

21. FIDELITY - PERSEVERANCE

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1. LEXICOGRAPHIC PRECISIONS

The two concepts of fidelity and perseverance cannot be mixed up but can be easily joined together, since they represent two aspects of an identical interior attitude. Perseverance constitutes, in fact, the principal condition which can prevent fidelity from being reduced to a passing attitude, the result of an early adhesion, without any perspective of duration.

A particular connotation of fidelity is coherence in the commitments made: perseverance, its duration in time and its definitive aspect.

According to the Dictionnaire de Trévoux (1721):

* Fidelity: “A kind of virtue which consists in observing exactly and sincerely what one has promised, what one is obliged to do: to keep the oaths made, the word given”.

* Perseverance: “A Christian virtue which gives one strength to remain on the path to salvation, in the faith, in love of God and neighbour, in the observance of the monastic Rule”.

In the use S. John Baptist de La Salle makes of the word, the concept of fidelity takes on three meanings or principal modes of usage:

* To qualify an action: For example: to carry out with fidelity, to accomplish with fidelity, to observe with fidelity... In this case, it is a synonym of faithfully, that is in coherent manner.

* In an absolute sense: As a virtue which manifests an attitude of coherence, availability and dependence towards God or as a characteristic quality of a fundamental condition of the Christian marriage. (Especially in Da p. 377-400).

* When related to someone or something to whom or to which one is faithful. For example: fidelity to the inspirations, to grace, to the Commandments, to the Rules...

For the sake of clarity in the exposition, we shall consider first here fidelity-perseverance as a virtue in itself, and therefore as an attitude related to certain objects to which La Salle refers with more frequency and insistence.

2. FIDELITY-PERSEVERANCE AS A VIRTUE IN ITSELF

In this sense, La Salle puts it forward as a personal attitude which connotes the manner of being and acting of the Christian and, in particular, the

Religious. Two forms stand out in a special way in Lasallian teaching: the first refers to a way of acting; the second to the way of being. This distinction while it does not clearly concern the substance offers the didactic possibility of facilitating an analysis of the Lasallian spiritual teaching.

2.1. To act with fidelity¹

In Lasallian spirituality, coherently with the personal attitude of the Founder and the religious and spiritual climate of his time,² the expression “with fidelity” seems to us, first of all, a quality of the seriousness with which we should face God, welcome his requests and get ready to answer him with the maximum of conviction and coherence.

What the Founder often calls “the work of God”³ deserves a total commitment and fidelity:

“God who has created all men, wishes them to have what is necessary, and he provides it himself when they have not the means of doing so. Since, therefore, you do the work of God in your employment, you may rest assured that he will take care of you, provided that you serve him faithfully and omit nothing that he expects of you” (MD 59,3).

To consider seriously God’s appeals is a precondition for future development in the spiritual life. Referring to the eager faith of the Magi, La Salle underlines: “The very salvation of our soul often depends upon our prompt acquiescence in the call of grace” (MF 96.1). In the Collection, he insists: “Be convinced that it is very important for you to be faithful to your state, and that this fidelity consists in not leaving out anything of that which God asks of you, since you will have to give an account of it to God up to the smallest detail” (R. 94-95). One of the most evident and most consistent signs of genuine love of God, is the very fact of “our carrying out with fidelity that which we know God wants from us” (Da 96).⁴

That is what we ask for and promise in Our Father, when we say “your will be done”... “we pray God to help us obey his commandments with as much fidelity and exactness as the Angels execute his orders” (Da 446).

The opposite would be to “carry out God’s work with negligence”. Woe to him who lacks fidelity in this manner, underlines severely La Salle:

“Act in such a way, that your principal virtues be firmness of purpose and fidelity in well-doing, especially with regard to your Rules and spiritual exercises. Never relax on these points. Often pray for this firmness and fidelity; perseverance depends on them. You will thus avoid the misfortune of which the Scripture speaks: “Cursed be he that doth the work of the Lord deceitfully” (R. 79-80).

This concept is also found in MR. 201.1: “In calling you to this holy ministry, God requires that you acquit yourself with an ardent zeal for their salvation, for that is God’s work, and he will curse him who does his work negligently”.

2.2. To live one’s fidelity

If, as we have seen, at every moment of our life, we behave “with fidelity”, we create an attitude of continual fidelity and perseverance, that gives fullness to our response to God’s call, through the total gift of our whole life. La Salle expresses the need for this continuity in fidelity, which is also a guarantee of truth and plenitude, in prayer form:

“You are my Lord and my God: I submit myself totally and irrevocably to you, as to my Eternal King, on whom I depend, and I want to defend always. I promise you, Sovereign Lord, eternal fidelity, obedience and love; help me, o my adorable Saviour, with that powerful grace which you have come to bring and merit for us through your Holy Birth, so that I may persevere constantly until death in the fidelity I owe you, and which I promise: I ask this of you, loving Jesus, through the intercession of your very Holy Mother” (EM. 75-76)

However, is man faithful to God or God faithful to man? The dilemma finds a solution only if we keep in mind the mysterious bond which unites fidelity to God to that of man in life’s events, during which the two “fidelities” condition each other mysteriously:

“We learn from this that God never completely abandons those who have a good heart, but that, on the contrary, he takes care from time to time to visit them with his grace. But it is of the utmost importance to correspond with such graces and to follow the inspirations which God may give, though we must always consult our superiors and take their ad-

vice, as St. Anselm did. The salvation of many may depend on this fidelity" (MF 115,2).

This mutual correspondence and the reciprocal conditioning which arises from it are rendered much more explicitly by La Salle when, in the Meditations, he contemplates Mary's visit to Elizabeth:

"We should esteem ourselves specially favoured when God visits us by His inspirations. Let us be careful to correspond faithfully thereto, for to this fidelity God usually attaches an abundance of graces which he gives only in so far as we execute what he asks of us. God sends us His holy inspirations only to see if we are prompt in receiving them, and in accomplishing with exactitude His divine will" (MF 141,1).

Such a fidelity is evidenced by perseverance even in the event of trials and suffering. These are in fact the most valuable occasions in which to demonstrate authentic fidelity, "for the more faithful you are to God in times of suffering, the more will God lavish his graces and blessings on you, in the exercise of your ministry" (MF 155.3 and 144.2).

The Christian life, in fact, is essentially made up of continuity and not of so many momentary generous decisions,⁵ which however lack the essential quality of perseverance: to persevere is clearly as important as to be available to the first impulse of grace: "You can enjoy the advantage of being taught by the same master as St. Mark by often reading the epistle of St. Peter. Like him you should practise faithfully the holy truths contained therein, which are so consoling and instructive" (MF 116.1).

Concerning this, Sauvage and Campos emphasize:

"However, most of the time, it is when referring to God's calls that La Salle evokes the particular consecration of his disciples to the Lord: the call to renew their total gift here and now, the call to live totally the concrete reality. The Founder seems more worried about inviting the Brothers to carry out effectively their consecration in their life than to put the accent on an initial gesture of which one may boast or feel self-complacent, whilst value and sense are to be found only in the extent to which it becomes evident in our own life. So far as he is concerned, there is no state in which a person is ipso facto consecrated to God; one's personal donation to God must be renewed every day".⁶

Perfectly consonant with this concept of "continuity in fidelity", we have the pages in which La Salle deals with the sacrament of marriage. It is an aspect of Christian life in which fidelity constitutes a central and fundamental reality. In the "Devoirs d'un Chrétien", La Salle often puts in evidence this specific connotation of the concept of fidelity: "husbands owe their wives love, respect, fidelity and vice-versa" (Da 127). In marriage, it is essential "to nourish an intense mutual fidelity" (Da 378, 384, 399-400); likewise, the symbolism offered by the exchange of wedding rings recalls this reality since "the ring is the sign of inviolable fidelity" (Da 398).

3. FIDELITY TO...

To situate the concept of fidelity in the reality of life, La Salle would in most cases connect it with the object to which fidelity refers itself. When all is said and done, fidelity is always practised in man's relations with God either directly (for instance, fidelity to his inspirations, to his graces, to his orders...), or indirectly through the intermediary of realities through which God manifests his will and his desires (for example, fidelity to the Rules, to the exercises, to obedience...). The explanation of these various themes takes up much space in the teaching of La Salle. Hereunder we offer a synthetic chart.

3.1. Fidelity to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

The theme of the spiritual life made dynamic "by the movement of the Holy Spirit"⁷ occupies a large place in the Lasallian vision in harmony with the whole spiritual movement of the 17th century.⁸ "Are you faithful to follow the voice of God when He speaks to you during mental prayer? Do you often neglect his holy inspirations?" (MF 78.2). In the Collection, he stresses the importance of this fidelity, motivating it analytically:

"Fidelity to the inspirations and the interior movements of grace

1. Because they are usually the light that God sheds upon the soul to enlighten it on what it should do to bring about its own well-being.

2. Because God ceases to give us inspirations when we cease to pay attention to them.

3. Because infidelity to inspirations is what St. Paul terms “extinguishing the spirit”. We may even say that it is to “resist the Holy Spirit”, and give him great offence (R. 62).

Naturally, at the same time as fidelity, La Salle stresses the importance of the wise and necessary discernment needed before taking decisions. He is no less realistic on this topic: “Are you very faithful to the inspirations God gives you? Do you consult your Superiors before you carry them out, so that they may see if they come from God and that they make you take all the necessary means to render them profitable” (MF 115.2 and 99.3).

Naturally, the major risk is always that “of lending a deaf ear to the inspirations of God” (MD 64.1). With the resultant spiritual insensitivity: “How difficult it is for Our Lord to cure such deafness. This arises from the fact that those who are so afflicted no longer have the unction of his grace in their soul”, he exclaims in the same Meditation.

3.2. Fidelity to grace

It is very closely related to the preceding one to which it is often united by La Salle in an identical interior movement: “We should admire his fidelity in following the first movements of grace, and the alacrity with which he corresponded with the inspirations of God. Are we as faithful as St. Anthony in heeding the inspirations of God and do we accomplish as promptly what grace solicits us to do” (MF 97.1).

Prompt availability in the life of the religious savours of the miraculous:

“You, too, can perform miracles both with regard to yourself and with regard to your employment. As regards yourself, by entire fidelity to grace, not allowing any inspiration to pass without corresponding there-to fully. As regards your employment, by touching the hearts of the children entrusted to your care; by rendering your pupils obedient to, and faithful in the practice of the maxims of the Gospel; by making them pious and recollected in church and during prayers; and finally by urging them to be industrious in school and at home. These are the miracles which God gives you the power to perform, and which, indeed, he expects of you” (MF 180,3).

The dynamics of the conversion of St. Augustine (MF 123) is studied in depth, especially under this aspect of the resistance to grace until the total surrender which gave him peace. “So faithful was St. Augustine to grace after his conversion, that he sought in all things to overcome his natural inclinations” (MF 123.3).

3.3. Fidelity to the commandments

In MD 42, La Salle takes up the theme of “the dispositions required to receive the Holy Spirit”: naturally, he places first “loving God and giving oneself totally to him”, but these words of Jesus “if you love me, keep my commandments” lead him to underline the second requisite disposition which is this one:

“to keep the commandments of God, and study to do his will in all things. According to Our Lord’s words, “the truth-giving Spirit will be continually at our side, nay, will be in us”. But, as he can take pleasure only in souls which strive always to do what God desires, and to conform to his holy will, we must not expect to receive this Spirit unless we are resolved to accomplish his divine good pleasure in all things” (MD 42,1-2).

Likewise, the treatise on Fidelity to the Commandments in Da and Db, follows up the idea that fidelity and love are related: The principal proof we can give that we love God and our neighbour is when we observe faithfully and exactly the holy commandments of God, for he who loves God must want to do what he wants and commands, and because the commandments which we have received from him oblige us to love him sincerely as well as our neighbour” (Da 102). Consequently, “those who have observed them faithfully will be eternally happy in heaven where they will see God” (Da 104). In the same manner, in the explanation of the OUR FATHER, he returns to the central dimension of fidelity to the commandments: “We ask for all the benefits which are necessary, the heavenly ones, those of the soul which are the virtues and fidelity to the commandments” (Db 79).

3.4. Fidelity to one’s vocation and state

It is in this context that fidelity and persever-

ance concur very closely and overlap easily, for perseverance is tied to fidelity and vice-versa. They are at the same time cause and effect. For La Salle, fidelity to the vocation is very closely linked with fidelity to obedience. We shall return to this topic:

“To this matter you should give your whole care and attention for ordinarily on this depends fidelity to one’s vocation. Hence, what you should most earnestly ask God is the grace to be ever obedient, and to obey in the right spirit, despite all the difficulties and obstacles which the devil may raise to give you a distaste for this virtue” (MD 10).

As a matter of fact:

“The chief fruit of obedience is that it enables a religious to attain the perfection of his state, strengthens him therein, and assures his perseverance” (MD 12,3).

The contrary is also true:

“For why do men fall away? Is it not because they cease to love their Rule and the practices of community, that they observe these with distaste, and finally only with great difficulty?” (MD 12,3).

This concept is taken up again with great emphasis in another meditation:

“As obedience is the first virtue we should have, however, and the chief among those which enable us to persevere, it follows that as soon as we fail in it we are left to ourselves without strength or vigour, and consequently are incapable of performing the good required of our state. The result is that we either abandon our state, or, if we remain, we become useless members, and even hurtful to others. Like branches that are no longer attached to the trunk, which is Jesus-Christ, we no longer receive the sap which enables us to produce fruit” (MD 72,2).

Perseverance in the vocation is obtained through prayer and made possible by a fidelity equal to anything: “I will not fail to pray God as you request, so that he will make you persevere until the end of your days” (L. 51.6). “And to deserve perseverance in so holy a life, let us be faithful to all the minutest practices of community and the smallest point of regularity” (MF 89.1).

3.5. Fidelity to the Rules

It is quite obvious that the various types of fidelity support and cross-check each other, given that they represent divers aspects of a single fundamental choice. For La Salle, the Rule, together with obedience, represents the privileged means to hear God’s voice and discern his will, as well as the most worthwhile support of one’s fidelity to the will of God once it has been willingly accepted. In point of fact, to be faithful means to be in sympathy and conformity with God’s project and from then onwards to develop one’s interior life. In the Collection, in fact, when La Salle lists the “means which the Brothers will use to develop their interior life”, he adopts the following order:

“FIDELITY: 1. To the Rules; 2. to the least community practice; 3. to obedience; 4. to inspirations and interior movements; 5. to filial confidence in one’s superior or director” (R. 56).

SYMPATHY WITH GOD’S WILL remains always in the background of the observance of the Rule and constitutes its most genuine motivation:

“Doubtless you had no other reason for leaving the world than to give yourself entirely to God, and to possess abundantly His Holy Spirit. You must not count on enjoying this advantage, however, unless you punctually carry out all that you know to be the will of God. Hence be very careful to observe your Rule strictly” (MD 42.2).

In like manner, the condition to build up the true freedom of the sons of God:

“let us make ourselves, so to speak, captives for the love of God, through an exact obedience, and a great fidelity to our Rules. This voluntary and loving submission will make us enjoy the true, noble and glorious freedom of the children of God” (MF 83,1; cfr. MD 64,1; MD 72,1...).

The synthesis of the principal motivations by means of which he strongly encourages fidelity to the Rules, La Salle offers it in the Collection: “Fidelity to the Rules”: 1. Because they are the first means of sanctification in a community. 2. Because our measure of grace is determined by this fidelity. 3. Because we advance more in the path of

perfection by the observance of the Rules than by any other way (R. 61).

Hence his insistence on regularity as an essential means of personal sanctification and community life (R. 82-83; RC XVI. 63-67).

3.6. Fidelity to obedience

As already said, this is often linked with other forms of fidelity of which it constitutes also a worthwhile means of discernment.⁹ For that reason in La Salle's teaching, it occupies a central place which, at least in theory, may seem sometimes rather exaggerated.¹⁰ It would be out of place here, to start such a debate. It is however worth recalling how keen La Salle was concerning the practice of "fidelity to obedience", as a guarantee and foundation of the religious life. The MD 10, in particular, focusses on "the fidelity that one should have to obedience notwithstanding the most violent temptations". Fidelity to one's vocation is very closely linked with this fidelity, as has already been pointed out, in so far as they seem to be connected to each other as cause and effect. MD 12, in turn exhorts:

"From this you may conclude of what importance it is for you to acquire a great love for obedience, and with what care you should strive to practise this virtue, for, according to Sulpicius Severus, it is the first and foremost of all the virtues which adorn a community. Rest assured that you will love your state and possess its spirit only in so far as you are faithful to obedience" (MD 12.3).

Likewise, when he reflects on the example of St. Joseph, La Salle continues in the same vein:

"Have you the accomplishment of God's will as much at heart as St. Joseph had? If you desire to obtain from God many graces both for yourself and for the Christian Education of the children confided to your care, you should strive to imitate this saint in his love for, and fidelity in, the practice of obedience. Of all virtues this is the most fitting to your vocation, and that which will bring down on you the most blessings" (MF 110,2).

In its synthetic concision, the Collection is very terse when it motivates such an attitude in the Brother: "Fidelity to obedience: 1. Because it is the virtue essential to community life. 2. Because

obedience draws down more abundant graces than any other virtue. 3. Because advancement in perfection is measured by self conquest, and perfect obedience conducts there to" (R. 62).

3.7. Fidelity to the exercises and to small things

The general principle which La Salle upholds is that before God nothing is small. The Gospel statement: "Whoever is faithful in very little is also faithful in much..." (Lk 16.10) is constantly recalled in various contexts (MF 89.1). In this connection, the beginning of MF 92 is in this sense very meaningful. In it we are reminded of the general principle that daily fidelity in things which would seem small guarantees fidelity to the commandments, emphasizing the above mentioned passage of St. Luke:

"We may fail in regularity either in the house, outside, or in school. We may fail in the community in three ways. First by want of punctuality in the performance of the exercises. Have you looked upon this point as being one of the chief means of salvation? Such, in fact, it is, because fidelity in this matter assures your exact observance of the commandments of God. Our Lord has said: He who is trustworthy over a little sum is trustworthy over a greater" (92.1).

In general, La Salle places in this category all the practices and the community exercises which have a different type of importance in themselves, but which are performed with the same profound fidelity. Having spoken of "fidelity to the Rules", the Collection tries to look deeper into the motives of "Fidelity to Community practices":

1. Because we neglect them only when we have little esteem for them: nevertheless, they are of great moment before God.

2. Because the Scriptures tell us that "He who despises small things will fail little by little" (Ecclesiasticus 19.1). The Gospel even states that heaven will be granted as the reward of fidelity to small things, such as feeding the poor. "Because you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much" (St. Mat 25.21) says the Lord speaking as the father of a family" (R. 61-62).

From daybreak we must adopt this interior disposition: "Faithfully observe silence till the

hour of mental prayer, sigh for the time at which it will begin; resolve from this moment to be very exact and punctual in all the community exercises; for fidelity in all the exercises of the day, often depends upon this first act and resolution" (R. 66.67).

Such is the Founder's habitual teaching: "Nothing will draw the blessings of God on you as fidelity in small things" (L. 11.9).

4. A CONDITION OF FIDELITY: TO OFFER AND GIVE ONESELF TO GOD

To be faithful, one must abandon interiorly and place oneself at the disposal of God's plans: "Offer yourself often to the Spirit of Our Lord, so that you may act only through him" (MR 195.2). In fact, fidelity and perseverance rely heavily on this initial and fundamental condition expressed by La Salle in oft repeated expressions such as: "to offer oneself", "to give oneself". In this context, they repeat a central teaching of the French School of Spirituality, i.e. the act of abandonment and availability to God to welcome His appeals and faithfully accomplish his will.¹¹ Suffice for us to recall here the strong relation which exists between the concepts of fidelity and of perseverance. "As soon as you wake up, you must remember God's presence since God thinks always of you; you must offer yourself to him and consecrate to him all your time and all the actions of the day" (Da 489-490).

The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Dc 153) and that of the Presentation of Mary (Dc 202) are considered by La Salle very appropriate occasions to renew with a profound conviction this offering and gift which must become a habitual feature of the spiritual life.

The conclusion of the daily prayer constitutes another particularly intense moment in this perspective: offer to God the resolutions taken and offer yourself, as a sign of your entire availability to be faithful to whatever gift has been made to you during prayer; the act of offering has this meaning: "In the last act of the mental prayer, we offer to God our meditation, the resolutions we have taken and our resolve to keep them, offering also ourselves to God, with all our actions and our whole conduct during the day" (EM 126 and R

16). But a particular aspect of this basic availability to remain faithful to God's designs is expressed in La Salle's exhortation "to offer and to give oneself to Jesus Christ or to his Spirit", so that our apostolic activities will be fruitful. To unite oneself intimately to Christ represents in fact the best guarantee of fidelity and perseverance in doing good, beyond one's own capacity and good dispositions. Here are some significant teachings:

"Admire this goodness of God, providing for the needs of His creatures, taking the means to procure for them the knowledge of the true good, that is, the salvation of souls. Offer yourself to Him for this purpose, to assist the children entrusted to you as far as He will require of you" (MR 197.1).

"In order to fulfil your responsibility with as much perfection and care as God requires of you, frequently give yourself to the Spirit of Our Lord to act only under His influence" (MR 195.2).

"Let us often remember that, as Jesus has given Himself unreservedly to us and for us, we should return love for love by giving ourselves wholeheartedly to Him, not seeking ourselves in anything. Our whole study must be to detach ourselves from all earthly objects that we may be united to God alone. There is nothing equal to Him; He is the only one to whom we can safely give our heart" (MF 88.2).

The delicate moment of the correction of the pupils itself implies a similar act of offering and fidelity for the salvific intentions of the God whom we want to serve.

"The first thing that must be assured is that they are not undertaken except under the guidance of the Spirit of God. This is why before undertaking them, it is desirable to become interiorly recollected, to give oneself up to God's Spirit, and to be disposed to make the reproof and correction with the greatest possible wisdom and in a manner best suited to make them useful to the one receiving them" (MR 204.1).

In the final analysis, it is always in the complete abandonment of oneself to God that is to be found the foundation of the whole perspective of fidelity described in the spiritual teaching of St. La Salle:

"Abandon yourself entirely to this divine Spirit, so that He may ask God for you, all that you will need for your soul and for those entrusted to you, and so

that you may act only for Him” (MF 62.2; cfr. MD 58.1; 70.2; MF 104.1; 123.2; 146.3...).

¹ The expression “with perseverance” is much rarer: La Salle uses it only twice and in the same context, when he speaks of “to pray God with perseverance”.

² In the Founder’s biographies, there is a constant stress on the seriousness with which he dealt with commitments, from his childhood onwards. See, for instance, Saturnino Gallego 1 or Miguel Campos, CL 45, p. 92-175. For the climate of his time, cf. Raymond Deville.

³ La Salle often uses this expression in connection with the creation, but more frequently with the educative role of the Brother, as a form of collaboration with the redeeming work of God (text refers to French ovrage and oeuvre...).

⁴ One of the characteristics of La Salle’s spiritual teaching is to concentrate the basis of our relations with God on the concept of Love. Cf. Frère Alphonse: *A l’école de St. Jean Bap-*

tiste de La Salle, Paris 1952, pp. 319...

⁵ In this connection, it is important not to lose sight of the actual practical lessons coming from what the Founder went through. He himself offers us a synthetic reading in the confidences he made to Messrs Gense and La Cocherie where he explains the event. Cf. Blain 1, 388; Blain 2, 357-358; Gallego p. 539-40.

⁶ Sauvage and Campos: AEP, p. 213. Cf. F. Alphonse, p. 195.

⁷ MD 3.2; 4.3; 43.1; 62.2; MF 107.1.

⁸ Frère Clément-Marcel: *Par le mouvement de l’Esprit*, or Sauvage-Campos: AEP p. 225-241.

⁹ Sauvage and Campos: p. 228-232, or Mario Presciuttini: *L’attualità del Fondatore*, in “Atti del 2° Convegno Nazionale Lasalliano”, Roma 1990, p. 24-25.

¹⁰ On this delicate theme, cf. Sauvage et Campos, p. 174-176; 380-384. Or Mario Presciuttini: *Introduzione alla lettura delle Meditazioni di San Giovanni Battista de La Salle*, Rivista Lasalliana 1/1990, p. 42-44.

¹¹ André Rayez: *La spiritualité d’abandon chez saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, RAM 1955, p. 47-76. Or Sauvage and Campos, pp. 224-229 (English traduction).

Complementary Themes:

Abandonment, Commandments, Consecration, Holy Ghost, State, Exercises, Inspirations, Obedience, Rule/Regularity, Stability, Union, Will of God.

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