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Kerygmatic Catechesis in the History of the Church

Katecheza kerygmaticzna w historii Kościoła

ABSTRACT: From the analysis of the catechesis over the centuries it can be concluded that the origin and development of kerygma dates to the beginning of the Church. Catechesis has always been the basis for the renewal of faith. In the history of the Church each century has pursued its own style of preaching kerygma. At the beginning of the Church it was the first proclamation of Jesus Christ. Over the course of the centuries the achievements of this trend have taken root in catechesis, thus bringing abundant fruit. Pope Francis in his statements, and especially in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, bearing in mind the contemporary crisis of faith in the Church, refers to the tradition of kerygmatic catechesis.

KEYWORDS: Church, Gospel, kerygma, catechumenate, catechesis, Christianity, preaching, baptism

ABSTRAKT: Na podstawie analizy katechezy na przestrzeni wieków można stwierdzić, że pochodzenie i rozwój kerygmatu datuje się już na początki Kościoła. Zawsze katecheza ta była podstawą odnowy wiary. W historii Kościoła każdy wiek realizował swój własny styl głoszenia kerygmatu. Na początku Kościoła była to pierwsza proklamacja Jezusa Chrystusa. Z biegiem wieków osiągnięcia tego nurtu zakorzeniły się w katechezie, przynosząc obfite owoce. Do tradycji kerygmaticznej katechezy w Kościele nawiązuje Papież Franciszek w swoich wypowiedziach, a zwłaszcza w adhortacji *Evangelii Gaudium*, mając na uwadze współczesny kryzys wiary w Kościele.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Kościół, Ewangelia, kerygmat, katechumenat, katecheza, chrześcijaństwo, głoszenie, chrzest

Introduction

The analysis of the Church's catechesis over the centuries indicates that it has always been a dynamic activity. It has been subject to change and has taken various forms depending on the current historical, cultural, and above all, pastoral situations. The kerygmatic renewal of catechesis has been considered one of the most revolutionary and lasting changes. It was also referred to by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.

In view of the still substantial need for kerygmatic catechesis in the contemporary Church, as Pope Francis points out, this article tries to answer the question of how it has influenced the renewal of the Church's faith in different periods of its history.

The origin of kerygmatic catechesis

The Acts of the Apostles show the prime Church community appeared to be the ideal of community life. The moral transformation that took place in the lives of Christians attracted the whole world at that time, both Jews and Greeks. The life of the prime Church paved the way for the preaching of the Gospel. An example is Saint Peter's speech from the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. At the centre of Peter's kerygmatic preaching is the person of dead, risen, and glorified Jesus Christ who is Savior, Lord and Messiah. This proclamation is a powerful word that gives birth to faith and builds up the Church.¹

The Acts of the Apostles provides numerous examples that the apostles considered the ministry of preaching the Word of God, the proclamation of the message of salvation, as one of the most vital forms of their activity. Their main activity was teaching. Nevertheless, all this was done through the Holy Spirit, whom they received. It was the Holy Spirit who stimulated them to bear witness to the risen Lord with courage and confirmed them with mighty signs and miracles.

The process of biblical evangelisation described by St Luke is made up of the following several stages:

- the prayer of those gathered in the Upper Room (Acts 1:14),
- the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-3),
- the kerygma of Jesus Christ delivered by St Peter (Acts 2:22-23),

¹ Cf. S. Dyk, *Duch, Słowo, Kościół. Biblijny model ewangelizacji*, Lubin 2007, pp. 171–172.

- faith and conversion born of listening to and accepting the Word of God (Acts 2:37-38),
- Baptism, to which conversion and accession to the Church leads (Acts 2:41),
- remaining with the teachings of the apostles and increase in faith (Acts 2:42),
- the testimony of Christian life (Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-42; 6:1-15; 8:4-40; 9:20-31, and others).²

Apostolic catechesis was directed to adults and required a mature decision. It was varied in content and form. Its essential elements include:

- the announcement of God – the Creator of Heaven, Earth and all beings,
- the renunciation of idolatry,
- showing the way of life leading to salvation and the way of sin as leading to eternal damnation,
- a call to recognize Jesus as Lord, Savior and Messiah, accept baptism, and obtain the forgiveness of sins,
- receiving eternal life in Christ.

Apostolic catechesis was proclaimed differently to Jews and differently to Gentiles. The Jews could be baptized immediately after they had confessed their faith in Jesus Christ as announced Messiah. The Gentiles had first to recognize the one God and accept the truth about the deity of Christ.

The teaching service was closely linked to baptism. According to the missionary mandate received from the Risen Lord, the Apostles taught and administered baptism. There are numerous examples in the Acts of the Apostles describing baptism (Acts 2:14-41; 8:12; 16:14-15; 18:8) that some form of teaching preceded each of them. The pre-baptismal teaching, known as the apostolic kerygma, is best documented in the New Testament Scriptures. It was at the same time evangelisation, namely the first Gospel proclamation and baptismal catechesis. Reading the biblical sources makes it possible to distinguish the Paul's kerygma and the kerygma of the Acts of the Apostles (the so-called Jerusalem kerygma). The kerygma to Jews and the kerygma to Gentiles are distinguished depending on the addressees.³

The Jerusalem kerygma can be recognized from the apostolic speeches contained in the first part of the Acts of the Apostles. The paschal mystery was and remains the focal point of the kerygma, the core of the apostolic preaching. All the other elements and events were arranged around or resulted from this fundamental fact.

² Ibidem, pp. 178–180.

³ Cf. R. Murawski, *Historia katechezy*, [in:] *Historia katechezy i katechetyka fundamentalna*, J. Stala (ed.), Tarnów 2010, p. 29.

In addition to the apostolic kerygma, there was also apostolic teaching that led to its deepening and development. It aimed at strengthening and increasing faith.

At that time, the terms used by those who proclaimed the message of salvation also found their origins. Some of them have survived to our times. These include words such as evangelise, teach, catechise, witness.

A detailed reading of the biblical texts allows us to learn about the elements that marked the path that those who wanted to become Christians had to follow.

Until the promulgation of the Edict of Milan in 313, the Church developed its apostolic ministry in missionary conditions. The apostles shared the ministry of the apostolate. Not only deacons, e.g. Stephen, but also other Christians dispersed because of persecution “passed from place to place preaching the Word” (OJ 8:4). Jesus’ disciples gave their successors the task of teaching. They fulfilled their mission in a dual form. The Second Vatican Council recalls the above in the constitution *Dei Verbum*: “The apostles pass on what they have received and admonish the faithful to keep to the traditions they have learned, either by oral study or by letters” (KO 8).

Clement of Alexandria believed that the ministry of the Word could be realized by both the spoken and the written word. He treated both forms of kerygma equally.⁴ At the time of persecution, the written message more fully implemented the principle of the universality of the kerygma, thus reaching out to all environments.

Until the middle of the second century, the preparation of candidates for baptism had a loose structure and took place within the commune that established its form. At the end of the 2nd century, organized forms of preparation for Christianity, called the catechumenate, began to emerge. The then catechesis is documented by numerous writings, including *Treatise on Baptism* of Tertullian around 200 years and *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolyte of Rome around 215 years. The collection of catechesis by Clement of Alexandria, Origen or Augustine comes from the 4th century. A continually growing influx of new candidates for baptism was the reason for institutionalization and handing over the mission of teaching to the representatives of the Church. Besides, the resistance of neophytes to the activity of sects was too weak, which caused them to fall easily into heresies.

The Catechumenate was created to provide baptismal candidates with a more robust formation, deepen it, extend the preparation time, and raise the demands

⁴ Cf. F. Drączkowski, *Idea kerygmatu pisemnego w przekazach patrystycznych*, Lublin 1994, p. 10.

on candidates. It had the character of collective teaching and led to collective baptism.⁵ Whoever wanted to become a Christian had to convert and believe in Jesus Christ as well as be baptised. Until about 200 years ago, it was not very easy to make a clear distinction between evangelisation and catechesis. These terms were often used interchangeably and expressed the same reality. Evangelisation, i.e., the first proclamation of the message of salvation, or catechesis, that is, in-depth instruction in the faith, was part of the preparation for baptism.

Most researchers divide the catechumenate that existed in the first centuries into two periods, which are separated by the Edict of Milan of 313 or by the Council of Nice of 325. The first event changed the external situation of the Church; the other one that was made possible by the first one influenced the internal life of the community.⁶ Until the promulgation of the Edict of Milan, the Church developed in missionary conditions because of its Judaic roots.

At the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries, the institution of the catechumenate was weakened. Over time the catechumenate became a catechetical school. Many candidates and a strict penitential discipline prevented many from baptising. The number of catechumens increased, but the number of true converts decreased. The practice of baptism of children also spread.

From the 6th century on, catechesis became an instruction for the baptised and the implementation of the Christian life. The catechumenate in its original also disappeared because the Greek-Roman world was already Christian and baptisms of adults became a rarity.

Development of catechesis during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

In the Middle Ages, teaching the truths of the faith was of explanatory nature. The truths given were illustrated by examples and texts taken from everyday life, the lives of the saints, the Scriptures, and the writings of the Church Fathers. For those who could not read, the so-called *Biblia pauperum* (The Bible of the Poor) containing scenes from the lives of biblical figures, especially from Jesus and the saints, in pictures with short explanations was intended.⁷

⁵ Ibidem, p. 45.

⁶ Cf. R. Murawski, *Katechumenat w epoce przedkonstantyńskiej – do 313 roku*, [in:] *Historia katechezy...*, op. cit., pp. 45–46.

⁷ Cf. M. Owoc, *Katecheza Kościoła w dobie Średniowiecza*, [in:] *Dydaktyka w służbie katechezy*, S. Dziekoński (ed.), Krakow 2002, pp. 68–86.

The Church in the Middle Ages mainly concerned not so much the initiation of adults as the introduction of baptised children into the Christian life. It was implemented naturally and spontaneously through the process of religious socialisation in the family. The Christian family was the most crucial factor in the religious upbringing of the young generation during that period. At that time there was no institutional catechesis of the Church for children and youth. The Christian family replaced the former institution of the catechumenate because parents introduced young Christians into the life of faith. Hence, we can speak about the family catechumenate functioning in the Middle Ages.

In the catechesis in the Middle Ages, unfortunately, the biblical and kerygmatic element began to disappear gradually, and the doctrinal element was increasingly emphasised.

Since the 16th century, there has been an impressive development of catechetical creativity, which particularly flourished in the 17th century. Many catechisms were created during then; some of them achieved great fame, being repeatedly published and translated into foreign languages, others quickly fell into oblivion.⁸

At that time, the catechisms, e.g. of St Peter Canisius in Germany, were the most effective weapon in defending the integrity of Christian Science. Peter Canisius tried to present the truths of faith in concrete, pictorial and living language. The Scriptures permeated the content of the lecture. The author avoided abstract definitions and theological terminology. The Roman Catechism, which was the first official catechism of the Catholic Church, falls among the most famous catechisms of that period. It was published in 1566 by Pius V after the Council of Trent. The message of Christian doctrine was positive, without clear polemical accents, and there were quite frequent references to the Scriptures. It had the following structure: I. Faith; II. Sacraments – Grace; III. God's Commandments; IV. Our Father – Prayer. The Catechism of the Catholic Church from 1992 is modelled on the Roman Catechism.

The third Renaissance catechism was that by St Robert Bellarmine. He created its new type that dominated the Church until the 20th century. It could be called a dogmatic-apologetic catechism. It was devoid of the biblical element and lacked reference to the Scriptures as the primary source of faith. The formulas were concise and easy to learn by heart. That was due to the then-prevailing belief that to believe is to know. Hence the concern that children, youth and adults should learn the truths of faith in such a way that they would be remembered for good.

⁸ Cf. R. Murawski, *Geneza i założenia Katechizmu Kościoła Katolickiego*, "Seminare" 10 (1994), pp. 37–38.

At the Council of Trent, apart from the catechism, adult catechesis received its classical structure: preaching on Sundays and holidays, daily (or at least three times a week) teaching the truths of faith based on the Scriptures during Advent and Lent. That was accompanied by sacramental catechesis to prepare the faithful to participate more fully and consciously in the Mass and to receive the sacraments fruitfully. Since the Council of Trent (1546) a catechesis of children and young people has been established in the Church. The family catechumenate was replaced by a new form – the parish catechumenate. It aimed at the Christian initiation of children and youth. The Council recommended the introduction of Sunday and Christmas catechesis for children and youth throughout the Church. Catechesis was to be given in all parishes and concerned transmission of basic messages in the faith and development of an attitude of obedience to God and parents. In this way, Sunday catechesis for children and young people ceased to be a private initiative of religious orders and zealous pastors and became the official form of Church catechesis.

Catechesis of the Age of Enlightenment

The successful development of catechesis in the 16th and 17th centuries was severely hampered at the end of the 18th century. A certain crisis in the catechetical activity of the Church emerged.

At the end of the 18th century, catechesis showed severe deficiencies. The participation of children and young people, especially in the countryside, was rather weak. Practically, the children could get involved only on Sunday, since on the remaining days of the week they were employed at home and in the fields. It emphasised learning by heart and neglecting explanations of the catechism. Complaints about heartless learning of truths of faith that were incomprehensible for children were common then. It was precisely this method that aroused aversion and resistance of more educated people to learning religion. Catechesis consisted most often in repeating catechism answers after a catechist.

The end of the 18th century saw that catechesis was transferred from the Church to school and changed into a school subject – teaching religion. The introduction of religious education in state schools brought many benefits. Systematic learning could be extended to all children. Moreover, the school religious education began to improve from the methodological and didactic point of view. However, in addition to these undoubted benefits, some dangers could also be seen. Under the influence of the rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment, which also permeated schools, catechesis began to transform. It was

not so much about conveying the truths of the faith as about instructing in religious matters. The proclamation of the faith, in which the human element became more and more evident, was no longer understood as an event taking place within the ecclesial community, between God and man, but as a purely human matter occurring between the student and the teacher.⁹ By introducing the teaching of religion to public schools, a slow process of distancing the family and parish from their catechetical and educational tasks began. The family began to free itself from the responsibility for the religious education of children. Similarly, parishes began to convey their educational and catechetical responsibility to the school. In this way, the family and parish catechesis, as well as the catechesis of adults began to disintegrate slowly.

The abovementioned changes in catechesis, both the external in the environment and internal ones, i.e., the transformation into a school subject, took place in the climate of the spirit of the Enlightenment. This spirit was shaped by rationalism, naturalism, and moralism. In catechesis, rationalism revealed itself in the pursuit of a purely rational, intellectual knowledge and assimilation of the truth of faith. Naturalism emphasised the importance of natural religion and diminished the spiritual values of Revelation. Moralism reduced religion to morality and practically transformed it into the science of morality, which aimed at educating and forming a loyal citizen. In the transmission of religious truths, and Bible stories as well, the main goal was to draw moral conclusions from them.

The Enlightenment brought about significant changes in the understanding and functioning of catechesis. The history of catechesis began with school catechesis that continues to this day and is called by many authors “the period of school catechumenate.” Attempts were made to introduce the Scriptures to catechesis. After almost two centuries of existence of biblical catechesis, it was a right solution, even though in a not yet satisfactory form as a separate subject of biblical history with a strong emphasis on the historical and moral side. In the period after Enlightenment, in the first half of the 19th century, eminent catechists appeared, who tried to overcome the damage caused to catechesis by the spirit of the Enlightenment (rationalism, naturalism, moralism) as well as by the actions taken at that time. On the other hand, they attempted to preserve and deepen the positive and valuable contribution to catechesis this epoch had made. The then-dominant general tendency was to strive for the historical-redemptive approach to catechesis.

⁹ Cf. R. Murawski, *Historia katechezy*, op. cit., pp. 91–106.

Kerygmatic renewal in the catechesis of the 19th and 20th century

The catechetical renewal initiated in the 19th century began to bring together a multitude of catechetical theorists and practitioners, which became apparent in the creation of many scientific works on the subject. The directions that developed during that period directly preceded the kerygmatic renewal in catechesis and were in no small extent the foundation for the Church's later teaching and preaching.¹⁰

When looking at the development of catechesis from the perspective of the last decades, three successive stages can be distinguished: scholastic, kerygmatic and anthropological ones within which specific catechetical directions were developed. The first one concerned scholastic catechesis directed mainly towards the transmission of religious knowledge. Over time, deepened reflection on the child and its development resulted in the introduction of activating and experiential elements.¹¹

The 19th century is considered the beginning of the renewal of the kerygmatic direction. Its initiators were Bernhard Heinrich Overberg, Johann Michael Sailer, Augustinus Gruber and Johann Baptista Hirscher.¹² B. Overberg reiterated the importance of the Scriptures as a source and basis for the transmission of faith. In turn, Johann Michael Sailer embodies what was the most original in Catholicism in the early 19th century. He makes the Scriptures and Revelation the starting point for preaching. He postulated the independence of the kerygma from school theology.¹³ In his view catechesis only uses religious knowledge to develop a Christian attitude in the catechised. He proposed to influence the whole personality of the catechised person. Augustinus Gruber, the author of catechesis based on St Augustine's *De catechizandis rudibus*, should be considered another pre-kerygmaticist. He pointed out that catechesis should be a biblical story, and the catechist should be a hero of God, proclaiming Revelation and telling about God's great works.¹⁴ Johann Baptista Hirscher was the classic representative of kerygmatic renewal in catechesis. In his works, he criticised the moralistic sermons of the Enlightenment. He paid attention to the renewal

¹⁰ Cf. M. Wojtasik, *Katecheza kerygmaticzna w Polsce po Soborze Watykańskim II*, Łódź 2010, p. 29.

¹¹ Cf. J. Michalski, *Katecheza parafialna w Polsce po Soborze Watykańskim II*, Olsztyn 1997, p. 16.

¹² Cf. T. Panuś, *Główne kierunki katechetyczne XX wieku*, Kraków 2001, p. 63.

¹³ Cf. F. Blachnicki, *Kerygmaticzna odnowa katechezy*, Warsaw 2005, pp. 59–60.

¹⁴ R. Murowski, *Historia katechezy*, op. cit., pp. 104–105.

of the content of the announcement. At the centre of his teaching there was the preaching of the mystery of faith centred around Jesus Christ.

Hirscher's kerygmatic principles can be summarised in the following points:

- historical-genetic representation of salvation works against the background of the history of salvation,
- presentation of the Christian religion in an organic outline as the whole of God's works, carried out in Christ for the glory of the Father and the salvation of people,
- emphasising the central truths and concentrating all the mysteries of Christianity around them,
- presentation of Revelation in practical terms, where the truths revealed are intended for the transformation and salvation of a man.¹⁵

Hirscher's thought was, for those times, something completely revolutionary. It was an apparent reference to the tradition of the apostles, and through St Augustine to the Roman Catechism. The catechism gained then permanent stimuli functioning until today.

This trend of catechesis, initially so enthusiastically received, was suppressed after several years because of the revival of the neo-scholastic direction and its supporters. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that kerygmatic renewal found its way to more fertile ground. In his book *Katholische Schulbibel*, Jakob Ecker recalled the kerygmatic ideas proclaimed by the authors mentioned above. He pointed out the need to develop a textbook for the study of religion entirely based on the Scriptures.¹⁶

The years 1936–1960 are considered the peak development phase of the direction of kerygmatic renewal. Joseph Andreas Jungmann's book *The Good News and Our Preaching of the Faith* published in Regensburg was a breakthrough. According to Jungmann, catechesis is not meant to popularise theology, but it should become the proclamation of the Gospel. The purpose of catechesis was to be a personal response of the disciple to the Word of God. Its essence was the reflection on the Word of God based on the mutual commitment of the catechist and disciples. The catechist was seen as a hero, messenger, witness.¹⁷

Kerygmatic catechesis at that time found strong support in the biblical, liturgical, and pastoral movements. The first one contributed to linking catechesis to the Holy Scriptures. The liturgical movement, on the other hand,

¹⁵ Cf. T. Panuś, *Główne kierunki...*, op. cit., p. 65.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 66.

¹⁷ Cf. R. Chałupniak, *Dzieje katechezy*, [in:] *Wybrane zagadnienia z katechetyki*, R. Chałupniak, J. Kostorz (eds.), Opole 2002, p. 35.

helped it to open to the mysteries of the sacraments in the Church. Whereas the pastoral movement sensitised catechesis to the danger of excessive activism and pointed out that the concept and implementation of catechesis are to be closely connected with the realisation of the Church.¹⁸

The basic elements of kerygmatic catechesis can therefore be summarised in the following points:

1. Christocentrism – catechesis proclaiming the message of salvation must put the person of Jesus Christ at the centre.
2. Theocentrism – the content structure of catechesis must be theocentric – Trinitarian: through Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit.
3. Ecclesiocentrism – the emphasis of an external organisation with a hierarchical system has been shifted to the living experience of the Church as a community of those who belong to Christ and have a share in His life.
4. The Scriptures occupies a prominent position in the Church.
5. Liturgy has become a necessary element of catechetical preaching.
6. Man's response to God's call – the task of catechesis is to present the content in such a way as to evoke in the catechised people a response to the proclaimed message of salvation.¹⁹

The kerygmatic movement restored concepts forgotten in the Church such as the Word of God, Christocentrism, revelation, kerygma, personal dialogue between God and a man, history of salvation, and others. It drew attention to the dynamic and existential character of Revelation, emphasised the role of the Sacred Scriptures in the life of the Church and individual believers. It can be said that it laid the foundations for the Council's demands for preaching.

The tradition of kerygmatic catechesis in the Church is referred to by Pope Francis in his statements today. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* he states, among other things, that: "kerygmatic catechesis is the main message to which one must constantly return and listen in various ways and which must be constantly proclaimed in one form or another at all stages" (EV 164). It is expressed in the statement that "Jesus Christ loves you, He gave His life to save you, and now He is alive at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen, and liberate you" (EV 164). The whole Christian formation is to be a deepening of the kerygma, a proclamation of Christ; it will have "the characteristics of joy, stimulus, vitality and harmonious fullness not reducing the preaching to several doctrines, sometimes more philosophical than evangelical." As can be seen in Pope Francis, the first proclamation of Christ leads to a personal relationship

¹⁸ Cf. M. Majewski, *Katecheza wierna Bogu i człowiekowi*, Krakow 1986, pp. 36–37.

¹⁹ Cf. W. Koska, *Katechetyka*, Poznań 1989, pp. 71–76.

with Him and becomes a personal dimension of everyday life.²⁰ For this reason, Pope Francis stresses the importance of kerygmatic catechesis, which “is a message that responds to the desire for infinity in every human heart” (EV 165).

Many movements for the renewal of the modern Church use kerygmatic catechesis in their activities.²¹ For example, the Charismatic Renewal, the Light-Life Movement, the Neocatechumenal Way, Comunion e Liberazione, Cursillo, and so forth, can be mentioned here. Kerygmatic catechesis in these movements contributes to the continuous development of the contemporary Church.

Conclusion

The analyses presented allow the conclusion that the creation and development of the kerygma in catechesis, which dates to the beginning of the Church, has always been the foundation of a renewal of faith. Throughout the history of the Church each epoch has pursued its own style of preaching the kerygma – at the beginning of the Church as the first preaching of Jesus Christ, then through the catechumenate, until the 21st century. The deepened faith of the catechised leads to evangelisation, that is, sharing of the living Jesus with brothers and sisters. For more and more often, they do not know Him or have forgotten Him. That has a transforming effect on their daily lives and directs them towards the supernatural life.

The fruit of kerygmatic catechesis is, above all, the building up of faith in its participants, which is vital in times of contemporary crisis of faith. It is therefore worth undertaking further detailed research into the causes of this phenomenon.

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²⁰ Cf. W. Osiał, *Wizja współczesnej katechezy w nauczanie papieża Franciszka*, “Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne” 27 (2014), no. 1, p. 298.

²¹ Cf. P. Tomasiak, *Owoce orientacji kerygmaticznej we współczesnej katechezie polskiej*, “Studia Katechetyczne,” vol. 8: *Kerygma – Biblia – katecheza*, R. Czekalski (ed.), p. 51.

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