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The Trinity Who Prays and Engages Others to do the Same

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Abstract

A Christian understanding of prayer, at the popular as well as the academic level, frequently holds up Jesus Christ as the model for interpreting what it means to pray. Think, for example, of the oft-cited text of Matthew 6:9-13: "This then, is how you should pray" But beyond reciting a prayer to the God of Jesus, as Jesus himself did, how is a prayer to be understood as an integral part of daily human life? What does it mean to "pray always," as many mystics and faith-filled Christians have admonished over the ages? This article, rather than focusing on the life of Jesus as a singular reality to engage an understanding of prayer life, engages the communitarian life of the Triune God as the model for living and interpreting Christian prayer and how it is lived in everyday life of the Christian. As such, the article frames Christian prayer as essentially informed by and lived through the prayer of the community of the Trinity – a community of life that is present in moments of joy and celebration as well as moments of failure and disappointment. God, who is One, draws the Christian richly into Divine Life through the prayer of the Trinity to be the prayer, as Jesus was.

Introduction

Action and contemplation do not pertain to separate spheres: the sacred and the secular, church and world, spiritual life and

the domain of the mundane and profane. The one God who is constantly ‘adventing’ is not only for us but for the whole world. Prayer is well thought of as awakening to the divine presence in every dimension of everyday living.¹

The above description of prayer is consistent with what the Christian Bible says. The New Testament contains many references to prayer. Most Christians are familiar with the Lord’s Prayer cited in Matthew 6:10-13. Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, urges the Christian community in Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing.” In Romans 12:12, he admonishes the community to “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer,” and in Ephesians 6:18 says, “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.” Clearly, prayer was key to the life of the early Christian communities. But it was also important to Jesus. Jesus spent a good amount of time in prayer.

Before he chose the twelve who would journey with him in a special way throughout the remainder of his lifetime, he prayed to God and communed with God’s Spirit. He took time away with God in the silence of a mountaintop (Luke 6:12-13). Another significant example is in John’s gospel. All of the 17 chapters describe the prayer of Jesus. He prays to God so that all of Jesus’ followers may be one with God as he is one with God. For Jesus, prayer was an expression of an intimate relationship established with God and of what Jesus desired for all people: that God may be one with them as Jesus was one with God.

Jesus Becomes One with God

For Jesus, becoming one with God was having a conversation with God as the Trinity experienced conversation since time immemorial. Khaled Anatolios, writing from a Greek Orthodox perspective, describes the Trinitarian conversation in this way:

The Father speaks to the Son and sends the Son and raises Jesus from the dead; the Son

speaks to the Father and hands over his life to the Father and sends the Spirit; the Spirit descends on the Son and leads Jesus into the wilderness and blows where he wills.²

1 Michael Downey, “In the Ache of Absence,” *Liturgical Ministry* 3 (1994), 98.

2 Khaled Anatolios, “Personhood, Communion, and the Trinity in Some Patristic Tests,” in *The Holy Trinity in the Life of the Church*, (2014), ed. Khaled Anatolios, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 155.

Prayer, for Jesus, was a conversation with the Triune God, a conversation in which each person of God-as-Trinity is giving to and sharing with the others. As the Incarnation – God become human – Jesus learned slowly over the years to have this conversation again. Over the course of his earthly life, he “hands his life to the Father.” There is a conversation, a communion, and a self-giving that takes place within the Trinity that Jesus of Nazareth, as the Son of God, partook of all the while he was on earth.

If there is no conversation, no self-giving love, within the Trinity as distinct persons, there can be no conversation between human beings and God. The possibility of this conversation, as Jesus shows the Christian community, is the inestimable gift of Jesus to humanity. This is what is reflected in the biblical text from Matthew cited above: Jesus taught his disciples to pray personally to God, to converse with God as he did, in the following words: “Our Father, who art in heaven . . .” And thus Jesus invites his followers to partake in that conversation, that self-giving love as well, and works to draw them into it in a variety of ways. For Christians, this is what it means to be human beings, to have the capacity for God, that is, the desire for God and to be as God is. As Gregory of Nazianzus describes it, “When that within us which is godlike and divine . . . should have mingled with its like, and the image shall have ascended to the archetype, of which it now has the desire.”³

In Jesus’ prayer, all people, believers or not, have been adopted into the life of the Trinity. Jesus wants humanity to have what he has with God – on the level of relationship with God and on the level of the way people live their lives with each other. Here is an example that concerns the type of justice God desires for all of the humanity and connects that justice with the Christian’s life of prayer: a conversation with God as adopted sons and daughters.

Jesus tells a parable about a widow and an unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8), where the woman was seeking to be justified with her opponent. The judge refused to hear her plea. Time and time again, she returned to him to plead her case. Finally, the unjust judge relented and granted her justice. To this action of the unjust judge, Jesus says, “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to

3 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations* 2. 17, cited in Anatolios, “Personhood, Communion, and the Trinity,” 155.

them”Jesus is encouraging people to pray always and not to lose faith in their prayer before God – their conversation with God, their adoption by God. Keep the conversation going; he is saying, just as he kept the conversation going with God while he lived on earth. Even in the moments of pain, doubt, and adversity – for example, as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46) or hung upon the cross (Luke 22:34) or felt God had abandoned him (Mark 15:34) – Jesus kept the conversation, the relationship, going.

What is Prayer?

But these passages about Jesus’ prayer still beg the question: What is prayer? What is it to pray? How do we do it? And then comes the kicker: Why are prayers, even in urgent and dire circumstances, not always answered? After all, the passage we just saw from Luke tells us that justice will come. This reflection on prayer reminds me of a friend who is a real estate agent. She depends on the money she gets from selling houses to support her family.

My friend told me of a colleague who prayed to God to sell more houses. His prayers were answered, and he sold more houses. My friend tried the same thing: she prayed to God to sell more houses, but her business did not increase, so she phoned me to ask me what she was doing wrong! What she failed to realize was that prayer is not a means to an end. Quite the opposite: prayer detaches the pray-er from the universal prejudice of power, functionalism, and pragmatic outcomes. Prayer is to rest in God, to soak up Trinitarian life. What Jesus did here was that He prayed. He lived out of the relationship he experienced so personally and intimately with the Triune God – a God he had come to know slowly, over the course of a lifetime. He had learned that God is within, around, above, and below at all times. Prayer is the awareness that this is the reality in which and by which Christians live.

Being aware of God’s intimate and abiding presence in life is already to be deeply engaged in prayer. Saying prayers is meant to sensitize individuals and communities to this presence, to deepen it, and to make the pray-er aware of how God is loving and transforming people’s lives in everyday experiences. Julian of Norwich, an English mystic who lived in the fourteenth century describes the Triune God’s everyday activity in the lives of people:

And therefore the blessed Trinity is always wholly pleased with all its works; and God revealed all this most blessedly, as through

to say: See I am God. See, I am in all things. See, I do all things. See, I never removed my hands from my works, nor ever shall without end. See, I guide all things to the end that I ordain them for, before time began, with the same power and wisdom and love with which I made them; how should anything be amiss?⁴

Being persistent in prayer is to commit oneself to working on developing a sense of this Divine presence in every breath taken. What greater gift could one want to commit one's time and energy to than seeking to be aware of Divine Spirit in one's heart, in one's soul, in one's life?

Clement of Alexandria, a Christian writer in the second century, had this approach to prayer. He described prayer as “keeping company with God.”⁵ He taught his followers that prayer is attention or attentiveness to God's abiding presence in life – habitual mindfulness so that one's very existence depends on this abiding presence. Origen wrote about Christian prayer in the third century.⁶ He taught that the entire lives of those who closely follow the teachings and spirit of Jesus Christ could be considered to be prayer. For Origen, prayer was not something to be done; rather, it was a lifestyle. Thérèse of Lisieux, who lived in the nineteenth century, wrote of prayer as “a surge of the heart ... a simple look toward heaven... a cry of recognition and love, embracing both trial and joy.”⁷ All of these authors point to prayer as a way of life, not a specific thing that is said or done.

The fact that prayer is a lifestyle that is focused on nurturing the conscious presence of God in life makes sense of Saint Paul's admonition to “pray always” – to always live in the presence and mind of God. Prayer is therefore not about constant repetition of formulaic praise, petition, or pious practices. It is about developing a deep sense of interiority that

4 *Julian of Norwich: Showings* (1978), ed. Edmund Colledge, Long Text (LT, 11), New York: Paulist Press.

5 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7:7 (PG 9:455); Evagrius Ponticus, *De Oratone* 3 (PG 79.1167), cited in Simon Tugwell, *Prayer* (1974), Vol. 1, Dublin: Veritas Publications, vii.

6 See Admantius, Origen, *Origen on Prayer*, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/origen/prayer.pdf> Retrieved on April 29, 2017.

7 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Preface to no. 2559. See also Mary Frohlich, “Christian Mysticism in Postmodernity: Thérèse of Lisieux as a Case Study,” in David B. Perrin, ed. (2001), *Women Christian Mystics Speak to Our Times*, Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 157–171.

touches God's life through the life of the individual or community – through human actions, human hopes, human desires, and human joys. To speak of one's interiority is not always to speak of a sea of calm but also a sea of storms. It is there, in this interior space, that an individual may meet a self who has been ravaged by time but who knows the place of God's transformative grace in their life.

Prayer is Transformative

Even in tragedy, as Jesus himself experienced, prayer is a transformative experience. Following the atrocities of the Second World War, Karl Rahner, the famous Jesuit theologian, said: "If we let ourselves be educated through the every day to kindness, to patience, to peace and understanding, to forbearance and meekness, to forgiveness and endurance, to selfless loyalty, then the every day is no longer the everyday, then it is prayer. Then all diversity becomes one in the love of God."⁸For Rahner, the fundamental experience of human life is the experience of the self. At the heart of the experience of the self within the daily activities of life lies God. Tragedy and loss have a way of stripping away that which is not core to what it means to live a full and meaningful life. Through the experiences of life, all of them, one discovers it is God's self-gift that lies at the heart of one's self, and this discovery is transformative. This discovery calls forth the same kind of self-giving love first experienced within the Trinity. Thus, prayer is always answered since it deepens the relationship with God and with others. Prayer springs from the foundation of care for others and, in the praying, deepens that foundation. One's prayer draws life from Trinitarian life and inserts the individual or community ever more deeply into it, as we will see a little more below.

Praying for others makes explicit an implicit bond: it holds the other in goodwill and is an expression of goodwill. In this way, prayer grows those qualities felt toward the other, such as concern, benevolence, justice, equality, and health. In prayer, one already realizes some level of what is prayed for the other, as one's awareness of their need is already a positive, enabling response. It allows a healthy relationship with the other to grow. The effect is to become one with the other as God desires to become one with people. This step toward the miracle of becoming one is realized in prayer: that the praying Trinity is One

8 Karl Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer* (1997), tr. Bruce W. Gillette, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 46–47.

is already God's response to answering an individual's or community's prayers for the other.

Thus, there is a moral implication to one's prayer life – how an individual is and acts before the other part of their prayer life. Christian spirituality and ethics meet in prayer. When an individual is not one with the other, the person needs to reflect upon their life of prayer, of being God's prayer for the other. Prayer is an act of being – a showing of the authentic self, the *imago dei* in whose image the pray-er is created. When an individual or community fails in this *imago*, in this relationship to God and others, sin enters the picture. Thus Christians should consider sin, the failure of being one with the other as God is One within the Trinity, in their prayer-filled life.

Through sin and the subsequent deep soul-searching upon it, one comes to know oneself better and indeed discovers how God loves each person individually, through their sin as much as in moments of success and joy. Who one is today is a product of both successes and failures in life. Let the sins of the past rest. God has taken care of those for the sinner. However, when the sins of the present are too much like the sins of the past, one needs to seek a critical awareness of why this is the case and to change it. God journeys with people in all of these situations, but individuals and communities need to nurture the deep-felt awareness that this is constant. They need to find themselves always praying and reflecting on their life with God by contemplating the quality of relationships they have with people around them.

Prayer as Self-Realization Through Self-Transcendence

What is being suggested here is the connection of prayer to self-realization through self-transcendence.⁹Self-transcendence is a fundamental characteristic of human life¹⁰that involves moving beyond the narrow confines of one's own life. Often it means leaving behind the false sense of oneself revealed in the debilitating effects of, for example, one's self-interest, biases, oversights, and misjudgments. Generally speaking,

9 Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan develops the concept of self-realization through self-transcendence in *Method in Theology* (1990). See also Michael McCarthy, *Authenticity as Self-Transcendence* (2015).

10 Michael H. McCarthy, basing himself on the writings of Bernard Lonergan, states this from a negative (albeit helpful) perspective: "... humans are inherently self-centered and summoned to self-transcendence." See his *Authenticity as Self-Transcendence: The Enduring Insights of Bernard Lonergan* (2015), Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 39. See also 27–30; 38–39.

self-transcendence refers to the capacity to leave behind one's small and limiting world to be authentically interested in the world of others. The self is not autonomously self-constituting or self-creating, but molded, shaped, and re-formed within the context of multiple relationships. It is in these relationships that meaning in life is generated.

Transcendence – a going out of oneself-beyond-oneseft to dare to hope for the other, whether that Other is God or other human beings – is what makes Christian prayer possible. In authentic Christian prayer, the restrictions of the circumstances of life are laid before the other in a kind of faith that doesn't turn over personal responsibility to the other but engages the other in a profound hope together. In the deepest moments of transcendence, there is no "I" and no "You" but a "We" that journeys together.¹¹ This form of transcendence is operative especially when the pray-er no longer knows whether God exists. It is the transcendence of the Christian mystics. From this point of departure, the radical choice of faith is anchored.

From a Christian perspective, transcendence is modeled on the multiple relationships of the community of the Trinity: a communion of Absolute Love.¹² The Trinity is ultimately the meaning of Absolute Love. God, each of the three persons, chooses what is Good for the Other; that is the nature of the Divine Being and the meaning of what human beings are invited into through prayer.

Mechthild von Magdeburg, a devout Christian woman who lived in the thirteenth century in the Saxony part of Europe we now know as Germany, describes the experience of this relationship with God, this communion with God:

Of what are you made, soul, that you rise so high over all creatures, and mingle with the Holy Trinity and yet remain wholly in yourself? – You have spoken of my origin; now I tell it to you truly: I was made in that place from love, therefore no creature can satisfy me according to my noble nature, and no creature can unlock me, except love alone.¹³

11 Martin Buber famously develops this dialectic in *I and Thou* (1996), tr. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Touchstone.

12 For further analysis, see "Personhood, Communion, and the Trinity in Some Patristic Tests," in *The Holy Trinity in the Life of the Church* (2014), ed. Khaled Anatolios, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 147–164.

13 Cited in Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions* (1985), ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, tr. Esther Cameron, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 52–53.

Mechthild speaks of the origin of human life, which is birthed from the nature of Absolute Love that is Trinitarian Love. Although in birth human life is separated from its origins in God, it also begins its noble vocation: to live in and through Trinitarian Love in this world. From this dynamic, the fullness of human life is achieved. Human life is oriented from the very beginning to live that noble life of which Mechthild speaks: persons in the community as the Triune God is in the community. Prayer is the awareness of participation in that Trinitarian Love, mingling with the Trinity, as Mechthild describes it, in life as we know it today. In prayer, one surrenders to the draw of God's love and enters more fully into an awareness of God's desire for humanity – even amid sorrows and disappointments, hardships and failures in life.

Prayer in Adversity

In adversity, too, there is a gift – in human suffering, individuals and communities come to know better themselves, the foundations upon which they live, their core values and principles. This sure knowledge allows the Christian individual or community to go forth in freedom of conviction and be God's pray-er for others in the world, so that they, too, can grow in Trinitarian Love. The cycle never ends. God lives through individuals and communities, in their working, in their resting, in their breathing and thinking. Humanity is always praying as individuals and communities are being and growing in God's love for others. The dynamics of prayer invites people to develop and live lives mindful that all life is utterly dependent on God. One comes to know that life is a pure gift, given freely out of Trinitarian Love.

So, we ask the question again: What does it mean to say prayers? Like the real estate agent, we need to remind ourselves that saying prayers is not direct cause and effect. Saying prayers, which is a wonderful thing to do regularly and faithfully, is meant to nurture the individual and the community along the journey described above: into a growing awareness of God's abiding presence, profound love, and healing touch in people's lives. Through these movements of God in people's lives, individuals, and communities are transformed.¹⁴ And then something astounding happens: others are healed and transformed through the faith-filled presence of God brought into their lives by the pray-er. The truth of the life of the pray-er, the life of Trinitarian Love, becomes their

14 Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), the Danish philosopher, theologian, and poet, put it this way: "Prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who offers it." "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing" (1847), tr. Douglas V. Steere, Ch. 2, 18.

truth.¹⁵The healing touch of love in the life of the pray-er becomes the healing touch in others.

John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Christian, loved the image of fire to describe this dissemination of Divine Love. He wrote, "... love is never idle, but in continual motion, it is always emitting flames everywhere like a blazing fire."¹⁶(F 1, 8; Kav 643)And so personal prayers, and the prayers of others are answered when the blind see a new life, the disillusioned experience hope, quarreling becomes peace, and the sinner sins no more. In this way, the words Jesus taught his community to pray – the text of Matthew mentioned above – are fulfilled. God’s kingdom truly comes on earth as it is in heaven: that is, as it is with the Trinitarian community.

Through people being pray-ers, Trinitarian life takes up its abode in humanity’s abode, in the dwelling places that are also the dwelling places of the Being-of-God. Being is most correctly interpreted as the authenticity of the transcendental nature of life, such as the experience of joy, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, and love. Saying prayers ought to be an expression of the journey along this pathway: the advent of Trinitarian Life in the life of people through these very same experiences, and many of them. The individual along this pathway will have crossed oceans of doubt, fear, and darkness. He or she will have experienced moments of great sweetness, delight, and joy. All of this mixed is a life of prayer: each moment of one’s life is ultimately lived within the mysterious Other called God.

The Pray-er “Becomes God”

John of the Cross goes so far as to say that the individual “has become God” in his or her journey of transformation:

15 John of the Cross (1542–1591) speaks of the “truth” of one’s life as being that element that is most important or valuable. See F 1, 9; Kav 644. In the category of scholastic thought current at the time of John of the Cross, “truth” is the “substance” or true essence of something. John fully subscribed to this understanding of truth. Thus, in naming the truth of a life, one is attempting to name the “most interior, most intimate, part of the soul where the substance of God touches the substance of the [human] soul.” John Welch (1990), *When Gods Die: An Introduction to John of the Cross*, New York: Paulist Press, 57.

16 References to the writings of John of the Cross are to the translation of Kavanagh and Rodriquez (1991), henceforth: Kav. The complete reference is given in the *References* following the article. References use the following format: F = The Living Flame of Love (commentary, second redaction), followed by the stanza number and paragraph number; C = The Spiritual Canticle (commentary, second redaction), followed by the stanza and paragraph number.

the intellect of this soul is God's intellect; its will is God's will; its memory is the memory of God, and its delight is God's delight; and although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God, since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion into him, it has become God through participation in God (F 2, 35; Kav 671).

What John is saying is that the individual or the community is so engaged in being-God's-pray-er in the world that she or he spontaneously makes choices and decisions in life that naturally reflect and accomplish God's divine action in the world. Because of these movements, the pray-er gives birth once again to God's flesh in the world. The Incarnation takes place over and over again through prayer. The faith-filled individual or community is witness to the Incarnation happening over and over again before its very eyes through the dynamics of prayer. The pray-er is the humanization of God: that is, God takes on flesh again, God becomes human again in the lives of individuals.¹⁷ John of the Cross notes that, in this way, God crowns the human person with the loftiest of vocations, to be God in the world: "The soul thereby becomes divine, God through participation, insofar as it is possible in this life" (C 22, 3; Kav 560-561).

This gratuitous outpouring of Trinitarian life – the love shared through the Triune God in this world – is more common than many will acknowledge. What must be understood and rejoiced in is that saints are born from sinners. How fortunate is the pray-er to be counted among the sinners so that all may be saints! John gives each endless hope in their journey of becoming the pray-er-of-God when he speaks of God's "degrees of love" (F 1, 13; Kav 645). Ultimately, God's "flame of love" (F 1, 8; Kav 643) wounds the soul in its ultimate and deepest center.¹⁸ He states that at no point is an individual not centered in God's love; the individual moves from center to center, all the while being transformed into an individual who is more and more anchored in the "deepest center" of God's redemptive life. John acknowledged that Christians are always pilgrims along the way, but are always centered in God – wherever one finds oneself along the pathway of life, saint or sinner, and mostly a mix

17 This approach to the Incarnation supposes divine alterability (that is, God's ability to move and be moved) as well as a certain anthropomorphism – the humanity of Christ as revelatory of the Trinity. This is the approach adopted by Hans Urs von Balthasar and reflects the approach adopted throughout this article. See his *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (1989), VII: Theology: The New Covenant, tr. Brian McNeil, San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

18 See David B. Perrin (1997), *For Love of the World: The Old and New Self of John of the Cross*, London: Catholic Scholars Press, Appendix One, 113.

of the two, within which is grounded one's humanity and the everyday realities of life.

This perspective is shared by Julian of Norwich who was quoted earlier in this article. In one of her visions she describes the participation of human beings as sharers in the "substance" of God:

And I saw no difference between God and our Substance, but, as it were, all God; and still my understanding accepted that our Substance is in God, that is to say, that God is God, and our Substance is a creature of God. For the almighty truth of the Trinity is our Father, for he made us and keeps us in him. And the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, in whom we are enclosed. And the high goodness of the Trinity is our Lord, and in him, we are enclosed and he in us. We are enclosed in the Father, and we are enclosed in the Son, and we are enclosed in the Holy Spirit. And the Father is enclosed in us, the Son is enclosed in us, and the Holy Spirit is enclosed in us, almighty, all wisdom and all goodness, one God, one Lord.¹⁹

Conclusion

God's surprise for each human being is this- that God is ever present in one's history – in failure and loss as well as in success and fortune. God's enduring presence in history continues to shock the status quo, just as it did with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

We see here that Christian prayer, being- the pray-er, take the community to the heart of the action is not distracted business. Rather, it is the mindful (prayerful) centering of one's life in God-Become-Flesh for others. Ultimately, prayer is answered, in ever so subtle ways, when one allows the life of the Trinity to shine through one's own life. Reflecting on what is important now will give new life now and for the future. Life can get rough. We all know that. The faith-filled Christian takes their real-life situations to prayer, to quiet and focused contemplation, and listens.

In listening, individuals and communities are continually invited to dig deep down and live again – but in a new way. For example,

to allow the humiliation of one's life to become humility;
to allow the betrayal of one's life to become forgiveness;
to allow the manipulation experienced in life to become understanding.

¹⁹ *Showings*, LT, 54.

It can feel as if life has brought them low, but the pray-ers are never alone in moments of despair, turmoil, or loss. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, pray as He did: allow God to drink up the moments of passion in their life so that new life is received. Through prayer, Jesus allowed God to transform His moments of suffering and joy into opportunities for the salvation of others. Always in community with the Trinity, Jesus was God's pray-er for the world. A Christian's prayer life can make it their goal of becoming God's pray-er for others that makes the communitarian life of the Trinity, a life of mutually shared love, part of the reality of day-to-day living.

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