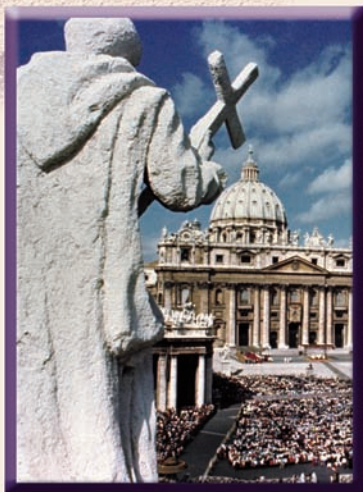


WHAT CATHOLICS BELIEVE

FR JOHN REDFORD



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In 20 Lessons

by
Fr John Redford

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INTRODUCTION

To the Instructor

1. These notes were written week by week as I gave a course in the Catholic faith to a young person who came to me for instruction, and so were not intended originally for publication. But, if any priest or catechist finds them useful in instructing those interested in being introduced to the Catholic faith, then they will indeed serve a useful purpose, well beyond what was originally intended for them.

2. It must be first remembered that this course is not ‘do-it-yourself’, and can in no way be considered adequate without an instructor. Each week’s lesson - the course comprising twenty weeks in all, 30-45 minutes per lesson - is only an outline; and the instructor will have to ‘fill in’ and explain each of the points made.

3. It will be helpful if your enquirer has prepared the week’s lesson in advance, so that he is ready to ask questions and discuss points arising from the notes.

4. As time goes on, the enquirer may be given additional reading material, if he or she wants it. It is a very good practice for the instructor to have a good amount of books

and pamphlets which can be handed to the enquirer as required, to take away, read, and, hopefully, return! People will differ very much as to reading capacity, and this course can be given without any other reading being done, if the instructor judges that the enquirer is not the 'reading type'. But obviously, the more interest shown in good reading material, the better.

5. At the close of the course (Lesson 20) there is a series of questions summarising the course. Where the first enquirer who did this course was concerned, these questions were asked by me without prior warning, since a memory examination would surely serve little purpose, and one wanted to find out how much had really gone home, without any 'swotting'. Needless to say, the instructor could well compile a questionnaire of his own, tailor-made to his own enquirer's needs. But for some enquirers, to feel that questions can be answered at the end of a course may well be most encouraging.

6. Just as this course needs an instructor, a priest or catechist, to work at all, so it must also be emphasised that it is not intended to be a complete expression of the Catholic faith, only an introduction to it. It is to be hoped that, if, after this course, the enquirer is received into full communion with the Catholic Church, the instruction will still continue, at least to the extent that the instructor sees

the newly-reconciled Catholic from time to time (perhaps once per month during the first year) to discuss problems, and to find encouragement in the growth of Christian life. The instructor should perhaps be especially concerned to see that the new member is beginning to feel a part of his new-found family, God's Church.

7. Finally, different enquirers will find different questions to ask; some will have problems concerning marriage and family life, some with questions of faith, such as God's existence or the truth of the Gospels, others with problems concerning justice and peace in the world. It is therefore again the skill of the instructor to develop parts of this course as those questions arise. And, if the inadequacies of this course start you writing another of your own, so much the better! The instructor has the vital task of communicating the Gospel of Christ to his enquirer, of being an instrument of the Spirit of Truth. May he use you effectively for this purpose.

1. 'I HAVE CALLED YOU FRIENDS'

1. Friendship is the most important thing in life, apart from our own life itself; and even if we stay alive, our life is not worth living without friendship. Loneliness causes the greatest suffering (e.g. broken marriages, children leaving their parents, friends betraying each other).

2. People spend a lot of time therefore trying to make friends whom we can rely upon and love, and even try to buy friendship, but without success. Friendship begins and continues because one person is attracted to another, and loves to be with that person. In particular, this is true of marriage, which is one of the deepest kinds of friendship which we know on this earth, and where two people vow to spend their lives together until death.

3. The Catholic faith is about God and ourselves becoming friends. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, said to his disciples, 'I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I learnt from my Father. You did not choose me, no I chose you...'

4. Our deepest loneliness is caused by the fact that we are not born 'naturally' to be friends of God. Not only is God invisible to our eyes, but we often get the feeling that we

have done things which do not please him. The story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis tells us of how mankind originally lost God’s friendship by not doing what God wanted, in fact by disobeying him. Therefore, just like human friendship, man loses his friendship with God by doing what God does not like. Again, Jesus said to his disciples, ‘You are my friends if you do what I command you...’

5. The Christian faith, then, is the story of how God went out of his way to restore the friendship which we had lost by disobedience. God has shown us how we can restore that lost friendship, and the Catholic faith shows us how to live a life of love and friendship with God through his Son Jesus Christ, beginning in this life and ending never!

6. But what do we have to do even to start becoming God’s friends?

(a) Believe that God exists. Although we cannot see him, we know that God is there because an infinite Spirit is the only adequate explanation of the creation of the world as we know it. He must exist because we exist. He is therefore our ‘father’ and we his ‘children’.

(b) Commit ourselves to follow in his way. He has shown us how to become his friends in the Bible and in the Life

of the Church. We simply say, ‘Lord, I want to be your friend always; teach me your way, and I will try with your help to follow’. In that way, we can never go wrong.

(c) Talk to God our Father, and so become his friend. This is what we mean by ‘prayer’, the development of our human relationship with our heavenly Father. That is why Christians say regularly the prayer his Son taught us.

Further discussion

Discuss friendship and how we respond to God’s friendship. Discuss and learn the ‘Our Father’.

Scripture references

1.3 John 15:15

1.4 Genesis chapters 2, 3; John 15:14

1.6 (a) Romans 1:20

(b) John 14:6

(c) Matthew 6:9-14

2. THE OLD RULES

1. Although we all find any rules irksome, we yet have to admit that some regulations are necessary if human life is to be peaceful and well ordered (e.g. ‘Please keep off the grass’ is a regulation intended to keep the grass in good condition for everyone to enjoy).

2. Rules are generally put in a negative way (‘You may not park your car on double yellow lines’) in order more clearly to mark off the forbidden area. However, even if the law is expressed in a negative way, its aim is always positive, for the benefit of everyone (double yellow lines forbid traffic to park, but only in order for all cars to move more freely down that particular road).

3. When God first chose a people to become his special friends, he had to educate them away from the customs of their neighbours, who murdered out of revenge (as the story of Cain and Abel tells us), and even sacrificed their children to their gods in order to win their favour. He needed, then, to impress their simple minds with his power and with his truth. (And we, perhaps, are not so different today).

4. God, therefore, first showed the Israelites how powerful he was, but only as a means of attracting them

to himself. He allowed them to become slaves in Egypt, and then helped them to escape miraculously from the power of the Pharaohs across the desert. He then led them into what they called the ‘promised land’, ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’, the land of Israel, in which land they were to live according to his rules, and so to begin to become his friends.

5. Now, we all know that no friendship can be founded simply upon a set of rules; there needs to be love as a solid basis for a personal relationship. But on the other hand, we also know only too well that there can be no friendship between two people where one is harming the other by cheating or continually lying. Like any good set of laws, therefore, God’s old rules simply told his people the limits beyond which they could not go if they wanted still to be called his friends.

6. Christians have now been given a ‘new law’, the Spirit of God’s love poured into our hearts by Christ our Lord. But the old rules given by God to Moses are still important to us, because they express the voice of our own conscience telling us right and wrong. John the Apostle said, for instance, ‘How can a man say that he loves God if he hates his brother?’.

7. Here, then, are God’s old rules, the ‘Ten Commandments’:

You shall have no gods except me
(Our duty is to honour God alone).
You shall not make yourself a carved image
(God is invisible, spirit).
You shall not abuse the name of God
(We must respect God, and revere him).
Remember to keep the sabbath day holy
(One day per week for rest from work).
Honour your father and your mother
(We must love and care for our parents).
You shall not kill
(Life is sacred, because man is made in God's image).
You shall not commit adultery
(Marriage is a sacred covenant).
You shall not steal
(We must respect other people's property).
You shall not bear false witness
(It is wrong to slander another's character).
You shall not covet
(That is, lust after what belongs to someone else).

8. Now a prayer to ask God to help us to keep happily in the way of his Law: Almighty God, you are all light, in you there is no darkness. Let your light shine upon us in all its radiance, so that we may walk gladly in the way of your commandments. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Further discussion

Discuss the need for rules and laws.

Scripture references

2.2 Genesis 4:1-16; 1 Kings 16:34

2.4 Exodus 3:7-12

2.6 1 John 2:3-11

2.7 Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5

3. WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH

1. We all know that waiting for something or someone increases the delight when the event actually happens, e.g. birthday presents, preparing for holidays. Half the pleasure is in anticipation. This pleasure is even greater when a person is involved whom we love, and whom we have not seen for some time. In this case, we are not merely 'waiting', we are 'longing' for that person to come, and to make us happy with his or her presence.

2. What we call the 'Old Testament' is the time of waiting for the Messiah, Christ, to come (about 2,000 years from Abraham's time to the time of Christ). The Jews had to wait this time, because they had a great deal to learn before they were ready to receive the Messiah; and indeed, as we know, when the Messiah did come, only a chosen few of the Jewish people (such as Mary, the Apostles, and Paul) recognised him, just as all through their history, only a few had recognised the prophets as coming from God, those few being called 'the remnant'.

3. The word 'Messiah' means 'Anointed', the ceremony of anointing being the old way of crowning the king, or consecrating the prophet. David the king, indeed the greatest king in the history of Israel, was called the

‘Messiah’ because he was anointed king by the prophet Nathan. And God promised to David that his son would always be king in Israel. Thus, in time of trouble, the Jews began to look for a Messiah, the son of David, who would once more rule them in justice and in peace.

4. What were they expecting the Messiah to do for them?

(a) He would be a good shepherd, a better King even than David. He would help the poor and the weak, and defeat all their enemies. In his time, even the animals would be at peace with each other.

(b) He would be an ideal Priest, not relying on animals offered and slaughtered, as with the sacrifices of the Old Law, but offering his own sufferings to God for the sins of the people. He would say to God, ‘You don’t want sacrifices; I am offering myself’.

(c) He would be an ideal Prophet, not only telling people that they had disobeyed the Ten Commandments of God’s Law, but helping them to change their hearts by giving them the Holy Spirit of God, so making them want to follow God’s way and become his friends.

5. In the Catholic Mass, after the introduction when we confess our sins to our heavenly Father, we always on

Sundays have a reading from the Old Testament. In this way, we join the Jews of Old, waiting for the Messiah to come, and, together with them prepare for his coming. In this way, also, we prepare ourselves better for the Gospel reading, where we hear of the words and deeds of Christ, and finally to receive our Lord in Holy Communion.

6. Then, again at Mass, after the Reading, we say ‘This is the Word of the Lord’, indicating that we believe that God is speaking to us; and we follow by saying or singing a Psalm, one of the Hymns of the Old Testament, to praise God for speaking to us in the Old Testament, and to join the company of people waiting for the Messiah. Just before Christ came, there were many Jews so waiting for the Messiah, even a community of monks on the Dead Sea at a place called Qumran. But the most famous man who waited for the Messiah was a man called Simeon, who, when he held Jesus Christ in his arms, said this most famous Christian prayer:

Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace, just as you promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans, and the glory of your people Israel. (The ‘Nunc Dimittis’, or ‘Song of Simeon’; sung at Night Prayer).

Further discussion

Why is the Old Testament important to Christians?

Scripture references

3.2 Micah 5:1-6

3.3 2 Samuel 7

3.4 (a) Ezekiel 34:23-31

(b) Psalm 40:6; Isaiah 52:13-53:12

(c) Deuteronomy 18:18

3.6 Luke 2:29-32

4. A BOY IS BORN

1. The birth of a child is perhaps the happiest of all human experiences. We see the wonder of new life, the helpless dependence of the tiny infant on its mother, and above all the great love which the parents have from the beginning for the child which is the fruit of their own love.

2. When we read the story of Christmas, the birth of Christ, in the Gospel of Matthew, and the Gospel of Luke, we capture once again the joy that Mary, Joseph, and their relations and friends had at the greatest birth of all time; and we should share their joy, because for us, just as much as for them, Emmanuel, God-with-us, is born.

3. If part of the wonder of birth is the wonder of new life, then the birth of Christ is still more amazing, since Christ is truly the Son of God, and so, in the Christian belief, God becomes a tiny infant, for us. This is why God chose that Jesus should be born of the Virgin Mary, and should have no human father, Joseph being only Christ's 'guardian' as the husband of Mary. The true father of Jesus was God the Father, whom Christ always called 'Abba' (Dad!).

4. However, although having no human father, Christ had a human mother, and depended upon her in every

way while an infant and a child. This was because Christ had come to save us from sin (the word 'Jesus' means 'Saviour'), and to create the love of God his Father in us. To do this, he began by creating the love of God in his own mother Mary.

5. This is why Catholics have a great devotion to Mary, his mother. When the Angel Gabriel came to her and told her that she was to have a son, she made a great act of faith. Be it done to me according to Your Word; and so began a relationship with God's own Son which was so deep that she became, in God's eyes, the greatest of all creatures.

6. Little is known of Mary's life apart from what we read in the Gospels. We believe that, in order to be a fitting mother for God's Son, Mary herself was free entirely from sin, and remained so till the end of her life on earth, when she went to join her Son again in heaven.

7. Mary is, therefore, an example of a perfect Christian life; she loves us personally as our mother, since we are children of God, and Christ is our brother; and finally, as the greatest of the 'saints' (i.e. those who have gone before us to heaven), her prayers to God the Son are most effective for us, her spiritual children.

8. Catholics, then, do not treat Mary as an idol, but as the beginning of God's love story, who can help us as a human being in our journey. Above all, she is the girl of humble origin who became, by virtue of her faith, hope, and love, the 'Queen of heaven', the first sign of God's victory over the devil.

9. We speak to Mary, therefore, with love and devotion as our mother, and ask her to help us develop that deep relationship with her son that she always enjoyed. We begin with the greeting of Gabriel:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee; blessed art Thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of Thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Further discussion

Why do Catholics have such a strong devotion to Mary? What is the difference between devotion to Mary and worship of God?

Scripture references

4.2 Matthew 1:18-25

4.3 Mark 14:36

4.4 Matthew 1:21

4.5 Luke 1:38

5. JESUS OF NAZARETH

1. Of all the great personalities who have ever lived, and even among the great religious leaders in this world's history, perhaps Jesus of Nazareth is the most famous. What the centurion said at the foot of the Cross, 'This was truly a good man', is the verdict of anyone who reads the Gospels.

2. But Jesus himself would not have been satisfied with merely our approving of him. He called disciples, that is, people who were to follow his teaching. And these disciples were to share his way of life as a travelling herald of God's kingdom. They were so attracted by the powerful and loving personality of Jesus that they were willing to sacrifice everything for him.

3. The first thing which attracted so many people was the healing power of Jesus. In contrast with John the Baptist, the announcer of the Messiah, who told them that they were wicked sinners and must flee from the wrath to come, Jesus began by healing sick people wherever he went, and particularly by curing the possessed from their madness. In this way, he showed his power over all the forces of evil, and his love and pity for suffering humanity.

4. The second thing which again attracted thousands of Jesus' own contemporaries was his magnificent teaching to huge audiences in the open countryside. They were struck by the power and authority of his message, and by the fearless way in which he criticised the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his time, and welcomed the outcasts of society, encouraging them to make a new start with their lives.

5. Central to the teaching of Jesus was the idea that, in order to please God, we have to do more than simply obey the Ten Commandments; we have to get to the spirit of them, which Jesus expressed as the twofold command of love; to love God with all our hearts, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. And there are no limits to this love. For instance, Jesus said it was not sufficient just to say 'Thou shalt do no murder'; it was also wrong to destroy people's dignity by insulting them, or by failing to help them.

6. But Jesus was not just a great teacher. He wanted people to ask themselves the question 'Who is He?' Among the disciples, Peter, a fisherman from Galilee, seems to have had the awareness fairly early on that Jesus was no ordinary man, particularly when he saw Jesus was able to calm a storm, and find huge catches of fish when all the fishermen had given up. But, more than any one

thing which Jesus did, was the sense that he gave to Peter of God's presence; and so, when one day Jesus asked the disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?', Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!'

7. When we become the friends of Jesus Christ, therefore, we become friends of God, because Christ is the Son of God, God become man. However, the disciples did not see this very clearly before the death of Christ and his resurrection; even when they saw a vision of Christ in glory on mount Tabor, together with the old prophets Moses and Elijah, they still did not understand.

8. Above all, the disciples could not understand when Christ spoke to them of the necessity of dying at the hands of his enemies. Everyone knew that Jesus had made enemies by his outspokenness and as a result of his enormous success. But where the disciples went wrong was to assume that their leader would use his power to defend his position. They were soon to realise, however, that his way, and their way, was to be the Way of the Cross, and so to the victory of love.

Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given me, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Scripture references

5.1 Luke 23:47

5.2 Matthew 4:18-22

5.5 Matthew 5:20-48

5.6 Matthew 16:16

6. FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

1. To forgive the harmful things which people have done to us is perhaps the most difficult thing for any human being to do. And forgiveness is that much more difficult if we love (or loved) the person involved, because the hurt is that much greater.

2. No one loved the human race more than Jesus Christ, because he loved us with the love of God, as God's Son. And no one did greater good for the human race in healing their sicknesses, and preaching the Good News of God's love. Therefore, the crucifixion of Christ as a common criminal (the most painful death invented by the cruelty of man) was the worst injustice ever perpetrated by the human race.

3. It is all the more amazing, therefore, that Christ was prepared to forgive his persecutors, who were jealous of his success, and fearful as to the consequences if the movement started by him grew too large. But in this, he was giving us an example as to how we should behave as Christians, forgiving those who harm us.

4. Christ knew quite early on in his ministry that he would die on the Cross. That is why, just before his arrest, he

celebrated the Passover (a Jewish festival supper commemorating the departure of the children of Israel from Egypt) with the disciples for the last time on earth. But, instead of the usual sacred meal, Christ took the bread and wine and said, 'This is my body, this is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins', thus celebrating the first Mass, and showing that the forgiveness of sins in his name continues for ever now in the church.

5. But he showed this forgiveness even more clearly to all men when, on the cross itself, instead of cursing those who had unjustly murdered him, he said to his Father in heaven, 'Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing', saying the same words of encouragement to the robber also on the cross with him: 'This day you will be with me in Paradise'. But not only the people around him on that afternoon were forgiven; God the Father accepted Christ his Son's deepest prayer in his agony on the cross, and forgave us all because of Jesus' love and forgiveness.

6. However, not all accepted his forgiveness. Judas went out from the Last Supper, the first Mass, and committed suicide in despair. Even worse, some of the people watching Christ crucified only mocked him, and dared him to come down from the cross. It is possible for people to be very hard and to resist the love of God.

7. Jesus eventually died, and was buried in a new tomb bought by Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy Jew who supported Christ during his public ministry. But, early in the morning, some women, including Mary Magdalene, came to anoint his body, only to find the tomb empty. 'He is not here, he is risen', they were told.

8. Christians believe that Jesus appeared to his disciples, and ate with them, in order to prove to them that he had risen from the dead. Then he breathed on them the Holy Spirit, to give to them the power of forgiving sins for all those who were sorry, and who would promise to try to live better lives in the future. Thus, by his resurrection, Jesus proved finally that he was the Son of God, since he had power over death; and he proved that God answered his prayer, 'Father, forgive them', by saying, 'Yes, I do forgive'. Now an old prayer of Eastern Christians:

Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Scripture references

6.3 Matthew 5:43-48

6.4 Mark 14:22-25

6.5 Luke 23:34; 23:39-43

6.7 Luke 24:6

7. HE IS RISEN

1. The experience of death is the most frightening of all that we go through as human beings, because it is truly a leap into the unknown. Thus, of all the subjects which we talk about, death is the least popular as a topic of conversation. But we all know that one of the few certainties which we have in this life is that we will die and so from time to time we venture to think about it.

2. The greatest fear regarding death is that it is in reality the end of our existence, when we return to 'nothingness'. However, it is here that the Christian hope is strongest, because we believe that death is not the end, but the beginning of a new life, where we shall be with God for ever, and 'every tear will be wiped away'. In this way, for the Christian, death is not only something to look forward to, but is also a motivation for living, because we know that everything which we do on this earth has a purpose, to prepare us for eternal life with God.

3. Even before Christ came, the Jews were growing in their faith in the 'after-life'. They, and Christians too, do not only believe in the 'immortality of the soul', but the 'resurrection of the body', that is to say, the resurrection of the whole person of man, which includes in a mysterious way body and soul.

4. Still, no one, not even his closest disciples, really believed Jesus when he told people that he would rise again from the dead after his crucifixion and death. It was the women who found his tomb empty on the first Easter morning, and the disciples did not believe them. The 'empty tomb' for the Christian is a sign that Jesus had risen from the dead, both body and soul, since, if only his 'soul' lived on, his body would still have been there; unless, of course, someone had stolen it, which the Gospels strenuously deny.

5. But even the 'empty tomb' was not enough to convince the disciples that Jesus had risen. He had to appear to them, speak to them and eat with them, for them to believe; and Thomas even had to touch the wounds (or at least was challenged to do so by Christ) before he would say, 'My Lord and my God'. Thomas in this way acts on our behalf; because he saw, we believe without seeing.

6. The appearance of Jesus to his disciples also emphasises that the resurrection of Jesus is not simply his resuscitation, his recovery from death. It means that his whole person has been transformed into a new kind of existence, eternally to be with his Father and praying for us, offering his whole life, death and resurrection as a perfect sacrifice which the Father accepts willingly.

7. And that is why the resurrection of Christ is the most important event of all in the whole story of our salvation. Eventually, the appearances of Jesus, which were only to convince the disciples that he had risen, ended, and the Lord 'ascended into heaven', to be present with us now by faith, and by the coming of the Holy Spirit. He was with his disciples briefly, to tell them that he would be with them until the end of the world, through the Spirit and through his body the Church.

8. For the Christian, the resurrection is not only something to look forward to at the end of the world as we know it. Christ before he ascended into heaven breathed his spirit on the disciples, and so upon us all through them. And this means that there is new life within us, the life of Christ, which is constantly against our old ways, the 'spirit of death', until, after our actual death, this new life is completely liberated, as it was when Jesus, 'the first fruits from the dead', left that tomb empty with the stone rolled away.

Acclamation at Mass:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Alleluia! (A Hebrew word meaning 'Praise The Lord').

Scripture references

7.2 Revelation 7:17

7.3 2 Maccabees 7:13-14

7.4 Luke 9:22

7.5 John 20:28

7.7 Matthew 28:16-20

8. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

1. We all realise how much we depend upon each other, from the time when we are helpless babies dependent on our parents completely, to old age when we need everything to be done for us. But even in our healthiest moments, we need the guidance and help of others to make life more worth living. That is why we have the State, the family, the school, the club, the gang, the team; and the Church.

2. We believe as Catholics that Christ founded the Church; that he intended us to live as Christians as one body, not 'doing our own thing' in isolation from each other. That is why he began his Church by calling 'disciples' (learners), twelve chosen men, who were to share in his mission. He depended on them, and they, even more, depended on him. They went around with him, learning his teaching, using his power to cure the sick, and preaching his Gospel.

3. Their leader was Peter, whom Christ called 'the Rock' on which he was to build his Church. Christ wished his work not to cease after his death and resurrection, but to go on from strength to strength; and Peter was to be the leader in this new work, in spite of his weakness and

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