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QUEEN OF ANGELS: AN EXAMPLE OF EVANGELIZATION IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

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Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi, On Evangelization in the Modern World*, reminded the Church of an aspect of evangelization that is important to our understanding of the African-American Catholic experience and its relationship to the larger Church. He wrote that:

"The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself. She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of brotherly love, and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love. She is the People of God immersed in the world, and often tempted by idols, and she always needs to hear the proclamation of the "mighty works of God" which converted her to the Lord; she always needs to be called together afresh by Him and reunited. In brief, this means that she has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigor and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel.¹

Queen of Angels Church, an example of evangelization in the African-American community, is a story of the conversion of non-Catholics to the Catholic Church; however, it is also the story, and one which still continues today, of the opportunity of the larger Church to be evangelized from within. Queen of Angels and its five missions, including St. Peter Claver in Montclair and Holy Spirit in Orange, and the virtually simultaneous founding of Christ the King in Jersey City in 1930, were all examples of a call for renewal and conversion of European-American Catholics.

The singular fact that the founding mothers and fathers of Queen of Angels and Christ the King felt a need to petition for a separate church was indicative of the conversion that was needed in the Church, from an alignment of Catholics with the prevailing racism of society, to a prophetic and courageous gospel stance to which Christ calls us. For nearly 75 years, African-Americans in the Newark Archdiocese have been part of the steady movement toward a greater understanding of themselves as Catholics. The evolution of black theology since the 1960s continues to challenge European American Catholics to listen to and live the Gospel more completely by aligning themselves with their suffering, and by actively listening to their faith experience.

The Church must acknowledge the black theologian's task, as Shawn Copeland describes it: "to excavate, critique, and reconstruct our African-derived religious, cultural, and aesthetic wisdom, traditions and practices," while at the same time they engage the 2000 year Catholic liturgical, spiritual, and intellectual tradition and integrate the "religions, cultures, and histories" that shaped African-Americans uniquely.² Many of the distinctive qualities that black Catholics appropriate into their faith lives as Catholics evolved in the black Protestant tradition, the most powerful institution of African-American life. When scholars explain the social and historical forces that shaped the black Church, it is perhaps easy to miss that fact that the African-American center of power has a religious rather than secular context. It is not in a corporate board room, but in a pulpit and in the powerful connection of the African diaspora to the spiritual heritage of their African roots. This spiritual heritage enriches the lives of African-American Catholics, and, by extension, the rest of the Catholic Church because we are one in Christ Jesus, as Paul would say. And as Martin Luther King would say, we are "tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality."³

The American Catholic Church has the opportunity to be evangelized from within by one of the most, if not the most, exciting ongoing developments in theology today; and reconstructing the history of African-Americans in the Newark Archdiocese is part of the enterprise of black theology.

But when we speak about the phenomenon of Queen of Angels, Christ the King, St. Peter Claver and Holy Spirit, it need not be a reminiscence of times gone by, or a nostalgic trip to the past of a quaint people who lived in different times that have nothing to do with us today. They may have faced more obvious obstacles than we do, but as black theologians remind us, the legacy remains.

Evangelization: A Three-Pronged Endeavor

The Queen of Angels story involves the response of diocesan clergy in the Newark Archdiocese to the appeal from African-Americans for a way to live the faith more completely for themselves in a church of their own. The Newark Archdiocese was directly involved with the evangelization of the black people

of the Archdiocese through the Mission to the Colored, which reported directly to Vicar General John Duffy and his successor, Thomas H. McLaughlin, in the 1930s. From its beginning and throughout its history, Queen of Angels has had a strong lay aspect, although there have been periods of more intense and pervasive activity than others. The greatest periods of evangelism, innovation, and social activism were when lay, religious, clerical and Episcopal levels worked together in a concerted effort. The peak periods were from 1930 to 1940, with Reverend Cornelius Ahern as pastor, and from 1958 to 1970, under Monsignor Thomas Carey.

Queen of Angels was founded in September 1930, but it began with a preecclesial lay enterprise in 1916 with one woman, Ethel Wright, and her catechesis of children in her home. The officially organized evangelization of African-Americans sprang from two lay movements of African-American women which were founded for different purposes but converged into one as it flowed into the founding of the church. Both of the groups were consciously and specifically Catholic, but the first group, of which Ethel Wright was a founding member, was established for the purpose of providing housing to black immigrant women from the South as they settled into the urban environment of Newark. The Theresa Lane Council, as it was called, sought to reach out to the larger culture in a non-sectarian manner. But the second movement, the Little Flower Guild, was organized by Ethel Wright specifically for the purpose of obtaining a parish environment of acceptance and empowerment for black Catholics apart from the indifferent and often hostile world of white Catholics.

Enter Sister Peter Claver of the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity. In 1928, Sister Peter Claver learned of the Theresa Lane Council. She was introduced to Theresa Lane by two French teachers who stopped to talk to her after Mass. Sister Peter Claver was crucial to Queen of Angels' history for three reasons: the fact that she was a woman; her commitment to working with black people; and the worldview of her order, the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity, which was founded by Reverend Thomas Judge, C.P.

Being a woman allowed Sister Peter Claver access to the world of the Theresa Lane Council which I do not believe a man would have had. Both of the preecclesial groups were formed with the knowledge and apparent blessing of Reverend Masterson from St. Bridget's Parish, but his involvement stopped there. Sister Peter Claver asked Father Judge for permission to attend one of the Council's meetings and received it. She had been working with Italian immigrants in Newark, but had a great desire to work among Blacks because of her personal childhood history in Rome, Georgia. She was hoping that when she attended the meeting, it would lead to a total immersion into that work.

The Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity began in 1909 as a group of lay people under the guidance of Father Thomas Judge, a Vincentian priest, who maintained from the beginning of his priesthood that the Catholic Church would benefit from the active apostolate of lay people. He believed that lay people could become "work-a-day apostles," reaching out to people in their "every day life." And, anticipating the Second Vatican Council, he believed that through that experience they would be taught to "realize that they are the Church and to be alert for its interests and the welfare of souls."⁴

Judge gave Sister Peter Claver permission to attend the meeting, but he was reluctant for Whites to take over the apostolate among Blacks. He instructed his order to think of work among African-Americans as a temporary situation. He believed that racial problems were national and had to be addressed on that level, but that Whites were incapable of solving African-American problems, they "must solve it themselves." To this end they required their own "priesthood and their own sisterhood and, therefore, . . . their own Apostolate."⁵ Therefore, the Trinitarians should only be involved until African-American clergy and spiritual leaders were sufficient, and at that time "the missionary's work must be considered brought to a happy close."⁶

So this was the mandate that Sister Peter Claver received from the founder of her order — a mandate written in the 1920s that sounds very similar to language of black theologians since the 1960s. With this in mind, Sister Peter Claver attended a meeting of the Theresa Lane Council to observe the workings of the group. She came away believing that the women were very much like the lay apostolate of the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity, that is, as a group led by the Holy Spirit to do work among their people.

Sister Peter Claver received permission to work with the Council one day a week. With 10 cents for the ride back on the trolley car, she walked with Lucy Mulligan, the president of the Theresa Lane Council, throughout the blocks of Newark seeking other black Catholics and talking to those who might be interested in the Catholic faith. The members of the Council would bring pieces of paper to Sister, on which were written the name of those whom they had contacted. The women worked this way from 1928 until the founding of the church in 1930.

Sometime in 1929, Lucy Mulligan mentioned Ethel Wright and the Little Flower Guild to Sister Peter Claver. When Sister met with Wright, the goal of a black church became solidified, because Wright found in Sister the liaison she needed with the official Church. She found someone who would not only listen, but would have the courage and connections to clergy and episcopacy to effect movement toward that goal.

Sister Peter Claver asked Judge what she should do about the request from Wright for a separate "colored church." He guided her to approach Monsignor John Duffy, the Vicar-General of the diocese who was sympathetic to Judge's work. Duffy was the perfect person to contact, not only because of his affinity to the Trinitarians, but because he had gained power to get things done during Bishop O'Connor's long illness, and because he had a personal commitment to assist black people. He had been searching for a church building for Blacks for a long time. With the request for a church arising from the community itself, Duffy sprang into action to give them what they wanted. He went to the pastor of St. Bridget's Church and asked him if the group of black Catholics could use the church's hall or basement for their gatherings. He said yes, but, then again, Monsignor William Field, who knew Duffy, told me that he was no man you said no to.

By June of 1930, Christ the King parish was founded, with substantial funding for a church from the Smith family. In September of that same year, Father Cornelius Ahern, as Director of the Mission to the Colored, joined with John Duffy on the Episcopal level, the growing number of lay parishioners, and the Trinitarian sisters to begin the work of establishing churches and missions throughout the diocese.

In a decidedly “social gospel” approach to evangelization, Ahern wrote in his report to Duffy that: “After being over three weeks with the colored people I find we must (1) get them work (2) take care of the poor and deed them [get them housing] and (3) offer an attractive church and hall to compete with the wealthy Baptists and Presbyterians.”⁷ Decades before President Bush’s concept of faith-based initiatives, Queen of Angels’ organization of churches and missions strategized and coalesced with government programs and private organizations to provide food, clothing, housing, and employment to those who asked, regardless of religious affiliation. The demographic consisted of Cape Verdean Catholics, also called black Portuguese, West Indians, African-American Catholics and non-Catholics. Whites were also, although a minority, a constant part of the parish.

Ahern established missions in Down Neck, Orange, Montclair and Elizabeth as well as a church on Academy Street in Newark where Sunday Mass was held. Some people and children were bussed to church, and others traveled on their own from adjacent towns by whatever means they could.

Laypeople, both black and white, were trained to catechize by the Trinitarian sisters and the Mount Carmel Guild. White Auxiliaries were formed who donated funds for the building or purchasing of church buildings. They drove parishioners to church and instructions and other classes, and worked with black parishioners running clothing cooperatives.

The scope of the work was tremendous, covering a large geographical area and responding to the desire of the people to be educated. Queen of Angels offered special lectures such as those on the liturgy by Reverend Benedict Bradley O.S.B., from St. Mary’s Abbey, and other lecturers on different aspects of theology. The Trinitarian sisters and lay people offered a wide variety of subjects from sewing to dance to band. Lay devotional societies were formed like the Holy Name Society, sodalities for adults and children, and the Rosary Society in addition to the Little Flower Guild which continues to this day. Bid whis card parties, dances, street fairs, summer beach outings, and picnics were successful fund raisers and very popular among Catholic and non-Catholics from all over the metropolitan area. Folks from Connecticut, Brooklyn, New York and New Jersey attended the Trinitarian St. Joseph’s Shrine in Stirling, New Jersey, with over 1,000 attendees in 1935. In keeping with the “plenty good room” ethos of African-American life, everyone was welcome and knew it. As Ollie Pierce, a convert from Protestantism and long-time member of Queen of Angels, related, the Sunday morning pancake breakfasts and all other functions were well attended by non-Catholics who enjoyed a chat with the priests and parishioners. They were always “welcome at the priest’s table. Queen of Angels was known everywhere.”⁸

A medical clinic was established in order to provide the much-needed health care to the community. Queen of Angels opened its first medical clinic in April of 1932. Two Protestant doctors administered the clinic on a voluntary basis.⁹ This particular clinic operated until the 1950s. Another was reopened under Carey in 1968 with the help of Dr. Leon G. Smith, the director of medical education at St. Michael’s Hospital. Three times a week, Dr. Smith and two other staff specialists from St. Michael’s, Dr. Thomas Scully and Dr. Virginia Malfitan, donated their services to the clinic.¹⁰ The church also operated a clinic for the aging at the Hayes Housing projects near Queen of Angels.¹¹

In October 1932, Harold Purcell, a Passionist priest known throughout the country for his skill as orator at revival missions, preached the inaugural novena to what became the first continuous devotion to St. Jude in the country.¹² It became a perpetual devotion that continued for more than 40 years under the leadership of the diocesan priests and ended in the 1980s. It was highly successful, attracting close to 700 people a day.¹³ It is the only devotion to a saint that seems to have captured the imagination of the early black converts, but attracted Whites even more. Ahern was amazed at the amount of white attendees even though “the old objection of whites mixing with the colored will not be put down.”¹⁴

The St. Jude Novena provided a neutral ground where the petitioner’s need for “the impossible” temporarily lowered boundaries. It increased good will by integrating white and black worshippers of different classes, attracted potential converts, and brought much-needed revenue into the parish.

In the 1930s, the Missal, with both the Latin Mass and its English translation, was still a novelty among American Catholic lay people. Apparently at the request of Ahern, Reverend Benedict Bradley translated a pamphlet version of the Latin Mass into English which was used by Queen of Angels parishioners. A man from the parish would stand in front of the congregation and read the English, while the priest said the Mass in Latin and the people followed along in English from their pamphlets. This innovation, called the dialogue Mass, placed Queen of Angels on the cutting edge of the liturgical movement begun by the Benedictines in Europe. Queen of Angels used that form until Vatican II introduced the vernacular in the Mass in the late 1960s.

Father Cornelius Ahern and Monsignor Thomas Carey

Father Cornelius Ahern and Monsignor Thomas Carey lived and worked in two different eras, one in the Great Depression pre-World War II America, and the latter during the era of Civil Rights and Black Power movement. Ahern’s view of himself as a priest was that of a father to his people. Ahern believed that the Catholic rectory was the Father’s house where his people could go when life became unbearable. There the father of Christ’s “prodigal son” lived and waited for your return if you strayed off the path. He knew and loved you so well that he welcomed you home “when the world and its people would cast you aside.”¹⁵

The priest was a conduit through whom God dispenses graces and gifts “to his people.” He must be all things to all men: an educated man possessing the sterling qualities of a gentleman; he must be a theologian, philosopher, historian and scientist, to be a doctor with doctors and a lawyer with lawyers in order to “lead them to their salvation.” Since all strata of society must have the Gospel preached to them, a priest must be as comfortable in the company of the “high” as with the “lowly.”¹⁶

About 30 years later, around 1967, Carey spoke about the Church in a much different way that indicated the change of times. In an unpublished paper responding to the question, “What can be done by the Church for the problems of the inner city?” he identified what he called the attitude of paternalism

that “creates an atmosphere where leadership cannot grow.”¹⁷

Often as clerics, we feel we know what is best for the people, and so there might well develop a growing tendency to direct everything. We become self-appointed experts in almost all fields, and slowly but surely we refuse to trust anyone else with important decisions. . . . We do not trust them to know the problems themselves much less be able to offer solutions. This approach stifles the development of a community. . . . Consequently, the first contribution the Church can make to the solutions of problems of the inner city must be the resolution that we will have a supportive rather than a directive role. . . . We will support the black community in the cities of our Archdiocese by giving them the tools to solve their own problems. . . . Blacks can do it; we should support.¹⁸

Different approaches for different times. Although Ahern desired to be all things to all people, he also was known to be a consummate manager who did not get in the way of the Trinitarians, who worked intimately with the lay men and women who in turn were leaders in various ways and in the several locations. Both Ahern and Carey established a tone in the parish that engendered respect for the people and invited and encouraged their involvement, but ways that were adapted for the times in which they lived.

Another aspect of Carey’s tenure was his attraction and use of Latin American Liberation Theology, and his application of it at Queen of Angels. After the 1967 riots, Carey and the priests of Queen of Angels were casting about for new strategies to tackle the challenges of an inner city parish. In the summer of 1968, before Gustavo Gutiérrez published his seminal book, *A Theology of Liberation*, and in the same year that James Cone’s *Black Theology, Black Power* was published, Father Tom Carey paid a visit to San Miguelito, an experimental community in Panama in Latin America. Reverend Leon Mahon from the Chicago Archdiocese founded San Miguelito, using the concept of *comunidades de base*, or base communities, meant to empower lay leadership in small local groups.¹⁹

Carey was so struck by this concept that he decided to attempt something like it in Newark. He sent the priests and sisters from the parish to San Miguelito for an eleven-week course of gospel-centered dialogue designed to form Christian leaders, especially among men. Carey then asked each person from Queen of Angels who was trained in the base community approach to apply it to Newark and utilize it somehow in the ministry of their choice. For example, Reverend Thomas Comerford chose housing, and Monsignor William Linder chose the youth group and civil rights activities like Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Poor People’s Campaign.

By the time the 1967 riots occurred, Queen of Angels was one of the busiest places in Newark. It was the Mecca to which white Catholics turned for answers to the questions, “why did the riots happen?” and, “what could be done to change things?” The process of providing answers involved Willie Wright, a black parishioner and convert to Catholicism, inviting Whites to tour Newark’s inner city to discover the reality of living there. That experience, which was well attended, led to a Day of Understanding, which provided a forum for brainstorming for viable steps to take toward change. From that day, Operation Understanding was organized — an interracial, inner city-suburban coalition that worked on several fronts to improve the lives of the Newark community. A Palm Sunday March was planned for April, 7, 1968 to again tour the inner city, but to also show a solid front of brother- and sisterhood among both urbanites and suburbanites, Blacks and Whites. When Jewish organizations expressed an interest in the march, the name was changed to the Walk for Understanding.

As a result of the tragic death of Martin Luther King, another dimension was added to the march, and on April 7, 1968, 25,000 people came together to Walk for Understanding throughout the inner city of Newark. Just months earlier, riots broke loose, expressing anger, despair and frustration in the face of poverty, discrimination and oppression. But on that day, arising out of the constant evangelizing of others and themselves, Queen of Angels Church gave birth to a day that proclaimed that people of whatever class or color contained within themselves the potential for love and understanding. On that day when other cities throughout the United States burned, people came and walked quietly through the South Ward and listened to Monsignor Carey speak of the great modern prophet, Martin.

That event was the apex and most visible event of Queen of Angels’ history, but it was and is not the only important event to occur. Evangelization continues at Queen of Angels today, as it does among many other black churches which have become demographically black over the years with the flight of Whites to the suburbs.

Some have asked, “Why did Ethel Wright and other black Catholics not leave Catholicism?” I would argue that the ethos of her life — the tone, character, and quality of her life, its moral and aesthetic style — fit with the Catholic Faith and its symbols. Her life as a Catholic made sense to her; it represented an authentic expression, both in her interaction with fellow parishioners and her ability to share that Faith with others liturgically, catechetically, socially and devotionally.²⁰ And even though she felt compelled to seek a safe haven in a separate church, she was assisted in that endeavor by white Catholics who supported her in her goal to find a place where she could live a full Catholic life.

The process of black Catholics seeking their own place within the Church forces the Church to examine her attitude toward fellow religionists. Since 1930, black Catholics have grown in stature and presence within the Church; black theology continues to challenge the Church to live the Gospel, as the “People of God immersed in the world, called together afresh by Him and reunited.”

African-American political black activist, Clifton Carter, now past from our midst, wrote these words in commemoration of the Walk for Understanding, called, *They Came*:

They came

by car, by bus, by way
 into the Newark
 afraid, hoping, determined
 looking, and looking on
 redemption, despair, scattered dreams
 lay and religious
 some just laying, always laid by the way side
 looking on a new curious thing
 Whites and blacks assembled, marching
 folks passing through the bowels of Newark
 touched by history, hoping for justice
 something human in the air
 the Newark has always given
 a truer sense of where we are not
 where we have been, where we cannot go
 I'm not sure but Jesus came
 he was there in the faces of those who knew
 that this would be the last walk
 the very last time
 truth can only be crushed so long
 then of its own volition will rise
 will come to pass
 in a way we may not be ready for
 but those who came
 were changed forever
 they could never hide from themselves again
 they would always know
 where God's priorities are
 and who HE entrusts them with.

Clifton Carter 1993²

¹Pope Paul VI, "On Evangelization in the Modern World : Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*," Dec. 8, 1975, Washington : Publications Office, United States Catholic Conference, 1976.

²M. Shawn Copeland, "Method in Emerging Black Catholic Theology," in *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States*, Diana Hayes and Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., editors, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998).

³Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution, Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on 31 March 1968. Congressional Record, 9 April 1968.

⁴Unpublished writings of Father Thomas Judge, (Philadelphia: Archives-Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity, A-MSBT No. 00757, January 15, 1923). Hereafter cited by A-MSBT number only. Eventually, his lay apostolate evolved into the three orders of priests and brothers, religious women, and lay which exist today.

⁵A-MSBT No. 003740, October 31, 1922.

⁶Ibid.

⁷ADN: QAPP, Box 1, Letter from Ahern to Duffy, October 3, 1930. White Protestant churches in Newark posed little threat to Queen of Angels, as their congregations fled to the suburbs. See Moses Deleney, "The Interaction Between Protestant Churches and Their Social Environment in the Inner City," Ph.D. diss., (Drew University, Madison, NJ, 1959). Deleney describes the "white flight" of white Protestant churches from downtown Newark to the surrounding townships. This left the inner city to the Catholic and Episcopal Churches which had "territorially-based" rather than "congregationally-based" parishes.

⁸(Interview with Ollie Pierce, November 14, 1994).

⁹Ahern letter to Duffy, April 4, 1932. Sister Patricia Judge, cites the date of the medical clinic as 1931 rather than 1932. Judge wrote, "One of the first social endeavors of Queer of Angels in conjunction with the Mount Carmel Guild was the establishment of a medical clinic in 1931. It was the first sub-clinic in the city of Newark and had the full recognition of Doctor Charles Craster, director of the Board of Health" (Sister Patricia Margaret Judge, 92). In 1940, Gillard had this comment about the medical clinic: "Two physicians and two nurses give a day a week in the clinic connected with Queen of Angels Missions. Last year 370 cases were treated (CCIUS, 230).

¹⁰*The Star-Ledger*, September 4, 1968. Interview with Dr. Leon Smith

¹¹*The Star-Ledger*, September 4, 1968. Interview with Thomas Carey.

¹²Ahern letter to McLaughlin, October 1, 1934. Purcell went on to found The City of St. Jude in Montgomery, Alabama

¹³Ahern letter to Duffy, May 2, 1932.

¹⁴Ahern letter to McLaughlin, November 3, 1934. Half of the 11,826 attendees at the novena over a two year period were white.

¹⁵Sermon at the funeral of Father Remmele on December 9, 1939 at St. Anne's Church in Newark, QAPA.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Thomas A. Carey, undated, Unpublished paper gifted to the author, ca. 1968.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹See Leon T. Mahon and Philip Berryman, *Priesthood*, Unpublished talk given to a seminar along with Edward Schillebeeckx and Bernard Häring in Panama, November 18, 1967

(Carey Papers). The influence on Mahon and Carey by liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez can be inferred by their theology even though they did not explicitly use the terms Liberation Theology or base communities. Evidence of Liberation Theology's influence on Mahon and therefore Carey, is that Mahon's co-writer on Priesthood was Philip Berryman, who published an article, "Camilo Torres: Revolutionary Theologian," *Commonweal* 96 (April 21, 1972). Torres, who was killed on February 15, 1966 in Colombia as he was leading a group of guerrilla revolutionaries, was a priest and a close friend of Peruvian theology professor, Gustavo Gutiérrez. In 1968, Gutiérrez helped draft a position paper for Latin American bishops that became a prototype of Liberation Theology. San Miguelito certainly anticipated that theology. See William M. Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets*. Also see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1988).

²⁰See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 127.

²¹This is only a part of the poem "They Came" by Clifton Carter, published in its entirety in Mary A. Ward, *A Mission for Justice*, (Knoxville, Tennessee, University of Tennessee Press, 2002).

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