean that the Council text and "*Guidelines and Suggestions*" would be more easily and faithfully put into practice.

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*We continue to use the expression *Old Testament* because it is traditional (cf. already *2 Cor* 3:14) but also because "Old" does not mean "out of date" or "out-worn". In any case, it is the *permanent* value of the O.T. as a source of Christian Revelation that is emphasised here (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 3).

**A man of gnostic tendency who in the second century rejected the Old Testament and part of the New as the work of an evil god, a demiurge. The Church reacted strongly against this heresy (cf. Irenaeus).

Source: https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre/documenti-della-commissione/en2.html

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