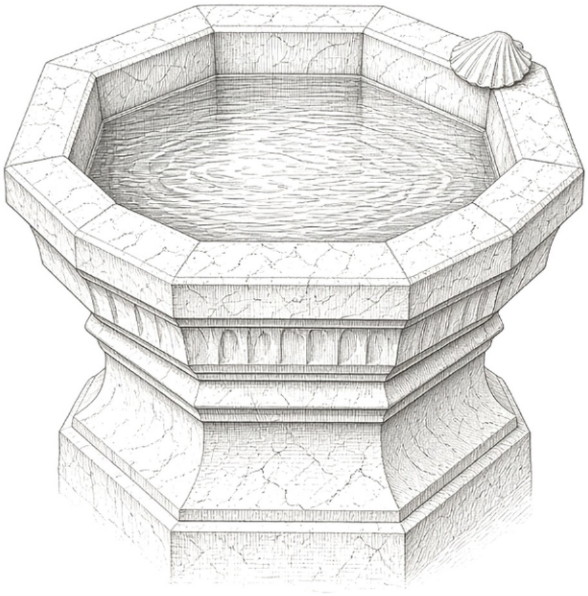
SILENT HOMILIES

The Water That Names You

The sacrament of Baptism



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures

The Water That Names You

The sacrament of Baptism

Before You Begin

†

This is not a long book, and it is not meant to be. Most of us were baptised before we could ask for it. From the back of a church it looks simple: a little water, a few words, a crying child, a photograph. It is not simple.

What follows is what the Church believes actually happens. A human being is washed, marked, and brought into a family that does not end when the lunch does. The personal name spoken over the font is beautiful. The sacrament itself is older than that name. It is water, poured or immersion, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Read it before a christening if you can. Read it after one, if the day went by too quickly. The water is dry. The name is not.

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Chapter 1

Why It Has to Be Water

†

God could have chosen fire, or oil, or a spoken word alone. He chose water. That is worth sitting with for a moment, because water is the most ordinary thing in the house. From the first page of Scripture it is also how God starts again. The Spirit hovers over the deep. The flood drowns a ruined earth, and a family comes out onto a washed world. Israel walks through the sea and is no longer a slave people. Naaman the Syrian dips in the Jordan seven times, and his flesh comes back like a child's.

Then Jesus walks into the same Jordan and asks John to baptise Him. He has no sin to wash. He is taking our river upon Himself. The voice from heaven and the dove are not a decoration. The Father speaks, the Son stands in the water, the Spirit descends. Every later font has that riverbank to point to. When the Church pours water and says the Name, she is not inventing a ceremony. She is stepping into a story that is already wet.

Jesus later says that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. The Church has always heard Baptism in that sentence. St Peter, on the day of Pentecost, tells the crowd to repent and be baptised, and he says the promise is for them and for their children. St Paul will say that in Baptism we are buried with Christ and raised with Him. The water is doing biblical work, not decorating a family day.

The earliest Christian handbook we still have, the Didache, already tells the Church to baptise in living water if she can, and to pour water on the head if she cannot. A sacrament meant for the whole human race could not depend on rare spices. It had to depend on the thing every mother

already uses to keep a child alive. In an emergency it can be the rain, or the kettle, or the hospital tap.

If you have ever stood at a font and thought, is that all, you have seen the point and missed it in the same second. Yes. That is all. God likes to hide glory in things we have already touched a thousand times. Bread. Wine. Water. The surprise is not the element. The surprise is who is using it.

Reflection

A parent holding a baby over the font is often thinking about the photograph. That is understandable. The day has guests, and the child will not remember it. What is easy to miss is that the Church has chosen the one element nobody has to send away for.

You can find this water in a palace and in a ditch. That is not a small thing if you believe the gift is for the whole human race. A religion that needed imported oil before it could make a Christian would have left most of the world waiting. This one does not.

The next time you bless yourself with the water at the church door, you are not performing a habit with no house around it. You are touching the same kind of thing that was poured over your head. Ordinary, on purpose.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, baptised in our river, teach me not to despise the water that named me. Amen.

Chapter 2

The Words That Do the Work

†

Water by itself is only water. You might wonder, then, what makes a baptism a baptism. The Church is exact about the rest. A person is baptised when water is poured over the head, or when the body is immersed, while the minister says, I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Those words are not a caption under a photograph. They are the form of the sacrament. Christ told the Eleven to make disciples and to baptise in that Name. Change the Name, and you have not done what He told them to do.

Notice the grammar. I baptise you. A particular person is being addressed. This is not a general blessing over a family. Then comes the Name above every name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism is not an initiation into a mood. The one being washed is claimed by the life of God, not by an idea.

There is a distinction worth keeping clear, because the title of this book can blur it. The Church loves to speak your own name at the font. That name is a sign of being called and of belonging. It is not what makes the sacrament. The essential reality is water and the Name of the Trinity. A child baptised in an emergency, before anyone has settled the name for the register, is still baptised.

The Church has always been careful here, because love is careful. A vague formula, or a ceremony that talks around the Trinity, is not the same gift. When there is a real doubt about whether the words and the water were used as the Church requires, a priest may baptise conditionally: If you are not baptised, I baptise you. The point is simple. No one should be left unsure, and no one should be baptised twice.

If you were present at a baptism and the words went by in a blur, say them once more, slowly, with the name of the person you love in the middle. That is what happened to them. That is what happened to you, on a day you cannot remember.

Reflection

Most of us cannot remember hearing our own name at the font. Somebody else had to answer for us, and somebody else had to listen. That is easy to treat as a gap. It is also a picture of how a Christian life begins.

You were addressed before you could answer. The sentence was not waiting for your vocabulary. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were spoken over a particular head, and the Church has been saying that sentence ever since, in kitchens and cathedrals and hospital rooms.

If you know the date, or if you can find it, say the words once this year with your own name in them. Not as a second baptism. As a remembering. The sentence did not expire when the water dried.

A Short Prayer

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, You spoke my name before I could speak Yours. Keep me inside that sentence. Amen.

Chapter 3

What the Water Washes

†

The first thing the Catechism says Baptism does is also the oldest. It washes. Original sin is forgiven. So are all personal sins, if the one being baptised has any, and so is the punishment due to them. That needs a plain explanation, because parents often hear the first half as an accusation.

Original sin is not a list of naughty things a baby has done. A baby has done none. It is the wound we inherit by being born into a human race that has already turned from God. We are born without the original holiness Adam and Eve were given. We are born into a world where death, weakness and a pull away from God are already at work. Baptism is not the Church calling the child wicked. Baptism is not an accusation against the baby. It is a rescue the baby cannot arrange.

An adult is different, and the difference matters. A man or woman baptised at the Easter Vigil may be carrying years of real sins, remembered and regretted. All of that is forgiven in the water, together with the inherited wound. St Paul tells the Romans that we are buried with Christ in Baptism and raised with Him. The old language of drowning is not a joke. The Vigil spends the night walking through creation, the flood, the sea and the Jordan, and then it brings a person to the font. He is not being given a membership card. He is being made new.

St Augustine has left us a small picture of how easily this mercy used to be delayed. As a boy he fell ill and begged to be baptised. His mother, Monica, was about to have it done. He recovered, and the baptism was put off, because in that time and place people often waited. He spent years regretting the wait. The Church's later insistence on not delaying is

partly the fruit of stories like his.

If you were baptised as an adult, you know what was washed. If you were baptised as a child, you have to take the Church's word for a mercy you cannot remember. That, too, is a kind of faith. Most of the best things done for us were done before we could say thank you.

Reflection

An adult coming out of the font is in a strange position. The past has not been deleted from the memory. Friends still know it. He still knows it. What has changed is the debt.

The Church is bold enough to say that the ledger is clear. Not because the years were small, and not because he has become impressive in an hour. Because Christ has joined him to His own death and rising, and has forgiven what the man could not undo.

If you can still remember what you brought to the water, you do not have to pretend it was nothing. You have to believe it was met. The rest of the Christian life is learning to live as someone who has already been forgiven, and who therefore has a reason to forgive.

A Short Prayer

Wash me more deeply than I can see, Lord, and keep what You have already washed. Amen.

Chapter 4

The Mark That Cannot Be Undone

†

Baptism does more than wash. It seals. The Church speaks of an indelible character, a spiritual mark that cannot be erased. You can stop going to Mass. You can argue with God for decades. You cannot un-baptise yourself. That is why the sacrament is never repeated. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, St Paul says. The Church took him at his word.

The mark is not a tattoo you can show a friend. It is a belonging. You have been configured to Christ, grafted into His Body, and made a member of the people who call God Father. Confirmation and Holy Orders will, in their own way, add further seals. Baptism is the first. Everything else in the sacramental life assumes it. This is why a priest asks, before almost anything else, whether you have been baptised.

This is a comfort and a warning in the same breath. No failure of yours can make you a stranger whom God has never claimed. The claim is also real. You can live against your baptism. You cannot live as if it did not happen. The name is still on you.

If you have been away a long time, you do not need to be baptised again. You need to come home. The font already did its work. Confession, the Eucharist, a priest who will not humiliate you: those are the next rooms. The front door is still the one that was opened over your head.

Reflection

There is a particular kind of homecoming that does not look like a ceremony. A man in his sixties comes back to a church he left at twenty. He half expects to be treated as a stranger who must begin again from nothing.

He does not. God has not forgotten a baptism the man has almost forgotten. The register may be in another parish, and the godparents may be dead. The mark is not stored in the register. The register only witnesses to it.

If that is you, you are not being asked to recover a feeling from a day you cannot remember. You are being asked to trust that the door is still open because it was never shut. Come to Confession. Come to Mass. You do not need the water again. You need to come back to the life the water began.

A Short Prayer

Christ, You marked me and did not ask my permission. Teach me to live as someone already Yours. Amen.

Chapter 5

Why We Carry Children to the Water

†

Infant baptism offends a certain modern instinct. A baby cannot choose. Therefore, the instinct says, wait. The Church has heard that instinct for a long time and has not agreed with it. The reason is not that a baby's freedom does not matter. It is that grace is a gift before it is a choice, and a child is already in need of the rescue the rest of us needed.

People sometimes say the Acts of the Apostles proves the practice, because whole households are baptised: Lydia's, the jailer's, the household of Stephanas. Those passages matter. They show Baptism taking hold of a family, not only of a lone adult. They do not, by themselves, say that infants were in the room. An honest reading stops there. The direction of the Church's life has to be taken from what she did next, and from why.

By the middle of the third century the practice is no longer a guess. Around the year 253, a bishop called Fidus wrote to St Cyprian of Carthage asking whether baptism should wait until the eighth day, on the old pattern of circumcision. A synod of sixty-six bishops answered no. An infant should not be refused the water. They were speaking of a custom they already knew, not inventing one. St Augustine, who had himself been made to wait, later said the Church's practice of baptising children came from the apostles. Historians still debate how early the first infants were carried to the font. They do not debate that the Church, once she spoke clearly, refused to leave children outside.

The theological reason is close to the parental one. Love does not wait for a child to request food. Grace is not ruder than love. Parents who bring a baby to the font are not forcing a personality. They are placing a son or

daughter inside a mercy they themselves received. The child will, in time, have to live the faith with his own life. Confirmation does not make the baptism real. It strengthens the grace Baptism has already given, and binds the person more firmly to the Church. Sunday after Sunday does the rest of the living. None of that undoes the fact that the door can be opened before the child can knock.

There is an old, honest pastoral question. What if there is no real hope that the child will be brought up in the faith? Baptism is not a photograph. The Church asks for a founded hope that the infant will be raised Catholic. If that hope is altogether lacking, the baptism is delayed, and the parents are told the reason. Godparents exist for the same reason. Someone has to answer, and someone has to remain. If you are preparing a christening, the most important work is not the flowers. It is the hope. Can this child be walked toward the same water later, as a boy who prays, as a girl who knows she is named? If the answer is yes, bring the baby. If the answer is not yet, tell the truth and let the priest help you get there. The font will wait. It has waited for worse delays than yours.

Reflection

Before you could promise anything, other people promised for you. A mother, perhaps. A godparent who may since have lost your address. They renounced sin in your name and professed the faith in your name, and the Church accepted the promise.

That can look, later, like a liberty taken. It is also how every child begins. Somebody feeds you before you can ask. Somebody carries you before you can walk. Baptism simply refuses to make grace the one gift that must wait until you are articulate.

The promises are still yours to keep or to neglect. They were never a cage. They were a door held open by hands that were not your own. If those hands have failed you since, the promise they made to God has not become a lie. It has become your invitation.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we carried our children before they could walk. Teach us to carry them to You. Amen.

Chapter 6

Oil, Cloth, and a Lighted Candle

†

The water is the sacrament. Everything else is the Church teaching with her hands. It helps to know that, because a christening can feel like a sequence of objects, and a parent can wonder which part is the part that matters.

Before the pouring, in the rite many parishes still use, the child is signed with the Oil of Catechumens, a sign of strength for the fight that a Christian life will be. After the pouring, sacred chrism is put on the crown of the head. Chrism is the fragrant oil used at Confirmation and at the ordination of priests. A baptised person is anointed as Christ was anointed: priest, prophet and king, in the small and real sense that belongs to every member of His people. St Paul says that whoever is baptised into Christ has put on Christ. For a few minutes the Church makes that sentence visible.

Then a white garment. The early Church took this further than we usually do. The newly baptised at Easter wore white through the following week, and the Sunday after Easter came to be called White Sunday for that reason, the day the white things were laid aside. A baby looks slightly astonished in a gown that is too large. An adult at the Vigil looks like someone who has just been given a future. Both looks are correct.

Then a candle, lit from the Paschal candle, the tall pillar that was itself lit in the dark of the Vigil. Receive the light of Christ. Keep it burning. Parents and godparents are told to see that the flame does not go out. It is a domestic instruction disguised as a ceremony. Someone has to take the fire home.

If the gown is in a drawer and the candle is in a box, take them out on the anniversary. Light the wick. Tell the story. These things go stale when they are only stored. They wake when they are used.

Reflection

The candle is the easiest part of the day to lose. It is thin, it leans, and it ends up in a cupboard behind the photographs. The instruction attached to it is larger than the wax.

Somebody was told to keep a light burning for a person who could not yet keep it. That is most of Christian parenthood, and most of what a godparent is for. Not a second set of opinions. A promise to notice if the flame goes out.

You do not have to reconstruct the whole christening to keep the promise. One evening a year is enough to begin. Find the date if you can. Light what you have. Say whose name was spoken, and whose Name was spoken over it.

A Short Prayer

Christ, our light, keep a flame in the house that still owes You its name. Amen.

Chapter 7

Who May Pour

†

The ordinary ministers of Baptism are the bishop, the priest and the deacon. That is the Church's usual order, and it is how almost every parish christening happens. There is a reason for the order. Baptism brings a person into the Church, and the Church's ministers are the normal hands for that.

Baptism is also necessary in a way the other sacraments are not. So the Church, with a kind of holy urgency, says that anyone may baptise in a true emergency, even someone who is not baptised, if they do what the Church does. The conditions are few, and they are not optional. Real water. The words: I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The intention to do what Christians do when they baptise. Pour the water, or immerse, while the words are said.

Hospitals know this. Midwives have known it. The font is the ideal. A cup of water and a frightened voice saying the Name is enough when death is at the door. This is not an invitation to baptise a healthy baby in a kitchen because the church date is inconvenient. Where there is no danger, wait for the priest. The generosity is for the moment when waiting would be too late.

If the person lives, tell the priest. The baptism is not repeated. It is recorded. A ceremony in church may supply the missing signs, the oil, the garment and the candle, but the door has already opened. Parents who have done this in a delivery room are sometimes shy to mention it. They should mention it. The Church wants the truth in the register, not a second washing.

If you have ever baptised someone in a hurry, or been present when it was done, you have touched the sacrament at its most bare. No hymns. No flowers. Only the Name, and water, and a soul. That is how close the thing always was.

Reflection

When a life is running out, God asks for very little. Water. His Name. The intention to do what the Church does. Another human being, who may be frightened and may not share the faith.

That small list is not the Church lowering her standards. It is the Church saying that a dying child, or a dying adult who asks, should not be left outside because the right minister is on another corridor. The same Church that is exact about the words is lavish about who may say them, when the hour requires it.

If you are a nurse, a midwife, a parent or a friend who may one day be that person, learn the sentence before you need it. Write it in the back of something you keep. The moment for looking it up is a bad moment.

A Short Prayer

Lord, thank You that the door can open in a kitchen as well as in a cathedral. Amen.

Chapter 8

When There Is No Water

†

The Church holds two things together, and both matter. The Lord says that no one can enter the kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit, and she will not soften that. Baptism is necessary for salvation. She also refuses to make God smaller than His own mercy. God has bound salvation to the sacrament. He Himself is not bound by His sacraments.

There are two old companions of the font, and they are not the same thing. Baptism of desire is the name for those who wanted the water and died before it could be poured. A catechumen killed on the way to the Vigil is the clearest case. He had already asked. The Church says he did not miss the mercy because the calendar did. The desire is not a loophole. It is a reaching that God can complete.

There is a wider mercy, and it should not be collapsed into that sentence. The Church also teaches that those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and His Church, but sincerely seek God and try to do His will, may be saved. She does not pretend they were baptised. She trusts God with them. Implicit desire, as theologians have sometimes called it, is not the same as a catechumen who died with the date already booked.

Baptism of blood is the other old name. It belongs to those who die for Christ before they can reach the font. The early Church buried catechumens who had been killed for the Name with the honour of martyrs. Blood, in that case, did what water does. It is not a metaphor for a hard life. It is death borne for Christ.

None of this is a reason to postpone a baptism that can be done. Mercy is not an excuse for delay. It is a net under a sacrament that God Himself

made necessary. If you have lost an unbaptised child, or a friend who was on the way, you may trust the size of God without pretending the font does not matter. Both sentences can be true at once. The Church has been saying them together for a very long time.

Reflection

A family that could not reach the water is often left with a cruel arithmetic. We should have called sooner. We should have known the words. The Church does not hand that family a verdict.

She hands them two truths, and asks them to hold both. The font matters, which is why she runs toward it. God is not smaller than the font, which is why she will not speak as if His mercy stops at the parish boundary.

If you are carrying a child, or a parent, whom you could not bring to the water, you are allowed to pray for them by name and to leave the result with God. Grief does not have to become a doctrine. Trust is enough for the night.

A Short Prayer

God of the font and of the thief on the cross, keep all whom we could not carry to the water. Amen.

Chapter 9

One Baptism

†

Because the mark cannot be undone, the Church recognises a baptism once it has been validly given, even if it was given outside her visible walls. A great many Christians baptised in other communities, with water and the Triune Name, and with the intention of doing what Christ commanded, are not baptised again when they come into full communion. They are received. That door has already been opened. What follows is the rest of the house.

This is not a courtesy, and it is not a claim that every Christian community baptises validly. Some do not use the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Some do not intend Christian baptism at all. A priest has to ask. Where was it done? By whom? With what words? With what water? The questions can sound nosy. They are how the Church refuses to wash again a person Christ has already claimed, and how she refuses to pretend a ceremony was a baptism when it was not.

When there is a serious doubt, she baptises conditionally, so that the person is not left standing in a doorway no one can find later. When there is no doubt, she will not repeat what the Lord has already done. One baptism means one.

Ecumenism, at its most honest, begins here. We may disagree about the Pope, about the Mass, about a dozen other things. If the Name was spoken and the water was poured as the Lord commanded, we already share a death and a rising. That is not nothing. It is the first thing. The divisions are still with us. A valid baptism is already something shared.

If you are not sure whether you were baptised, or how, say so. Uncertainty can be healed. Guesswork in the register cannot.

Reflection

Christians who remain divided can still look back to the same Trinitarian water. That does not dissolve the divisions. It tells you what the divisions are dividing.

A Catholic and a Baptist and an Orthodox Christian may not yet share one altar. If each was washed in the Name the Lord gave, they already share a birth. The argument about what comes next is a family argument, even when it is a painful one.

The next time you hear of a baptism in another church, you do not have to pretend the differences are small. You also do not have to pretend the water was nothing. Ask what was done. Then honour whatever Christ has already claimed.

A Short Prayer

One Lord, one faith, one baptism. Make us as single as that sentence. Amen.

Chapter 10

Living the Wet Name

†

Baptism is a beginning that looks like an ending. Something of the old life is buried with Christ. Someone is raised. Then the rest of life arrives, with breakfast and weather and the long work of becoming what the water already said you are.

The name you were given at the font, your own name, spoken inside the Name of God, is meant to be used. Sign yourself with holy water when you come into church. That small gesture is a remembering. You are walking back through the door you did not see. Keep the date if you can find it in a register. A person who does not know when they were born can still live. A person who does not know they were born of water will live as if the house has no front door.

Teach the children the story before they are old enough to find it embarrassing. Show them the font. Light the candle. Say: this is where you were named. Not only by us. By Him. Embarrassment will pass. The name will not.

If these pages have done their work, the next baptism you attend will not be a blur of hats and phones. You will watch the water and the words, and you will know what you are seeing. A human being is being joined to Christ's death and rising, and brought into a family that can keep them when every other family fails.

Reflection

The easiest baptism to overlook is your own. Other people's are in the diary. Yours is a date on a certificate, or a story your mother told once.

You do not need a new ceremony to take it seriously. You need the life that assumes it. Confession when you have walked away from it. Mass, because the family you were born into gathers there. A sign of the cross with the water at the door, done as if you meant the door.

The water dried on the morning it was poured. The claim did not. Living it is mostly ordinary: telling the truth, forgiving sooner than you prefer, and not treating Sunday as a suggestion. That is not a second sacrament. It is the first one, still at work.

A Short Prayer

Lord, I was named before I could answer. Let my life be the answer. Amen.

A Last Word

†

If these pages have done their quiet work, the next font you pass will not be a piece of furniture. You will know what it is for.

Keep the book if it helps. Give it to someone who is about to carry a child to the water, or to someone who has forgotten that they were carried.

May you remember the day, even if you cannot remember the hour. May you come home if you have been away. The font already did its work.

Sources and Further Reading

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Scripture: Genesis 1:2; Genesis 6–9; Exodus 14; 2 Kings 5; Matthew 3:13–17; Matthew 28:19; John 3:5; Acts 2:38–39; Acts 16; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:20–21.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1213–1284, especially 1250 on infants, 1257–1261 on the necessity of Baptism, baptism of desire and those who do not know the Gospel, 1262–1274 on the effects and the indelible character, and 1275–1284 on the baptismal priesthood and the white garment.

Code of Canon Law, 849 on what Baptism is, 861 on the minister and emergency baptism, 864–871, especially 867–868 on infant baptism and a well-founded hope of a Catholic upbringing, and 875–878 on sponsors and the register. The Order of Baptism of Children, on the questions, the oils, the white garment and the candle. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, on the catechumenate and the Easter Vigil.

The Didache 7, on baptising in the Name, in living water where possible, and by pouring where necessary. St Cyprian of Carthage, Letter 64, and the synod of about 253, on not refusing baptism to infants. St Augustine, Confessions 1.11, on his own delayed baptism. The old name White Sunday, Dominica in albis, for the octave on which the newly baptised laid aside their white garments.

Carry Them to the Font

†

A font looks simple when you stand beside it. Someone had to carry the child there. Someone had to learn the words. Someone had to keep the register, and someone, years later, has to explain what the water did.

These pages are free to read. A gift is not payment for them. They are already yours. What a gift adds, if you are able to give one through the Silent Homilies website, is help towards the next person who needs the explanation: the hours with Scripture, the Catechism, the canons, Cyprian and Augustine, so that a difficult mercy is said simply and said truly.

I would be truly grateful. It is a practical help with time and resources, not a condition of reading. If you cannot give, nothing is owed.

Give the booklet to parents preparing a baptism. Find your own date and pray for the person who carried you. Or help someone who has been away to see that they do not need a second washing. They need to come home. www.silenthomilies.com

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