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A Community of Holy People in a Sacred World: Rethinking the Communion of Saints

They were nothing more than people, by themselves. Even paired, any pairing, they would have been nothing more than people by themselves. But all together, they have become the heart and muscles and mind of something perilous and new, something strange and growing and great. Together, all together, they are the instruments of change (Hulme, 4).

Imagine, if you will, a religious symbol that joins all living people who seek the face of God into a circle of mutual companions; one, furthermore, that connects this living community with the faithful dead of all ages; one that also links them all with eucharistic bread and wine and through this sacrament with the whole realm of the natural world; one, finally, that embraces this totality with the outstretched wings of the creating, redeeming, liberating Spirit of God who unites and lures them further into participation in God's own life. Such is the doctrinal (Apostles Creed) and liturgical (All Saints Day) symbol traditionally called "the communion of saints." From every angle this symbol crosses boundaries and stretches wide, bespeaking an inclusive participation in a community brought about by the play of Spirit-Sophia from generation to generation and across the wide world.

Now imagine a religious symbol seldom studied in the history of theology; one moreover frequently reduced to the dead alone; one that focuses on those few who have been officially canonized; one that casts the living into the role of needy petitioners calling upon powerful heavenly patrons; one that is now mostly absent from the preaching, catechesis, and existential piety of large numbers of people in advanced industrialized societies. This too is the communion of saints, a symbol that has withered to the point of oblivion or at least is sound asleep in current theory and practice. But a symbol so pneumatological, so relational, so inclusive and egalitarian, so respectful of persons who are defeated and praising of those who succeed against all odds, so hope-filled and so practical, it has the potential to empower all Christians who struggle for human dignity and the integrity of creation in the name of God. As such, it is worth another look.

Drawing upon both historical and contemporary theology, this article highlights three ancient meanings which combine to form the communion of saints: the holiness of the Christian community alive today; the connection of this community with the dead; and the relation of this multitude to the living matrix of the natural world. Our exploration is guided by a core vision inspired by the Book of Wisdom, where it is written: "From age to age, she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets" (Wis 7:27). The same Spirit who vivifies and renews the natural world enters into holy souls, and not so holy ones, sanctifying their struggle to be faithful and weaving them all into a holy community for the sake of the suffering world.

THE LIVING COMMUNITY TODAY: SAINTS ALL AND EACH

In the first place, the communion of saints comprises all living persons of truth and love. While the term itself springs from the experience of grace within the Christian Church, divine blessing cannot be limited to this circle. Within human cultures everywhere the Spirit calls persons to seek truth and live in love and justice with others, so that "friends of God and prophets" can be found in every tongue and nation, even among religion's cultured despisers.

This global framework serves to keep the symbol inclusive when applied specifically to its originating context, the Christian community, where it expresses a sense of blessing that arises at the heart of faith: "where sin did abound, grace did superabound" (Rom 5:20), so that "there is now no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 1:8). Consequently, the whole community, composed of redeemed sinners, is a holy *ekklesia* being transformed into a sacred dwelling of the Spirit. The holiness of baptized persons is not simply an ethical matter, being holy as being morally perfect. Rather, it is a participation in the very life of God, according to the dynamic of a covenant relationship: "You shall be holy for I am holy" (Lev 11:45).

New Testament writers drew deeply on this Jewish tradition of the holy people of God to describe their own community, meanwhile settling on a term to express it: "the saints." Over sixty times "saints" designates the Christian community as a whole: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints" (Rom 1:7); "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi" (Phil 1:1); "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Cor 1:2); "All the saints greet you" (2 Cor 13:13). The point is that corporately, inclusively, without discrimination, the whole living Church is a communion of saints. Too often theology has squeezed this meaning dry, eliminating most of the baptized from sainthood in favor of a small group of elite office-holders or those canonized. Even today many a theologian begins discussion of the subject by acknowledging that

even though the New Testament refers to the whole Christian community as saints, this will be set aside in order to consider paradigmatic figures, who then become in practice the real saints. But this strategy woefully shortchanges the breadth and depth of the gift of God who in gracious mercy through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ calls, blesses, and sends forth all the living people who form the beloved community.

Drawing its ecclesiology from the scriptures in a renewed way, Vatican II underscored this truth in its luminous teaching on “The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness” (*Lumen gentium*, chap. 5). Through baptism persons are justified in Christ; receiving the Spirit they become sharers in divine nature. “In this way they are really made holy” (LG 40). This holiness, furthermore, is essentially the same for everyone. There is not one kind of indwelling of the Spirit for lay persons and another for those in religious life or ordained ministry. Rather, “in the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God” (LG 41). In other words, the Church is not divided into saints and non-saints. Vivified by grace, every woman, man, and child, in whatever diverse circumstances and of whatever race, class, ethnicity, sexual persuasion, or other marker that at once identifies and divides human beings, participates in God’s holy life.

If this be the case, then the symbol of the communion of saints emerges with an unexpected prophetic edge. It challenges those charged with pastoral leadership in the Church, first, to bend every effort toward highlighting the extraordinary status of lay women and men, often overheard to be saying “I’m no saint” but in truth created in the image of God, graced by Christ, called and gifted in the Spirit. In other words, the holiness of ordinary persons in the midst of ordinary time needs to be ever more strongly underscored if people are not to be robbed of their heritage and their true identity. A second challenge arises from this realization that the whole community enjoys a transforming relationship with the triune God in an equal manner. In this light, social relationships and structures within the community of disciples that do not embody this truth appear questionable and in need of transforming grace. In other words, spiritual equality presses the question of social and political equality to the fore.

In a community of companionship in the Spirit that circles the globe today, living saints seek the face of God, cling to divine compassion in the face of suffering and sin, know the joy of Holy Wisdom’s gracious action in their lives, and make their own contribution to the Church’s heritage of faith and love. Then they pass through the shattering of death into the life-giving hands of God, to be followed by the fresh young faces of a new generation of all saints.

CLOUD OF WITNESSES THROUGH TIME

Since not even death “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39), the communion of saints is not restricted to persons who live and breathe at the present moment but also embraces those who have died. The difficulties that this aspect of the symbol present to contemporary minds and hearts are many. We are aware that death truly ends life as we know it, and no empirical investigation can lift the veil that shrouds this unknown future. Scientific investigation into the mind-brain connection and the interchange of matter through all life-systems, philosophical understanding of the person as spirit-in-the-world rather than a dualism of body and soul, and ethical critique of other-worldly concerns as robbing the earth of intrinsic value and sapping energy for justice here and now—all have conspired to make the inherited map of the Christian afterlife quaint, like drawings of sixteenth-century cartographers. In addition, theology is acutely aware that eschatological language uses metaphor, both in the Bible and regarding the classical constructs of heaven, hell, and purgatory, so that these “places” need to be interpreted in a symbolic rather than naively realistic sense.

Due to such difficulties, people in western secular culture often sense that those who have died have truly disappeared from this world. They are no longer accessible to the living in any direct fashion, as was possible to imagine in a previous age. If this is the case with people we know, how much more does it pertain to those who have died long ago, the whole traditional roster of saints. To retrieve this aspect of the communion of saints, three issues need to be addressed: the character of God who desires all to live; the companionship model of memory and hope; and the role of paradigmatic figures.

The Character of God

Since the darkness of death is unconquerable, the only way possible to resolve the issue of the fate of the dead is not with rational argument but with an existential act of radical faith in God. For the Christian community, the bedrock of this faith is the paschal narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This cruel death was a real death; it violently tore apart his whole life, no piece of him slipping through its mesh. In the face of this destruction, the Easter message proclaims that the crucified one dies not into nothingness but into the absolute mystery of the glory of God. Starting with Mary Magdalene, the disciples announce *Vivit*: the godforsaken one lives forever with God as pledge of the future of all the dead. While this is utterly unimaginable, and cannot be reduced to a kind of physiological miracle, it nevertheless affirms that Jesus in his whole person and in all dimensions of his historical existence has entered into a new and different brilliance of life in the embrace of God.

There is a precise analogy between the Spirit of God who raises Jesus to new life and the action of the same Creator Spirit bringing the world into being. In both cases one begins with virtually nothing: no world, no future for a dead person. Then the vivifying breath of the Spirit who creates the world "in the beginning" moves again and, in another act of creation, keeping faith with the beloved creature, carries a person through perishing into new life. Paul brings out this coherence when he names God as the One who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17). The Nicene Creed also follows this logic, starting with creation and ending with the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Hope in eternal life for oneself and others is not some curiosity tacked on as an appendage to faith but is faith in the living God brought to its radical depth. It is faith in God that does not stop halfway but follows the road consistently to the end, trusting that the God of the beginning is also the God of the end, who utters the same word in each case: let there be life. There is, then, reason to hope that persons are not lost in death but are enfolded into the mystery of the gracious being of God which to us is darkness but to them is the fulfillment of their lives in the sphere of the Spirit. The biblical images of light, banquet, harvest, rest, singing, homecoming, reunion, tears wiped away, seeing face to face, and knowing as we are known, all point to a deep, living communion in God's own life. Thus the loving, faithful character of God is the foundation for including the dead in the communion of saints.

If we ask after these persons, seeking where they are to be found, the only possible answer, since they do not belong to the empirical world around us, is that they abide in God. If we seek to relate to these persons, we need to realize that there can be no direct, sensate communication such as was possible when they were alive in time. Even if we try to summon them and transpose them into our concrete world, something that is attempted in spiritualist seances or manipulative pieties, they could only appear as we are, earth-bound, and not as they are, embraced in the light of absolute mystery. But they have passed from our circle into the hidden life of God, and so they are found in our experience where God is. In Karl Rahner's careful words, "We meet the living dead, even when they are those loved by us, in faith, hope, and love, that is, when we open our hearts to the silent calm of God's own self, in which they live; not by calling them back to where we are, but by descending into the silent eternity of our own hearts, and through faith in the risen Lord, creating in time the eternity which they have brought forth forever" (353-54). In other words, we meet them not by reducing their reality to our own imaginative size but by going forth to where they dwell in the mystery of the living God as the beginning of the new heaven and the new earth.

Companions in Memory and Hope

The company of saints in heaven beggars description. While some few are remembered by name, millions upon anonymous millions of others whom we will never know are also included. In different times and places their initiatives brought compassion alive and healed and challenged the world in ways that we can never imagine. The patterns of goodness they traced in history make faith today possible; bearers of our past, they also signify our future. Among these saints, known and mostly unknown, are counted those untimely dead, killed in godforsaken incidents of terror, war, and mass death, their life's projects cut down in mid-stride. Having drunk so deeply of the cup of crucifixion, they call forth special mention in anguish and lament. Among these saints are also numbered some whom we know personally. Their number increases as we get older: grandparents, mother and father, sisters and brothers, beloved spouses and life partners, children, teachers, students, patients, clients, friends and colleagues, relatives and neighbors, spiritual guides and religious leaders. Their good lives, complete with fault and failure, have reached journey's end. Gone from us, they have arrived home in unspeakable, unimaginable life within the embrace of God. To say of all these people that they form with us the company of the redeemed is to give grief a direction, affirming that in the dialogue between God and the human race the last word is the gracious word of life. In instances where persons have wrought real and lasting damage by their actions, faith holds out the possibility that at their deepest core they did not concur in diabolical evil. The Church's prayer is that God will be more merciful toward them than they have been to others. On their behalf, at least we may hope.

When the community alive today seeks to relate to this great multitude that has gone before them, two possibilities lie open. One, a patronage relationship, developed under the influence of the civil patronage system in the late Roman Empire. It reached its zenith in the medieval period and remains a force in some quarters today. In this patron-client model, God is thought to exist as a monarch ruling in splendor, with hosts of courtiers ranked in descending order of importance. Being far from the distant throne, people need saints as intercessors who will take on their case and obtain spiritual and material favors that would otherwise not be forthcoming. That is put rather baldly but it is not inaccurate. We have friends in high places, so to speak. This pattern of relationship is rapidly waning in our western secular context, not least because its patriarchal structure of power and neediness so misreads the biblical witness to God's mercy in the midst of the holy people.

A more original pattern of relationship can be discerned in Scripture and texts from the early Christian centuries. Modeled on the experience of companionship, it names those who have died as friends and

fellow travelers in the one Spirit-filled community. Rather than prayers of petition from a client to a patron, the main way of expressing this relation is through acts of remembrance and hope that release the power of their witness into the struggles of today. Several examples may awaken our religious imagination.

In the New Testament letter to the "Hebrews" there is an extraordinary roll call of Jewish ancestors, each of whom responded with faith to the challenge of their lives. Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, the parents of Moses, Rahab, David, along with myriads of others who both acted and suffered in the name of God. The point of this dramatic naming is to encourage the community to respond in like manner: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. . . ." (Heb 12:1-2). The image here is of a stadium packed with a crowd, each of whom had once run in the race, now cheering for those on the tarmac. Here the faithful dead are not proposed as the objects of a cult nor even as exemplars to be imitated, but as a throng of faithful people whose journey Christians are called upon to share and continue. Remembrance of their lives galvanizes the courage of those now running the race and awakens hope of a similar victory. It is a matter of being inspired by the whole lot of them, this cloud of witnesses to the living God.

In the age of the martyrs, this mutual, collegial relationship between the living and the dead came to new expression as the community drew strength from those who had witnessed unto death. The church at Smyrna, explaining the difference between Christ, whom they worshiped, and Polycarp their martyred bishop whom they venerated, wrote: "For [Christ] we worship as the Son of God. But the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord, and rightly so because of their matchless affection for their own king and teacher. May we too become their comrades and fellow disciples" (Musurillo, 17). The living were partners, comrades, co-disciples with those who had given their lives, one witnessing to the other, both graced in Christ. Even after persecution had ceased, this same lively sense of friendship appears in one of Augustine's sermons on the feast of the young women martyrs Perpetua and Felicity; despite the weakness of their sex, as he saw it, they had fought through to the crown of victory: "Let it not seem a small thing to us that we are members of the same body as these. . . . We marvel at them, they have compassion on us. We rejoice for them, they pray for us. . . . Yet do we all serve one Lord, follow one teacher, attend one king. We are all joined to one head, journey to the same Jerusalem, follow after the one love, embrace the same unity" (*Sermon* 280).

Preaching on the feasts of the martyrs over many years, Augustine provides an extended vocabulary for this partnership between the living and the dead. God is already at work among you, he points out, cultivating you like an orchard, producing buds, strengthening your branches, clothing you with leaves and loading you with fruit. Central to this spiritual growth is the Eucharist, whose consecrated elements of bread and wine have extraordinary power: "If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive" (S. 227). In this context, the saints in heaven are a gift: "Blessed be the saints in whose memory we are celebrating the day they suffered on; . . . they have left us lessons of encouragement" (S. 273). Sometimes the lesson of encouragement is a particular one: "If we follow Stephen, we shall be crowned with the victor's laurels. It is above all in the matter of loving our enemies that he is to be followed and imitated" (S. 314). More often this great cloud of witnesses inspires us by the general tenor of their lives. They are like a jar of ointment whose fragrance fills our whole house. Since they did what they did by the outpouring of the grace of God, in their company we find light and warmth and direction in our struggles to be faithful: "The fountain is still flowing, it hasn't dried up" (S. 315).

The early generations of Christians deserve special appreciation, Augustine thought, for they pioneered a whole new way of life: "When numbers were few, courage had to be great. By passing along the narrow road they widened it . . . they went ahead of us" (S. 306c). People who lived before us had no idea that one day there would be a community in Carthage, a church of the future praising God: "they weren't yet able to see it; yet they were already constructing it out of their own lives" (S. 306c). To realize as a people that we are the heirs of the faith passed on by such persons makes us grateful and rejuvenates our desire to contribute to this heritage for the next generation. Their adventure of faith opened a way for us, and now we go ahead of others in an ongoing river of companions seeking God. And when our own journey grows hard, we can draw strength from the memory of our forebears' sufferings and victories: "How can the way be rough when it has been smoothed by the feet of so many walking along it?" (S. 306). The communion of saints forges intergenerational bonds across time that sustain faith in strange new times and places. Surrounded by the cloud of witnesses, connected in memory and hope, we learn their lessons of encouragement and cherish in very different circumstances what they cared enough to live and die for. In recent times Vatican II underscored this original Christian intuition of a community of the friends of God and prophets, living and dead, using the explicit language of companionship: "Just as Christian communion among wayfarers brings us closer to Christ, so our companionship with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from their fountain and head issue every grace

and the life of God's people itself" (LG 50). Rather than be bound in a patron-client pattern, the saints in heaven and on earth become partners in memory and hope.

Paradigmatic Figures

Different times and places witness the emergence of particular persons who focus the energies of the Spirit for a local community in its own unique circumstances. When these persons are recognized by the common spiritual sense of the community, they become publicly significant for the lives of others. These are the persons traditionally and all too narrowly called saints. Theologically they have no essential spiritual advantage over the rest of the community who are saints in the biblical sense. But the confluence of their own unique giftedness with the needs of a moment in history give them a special function among their fellow pilgrims. Their names are remembered as a benediction, an act of resistance, a call to action, a spur to fidelity, a summons to encouragement.

Starting in the twelfth century, a centralized process of canonization took increasing control of this phenomenon. The results have been decidedly mixed. Gains in overcoming a certain fabulism and provincialism are offset by the nature of the list of official saints, who become an ever more elite group, proclaimed for their heroic virtue and power to produce spectacular miracles; a group, furthermore, that mirrors the face of the bureaucracy that created it, being largely clerical, celibate, aristocratic, and male; a group created in response to large investments of time and money and thus largely excluding lay and poor persons. Numerous scholars now argue that for the good of the Church, the formal canonization process should be abandoned or at least radically modified. In fact, the power of naming saints is already being reclaimed in a variety of worshiping communities. Long before the juridical process was invented, local communities, through the power of the Spirit, could recognize those persons who witnessed to the gospel in uniquely different circumstances and mediated God's presence through their life of discipleship. This power has not deserted the Church.

The position of women as a result of canonization is particularly troubling. A simple head count shows that 75 percent of the persons on the roster of canonized saints as well as on the liturgical calendar of the saints are men, while 25 percent are women. Does this mean that men are holier than women? Or does it rather underscore who has the power of naming in the Church? Least represented among these saints are married women who remained so for their lives (i.e., did not become nuns), reflecting the assessment that to be female is a handicap but to be a sexually active woman renders one almost incapable of embodying the sacred (the few exceptions are queens). As a result, the history of women's holiness has been largely erased from the collective memory

of the Church, a loss that some contemporary books on the saints unfortunately perpetuate. Even when they are remembered, the lives of exemplary women are narrated to reflect the patriarchal ideal of the “good” woman: acts of radical discipleship are transmuted into obedience to hierarchical leadership, and stereotypical feminine virtues, stressing suffering, sexual purity, and submission, are promoted in place of the history of women’s raw struggle in the Spirit. Once again the prophetic character of the communion of saints shows itself as feminist theological reflection reclaims this symbol by reading poor women, women of color, marginalized women, raped and brutalized women, caring and ministering women, strong and vibrant and artistic women, sexually active women, setting-out-not-knowing-where-they-are-going women, all holy women of the world, onto the list as equal partners in the company of God’s friends and prophets.

The biased character of the current list of the canonized does not undermine the importance of the role of paradigmatic saints amidst the whole community. They are women and men who distill the central values of the living tradition, making them accessible in concrete form. The direct force of their example acts as a catalyst in the community, galvanizing recognition that yes, this is what we are called to be. The uncanny integrity of their lives leavens the moral environment, luring the community ever more deeply into life lived for God. They are like a Milky Way, a shining river of stars spiraling out from the center of the galaxy to light a path through the darkness back to that center, the divine mystery. The light of their memory encourages the creative witness of others: one fire kindles another. This is their irreplaceable role, at the same time as we recognize that in the end the parameters of what it means to be holy can be given only by the whole communion of saints.

THE WHOLE COMMUNITY OF LIFE

On the face of it, the communion of saints seems to be thoroughly focused on the human community, living and dead. However, an intriguing ambiguity in the original Latin term *communio sanctorum* enables the natural world to be included in a compelling manner. On the one hand, *sanctorum* may be a form of the noun *sancti*, in which case the term means “holy persons.” On the other hand, *sanctorum* may just as well be a form of the noun *sancta*, in which instance the term refers to “holy things.” This latter reference was clearly intended when the phrase was first used in the eastern church, where *koinonia ton hagion* (fellowship of the holy) meant participation in sacred things, in particular the eucharistic bread and cup of salvation. Medieval theologians played with both meanings, the personal/subjective and the sacramental/objective, and in truth there is no need to choose between the two for they reinforce one another. The *communio sanctorum* is a

complex, multi-layered reality made up of the Spirit-filled community sharing in each others lives and in the sacraments, holy people and holy things inextricably linked.

In the light of the contemporary moral imperative to treat the ever-more damaged earth as a sacred creation with its own intrinsic rather than instrumental value, the elusive quality of the phrase's original meaning is a happy circumstance. At its best, sacramental theology has always drawn on the connection between the natural world and the signs of bread, wine, water, oil, and sexual intercourse which, when taken into the narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, become avenues of God's healing grace. Now, in the time of earth's agony, the *sancta* can be pushed to its widest meaning to include the gifts of air, water, land, and the myriad creatures that share the planet with human beings in interwoven ecosystems. For the universe itself is the primordial sacrament through which we participate in and communicate with divine mystery. Since the same divine creativity that fuels the vitality of all creation also lights the fire of the saint, then "communion in the holy" includes holy people and a holy world in interrelationship. Thus from within the symbol itself a way opens to include all beings, sacred bread and wine certainly, but also the original sacrament, the earth itself. Once again, this symbol reveals its prophetic edge as its cosmic dimension calls forth an ecological ethic of restraint of human greed and promotion of care for the earth.

Including the natural world in the communion of the holy sets up an interesting dynamic between human hope for the dead and hope for the natural world. In an evolutionary perspective, human hope for eternal life can be interpreted to embody the hope of the universe itself. Billions of years before our appearance the cosmos was already seeded with promise, pressing toward its future with an innate impulse that blossoms in religious longing for future fulfillment. "Human hoping is not simply our own constructs of imaginary ideals projected onto an indifferent universe, as much modern and postmodern thought maintains," argues John Haught. "Rather, it is the faithful carrying on of the universe's perennial orientation toward the unknown future" (109). Conversely, breaking connections with the memory of the dead saps our moral energy to care for the earth. Haught continues: "If we are unable to symbolize immortality in one way or another, we lose any sense of relatedness to the vast world that has gone before us, as well as to generations of living beings that may follow. In breaking our connection with other generations, we forfeit our responsibility to them. Stranded in a meaninglessly brief life span, and severed from communion with the perished past or the promised future, we grow ethically impotent" (129). This intriguing insight highlights the importance of the interconnection of all three aspects of the communion of saints

explored in this essay. Set within the life-giving history of God with the world, the community of the sacred encompasses all creation, past, present, and to come, holy people and the whole natural world imbued with God's blessing, together.

CONCLUSION

The religious symbols of creation, sin, covenant, messianic promise, incarnation, redemption in Christ, and eschaton have always carried a universal intent, relating the whole world in a common origin, history, and destiny through the one Spirit. The communion of saints is another such symbol, developed in Christian vocabulary to express the experience of being connected to one another in virtue of being graced by the mystery at the heart of the universe. Potentially it is a most inclusive symbol, for it relates not only disparate cultural, national, ethnic, and racial groups, and women with men, and the most socially marginalized with the powerful, all within an egalitarian community of grace, but also the living with the dead and the yet to be born, all seekers of the divine, in a circle around the eucharistic table, the body of Christ, which encompasses the earth itself. Allowing this symbol its full play in ecclesial life through remembrance and hope turns the Church toward historical praxis that adds to, rather than subtracts from, the measure of compassion and justice in the world that the next generation will inherit.

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