

# Custodians of the Tradition

*Reclaiming the Franciscan  
Intellectual Tradition*



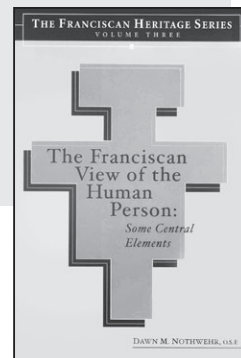
Those like ourselves who are immediate heirs of the tradition inspired by the spirituality of Francis [and Clare] might better see ourselves as responsible stewards of a treasure that has much to offer for the healing of humanity and of the world at large.

Zachary Hayes OFM  
Bonaventure Fest, 2003, Aston, PA



## The Franciscan View of the Human Person: Some Central Elements

Dawn Nothwehr OSF



Some theologies of the past focused primarily on the grandeur of God's holiness. *Franciscan* theology certainly does not miss the holiness of God. Francis could never forget the remarkable humility of God in taking on human form in Jesus. *Franciscan* theologians focus on how God is present in and through the human person, and in our routine, mundane and ordinary lives (incarnational theology). Francis, Clare, Bonaventure, Scotus — each in his or her own way — tell the story of the human only in relationship with God.

Three themes — dignity, mediation and mutuality — summarize **central elements** of this *Franciscan theology of the human person*.

### PART ONE Author's Introduction

The internationally renowned ethicist, Daniel C. Maguire, centers his understanding of Christian moral life on the maxim: "The foundational moral experience is reverence for human persons and their environment." This fundamental insight that underlies Maguire's ethics sings in harmony with what the Franciscan tradition claims about the human person, and it is through the lens of this insight that I read the Franciscan tradition. More importantly, however, the Franciscan tradition illuminates Maguire's basic **insight**.

*We assign value to persons as persons. This sacredness is not something that can be proven in a laboratory or through a logical syllogism. The inviolable dignity of the human person is known through the wisdom of the heart. Such wisdom is profoundly intuitive, affective and empathetic. Such is the wisdom of love meeting love. This is the great truth of the Franciscan view of the human person: God, who is Love and the Source of All Goodness, created humans and call them "very good."*  
(Gen. 1:31)

Beginning with St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi, Franciscans choose to define the human person in relationship to the great Love who is God. It is humankind that now faces the dilemma concerning whether to choose life or to choose death. (Deut. 30:15:18)

The Franciscan way is to choose life and love. It is to let go of the egotistic pride of individualism and the fear of failure and to open the human heart to God's longing and loving embrace.

It is my hope that in some small way this exposé of the Franciscan view of the human person might serve to reawaken the "miracle of real presence" that lies in each of us and in our human sisters and brothers. We are all bearers of the image of God (*imago Dei*) — life deified through the Incarnation, God manifests in human flesh.

### Major aspects found in Francis and Clare's life and teaching

1. Because humans are creatures in God's image and likeness, *each person bears an inviolable dignity.*
2. Authentic humanness requires that this *dignity be made concrete and embodied* in daily human life. Just as God made known divine love "in the flesh" through the person of Jesus, so, too, must we humans bring our belief in human dignity to bear on the ordinary activities of daily life.
3. *Humans are creatures of the earth who live in relationship* with all of creation.
4. As finite creatures, *humans ultimately need to embrace bodily death as part of life.*

## PART TWO

### Humans — Creatures Beloved of God in Christ: Some Central Elements in Francis and Clare

Francis and Clare of Assisi were friends who experienced a change of heart (conversion) and left lives promising prestige and wealth in order to “follow in the footprints of Jesus.” There are many similarities in the way they each understood the human person and the relationship between God, humans and all of creation.

From Francis’ own writings and from the biographies written by Thomas of Celano and by St. Bonaventure, we can glean two important themes that flowed from this experience and shaped Francis’ understanding of what it means to be a human person.



*Della Robbia,  
La Verna,  
Italy*

**FIRST**, Francis was thoroughly enamored of the profound humility of God, demonstrated in the Incarnation—God taking on humanness and living among us. (1C 84)



*Cimabue.  
Santa Croce,  
Florence*

**SECOND**, for Francis, the passion of Christ illustrated in the most powerful way God’s abiding and unconditional love for humans, indeed for the entire world.

### The Incarnation and Human Dignity

The humility of the Incarnation pointed Francis toward a distinct manner of understanding the human person. Because God became human in Jesus Christ, all of humanity was deified (*deificet*), i.e., graced by God and given access to become God-like.

Francis saw Jesus as the model human being who set the standard and marked the way for all other humans to travel on the journey of daily life toward the fullness of life with God. *In unfathomable wisdom, God chose to use the means of our very humanity to communicate great divine love for us.*

Francis organized the first living Nativity scene in the town of Greccio to help people see, in real life and in their own time and place, what the love of God looks like and the extent to which God would get to restore human dignity (1C84-6). In the scene, we see the generous love of God made concrete, but also the marvelous capacity of humanity — even an unsophisticated baby — to communicate that love. Like a parent who out of love freely chooses to suffer with or for a child so that the child might grow and be empowered to come to full maturity, so too God chose to love humanity into life.



*Giotto — Assisi — Greccio*

*Thus, Francis understood humanity as good and uniquely beloved of God, bearing the divine image and likeness and an inviolable dignity from the moment of creation. This image of God is found in all humans.*

Francis wrote, admonishing his followers: *“Consider O human being, in what excellence the Lord God has placed you, for He created and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the body and to His own likeness according to the Spirit.”* (Adm 5:1)

It is reverence for the life of God, present in each person, and the fact that Jesus came to us in human form that stirred in Francis a profound reverence for all human life.

### The Passion and Human Dignity

Yet, the loving God created humans with freedom, and there was always the possibility that they would break the love connection with God. Though they are endowed with an inviolable dignity, humans are mixed in their capacity for good or for ill.

In Francis’ view, the fall into sin was linked to human self-will. Therefore, humans deserve to be punished (Adm 2:3-5). However, God did not punish humans as they deserved, but instead, initiated a divine plan of salvation. As the biblical record of salvation history shows, time and time again when humanity sins, God is there to forgive the repentant sinner and to offer another chance. The most powerful statement of this love is the image of the crucified Christ. Francis expressed his deep joy and gratitude for the gift of God’s love in these words: *“O how holy and how loving, gratifying, humbling, peace-giving, sweet, worthy of love, and above all things, desirable: to have such a Brother and such a Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who laid down His life for His sheep.”* (1L1F 1:13)

*For Francis it was the virtue of obedience, of listening to God’s voice speaking to us through Scriptures, through one another and through all of the elements and creatures of creation that enables us to return and to stay rooted in life with God.*

## Eucharist and Human Dignity

In Francis' understanding, to fail to show

proper reverence for Christ present in the Eucharist or Christ present in the human person is also to blaspheme the other.

God's passionate love for and affirmation of the dignity of fallen humanity is also consistently offered to us in a marvelous and intimate way in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist can be understood as a continuation of the Incarnation and the ongoing fruit of the passion.

By participating in the Eucharist, we are united with Christ and share deeply in God's love and saving power. The bread, the wine and the human — each in its own way — is made holy and whole through the presence of Christ. Each communicant is affirmed and given the grace to love into her or his God-given dignity.

It was this kind of utter self-emptying love (*kenosis*) that Francis recognized at the core of Christ's influence over the human heart. Human dignity is established in the Incarnation, confirmed through the Passion and nurtured in the Eucharist.

## Human Dignity Embodied: Following in the Footprints of Jesus

Like Francis, all Christians need to seek justice for the poor, because the poor have a right to basic human dignity, life and sustenance. Francis was clear that the poor do not have to prove they are "deserving." Rather as Francis asserts: "*Alms are the legacy and a justice due to the poor that our Lord Jesus Christ acquired for us.*"

(ER 9:8)

For Francis, the Incarnation, the Passion, and the Eucharist were not just idle beliefs. To the contrary, they were real events that grounded the embodiment of human dignity in concrete actions and attitudes.

Francis was thus drawn to "follow in the footprints of Jesus" and he learned the depths of human dignity through the mercy of God.



Perhaps the most notable aspect of the life and ministry of Jesus is that he spent no time seeking prestige, but he constantly interacted with ordinary people, especially the powerless poor, widows and children of his day.

In freedom, humans can choose to respond to love or reject it. Paradoxically, as Francis learned by following Jesus, when humans surrender to love, they are most powerful and most free.

## Human Dignity and Mercy of God

Indeed, to be human is to be limited in many ways. Yet, God's mercy transformed and empowered the Poverello to live beyond those limits.

Clearly, God was instrumental in enabling Francis to embrace the very kind of human being he had only despised in his youth. Now, through the grace of God, Francis understood that it is not physical beauty, material wealth, military might, or political influence that makes people valuable.

Rather, it is the dignity that each person bears as one created in the image of God and unconditionally loved and redeemed by God in Christ what properly determines human worth. We are obliged to reverence this dignity by actions and attitudes for each human person.

Perhaps, for most of us, it is in the routine and mundane things of life that God's presence is most needed. We can follow Francis' example, finding ordinary ways

that God's image (*imago Dei*) and God's love can shine forth in us and for others.

## Human Dignity and Human Creaturehood

At the time he wrote the beginning of the *Canticle of the Creatures*, Francis was marked with the stigmata, a sign of profound intimacy of his identification with Jesus.

The biography of Francis tells the story of his struggle to embrace poverty as a way to opening himself in freedom to God and all creation. Through his relationship with God in prayer, he learned to love *as* and What God loves.

*Praised be You,  
my Lord, through  
those who  
grant pardon for  
love of You  
And bear sickness  
and trial . . .*

Piero Casentini,  
Assisi



To love authentically is to accept other humans and all creatures on their own terms.

It is particularly significant for our ecologically threatened world that Francis was able to find himself and true peace and harmony, not in warfare or wealth, but through spiritual means. He contemplated Christ and was in conscious communion with God manifested in creation.

## Thomas Merton Reflection

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities, and one which makes terrible mistakes; yet, with all that, God himself glorified in becoming a member of the human race.

A member of the human race!

To think that such a *commonplace* realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake!

There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun —

There are no strangers . . . If only we could see each other as we really are all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other — *that the gate of heaven is everywhere!*

Quoted in *What Is the Point of Being A Christian?* Timothy Radcliffe O.P. p.141

Quite significantly, and in a more personal way, Francis even called death, “Sister,” for he understood death as integral to human life. Indeed, death is the ultimate journey into poverty, a letting go of all possessions including life itself. (LMj 14:2)

## Clare of Assisi and the Human Person

*With an amazingly modern sensitivity to the kinds of conditions necessary to support a wholesome quality of life, Clare, in her Rule, set up a way of life that reflected great reverence and respect for human life.*

Unfortunately, there are very few works written by Clare’s hand, but we do have several letters and some documents related to the founding of the Poor Ladies (also called Poor Clares or Order of St. Clare). Through these documents we can see how Clare understood human beings, how she saw herself in relationship with others and what she expected of people, especially her sisters. Like Francis, Clare regarded human life as sacred because of the Incarnation — the great love of God displayed in the Passion of Christ. She recognized the deep communion that the Eucharist celebrates between God and human persons and human persons with their neighbors and all of creation. Yet, Clare lived out these beliefs in her own unique way together with her sisters.



*Dossal of St. Clare, Santa Chiara, Assisi*

Clare was particularly attracted to Jesus as the “poor Christ” of the Gospels, and she tried to imitate him and stay focused on him. Poverty was the central dimension of the Gospel in Clare’s view. She was

convinced that living in strict material poverty was the way she and the Poor Ladies could best conform their lives to Christ. But, while she believed that living in austere poverty helps a person focus on Christ, she understood that the Gospel demands above all a transformation of heart, something God alone can bring about.

Francis and the brothers traveled the world as poor itinerants, preaching and doing works of mercy, supporting themselves by working and begging. Clare, however, and the Poor Ladies who lived at San Damiano and elsewhere were totally dependent on the care and generosity of others. Here are two distinct expressions of the Franciscan tradition.

## The Incarnation and Human Dignity

The image of Christ closest to Clare’s heart was that of “the God who was placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world, and remained naked on the cross.” (TestCl 45)

This is the story of the Incarnation. The generous love of God is expressed in human flesh. For humans to be so loved is to be honored and graced with dignity beyond measure.

Indeed, being so touched by love is a life-changing experience. When people are “in love” they act differently — they smile more, they have a twinkle in their eyes, they are more positive and generous toward others. It was the goal of Clare and the Poor Ladies to become as loving and as generous as Christ Incarnate. That was their way of living out the reality of the Incarnation.

## The Passion and Human Dignity

For Clare, perhaps the most persuasive dimension of Christ’s poverty was his passion. In fact, the image of the suffering Christ stands at the center of the four-part process for prayer that Clare commends to Agnes of Prague. (2LAG 20-22)

Through contemplative prayer, in loving meditation on Christ’s passion, people can be affirmed in their dignity and worth for a lifetime. Through empathetic “co-suffering” with Christ, we can come to know the deep abiding love of God for us and be moved to love others in a like manner.

## Eucharist and Human Dignity

Clare’s great reverence for the Eucharist was demonstrated not only in her frequent reception of the sacrament (though not customary in her time) but also in how she treated items associated with it. Even when seriously ill, Clare made fine linen corporals for use in the churches in the region of Assisi.

Perhaps we can begin to grasp what it might have been like for her if we reflect on how we feel when we are with our best friend or with someone we know whom loves us. In such situations, it is not difficult to return love and become changed in the process. Therein lies the secret of the Eucharist and human dignity for Clare and for us.

**Once we know our own dignity through the eyes of another, we are inspired and empowered to pass on the experience to others.**

No doubt Clare understood her vocation not only as a personal love affair with God, but as a life lived for the sake of the Church and, indeed, for the whole world. Clare and her sisters provide a superb model for a genuinely respectful human way of life.

Through little everyday practices and attitudes, the value of human life was exhibited. With an amazingly modern sensitivity to the kinds of conditions necessary to support a wholesome quality of human life, Clare, in her Rule, set up a way of life that reflected great reverence and respect for human life.

In our world where the predominant paradigm of relationship is dominance and oppression of the less powerful by the more powerful, both human and non-

Clare writes to Agnes of Prague (1235): *“But as a poor virgin embrace the poor Christ. Look upon Him Who became contemptible for you, and follow Him . . . gaze, consider, contemplate desiring to imitate Your Spouse.”*

human, Clare shows a way of engaged and respectful human living. Beginning with the self-confidence of one beloved of God, and a respectful courtly bow to all of creation, Clare shows us a life marked by true deference, love and equal regard for others, the fruits of which are sensitivity, unity and harmony.



Dossal of St. Clare. Santa Chiara, Assisi

## PART THREE

### Humans — Mediators of God: Some Central Elements in St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio

Without St. Francis of Assisi, there would be no St. Bonaventure, as we know him today. Bonaventure, for example, follows Francis who frequently names God the “Supreme Good.” But Bonaventure uses the philosophical Pseudo-Dionysian notion *Bonum est diffusivum sui* — Goodness is self-diffusive. He calls God “*fontalis plenitudo*,” (Font of All Goodness).

Bonaventure tries to convey the basic idea that, just as someone is full of excitement about a good thing that has happened and simple *needs to share* the news with another, so too, God is so full of goodness that it simply *overflows in the divine creativity* that brings the universe into existence. Bonaventure, the Seraphic Doctor, gave the spirituality of the little Poor Man of Assisi a philosophical and theological framework.

Bonaventure understands the Trinity as divine exemplarity: that is, the immense fecundity (productiveness) of the goodness of God expressed in the emanation (giving out) of the goodness of the Three Persons and flowing outward into the created cosmos. More precisely, from the fecundity of the First Person of the Trinity (Father), there emanates the Word (Second Person) and spirates the Holy Spirit of Love (Third Person).

Bonaventure clearly places humans in an intimate relationship with the created world. At the level of the imagination, the world outside ourselves impacts our consciousness through our senses — touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight — and we make judgments about what we experience. Bonaventure held that, because God created all things, we could know something about God by experiencing the created world.



Australia stained glass window: *Canticle*

Bonaventure explains the existence of the created world as the result of the tremendous fruitfulness of the goodness of God. All living things are vestiges (resemblances) of God. However, humans represent God most closely and distinctly because, as Scripture tells us, they were created in God’s very image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). Humans can be most thoroughly influenced by God’s goodness and grace can become a *similitudo* (visible likeness) representing God most closely.

According to Bonaventure, that is why God created — so that through love, the creation can be brought into a kind of transforming fullness in union with the divine. And that happens first and to the fullest extent in Jesus. Given this vision, we can say that

the world of creation has its own truth, goodness and beauty.

At the very heart of Bonaventure’s understanding humans, unlike other creatures, are created with the power to know divine goodness both through the material world (mediately) and directly (immediately) like spiritual beings. The human soul is a body-spirit (not dualistic) relationship.

Humans, who image God, are also bearers of God (*capax Dei*). Humans are capable of becoming God-like, participating in life with God, actually receiving God into their being. It is through opening oneself ever more completely to God’s generous, overflowing love and grace that humans find their real identity and vocation.

But humans are not made in the image of God in a general way. They are *specifically* made to the likeness of the Son who is both human and divine. Because humans are made like God most fully expressed (exemplarity) in Christ incarnate (Word), the very nature of human beings is to like Christ-poor and humble-in relationship to God.

Just as Christ, the second person of the Trinity is “in the middle” in relationship to the Father and the Spirit, so too, in Bonaventure’s understanding, humans are situated in the middle of creation between the simply material beings (rocks, plants, animals) and the exclusively spiritual beings (angels).

Bonaventure saw humanity as God’s greatest work. Rather, it is through exercising their powers of intellect, memory and will that humans find their role as *mediators* between God and creation and as guardians of the multiple manifestations of God’s self-revelation.

*There is no place for arrogance in human interactions. Rather, humans need to join in humble service and mutual relationship, grounded in the reality that all of their gifts, talents and resources flow from God, the Fountain Source of All Goodness. As the poor Christ ministered to the poor and the outcasts of his day, so too must humans serve others in their own time and place.*

Because humans participate in the material world, they are historical beings who grow, change and develop.

Through their relationships with Christ, other humans, other earth creatures and through their reflection, they become increasingly more God-like and free. The more perfectly related people become the more human they become.

## PART FOUR

### Humans — Uniquely God’s in Mutual Relationship: Some Central Elements in Bl. John Duns Scotus



John Duns Scotus, known as the “Subtle Doctor,” frequently combined philosophical ideas and theological notion, integrating them to form a new understanding. Yet, he is a true son of St. Francis and St. Clare. At the heart of his thought stands a free, generous and loving God, who from the moment of creation delighted in the uniqueness of each human being. Duns Scotus sees God as the creative artist who affirms humanity from the beginning by envisioning the Incarnation, who accepts human goodness, and draws each person into the divine “Beatific Embrace.”

God, who is absolutely free and perfectly loving chose to create human beings in the divine image and likeness and sustains them in mutual relationship. This is a great affirmation of the value of humanity.

The Incarnation was not dependent on human sin. God intended the Incarnation from the beginning of time. God confirmed the value of human life by choosing human flesh as the medium most fitting to join with the divine in the Incarnation.

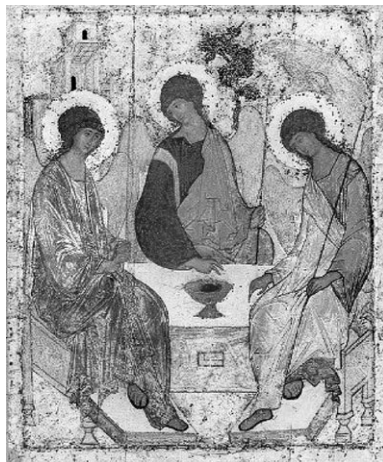
Just as Bonaventure taught, Scotus also sees Christ as the pattern after which all creation is fashioned. Like the Seraphic Doctor, the Subtle Doctor holds that progress in the spiritual life is a process of *christification* as well as *deification*; the more Christ-like one becomes, the more God-like one is. Indeed union with God is mediated through the Incarnation.

*Inviolable dignity is not given to humans only in a general way, as a species. Scotus’ principle of haecceitas holds that each distinct individual person has a particular dignity that must be revered and honored. Indeed, each creature of the created world bears this distinctiveness and must be respected accordingly.*

Humans are intelligent and free beings created by God, who is absolutely free and absolutely loving. The Human response to God is to live in a manner that is intelligently and responsibly free and deeply loving. There is no moral legalism here. Obedience to God comes from love, not fear of punishment.

In this light, the Ten Commandments are no longer chapters of a legal code, but themes of a love song about our relationship to God, neighbors and all creatures.

Scotus shows how the life of the Trinity provides a model for unity and mutual love. The Subtle Doctor holds Trinitarian life in mutual relationship as a foundational model for relationships between God, creatures, humans with one another, and between the divine and humans as co-creators and redeemers of the world.



Rublev icon of Trinity

We need to pay attention to the two affections of the human will — *affectio commodi*, this affection is directed inward toward a healthy kind of self-preservation or happiness. The second, *affectio iustitiae*, is directed outward toward others. When these are in harmony and balanced in us, we are healthy persons of integrity and we can be genuinely caring and loving. If we find ourselves living exclusively out of one affection or the other, there is cause for concern, because therein, says Scotus is the occasion for sin.

The deep desire of God is that humans return to final communion with the divine in the Beatific Vision. In marvelous acts of love, God accepts all human efforts to love (*acceptatio*), bringing our efforts to completion and perfection, fulfilling the divine intention and the order of love.

Our honest and integral efforts to live in love and in God’s presence are found worthy, profoundly respected and generously affirmed and supported by God. Herein lies great hope for humanity

### Major aspects found in Francis and Clare’s life and teaching

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Authentic humanness requires that this *dignity be made concrete and embodied* in daily human life. Just as God made known divine love “in the flesh” through the person of Jesus, so, too, must we humans bring our belief in human dignity to bear on the ordinary activities of daily life.

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Francis wrote, admonishing his followers: “Consider O human being, in what excellence the Lord God has placed you, for He created and formed you to the image of His beloved Son according to the body and to His own likeness according to the Spirit.” (Adm 5:1)

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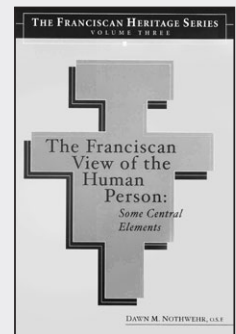
## SUMMATION POINTS:

1. **Image and Likeness: Beginning** with the accounts of Genesis, special attention is given to the creation of the human person and to the relationship of the human with God.
2. **Something about God:** Just as God relates lovingly and justly to all creation, so too, humans must engage in loving and just relationships.
3. **Something about Humans:** Bearing the “image of God” also speaks volumes about humanity. God, who is a communion of three persons (Trinity), created humans to be social beings. The more we participate in life in community with our sisters and brothers, the more we come to know our true selves.
4. **Relational Beings:** We must realize that all humans are created as relational beings, fundamentally interdependent with one another in all dimensions of life.
5. **Embodied Subjects:** Each person has the capacity for self-determination and freedom; each has a distinct conscience.
6. **Historical Subjects:** Though we are embodied, material beings, we are also spiritual beings, the material world made conscious. We move through daily life, writing our own story as we journey on our way to God. We have the awesome power to love one another into life or to desecrate the God-given dignity of another.
7. **Fundamentally Equal, though Uniquely Original:** There are no two people alike; each has a distinct imagination and life experience.

## The Franciscan View of the Human Person: Some Central Elements

Dawn Nothwehr OSF

Synthesis provided by: Mary Elizabeth Imler OSF



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She has also published *Ecological Footprints: An Essential Guide for Sustainable Living*, Liturgical Press 2012. Look for Dawn's media course on a CD: *The Earth is the Lord's: Catholic Theology of Creation, Ecology and the Environment*, from Now You Know Media, [www.NowYouKnowMedia.com](http://www.NowYouKnowMedia.com), 1-800-955-3904.

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