

A Critical Reflection On Monasticism - Old And New

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This is a critical reflection. Let me be clear right from the start about what I am and am *not* criticizing. I am criticizing monasticism as paradigm. I am *not* criticizing monastics as people. I am criticizing the concept of monasticism - the construct, the structure, the system. I am *not* criticizing the spirit of my heroes who were part of the Old Monastic Movement or the passion of my friends who are part of the New Monastic Movement.

Having said that, this article is essentially a critical - rather than appreciative - reflection, because over the years I have become quite alarmed about some aspects of Monasticism.

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Now lets be clear about our terms. ‘Monasticism’ (from Greek μοναχός, monachos, derived from Greek monos, alone) ‘is the religious practice in which one renounces worldly pursuits in order to fully devote one's life to spiritual work’.¹ A ‘monastic’ is a religious person living a ‘cloistered’ - or communal - life under religious vows - such as poverty, celibacy and obedience - ‘sequestered’ - or separated - from the world.²

Monasticism is a spiritual tradition that can be found in many different religions – including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity. It is a tradition to which people have turned as a way of developing total dedication to spiritual priorities.³

Monasticism was a spiritual tradition that emerged as ‘an ongoing reform movement in about the middle of the 4th century’. It was ‘an attempt to live a stricter, more "apostolic" form of Christianity through prayer, manual labor and mortification.’⁴ Monasticism at its best is represented in the Christian tradition by Basil, Benedict, Aidan, Francis and Nilus.

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In 357AD, after visiting monasteries in Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria and Egypt, Basil set up his own monastery at Annesi. Basil emphasized the importance of monasteries being communities, rather than collections of solitaries. He advocated all monasteries should serve the poor in their localities, requiring all prospective members to sell at least some of their property to give to the poor. He saw the core business of monasteries as embodying the love of God in the flesh. In 370AD, he was made the Bishop of Caesarea. Basil used his position as a platform to denounce ‘simony’ (making money from religious activities) and ‘usury’ (making a profit from the poor by charging interest on loans), and to encourage the support of people suffering from drought and famine. Basil established an institute at the gates of the city, which was used as a poorhouse, hospital and hospice.⁵

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In 500 AD Benedict moved to Enfide in the Simbrucini mountains about sixty kilometres outside of Rome. There he joined ‘a company of virtuous men’. While he was with them, Benedict’s understanding of spirituality was radically transformed. He was convinced that preaching ‘good news to the poor’ demanded grass-roots, hands-on solidarity with them. When the abbot of a nearby monastery died, the monks begged Benedict to become their leader. He declined, knowing their reputation as a quarrelsome community. But they persisted, and Benedict eventually became their abbot. The experiment proved to be a complete disaster. The monastery was more troublesome than Benedict had imagined it would be. The monks even tried to poison him.

Benedict’s painful experience caused him to think about the nature of Christian community. Over the years, he developed what he called a ‘little rule for beginners’ in Christian community — a 100-page primer that later became known as the ‘Rule of St Benedict’. The word ‘Rule’ may sound harsh to our ears, but Benedict was determined to make sure there was ‘nothing harsh’ in his primer. Benedict’s Rule was not written just for monks and nuns, but for every person who wanted to practise the love of Christ in their ordinary, everyday life. It encouraged people ‘in all things’ — whether waking or sleeping, eating or drinking, studying or working — to ‘take care of things’. Benedict was convinced that the best way for people to learn to ‘take care of things’ was in a Christian community which encouraged a balance between individual responsibility and relational accountability. His Rule was intended to serve as a simple, practical guide to a healthy, holy, communal way of life for the members of the small Christian communities that Benedict slowly built up round Subiaco.

Benedict believed that the dynamics at the heart of a healthy, holy, communal way of life were *work* and *prayer*. He said people could not ‘take care of things’ unless they were prepared to work hard. They were unlikely to be prepared to work hard unless their work was suffused with prayer, because for nobles to voluntarily do manual labour alongside serfs was a revolutionary idea at the time. Benedict did not prescribe a particular type of work. He expected people to take up any work that was required. It was not *what* was done, so much as *how* it was done, that counted. Everything was to be done in a way that would care for others — ‘relieve the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, help the afflicted, bury the dead’ (Rule, 4) — and so demonstrate their love for Christ. ‘Let all guests that come be received as Christ’ (Rule, 53). ‘Let the sick be served in deed as Christ Himself’ (Rule, 36). In his Rule, Benedict said that for any community to be really viable, it needed stability and order. To enhance stability, Benedict encouraged people to commit themselves to a particular community for life.

To ensure order, Benedict encouraged the people in a community to elect their own abbot and to then submit themselves to his leadership — with the proviso that every abbot’s decisions would be subject to public scrutiny and to open debate by all the members of the community on all matters of importance. Benedict’s advice to an abbot was clear and direct. ‘It beseemeth the abbot to be ever doing some good for his brethren, rather than to be presiding over them. He must be sober and merciful, ever preferring mercy to justice, that he himself may obtain mercy. Let him keep his own frailty ever before his eyes, and remember that the bruised reed must not be broken. Let him study rather to be loved than

feared' (Rule, 64). Benedict died in 543AD. He didn't know it at the time, but his 'little rule for beginners' — embodying ideas of 'a written constitution, an elected authority limited by law and the right of the ruled to review the legality of the actions of their rulers' — would become a critical catalyst for the development of 'due process'.⁶

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Aidan arrived in Northumbria in 635AD. He set up his base on Lindisfarne or the Holy Isle. Lindisfarne was isolated and protected — the perfect place for a monastery. It had a causeway connecting it to the mainland, which appeared twice a day at low tide, so the monks could travel back and forth on their missionary journeys. Aidan established an Irish-style monastery of round huts, a communal meeting place and a small church. The monks developed a routine of prayer and study. In preparation for their mission trips among the English, the Irish monks invested a lot of time in learning the English language. Oswald not only helped the monks learn the language, but also accompanied them on their trips as an interpreter. Aidan's approach to mission was simple. He walked round the countryside and chatted with the people whom he met along the way. Where people showed some interest, Aidan sent his monks to regularly visit their villages and form small local Christian communities.

Aidan was so committed to the importance of walking and talking with people, that when the king gave him a horse to help him on his travels, Aidan promptly gave the prize steed to the next beggar he met who asked for alms. The king, by all reports, was furious that Aidan had given away this expensive gift. But Aidan reprimanded him, saying that as far as he was concerned, people were more important than presents. Not surprisingly, Aidan developed a great reputation among the English for his integrity and generosity. According to witnesses, Aidan was 'indifferent to the dignity of a bishop, but influencing all men by his humility'. He 'delighted in distributing to the poor whatever was given him by the rich men of the world'. Aidan used the gifts of money he was given to ransom people sold into slavery. Aidan died in 651AD. As a result of Aidan's witness 'many Northumbrians, both noble and simple, laid aside their weapons, preferring to take monastic vows rather than study the art of war... He and his followers lived as they taught — namely a life of peace and charity...'⁷

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Francis Bernadone was born in Italy in 1182 AD. His father called him 'Francesco' after a trip to France. And the 'little Frenchman' was brought up on romantic French ballads sung by travelling troubadours. The son of a wealthy merchant, Francis led a cavalier life in Assisi until, in his early twenties, he fought in a battle against a neighbouring town, was captured and incarcerated. This was to prove a turning point for Francis. Following his release Francis gave away his horse, his armour, and his weapons. His father, exasperated over Francis's prodigality with family property, organised a meeting with the bishop to pull his son into line. But it backfired. Francis renounced his family, and his family's property, altogether. He gave back everything his family had given him,

including the clothes he was wearing at the time. Francis stood there naked as the day that he was born. Then he turned to his father and said: ‘Until now I have called you father, but from now on I can say without reserve, ‘Our Father who is in Heaven’ — I place my confidence in Him.’

Francis decided to spend some time living as a hermit beside an old church in San Damiano. While there, Francis heard a voice saying, ‘Rebuild my church’. Francis responded by repairing the ruins of the church in San Damiano, then set about the task of reforming the life of the church throughout Italy. Francis approached the task of renewal — not as a legislator — but as a juggler! He aspired to be like one of the jugglers who accompanied the troubadours, drawing the crowds, so they could listen to the music of the heart the musicians played. As *Le Jongleur de Dieu* (a ‘Juggler for God’), Francis wanted to travel from town to town like an entertainer, without a penny to his name, introducing people to *joie de vivre* (the ‘true joy of living’).

Thousands of people responded. And Francis pointed them to the Sermon on the Mount as the simple gospel imperative. For he longed for them to model the life of Jesus in the world. Remarkably, considering his views, Francis did not rage against the opulence of medieval society. Ever the romantic, he tried to woo people away from the trappings of power, and get them to fall in love with the lovely ‘Lady Poverty’. For him, poverty was not an end in itself. People needed to joyfully embrace poverty in order to follow Jesus. In 1210, Francis obtained approval from Pope Innocent III for a simple rule dedicated to ‘apostolic poverty’. He called the order the ‘Friars Minor’, and this band of ‘Little Brothers’ followed the example of their founder in caring for the poor. In 1212, Clare — a wealthy friend from Assisi who, like Francis, had given all her wealth to the poor — started a sister order to the brothers, known as ‘the Poor Clares’.

At this time, many Christians understood mission in terms of crusades – slaughtering as many Muslims as they could — in the name of the Lord. Francis not only refused to take up weapons himself, but traveled to Egypt where the crusaders were fighting, and begged them to lay down their swords. When they wouldn’t listen to him, Francis crossed the lines at Damietta, to talk with the ‘enemy’ sultan, Mele-el-Khamil, telling him about the ‘Prince of Peace’, and trying to broker a peace deal ‘in His name’ While Francis was overseas, disputes arose among the Friars. A Vicar-General was appointed to take control of the order, and a new set of rules were instituted which changed the character of the movement. Francis retired to a hermitage on Monte Alvernia where he died in 1226AD.⁸

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Nilus Sorsky was born in Russia in 1443 AD. At an early age Nilus, named after an early church father, joined the famous Russian Orthodox monastery of St. Cyril of Belozersk at White Lake. Very sincere about his faith, Nilus quickly became disillusioned with the corruption in the White Lake monastery. So, as an able scholar, he obtained permission to study at the revered Russian Orthodox monastery on the Holy Mountain of Athos in Greece. Nilus made the most of this time at Mount Athos. He was particularly

interested in the traditional practice of Christ-centred contemplative prayer as a discipline of the heart. Nilus also studied the early church fathers. He wrote: 'I lived like a bee flitting from one fine flower to another in order to know the garden of life'. Nilus was particularly drawn to the writings of Basil of Caesarea and his ideas about intentional Christian community. He took every opportunity he could to visit other monasteries round the Mediterranean, looking for communities based on the ideas of the early church fathers.

On his return to Russia, he had to stay at the White Lake monastery for a while, but as soon as he could, he moved as far away as possible. He found a place in a swampy region of wilderness near the River Sora, where he established his own simple, unpretentious Christian community. His 'Christian community' stood in stark contrast with the 'Christian civilization' of the day. By the end of the fifteenth century, the church in general, and monasteries in particular, had become very large, powerful institutions. The political power of the feudal state was reinforced by the church hierarchy. As much as one-third of all the available arable land in Russia was controlled by the church, mainly through large monasteries. One monastery — the St. Sergius Monastery of the Trinity — had 100,000 peasants cultivating estates in fifteen provinces.

Nilus set up his monastery as the antithesis of this. He and his monks deliberately set aside any quest for power or acquisition of property. They lived as simply as possible, owned no large tracts of land and employed no peasants as labour. They worked humbly with their own hands to support themselves. For most of the time, Nilus lived his life quietly with his monks at Sora. But from time to time, as a respected scholar, Nilus was asked to attend church synods and speak on the issues under consideration. When he did, Nilus strongly critiqued the church hierarchy's lust for power and the trappings of power. He called on the church to give up its Machiavellian political ambitions, and give away its large monastic landholdings, its jeweled icons and its gold and silver sacramental chalices. Nilus challenged his listeners to remember that 'the primary responsibility of a Christian is to be...as kind as possible.' Nilus' community was organized to encourage personal liberty in the context of communal responsibility. Nilus didn't set himself up as an authority figure in the monastery, but simply made himself available to the other monks as a fellow traveler on the holy journey. Each monk was encouraged to seek God's will in their own way as part of a company dedicated to following the scriptures. Nilus always pointed to Jesus as the example 'for us all to follow', individually and collectively.

In 1490, Nilus was asked to attend a council convened by the church to decide the fate of a group of heretics known as the 'Judaizers' — a group of people seeking to re-establish the practice of Jewish rites in the Christian church. They were also critical of the growing wealth of the church, and called for the church to repent, empty itself of its pretentiousness and return to a spirituality of simple, dedicated service. Joseph, the abbot of the monastery at Volokolamsk, advocated that the Judaizers be condemned as heretics, arrested and burned alive. He justified his appeal on the grounds that Russia was a Christian state and, in so doing, would be defending Christian civilisation. Nilus publicly opposed Joseph, arguing that only God was in a position to judge a person's relationship

with him, and that no-one else, be they an archbishop or an abbot, had a right to judge. Nilus said that if anyone was concerned for their souls, they should admonish them by their own example. He steadfastly refused to condone the use of corporal punishment, torture and execution by ecclesiastical or civil authorities under any circumstances, advocating clemency and charity as ‘more becoming to Christians’. It was only after Nilus’ death in 1508 AD that Joseph was able to begin his persecution of the Judaizers again — burning their leaders alive and throwing their followers into prison. As a result of his courageous stand, Nilus had been able to restrain the reactionary forces of the church and state for nearly twenty years.⁹

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When the New Monastics emerged is difficult to date accurately. ‘Some communities now identified with new monasticism have been in existence since the 1970s and 80s. Other communities - such as the Simple Way - were formed in the mid-90s.’ The terminology of New Monasticism is thought to have been developed by Jonathan Wilson, in his 1998 book called *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*. Wilson was building on ideas of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Noting the decline of local community that could sustain the moral life, MacIntyre ended his book *After Virtue*, by voicing a longing for “another St Benedict” By this he meant someone in the present age to lead another renewal of morality and civility through community. Wilson identified with that longing in his own book, but outlined a vision to carry it forward within the Christian tradition’.¹⁰

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Any reflection on monasticism must begin with an acknowledgement of the enormous contribution that monastics have made to church, to mission and to civilization. But no one would suggest that this contribution would place monasticism above criticism.

Let me begin my critique of monasticism with a couple of reflections that come from people who have observed the unhelpful role monasticism has played in other religions.

A Confucian critique of monasticism insists there is no basis for monasticism in the Confucian tradition. It asserts monasticism encourages the ‘unnatural renunciation of pleasure’, ‘un-filial self-immolation’, ‘anti-family celibacy’ and ‘withdrawal from (and opposition to) social structures’ – all of which are contrary to the Confucian tradition.¹¹

A Buddhist critique of monasticism is based on the fact that there is a tendency for monastics to see ‘monastic ordination as the act by which one becomes a truly committed Buddhist’. They tend to suggest that one can only become a ‘truly committed Buddhist’ is by becoming a monastic. But Sangharakshita says that a ‘truly committed Buddhist’ finds their refuge ‘in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha’ - not in the monastery.¹²

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One of the most famous Christian critiques of monasticism was by Erasmus. Erasmus, who had been educated in a monastery, wrote to a friend saying; ‘Monastic life should

not be equated with the virtuous life. It is just one type of lifea life for which I was averse both in mind and body: in mind, because I shrank from ceremonies and was fond of liberty; in body, because my constitution was not adapted to such trials.’¹³ In 1509 Erasmus wrote In The Praise Of Folly as a full-frontal attack on monasticism. Erasmus argued that monasticism was based on ‘man-made’ vows and that Christians should make only one vow – ‘the first and only vow we take in baptism – not to man, but to Christ.’¹⁴

Following on from Erasmus, in 1521 Luther wrote his attack On Monastic Vows. Luther condemned monastic vows as ‘works’. He attacked the vows of poverty and celibacy, saying they should be voluntary not mandatory. And he attacked the vow of obedience saying we are called by Christ to serve one another not just ‘one’ person - an abbot.¹⁵

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Jonathan Wilson called for a ‘New Monasticism’ in contrast to the ‘Old Monasticism’ He said that the New Monasticism should be characterized by four distinctives: ‘(1) it will be “marked by a recovery of the *telos* of this world” revealed in Jesus, and aimed at the healing of fragmentation, bringing the whole of life under the lordship of Christ; (2) it will be aimed at the “whole people of God” who live and work in all kinds of contexts, and not create a distinction between those with sacred and secular vocations; (3) it will be disciplined, not by a recovery of old monastic rules, but by the joyful discipline achieved by a small group of disciples practicing mutual exhortation, correction, and reconciliation; and (4) it will be “undergirded by deep theological reflection and commitment,” by which the church may recover its life and witness in the world.’¹⁶ It sounds good. Which is why there is so much enthusiasm about the New Monasticism.

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Certainly we need to recover our sense of purpose and redouble our resolve to follow in the footsteps of Jesus undergirded by deep theological reflection and action. And we can learn best how to do this from monastics like Basil, Benedict, Aidan, Francis and Nilus. However, I think we need to critically reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the way these saints lived their lives - and embrace their mysticism but eschew their monasticism.

I believe we should resist the call to pursue renewal through monasticism for ten reasons:

1. It has no biblical basis
2. It encourages self-abnegation.
3. It requires subordination to a hierarchy.
4. It typically involves separation from the community.
5. It principally involves imposition on the community.
6. That imposition may involve exploitation of the community.
7. The ‘monastic cycle’ tends to move from devotion to decadence.
8. Monastic organization makes monastics susceptible to appropriation.
9. Monastic isolation makes monastics vulnerable in times of persecution.
10. Last but not least, monasticism is totally unnecessary as a means of renewal.

1. Monasticism has no biblical basis

It is clear that when Jesus chose his path, he had four options – the ‘pietist’ Pharisee option, the ‘realist’ Sadducee option, the ‘activist’ Zealot option and the ‘monastic’ Essene option - and he specifically and repeatedly rejected each of these options - including the ‘monastic’ option. Christ did not call his disciples to form a special holy order based on a rule, circumscribed by regulations, characterized by a daily rhythm of religious rituals monitored, managed and controlled by spiritual hierarchs.

2. Monasticism encourages self-abnegation

Jesus encouraged his disciples to break with family bonds which domesticated them, and to be willing to lay down their lives for the sake of the gospel (Matt.10.37-39). But Christ did not encourage ‘unnatural renunciation of pleasure’, ‘un-filial self-immolation’, or ‘anti-family celibacy’ like many monastics do. He said the greatest commandment was to love God with your whole heart and ‘to love your neighbour as yourself’. (Matt.22.38)

3. Monasticism requires subordination to a hierarchy.

Erasmus said ‘the first and only vow we take in baptism (is) not to man, but to Christ’. And Christ expected his disciples to follow his example - and to serve others as he did. (Matt.20.28) He explicitly forbade his followers to use anyone else’s willingness to serve as an opportunity to exercise control over others - as monastics - old and new - typically do. (Matt.20.25-27) Rather, Christ came to abolish all hierarchies - even his own - by transforming his relationship with his disciples from ‘servants’ into ‘friends’.(John 15.15)

4. Monasticism typically involves separation from the community.

One of the major reasons given by New Monastics for the emergence of their new orders is to promote and support ‘relocation to the abandoned places in the Empire’ like the Old Monastics did. Which is great. We could do with more people like Basil in ‘Cappadocia’. However, the very nature of monasticism separates monastics from the communities in which they relocate and works against the process of incarnation they are committed to. Monasticism creates high caliber cadres of mission ‘for the people’ - not ‘of the people’.

5. Monasticism principally involves imposition on the community.

Chanequa Walker-Barnes, in her article, *My Struggle with the New Monasticism*, says ‘There’s a certain multiple personality disorder in New Monasticism. On the one hand, there is sincere valuation of racial reconciliation, commitment to diverse communities, and willingness to hear the voices of people of color (hence, the invitation extended to an outsider like me to participate in this conversation). On the other, when people of color are invited to be part of New Monastic communities, it’s on pre-established terms. That is, the communities in which you live are not of our making. People of color are not unaccustomed to living in multifamily households. For many of us, the idea of shared space is fraught with loaded memories, including traumatic ones. Consequently, many

of us will never be attracted to the structural conditions' of the New Monasticism.¹⁷

6. In monasticism imposition may involve exploitation of the community.

Voltaire saw monastics as 'parasites' living off the industry of the lay populace.¹⁸ As we have noted in Nilus' story, by the end of the fifteenth century, monasteries in Russia had become very large, powerful, social institutions. The political power of the feudal state both supported and was buttressed by the church hierarchy. It was estimated that as much as one-third of the available arable land in Russia was controlled by the church through large monasteries. In fact, at one stage one monastery – the St. Sergius Monastery of the Trinity - had 100,000 peasants cultivating the estates it ran in 15 provinces.¹⁹

7. In the 'monastic cycle' devotion and discipline tends to move to decadence.

Though some would argue St. Sergius was an exception rather than the monastic norm, Gordon Cosby argues that 'groups organized around devotion and discipline tend to produce abundance, but ultimately that very success leads to...decadence.' Cosby calls this historical pattern 'the monastic cycle'. Cosby says this cycle can be seen repeated again and again in monastic movements from the Dominicans through to the Jesuits. And over time even the abbots of St. Benedict became 'unenterprising, upper-class parasites'²⁰

8. Monastic organization makes monastics susceptible to institutional appropriation

The patriarchal, hierarchical, and traditional organization of most monastic movements make monastics vulnerable to the institutional ecclesiastical appropriation of their order. As we have noted in Francis' story, he turned his religious movement into a religious order. He traveled to Rome and negotiated with the Pope for permission to organize his Friars Minor as an 'apostolic religious order'. When Francis opposed the Pope's call for a Crusade and traveled to Egypt to persuade the Crusaders to lay down their arms, the Pope appointed a Vicar-General to take control of his order and institute a revised set of rules which were more suitable to the Pope's requirements. Thus Francis was displaced from his own order, the Franciscans were co-opted by the church and the Friars Minor became a tool that the church was later able to use in persecuting heretics during the inquisition.²¹

9. Monastic isolation makes monastics vulnerable in times of persecution

There is protection in being part of community. But monastics tend to see themselves as 'missionaries' to the community rather than as 'members' of the community and are seen by the community as such. So during times of persecution, monastics are 'sitting ducks'. The Nestorians, who took the gospel as far as Afghanistan, Tibet and China, were wiped out almost completely because their monastics lived apart from their communities and were easily identified and destroyed by those who were inimical to Christianity.²²

10. Last but not least, monasticism is totally unnecessary as a means of renewal.

I would like to suggest a New Monasticism is totally unnecessary. Everything Jonathan Wilson says that we need to do in order to recover our sense of purpose and redouble our resolve to follow in the footsteps of Jesus undergirded by deep theological reflection and action could be accomplished through a New Methodism rather than a New Monasticism.

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It is the mysticism rather than the monasticism of the monastics that we should embrace. We need to practice action-and-contemplation as members of our communities. We need to practice a spirituality of compassion - methodically embodying the radical be-attitudes of Christ as ordinary people - alongside ordinary people - in our ordinary every day life.

Footnote

Having said what I disagree with in Monasticism, I recognize God's delight in using those whom I disagree with. No doubt God is using many Monastics more than me.

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