

THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING AND ITS OBSERVANCE FOR TOMORROW

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ABSTRACT. The article theologically examines the document on fasting adopted at the Crete Council in 2016. With respect to fasting, as an obligatory practice, we could notice negative consequences in Church life, more than positive ones. For example, Eucharist has been understood as a cult with less relation to the world. It became only a ritual on the periphery of the Church's life. The emphasis on food as the most important value has a negative outcome for the relationship between our theology and our clergy. In most cases, obligatory fasting practice strips our Christian identity to an identity based merely around food. For all these reasons, the article advises that the Church should advocate fasting but no longer as an obligatory practice.

Keywords: alienation, Eucharist, church, lay people, fasting, Kingdom of God

Alienation and Communion

This year is the anniversary - 100 years since the great October revolution. The Soviet Union did not last 100 years to celebrate it. We could only imagine what kind of celebration that would have been. The reasons for the collapse of the USSR are many, but here I would like to mention one which I believe is important for our story today i.e. alienation. The last years of socialism in these countries have been characterized by a discrepancy between the ideal and the real – between socialist utopia and the life of the people. When schism became greater, collapse was inevitable - Alienation happened, alienation between the proletariat and those that led them towards communism. In a society which stressed the importance of collectivism, this was a very important fact; the lost faith between members of the big collective led to disintegration. Alienation between members of a community has the potential to lead to collapse. Human beings are longing to

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belong somewhere, to be loved and embraced and not alienated. Alienation and loneliness show the disinterest of the community towards the individual.

Speaking of the Church we eagerly accentuate that the Church has been born liturgically as an icon of the Kingdom of God.¹ Besides this liturgical dimension, it would be necessary for the church to reflect the values of the Kingdom in its very structure and organization. Let us remember that the first Christians had been involved in Church government and the election of priests.² Over time, they were consulted less and less, and the Church hierarchy gradually became alienated from lay people.³ Long battles with Gnosticism structured the church more. For the early Fathers, it became very important to show the linear succession of bishops, from Christ and the Apostles.⁴ Moreover, the recognition of the Church by the Empire led the bishops to draw their identity from the Empire and theologically from Christ and the Apostles.⁵

Although the New Testament reveals the Kingdom of God as a new mode of relationship, a new quality of life really has not been mirrored in the Church structure. Even though our text books on Orthodoxy like to mention that “the unique purpose of the Liturgy is to reveal the Kingdom of God... Reminiscence, *anamnesis* of the Kingdom of God is the source of everything in Church”⁶ that does not really happen in our reality of church life. More often Liturgy preserves the patriarchal mode of the relationship, the degradation of women,⁷ the disregard of lay people, and inaccessibility for the sick and the elderly.

What we do need today are deeds as authentic expressions of our words, bringing together theology and reality. To accomplish these goals we cannot forget the essential and constitutive role of the members of our churches, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light” (1Peter 2:9). This Epistle of Peter expresses the necessity of respect, the necessity of a personal approach and not collectivism.

¹ This is represented in the main stream theological works stemming from *Eucharistic ecclesiology*.

² *Didache* XV, 1-2.

³ Dejan Mackovic, “Socijalni kontekst bogoslovlja Sv. Ignjatija Antiohijskog”, *Srpska teologija danas 2012*, ed. Bogoljub Šijaković (Beograd: PBF/ITI, 2013), 288-302. On the subject of structures and alienation: Cyril Hovorun, *Scaffolds of the Church: Towards Poststructural Ecclesiology* (Eugene: Cascade books, 2017).

⁴ Irineos, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria.

⁵ Apostolic Constitutions.

⁶ Aleksandar Smeman, *Evharistijsko bogoslovlje* (Belgrade: Otacnik, 2011), 172.

⁷ At several conferences (Agapia 1976, Crete 1989, Rhodes 1988, Damascus 1996, Constantinople 1997, Durres, 2010), orthodox women theologians pointed out the fatal liturgical practice of our Church, however nothing has improved up to the present day: Karidoyanes Kyriaki FitzGerald, *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the ‘Sign of the Times’* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999).

Such an ideal is necessary even more if we, within the church, alienate church leaders and other members of the royal priesthood. I believe that the issue of fasting and the document from Crete: "The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today" itself fosters this kind of alienation which I will try to consider here.

The Document: The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today

The document adopted on Crete in 2016 does not differ much from the document on the same subject from 1986 pre-conciliar document.⁸ The first chapters try to explain the true meaning of fasting, accentuating social activism and good deeds.

- A. **Chapter 1:** Unfortunately, a problem arises immediately where in chapter 1 the document states that "Fasting is a divine commandment (Gen 2:16-17). According to Basil the Great, fasting is as old as humanity itself; it was prescribed in paradise (On Fasting, 1, 3. PG 31, 168A)." Carefully reading biblical text, God in paradise commands "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:16-17). These words in Paradise are not in accord with "not eating anything" which true fasting implies.⁹ If fasting was self-evident in the divine commandment, Jews would probably fast. On the contrary, for Jews fasting was never obligatory for the whole community but rather a reaction of individuals,¹⁰ a reaction on some of the troubles or problems in their lives.¹¹ After return from exile from Babylonian captivity, a one day fast was introduced on Yom Kippur, i.e. the Day of Atonement.¹² So, even the first chapter of the document is more than problematic in its definition that fasting has been a divine commandment. We should be reminded that in all three Gospels, the accusation against Apostles has been that they do not fast. (Mt. 9:14, Mk. 2:18, Lk. 5:33). Christ is fasting for 40 days, but only once in His life,

⁸ Viorel Ioniță, *Towards the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church: The Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Meetings since 1923 until 2009* (Basel: Institute for Ecumenical Studies University of Fribourg, 2014), 176-179.

⁹ Dejan Mackovic, "Post u savremeno doba", *Srpska teologija danas 2011*, ed. Bogoljub Šijaković (Beograd: PBF/ITI, 2012), 188-197, 189.

¹⁰ Patrijarh Pavle, *Da nam budu jasnija neka pitanja nase vere I* (Beograd: Izdavacki fond Arhiepiskopije beogradsko-karlovacke, 1998), 319.

¹¹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol 6, (Thomson Gale, 2007), 722.

¹² Lev. 23: 27- 32

similarly like many other fathers and prophets from the Old Testament.¹³ In other words, the argument that fasting is a divine commandment is more doubtful than convincing.

- B. **Chapter 6:** In chapter 6, the document on fasting recognizes fasting periods that have been developed throughout the centuries, and explains whether they exist in the canonical tradition. The Document says, "Following the example of the Holy Fathers, the Church preserves today, as she did in the past, the holy apostolic precepts, synodal canons, and sacred traditions, always advancing the holy fasts as the perfect ascetic path for the faithful leading to spiritual perfection and salvation...." Although in previous chapters, the document accentuates the social implications of fasting, in this chapter, fasting becomes solely seen as an ascetic path towards perfection. Are we lacking in substantial arguments about how fasting could be understood as a path to salvation? It is not unnecessary to remember that in early Christianity, the way to salvation was celebrated through the feast of eating and drinking and not fasting. Even the remembrance of Christ's death and the Second Coming were always connected with food, eating and drinking.¹⁴
- C. **Chapter 8:** *"It is a fact that many faithful today do not observe all the prescriptions of fasting, whether due to faint-heartedness or their living conditions, whatever these may be.* However, all these instances where the sacred prescriptions of fasting are loosened, either in general or in particular instances, should be treated by the Church with pastoral care, "for God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek 33:11), without, however, ignoring the value of the fast."
- D. As we notice immediately, the beginning of chapter 8 recognizes that *"many faithful today do not observe all the prescriptions of fasting."*¹⁵ It is interesting that this passage is almost identical as it is in the document from 1986 which makes things more grotesque.¹⁶ Thirty years passed, from 1986-2016, when the Church identified the problem where "many

¹³ Dejan Mackovic, "Post u savremeno doba", *Srpska teologija danas 2011*, ed. Bogoljub Šijaković (Beograd: PBF/ITI, 2012), 188-197, 189.

¹⁴ Veronika E. Grimm, *From Feasting To Fasting, The Evolution Of A Sin* (Routledge: London & New York, 1996), 69.

¹⁵ Almost the same as from the conference in 1986: Viorel Ioniță, *Towards the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church: The Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Meetings since 1923 until 2009* (Basel: Institute for Ecumenical Studies University of Fribourg, 2014), 176-179.

¹⁶ "It is a reality today that many Christians do not observe all decisions regarding fasting, either out of indolence, or because of the existing conditions of life, whatever they are," *Pre-Conciliar Document from 1986.*: Viorel Ioniță, *Towards the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church: The Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Meetings since 1923 until 2009* (Basel: Institute for Ecumenical Studies University of Fribourg, 2014), 178.

faithful do not observe fasting” and nothing was changed in the document.¹⁷ The “new document” does not offer any substantial solutions to resolve the issue – except to repeat the same conclusions.

- E. We could even say that the document from 1986 is more liberal in its approach: “All these are said, however, with the purpose of not weakening in any way the holy institution of fasting. This merciful dispensation should be exercised by the Church with all measure, in any case, with much lenience in the case of those fasts where there is not always a uniform practice and tradition.”¹⁸ In other words, the document at least recognizes that not all fasting periods have the same authority. The document from the Pan-Orthodox meeting in 1923¹⁹ shared the same points like the one from 1986,²⁰ which cannot be said for the document that has been adopted in 2016.
- F. **Chapter 9:** Pastoral care of the church and the dispensations mentioned in chapter 8 concerning fasting and those who do not follow fasting sounds obscure in the context of making fasting periods obligatory for all in the first place! That is explicitly stated throughout **chapter 9:** “However, the totality of the Church’s faithful *must observe the holy fasts.*”²¹ Making fasting obligatory, we produce as a consequence an orthodox identity that is inconceivable without a fasting practice. Unfortunately, food became our identity marker.²²

As a concluding remark we could only say that the document witnesses the church’s alienation, i.e. alienation of the bishops from the people. At the beginning, the document recognizes that many do not follow fasting but still prescribes higher ideals making the division greater to the point when probably the whole idea is going to breakdown.

¹⁷ The Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) asked papers on fasting during the 1970’s, one of those papers was a proposal of Patriarch Pavle (1914-2009), at the time bishop in the SOC. Even though he was personally ascetic, he proposed in 1976 a shrinking of fasting, but these proposals have been rejected: Patrijarh Pavle, *Da nam budu jasnija neka pitanja nase vere I* (Beograd: Izdavacki fond Arhiepiskopije beogradsko-karlovacke, 1998), 352-357.

¹⁸ Viorel Ioniță, *Towards the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church: The Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Meetings since 1923 until 2009* (Basel: Institute for Ecumenical Studies University of Fribourg, 2014), 179.

¹⁹ Ibid, 110.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ https://www.holycouncil.org/-/fasting?_101_INSTANCE_VA0WE2pZ4Y0I_languageId=en_US, accessed 25.4.2017. In Greek: τό σύνολον τῶν πιστῶν τῆς Ἐκκλησίας **ὀφείλει** νά τηρῆ τās ιεράς νηστείας.

²² *Letter of Youth from America towards Fasting Practice*, http://beleskesasabora.blogspot.fr/2016/06/blog-post_6.html, accessed 10.5.2017.

We may hope that by the end of chapter 8 of the document, we can find a more practical solution, but that is not the case: “it is left to the discretion of the local Orthodox Churches to determine how to exercise philanthropic *oikonomia* and empathy, relieving in these special cases the “burden” of the holy fast.” It is our hope that local orthodox churches at some point will try, even unilaterally, to change fasting periods and length changing this practice into private piety and not obligatory for all.

Tradition: Uncertainties

A brief look at our tradition will help us to draw some conclusions on the matter. For Apostle Paul, “food and eating are of social importance and may give rise to concern if they cause dissension and quarrelling in the Christian brotherhood. Hospitality is urged. Eating together, even with one’s pagan neighbour, is fine if it contributes to peace and mutual understanding; not so fine if food becomes a matter for argument, rivalry and a cause for social tension. The only warning given is that one should not eat (meaning in this context to associate) with a brother who is a fornicator.”²³

Fasting, undoubtedly came from a Jewish custom.²⁴ “As noted earlier, pagans were little inclined to self-mortification by fasting, while the Jews were known, even notorious, in the ancient world for their fasts long before Jesus (who, as the Gospel tells, went against Pharisaic custom, and did not fast).”²⁵ The Jews found many occasions for fasting such as the expiation of their sins, commemoration of the many disasters in their nation’s history, to implore God for mercy...²⁶ They may have fasted more often or more conspicuously in the Diaspora, probably in order that through the fasting they substitute for sacrifice.²⁷ Fasting, however, was not a part of the regular synagogal service.²⁸ Christian communities with little money, showed continuity with Jewish communities in terms of fasting but they changed the meaning of this practice: The community got an opportunity through fasting to show its social relevance for society – to help those in need.

Didache testifies that fasting should be on two days, Wednesday and Friday instead of Monday and Thursday (like Jews).²⁹ It was a matter of identity

²³ Veronika E. Grimm, *From Feasting To Fasting, The Evolution Of A Sin* (Routledge: London & New York, 1996), 57.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ VIII.1

against the Jews and others and not the matter of any theological importance. *The Epistle of Barnabas* also speaks about fasting but only in a context of social activism and not about food at all,³⁰ while the Second Epistle of Climent to the Corinthians testifies that mercy is greater than prayer and fasting put together.³¹ The Shepherd of Hermas also witnesses what the true fasting is and that is social activism.³² Apostolic Constitutions ask for fasting but only loosely. Even the fasting before Pascha is only for two days.³³

In the 5th century Sozomen observed that fasting is understood differently in the Empire in quality and quantity.³⁴ Socrates Scholasticus (5th century), *Church History* 5.22: "The fasts before Easter will be found to be differently observed among different people. Those at Rome fast three successive weeks before Easter, excepting Saturdays and Sundays. Those in Illyrica and all over Greece and Alexandria observe a fast of six weeks, which they term 'The forty days' fast.' Others commencing their fast from the seventh week before Easter, and fasting three to five days only, and that at intervals, yet call that time 'The forty days' fast.' It is indeed surprising to me that thus differing in the number of days, they should both give it one common appellation; but some assign one reason for it, and others another, according to their individual fancies. One can see also a disagreement about the manner of abstinence from food, as well as about the number of days. Some wholly abstain from things that have life: others feed on fish only of all living creatures: many together with fish, eat fowl also, saying that according to Moses, Genesis 1:20 these were likewise made out of the waters. Some abstain from eggs, and all kinds of fruits: others partake of dry bread only; still others eat not even this: while others having fasted till the ninth hour, afterwards take any sort of food without distinction. And among various nations there are other usages, for which innumerable reasons are assigned. Since however no one can produce a written command as an authority, it is evident that the apostles left each one to his own free will in the matter, to the end that each might perform what is good not by constraint or necessity. Such is the difference in the churches on the subject of fasts."³⁵

Early church sources clearly state the importance of fasting as a social practice. Even if we look at the Jewish community, the Babylonian Talmud (3rd-5th century) testifies that fasting was a replacement for sacrifice because of

³⁰ III.1-6

³¹ XVI.4.

³² *Parable* V.2

³³ *Apostolic Constitutions* 33.

³⁴ *Ecclesiastical History VII*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26027.htm>, accessed 10.5.2017.

³⁵ *Church History*, 5.22.

the absence of the Temple. At the same time, fasting has been judged as dangerous for the reason that one who is fasting could get sick and become a burden for the community. Philo, deeply inspired by Platonism, speaks about an ideal Jewish community which is vegetarian and celibate. But even Philo recommends this to the people over 50. Nowadays Jews have six fasting periods, two of them are lasting around 24 hours and four last for 12 hours (from sabbath to aksham).

Having in mind all these testimonies at the beginning of Christianity it is obvious that the social importance of fasting was accentuated in order to show the newness of Christianity in comparison with other religious customs.³⁶ Food was of secondary importance and true fasting expressed through good deeds.

In this context we should understand the true meaning of canonical punishments for those not fasting. In Apostolic canon 69 we find that, "*If any Bishop, or Priest, or Deacon, or Subdeacon, Readers, or Psalti fails to fast throughout the forty days of the Great Fast, or on Wednesday, or on Friday, let him be deposed, unless he has been prevented from doing so by reason of bodily illness. If, on the other hand, any layman fail to do so, let him be excommunicated.*"³⁷ In the Jewish food system we have a distinction between clean and unclean food which had religious significance. Food was a marker of identity which brought people into or excluded them from the community of God.³⁸ In that sense we should understand canonical provisions. They look very harsh but in a context of social solidarity. Fasting was proof of the social inclination of church members to save money for those in need. At the same time, to reject fasting was at that time understood as rejection to offer sacrifice for your needy brethren. In other words, fasting or non-fasting was understood socially and not in the context of food itself. Otherwise, the binary system clean/unclean would be just substituted with a new one: fasting/non-fasting food. That would be regression of Christian identity where food plays an extensive role in our relationship to God.

Fasting and Eucharist

In chapter 9 we have an interesting statement which is a new addition in the document from 2016, a quotation from Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite that fasting is connected again and again with the Eucharist: "... fasting before partaking of Communion is not decreed by the divine Canons. Nevertheless,

³⁶ In the Christianity preached by Paul food as such is of no religious concern: Veronika E. Grimm, *From Feasting To Fasting, The Evolution Of A Sin* (Routledge: London & New York, 1996), 57.

³⁷ Ralph J. Masterjohn, ed., *The Rudder* (West Brookfield: The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 2005), 214.

³⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

those who are able to fast even a whole week before it, are doing the right thing.” It is evident that here we have a schism between clerics and laymen, where clerics do not fast a whole week before the Liturgy, laymen have been invited to do so. This kind of logic would imply that partaking of Eucharist regularly would mean fasting for the whole year. It is obvious that this sentence was an addition to advance a different vision of the Church where people partake of the Eucharist only occasionally.

The connection that has been made in this chapter between fasting and Eucharist has had devastating effects on Church reality and Church life. In the majority of our churches, priests advise seven days of fasting even though they do not apply the same for themselves. At first glance we notice a *bourgeoisie mentality*, the strong difference between priests and the faithful. Far worse than this mentality has been the introduction of the market economy in the Eucharist. Even though we have evidence from the canonical tradition of selling Eucharist for money (VI, 23) it is almost the same today – not much difference. Confession has been obligatory before every communion³⁹ where people usually give money. After confession, where they admittedly confess that they had only “proper”, i.e. fasting food, they have been considered “worthy” for Eucharist. It is a twofold danger that this document should have avoided, instead of supporting wrong practice that has lasted for centuries. Fasting became new money which makes someone worthy of partaking. In other words, insistence on food almost makes food as a tool which makes successful payment for Eucharistic participation (fasting prior to communion is necessary, at least for three days).

As stated above, this only contributed to the development of the *bourgeoisie mentality* of our priesthood. We need to be reminded again and again that “the liturgical (priestly) offices should exist for the sake of the Eucharist, and their *raison d’être* should be the celebration of the Eucharist together *with* the people rather than *instead of* the people, serving as an icon of the eschatological gathering of the people of God in one place around Christ, with the bishop ‘in the type and place of Christ,’ and the presbyters as types of the apostles.”⁴⁰ In that context, it is necessary to realize the signs of the Kingdom of God in the Liturgy, in order to reflect them in Church structures and later in society itself. Instead of that we iconize economic practice that prevails in the world where almost anything can be paid for. That very spirit has been evident here too, where Eucharist is not a gift but a payment. The sense of Eucharist as a gift has been lost completely.

³⁹ Aleksandar Smeman, *Veliki post* (Vrnjacka banja: Bratstvo Svetog Simeon Mirotočivog, 1999), 149-163.

⁴⁰ Kalaitzidis, Pantelis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: WCC, 2012), 103.

Eucharist should nourish us as God's gift to us, in which we "experience the need to share God's gifts with our brothers and sisters..." Instead; Eucharist has been understood as one's individual achievement and a struggle to meet certain rules. From God's gift Eucharist becomes the deserved means of salvation. In such a liturgical setting, Communion makes a new ethos of exclusion and pride with no need for others. Why would someone need or feel necessity for the other in the Eucharistic setting when he individually deserved it through confession and fasting. In other words, confined to its cultic measurements, the Lord's Supper develops an ethos of isolationism and self-pride. This ethos of payment is indirectly mentioned and perceived in chapter 3 of the Crete Council: "Therefore, the true fast affects the entire life in Christ of the faithful and is crowned by their participation in divine worship, particularly in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist."⁴¹

Alienation: Discrimination inside the Orthodox Church

The document also represents a kind of discrimination towards those churches that follow the old calendar. Representatives of local churches that follow the old calendar did not manage to raise their voice in order to achieve equality with other churches. Fasting of the Holy Apostles is always longer in churches that follow the old calendar. In the last almost 100 years that difference is bigger – more than three years. Clearly the representatives of Orthodox churches that follow the old calendar, even after recognizing that the *majority of people do not fast*, did not find it necessary to do anything in order to represent their own faithful and care for unity of the Church on this matter. The same could be said for the churches that follow the new calendar. They ignored this issue, i.e. issue of unity and life of laity in other local churches. This is also a sad fact which contributes to our theory of alienation between clergy and laity. Obviously issues for the clergy are not the same as those for the laity.

Conclusion - Process of Alienation

With respect to fasting, Eucharist has been understood as a cult with less relation to the world. It became only a ritual on the periphery of the Church's life. The emphasis on food as most the important value has a negative outcome for our theology and our clergy. The ethos that such an understanding produces in our faithful is melancholy towards the world and our fellow human beings, i.e. to become close in the eyes of God what matters is fasting.

⁴¹ "The Importance of Fasting and Its Observance Today", Chapter 3.

Fasting stripped our Christian identity to an identity based merely around food. It is a shame that today Orthodox distinguish themselves in the world through their food consumption, and not their deeds.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. (John 3:16-17)." Needless to say that the world and the relations that we make within it should be understood as a space which gives us the possibility to actively participate in our society and care for others. Our true fasting should be our *rejection to reject* the world in the context of salvation. Making fasting non-obligatory would help in this process of healing; healing of individualism and alienation.

In conclusion, we can give you some research results from Serbia that has been conducted in 2010 showing that 7.9% of the faithful take frequent communion, whereas almost 78% have communion only a few times in the year. At the same time, 28% declared that they fast regularly, while almost 63% never fast or only a few times during the year.⁴² These numbers are very high because the number of those in the survey is around 1250 people. Probably these numbers would be much less if the survey had been conducted on a larger scale. This proves that the identity of Orthodox Christians lies more in fasting than in the Liturgy; the center of our worship being of secondary importance.

It is good for the Church to prescribe fasting, but as a recommendation and not as an obligation for all. Even when we discuss fasting it is more important to pose this question: do we know and understand human beings of today? In many regions, preparing fasting food consumes more time and money. In today's world people have less time for themselves. Working time is getting longer leaving less time for cooking and these social changes should be taken into consideration. For this reason it is legitimate in the context of fasting to pose the question of whether we know the human being of today and whether we try to understand the issues and challenges that he faces in today's world?

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