

Why Confess to a Priest?

By MARTIN J. SCOTT, S.J.

You affirm that you are a Christian, yet you deny the doctrine of Confession. Isn't that rather inconsistent?

Inconsistent? What do you mean? Why can't a man be a Christian without believing in Confession?

Christians believe in the Apostles' Creed, and make its recitation part of their service. Now that Creed states distinctly the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins. That is why I said it is inconsistent to deny Confession and affirm oneself a Christian.

I return the compliment, and say that you are inconsistent in affirming that belief in the forgiveness of sin means belief in Confession. Of course, the Creed states the forgiveness of sins, but not in confession to a priest.

You admit, since you are a Christian, that Christ is God, and that to the Church He founded He delegated certain of His Divine powers. One of such powers was that of forgiving sin. He said solemnly: "As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you . . . Receive ye the Holy Ghost whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." (Saint John xx. 23).

Well, I don't see how that implies confession to a priest.

By the very fact that the Church has the power of forgiving or not forgiving sins, it follows that the sins must be known by those who exercise this power. From the days of the Apostles, it has been the duly authorised ministers of the Church who have exercised this power.

I am not convinced that the forgiveness of sin implies the confession of sin, or that the priest has the power to forgive sin. I think you quote the Bible to suit your belief. Unless I am mistaken, the Bible distinctly says: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

You are not mistaken. Those are the very words of Christ Himself, and they are recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

How then can man forgive sin, in view of that plain declaration?

God alone forgives sin by His own power and in His name. The priest forgives sin, not in his own name nor by his own power, but by delegated power, somewhat the same as an ambassador acting for his sovereign. It is for this reason that Saint Paul said of the ministers of the Church: "For Christ we are ambassadors" (2 Cor. v. 20). Christ first demonstrated that He has the power to forgive sins and then He delegated this power to the Church.

You say that Christ demonstrated His power to forgive sins. Demonstration means giving actual proof. Where in the Bible do we read that Christ gave evidence for His right and power to forgive sins? I'm asking this just for information.

Since you appeal to the Bible, I shall point out the demonstration as given in the Bible. Before I refer you to the text, however, let me say that the appeal to the Bible in order to justify Christian belief and practice is not the only way to justify Christian Faith. The Church was widely and firmly established before the Gospels were written. They are merely a partial documentary record of Christian belief and practice.

To give you an example, the Bible commands us to keep holy the Sabbath day. As you know, the Sabbath day is Saturday. Christians, however, keep Sunday holy. There is not a word in the Bible about keeping Sunday, instead of Saturday, as the day of Christian worship. How then did it come about? The Church, Divinely authorised, made the change. If you appeal to the Bible for justification for Sunday as the day of worship, you will not find it. I mention this in

passing, in order that you may know that the Bible is not the sole authority for Christian belief and practice. The living Church, not a book, is God's spokesman to mankind.

However, as you lay such stress on the Bible, let me ask you to turn to Saint Luke v, 21; Saint Matthew ix, 2; or Saint Mark II, 3, and there you will find a positive demonstration of Christ's power to forgive sins. Although if you believe that Christ is God, I don't see why you want that power demonstrated.

I'm sorry to admit that, although I asked you for Biblical corroboration of your statement, I haven't a Bible. Do you mind giving me the substance of the demonstration as found in the Gospels?

I am glad to do so for several reasons, principal of which is that it affords evidence furnished by His very opponents. While Jesus was preaching to the multitude on a certain occasion (Saint Luke v, i 8) He was interrupted by the approach of four men carrying on a stretcher a helpless cripple. Jesus knew that they expected Him to cure this palsied old man, as He had cured so many others. But first He did something entirely unexpected.

Let me explain: The Jewish leaders had turned against Jesus because He declared that His Kingdom was not of this world. Moreover, on various occasions, He had pointed out their vices and reproved them for their injustices. Hence they determined to destroy Him. They were afraid to act openly against Him, because they feared the people, who regarded Him as a prophet. Accordingly they trailed Him, observing everything He did, in order to accuse Him of some breach of the Jewish or Roman law. Their purpose was to have Him haled before the Roman or Hebrew tribunal, and thus have Him discredited, and, if possible, put to death.

Jesus, knowing their evil designs, and knowing that there were agents or spies from the Jewish Council present, took advantage of the fact to exercise a power which the Jews attributed to God alone—namely, to forgive sin. In the hearing of the multitude, He said to the cripple: "Man. thy sins are forgiven thee." This exercise of Divine power startled the multitude. For the Jews did not believe that any man, not even Moses, could forgive sin.

"And the Scribes and Pharisees began to think, saying: Who is this man who speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone? And when Jesus knew their thoughts, answering, He said to them: What is it you think in your hearts? Which is easier to say: Thy sins are forgiven thee; or to say: Arise and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, He saith to the sick of the palsy: I say to thee, arise, take up thy bed and go into thy house. And immediately rising before them, he took up the bed on which he lay, and he went into his own house, glorifying God. And all were astonished, and they glorified God" (Saint Luke, V, 21-26).

But did not the prophet Nathan forgive the sin of David? Why then did the Jewish leaders on this occasion accuse Jesus of blasphemy because He forgave sin?

Nathan did not forgive sin in his own name, but in the name of God, saying: "The Lord hath taken away thy sin (2 Kings xii, 13). But Christ by His own power forgave sin. Consider for a moment the nature of what Jesus did on this occasion. Anyone could say to another: "Thy sins are forgiven thee," but how could we know they were forgiven? Jesus virtually said to those who accused Him of blasphemy: "You say that only God can forgive sin, and you are right. But that you may know that I am God, I am going to do what you admit no one but God can do. Only God, merely by a word, can restore this cripple to soundness of limb. If, therefore, I by a word heal the body of this man, a thing which all of you may see, you will know that My word also heals his soul which you can not see."

I must admit that no one, after that manifestation of Christ's Divinity, may reasonably question His power to forgive sin; but how does that have a bearing on the doctrine of confession to a priest?

I am leading up to that. You know that Jesus came upon this earth in order to show us the way to a blessed eternal life, and to give us the aid to walk in that way. By His doctrine, He teaches us what we should believe, and by His sacraments, He aids us to live by that belief. He knows our nature and He knows our human frailty. Among other aids, He instituted the Sacrament of Penance, in order that those who might lose His friendship by sin would be able to regain it by

repentance. By the Sacrament of Penance He empowered the ministers of His Church to grant pardon in His name to those who sinned. This is known as delegated power, such as is termed in law the power of attorney. If a person of influence and wealth desires for some reason to have another person act in his name, he gives that person power of attorney. This is done by stating in the presence of witnesses that he designates a certain person to represent him in his financial and other affairs. The person so designated, previous to his appointment, might not be able to have a bank cash a cheque for fifty dollars. But five minutes after his appointment, if he presented a cheque for fifty thousand dollars, every bank in the country would be glad to cash it. What made the difference? The delegation of power conferred on him by one who possessed the power.

Now this is precisely what Christ did by the institution of the Sacrament of Penance. "As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you." When He had said this, He breathed on them and He said to them: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them: and whose sins you shall retain they are retained" (Saint John XX, 21). If these solemn words have any meaning, they confer on the ministers of Christ's religion the power which the priest exercises in the confessional when in God's name he absolves the penitent sinner.

Why is it that, in face of these Bible words, some Christian denominations reject confession to anyone but God alone?

For the same reason that they reject the Mass and other Sacraments instituted by the Divine Founder of Christianity, By their fundamental doctrine of private judgment, they constitute themselves the interpreters of the Bible, and thus accept from Scripture whatever meaning suits them, with the result that they virtually become founders of their own religion.

Is that the reason that there are literally hundreds of Christian sects, each one at variance with the others?

Precisely. But Christ founded one Church only. He founded a Church, not churches. And Saint Paul declared that any religion different from the one preached by the Apostles was false, even if preached by an angel from Heaven (Gal. i, 8). Every Christian denomination except the Catholic Church has as its founder someone who was not Christ. History gives the name and date of the human founder of every Christian sect. If an angel from Heaven was not entitled to preach a doctrine different from that of the Apostles, surely no human being was entitled to do so.

You doubtless imply that the Catholic Church, and she alone, is the Church of the Apostles?

Absolutely. She is the only Church that teaches everything in the Apostles' Creed. One of the articles of that Creed is: I believe in the Holy Catholic Church. The Catholic Church not only teaches everything that the Apostles held, but she is the only Church that goes back in unbroken line of succession to the Apostles. If the Apostles returned to earth today, they would find that every doctrine they taught was now the Creed of the Catholic Church. But if the founders of the other denominations came back to earth, they could hardly recognise the churches they founded, so much have they changed.

To return now to Confession. The main thing to realise regarding confession to a priest is that the priest in the confessional is the representative of Christ. The priest is, as it were, a wire from earth to Heaven. When the sinner confesses to the priest, it is really to God that he confesses. When the penitent receives absolution from the priest, it is God Who forgives.

It requires a lot of faith to believe that.

Precisely, and that is one reason why Christ instituted this Sacrament. Every time a penitent kneels in the confessional, he is making an act of faith in Christ as the Divine Founder of the Catholic religion. And let me say, in passing, that no merely human being could have instituted confession to a priest. Unless it was God Who instituted this Sacrament, it never could have obtained acceptance among mankind.

I quite agree with you on that point. However, an objection which I have always had to confession to a priest is that it

is awfully embarrassing, not to say humiliating, to disclose one's secret sins to a fellow-man, even though that man be a priest of God

I agree with you that, at least in some cases, it is humiliating and embarrassing to confess one's sins to a fellow-man. But this again is one of the reasons for the institution of this Sacrament. Sin is an act of pride. It is opposing one's will to that of the Creator. It is only fitting that an act of humility should in part atone for the act of pride implied in the defiance of God's law.

Really, that is a feature of confession I never adverted to. Yet there is a good deal of truth in what you say.

Yes. If you analyse sin, you will find that it is a defiance of the Creator by the creature. The sinner virtually says to God: Not Thy will, but mine, be done. Of course, the sinner does not actually say those words, but he acts them, which is worse. That is what makes sin so serious. An act which constitutes a sin—I mean, of course, a mortal sin—is a deliberate transgression of a serious law of God. Such an act breaks the friendship between God and man, as is evident. An act of humility is an appropriate means of restoring that friendship. Let me say, however, that ordinarily Confession is not humiliating. In fact, it is one of the most consoling practices of the Catholic Church. For, as you know, although Confession is necessary in case of mortal sins only, it is advisable for minor or venial sins. It is known that many a Pope went to Confession every day, not because he had serious sin on his soul, but in order to receive the grace of the Sacrament, and, furthermore, in order to employ every means possible to be a worthy celebrant of Mass, and to be, as far as humanly possible, a worthy representative of his Lord and Master.

For Confession not only remits sin, but is also a preventive of sin. Before Confession, the penitent examines his conscience, taking a sort of spiritual inventory of his soul, viewing it, as it were, in a spiritual mirror. In this way he finds just how he stands with the Lord. This regular examination is a very great help to keep from slipping into serious sin, for, when a person is careful about minor faults, he is not likely to fall into those which are serious. Besides all this, there is the grace of the Sacrament, Sanctifying Grace, which is conferred every time one goes to Confession. It is safe to say that no one who is faithful to Confession is in danger of losing his soul. You see, therefore, that the Sacraments are not mere arbitrary institutions, but a means devised by Divine Wisdom and Goodness for the salvation and sanctification of mankind.

Nevertheless, I have often heard it said that Confession is an encouragement to Sin.

You might as well say that medicine is an encouragement to illness. Because a physician may remedy an ailment is no reason for incurring the ailment. It is true that Confession gives a remission of sin, but only to those who are rightly disposed. If a person, for instance, stole a sum of money and went to Confession with the intention of stealing again after forgiveness, his sin would not be forgiven if he went to Confession a hundred times. Moreover, unless he agreed to restore the stolen money, he could not receive forgiveness. It is so with regard to every other sin. The intention of doing one's best to avoid the sin in the future, and of doing all in one's power to repair whatever loss or harm that was caused by the sin, are conditions requisite for forgiveness.

Still, I know people who go to Confession regularly, and I don't see much improvement in them.

Confession will not ordinarily change one's nature. Each one of us has certain characteristic traits, some good, some bad. Such traits, if bad, result naturally in various undesirable and even reprehensible actions. These actions, because they are not the result of malice or ill-will, are not serious sins—in fact, may be no sins at all, but simply defects of one's character. Such defects generally may be minimised but hardly eradicated by Confession, even with the best of goodwill. In not a few cases, however, even these characteristic defects are uprooted by the practice of Confession.

How about those persons who go regularly to Confession and yet disgust people by their lack of the ordinary decencies of life?

My dear sir, respectability is not virtue, nor is vulgarity vice. A person may have bad manners, but be willing to die

rather than commit a mortal sin. Some of the most vicious persons, on the other hand, are models of good breeding. There are cultured people who would vigorously denounce a breach of etiquette, but who would think nothing of boasting of intimacy with another's husband or wife.

This is not to say that religion has not a refining, and even a most refining, influence on life, but only to reply to those who judge of virtue by social refinement. There are those who actually judge the truth of religion by the respectability or prosperity of its adherents. By this standard the Apostles would fare badly. When Jesus and His disciples stood before Herod, they compared socially very unfavourably with that ruler and his court. But Herod and his court were steeped in vice, regardless of their external respectability.

Should not Confession, however, curb the selfishness and other low tendencies in those who go to Confession regularly?

My dear sir, human nature is ordinarily a stubborn beast. It yields grudgingly to corrective and refining influences. After three years' association with Jesus, the Apostles still retained many of their characteristic defects. Nevertheless, they suffered torture and death for living and preaching His doctrine. You will find, however, that wherever true religion is practised for a sufficient period, it produces in the entire community the loftiest standards of true culture known to mankind. The peasants of Oberammergau are evidence of this virtuous effect of Christian precept and practice. Moreover, although those who go frequently to Confession should have pretty much the same minor accusations to make, they might have much more serious sins to confess if they neglected Confession.

I must admit that you have cleared up a good deal of misunderstanding I have had about Confession. I readily perceive that if it is rightly practised, it is indeed a most effective help for virtuous living.

Confession is, nevertheless, one of the things about the Catholic Church which frequently deters persons from entering it. When, however, such persons eventually embrace the Faith, they find that Confession is one of the most consoling and helpful practices. For, in the confessional, one may open one's soul as to God. The confessor is not only a dispenser of God's mercy, but also a sympathetic friend and capable advisor. There are things which men and women would not discuss with any living being but which they freely confide to their confessor and abide by his counsel. Jesus said: "Not they who are well need the physician, but they who are ill." There are ailments of the soul as well as of the body. In the confessional, the priest is the physician of the soul.

What reply would you make to opponents of Catholicism who assert that the priest in the confessional has the opportunity of doing harm as well as good to the penitent, and that he often makes use of his information for his own ends, which are sometimes very base ends?

To this charge I answer that there is no institution on earth so safeguarded against abuse as the confessional. It is not on record that a priest ever betrayed a confessional secret, even though he had to suffer imprisonment, exile or death for his fidelity to his sacred trust. As a class, the priests are the most virtuous body of men in the world, consecrated by vow to live chaste lives, and whose sacred duty it is to help others to live virtuously. Christ Himself was falsely accused on various occasions, and we should not be surprised that the ministers of His Sacraments should meet with like treatment.

What would you reply to a person who said he was content with keeping the Ten Commandments, and, as long as he did that, there was no need of going to Confession?

To that person I would say that the surest way of keeping the Commandments is God's way. He Who gave us the Commandments is also the Author of human nature, and, knowing our nature as only He can know it, He has instituted Confession as a most effective way of living as He has commanded us to live.

But suppose a person knows he is not guilty of mortal sin, why should he go to Confession, for you stated previously

that Confession was necessary for mortal sin only?

True, Confession is necessary in case of mortal sin only. But he who aims solely at avoiding mortal sin is on slippery ground. A prudent man not only avoids crossing the danger line, but keeps at a safe distance from it. A person who values his health avoids not only deadly disease, but the minor ailments which may lead to it. He who confesses venial sins receive the Sanctifying Grace of the Sacrament, and besides, by the preparation which Confession entails, makes a check-up on his spiritual state, observes tendencies to serious faults, and thus, by foreseeing danger, avoids it.

People who are conscious of no serious disease go at stated times to a doctor for a general examination. The confessional affords a spiritual check-up, and he who is solicitous for his soul's welfare will avail himself of it, not only for mortal sin but also for venial sins. Nuns in convents, priests, members of religious orders, rarely have serious matter for confession, yet go to Confession regularly every week or oftener. It is a wise counsel to resist beginnings, for a remedy is often too late, not only for health of body, but also for health of soul. Frequent Confession of venial sins may not free one from imperfections, but will surely keep one from serious lapse.

Now that we are on the subject of Confession, there is a matter in connection with it about which I am hazy. Do you mind informing me just what is meant by an indulgence?

In order to understand the doctrine of indulgences, it is necessary to have a right understanding of sin. Sin—that is, mortal sin — means knowingly, freely and deliberately doing what is against God's important commands. If a person at the time of doing the act does not know that the act is seriously wrong, or if knowing it to be wrong, he is not free to do it or not to do it, or if he does it thoughtlessly—that is, without deliberation—the act is not a mortal sin. You see, therefore, a mortal sin means deliberately doing what you know to be seriously wrong, and doing it willingly. Such an act is clearly a defiance of the Divine Lawgiver. Because the Lawgiver does not immediately chastise the offender does not lessen the offence.

If a person seriously violates a law of the state, two consequences follow. First, he loses his citizenship, and, secondly, he is sentenced to a term of imprisonment. If a person seriously breaks God's law, two consequences follow. First, he loses his citizenship or inheritance to the Kingdom of God, and, secondly, he is subject to chastisement. By absolution in Confession his citizenship or eternal inheritance is restored and his obligation to undergo eternal chastisement in hell is remitted. But the obligation to submit to some chastisement here and now or hereafter in Purgatory frequently remains. This chastisement is termed the temporal chastisement due to sin. It is ordinarily satisfied by some act of penance.

Now, an indulgence means that, after the guilt and eternal consequences of sin are remitted, the temporal punishment due to sin is mitigated by the power conferred on the Church by her Divine Founder. "I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven," etc. (Saint Matthew xvi, 19). Drawing on her spiritual treasury of satisfactions offered to God by Christ and all the Saints, the Church enables the repentant sinner to satisfy for the temporal punishment incurred by sin, by a milder form of penance. That is why it is called an indulgence.

To illustrate: In the early ages of the Church the temporal punishment due to sin after the guilt was remitted was satisfied by long and severe penances, sometimes of days, years or even for life. An indulgence means that the chastisement due to sin, which was satisfied by former severe penances, can now be satisfied by works of mercy, or approved devotions, or various acts which have a tendency to make one grateful and pious. When the priest in the confessional gives a penance for sins committed, it may or may not satisfy for the chastisement due. Only God is the judge of the satisfaction, for only God knows the heart of the sinner. For this reason, Catholics often offer up self-imposed reparation for their sins, in the hope that it will satisfy the justice of God.

I am still a bit confused about indulgences. Would you mind clarifying them a little more?

By an indulgence, the Church substitutes prescribed acts of piety and mercy as satisfaction for sin, instead of those severe canonical penances of the early ages. For instance, if you gain an indulgence of forty days or seven years, it means that, by complying with the conditions of the indulgence, you satisfy for sins to the same extent as did those who, in the

early days of the Church, performed penances of forty days, seven years, etc. A plenary indulgence means the total remission of the temporal punishment due to sin. If a person should die directly after receiving a plenary indulgence, he would go straight to Heaven, provided, of course, that the indulgence was gained in its perfection.

Does that mean that a life-long sinner or a murderer would go straight to Heaven if he gained a plenary indulgence at the point of death?

Yes, if he gained an indulgence perfectly, which means if having the desire to gain it, he complied fully with the conditions for gaining the indulgence.

Doesn't that encourage one to put off conversion to the last moment, and meanwhile to go on sinning? Doesn't it look rather unjust?

Jesus did not think so. It was He Who granted the first plenary indulgence, and He granted it to a murderer who was at the very point of death. It was on Calvary, when the criminal on the cross alongside Jesus turned to Him and said: "Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom." And Jesus answered him: "This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise." By these words, Jesus remitted all the temporal punishment due to that criminal's sins. By temporal punishment is meant, as you know, the chastisement which must be undergone either in this life or in Purgatory hereafter.

Unless I mistake, you said previously that an indulgence was possible only after the guilt of the sin was remitted, but Jesus did not remit the guilt in that case, but bestowed Paradise directly, without any reference to guilt.

When Jesus changed water into wine at Cana, He made no reference to the miraculous thing which He effected by His will only. So in the case of the criminal to whom He granted a plenary indulgence, He made no reference to guilt. Doubtless He saw in the soul of this man all the conditions requisite for absolution, and having remitted the guilt of his sins, He then remitted the temporal punishment as well. If you remember, the criminal, before he asked Jesus to remember him in His Kingdom, made an act of contrition in his own way, saying to the other criminal: "Neither dost thou fear God, seeing that thou art under the same condemnation? *And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done no evil.*" (Saint Luke xxxiii, 40). That was not only an act of contrition, but also of sublime faith as well, for he proclaimed the crucified Jesus to be his God: "Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into *Thy kingdom.*"

But all deathbed confessions are not like that. Take, for instance, the case of Dutch Schultz, who received the last Sacraments a few years ago. That man's life was spent in racketeering, murdering and vicious deeds of the vilest character. Yet he asked for a priest when dying and received the last Sacraments. Do you believe it was right for that man to go to Heaven, simply because at the last moment he received the rites of the Church?

Who said he went to Heaven? Who said he obtained complete remission of the temporal consequences of sin? God alone knew the disposition of his soul. If he was not rightly disposed, and God is the judge, the rites of the Church did not save him from either the eternal or the temporal consequences of his evil life. The Sacraments of the Church are administered to all who request them, but it does not follow that they produce their effect on those who are not rightly disposed to receive them. It is probable that Judas received Holy Communion, but it possibly did not benefit him to salvation.

So the last rites which are administered to all those who desire to receive them depend for their effect on the cooperation of the recipient. Dutch Schultz, even if the guilt of his sins was remitted, may have to satisfy for the temporal chastisement due them by suffering in Purgatory to the end of time. Don't think that you can fool the Lord. If we have a sense of justice, so has He Who made us.

Just the same, it seems hardly equitable that a hardened sinner should be saved by a last minute conversion, while others struggle against evil all their lives in order to save their souls.

To that I make the reply of Jesus in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, in which those who entered at the last hour of the day received the same hire as those who laboured all the day long. To each one of those who complained of this Jesus said: "Is thy eye evil because I am good?" (Saint Matthew xx, 5). Let us be solicitous for our own salvation, and leave God's mercy and justice to His own wise dispensation.

Another thing often bothers me about confession to a priest. Suppose the priest is a bad man, in the state of sin, how can he be the representative of God in the confessional?

Saint Peter denied his Master with an oath; yet Christ made him His representative on earth. Saint Peter had his human weaknesses all through life, yet he was the Vicar of Christ. A judge who dispenses justice in the State tribunal may be a morally bad man, but his decisions are as much respected as those of a virtuous judge. Peter as the Vicar of Christ, a judge as the administrator of the law, and a priest as the minister of God's mercy in the confessional, act not in their personal but official capacities, which are independent of their private morality.

Of course, an official should, and generally does, conduct himself in a manner befitting his dignity, but, in case he fails to do so, it does not affect his official acts. However, let it be said that if any body of men on this earth have shown themselves worthy of acting as the ministers of God, it is the Catholic priesthood.

I am glad I've had this talk with you. It has cleared up a lot of misconceptions I have had regarding Confession.

I hope I have made it clear that Confession is not a merely arbitrary institution, but a Sacrament admirably adapted to the needs and welfare of mankind. Confession not only fosters piety, but also enables one to acquire great merit from the sacramental grace which flows from this Divine institution. This is why saints as well as sinners have recourse to Confession—the saints in order to advance in holiness, the sinners in order to repair the past and to enter upon the sure road which leads to everlasting happiness.

Nihil Obstat
JOSEPH P. NEWTH, C.C.,
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