

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

April 25, 2008

In my letter last week I included 7 posts from my blog from a series there titled, "Reflecting on the Papal Visit." This week I include the last 8 posts in that series. I hope that you might also visit my blog at www.ConcordPastor.blogspot.com where you'll find illustrations for these posts and, more important, links to the full text of speeches, homilies and articles excerpted below.

Last week I also came a-begging for someone in the parish who might donate four seats to a Red Sox game that we might raffle off to support our young peoples' Summer Service Trips. Unfortunately, no one responded. And no, it's not too late.

Fr. Fleming

Reflecting on the Papal Visit - 8

Their names are Olan, Faith and Bernie. They are three of the five survivors of clergy sexual abuse who met this afternoon with the pope. Their stories are painful ones and have been told in many forums but not until today were they heard by the Vicar of Christ. You can hear them speak of their experience this afternoon with the pope at CNN. (*Hyperlink provided on blog*)

I had not been very excited about the prospect of the papal visit. As I noted in my posts on Benedict's trip, I thought much of what we would see and hear this week would be a series of posed tableaux - although I did mention that sometimes there can burst forth from what was intended to be only a representation a reality that draws us to unanticipated depths. I believe that has happened...

I also invited you to join me in praying that the pope would be open to the people of the American Church and that we would be open to him. I believe those prayers have been answered... I know that these past few days have been transforming for me.

No, I don't believe all the work has been done. No, I don't believe all the tensions have been resolved. No, I don't believe all the disagreements have been reconciled. But I do believe that this man we call the pope, whose election to that office left me personally dismayed, has caught my attention, respect and ear. With stunning frankness and gentle gestures he has spoken to and touched the hearts and faith of Americans in and outside the Catholic Church, and he has touched me, too.

I would still love to have the 45 minutes with Benedict that President Bush was given. I would plead with him about how so many find the doors of church life closed, locking out them and their experience. In fact, we'd need more than 45 minutes to get at that subject! But as large a pastoral concern as that is for me, my mind and heart have been opened to the way he has ministered this week to the American Church.

I know the week is not over and I haven't yet read the pope's remarks today to the college and university presidents but I wanted to share this with you now. Writing this blog has kept me close to the story of this visit and so I'm grateful to you, my readers, who have indirectly led me to listen and watch carefully as Benedict makes his way among us.

-ConcordPastor

Reflecting on the Papal Visit – 9

Fortunately, I was on my days off for the first days of the papal visit. Now that I'm back to work, keeping up with the pope's pace is more difficult. I may fall behind in this task, but I pledge to offer some text and comment on the major moments of Benedict's ministry among us.

On Friday afternoon, the pope addressed leadership figures in American Catholic education. Many were hoping that this would be an occasion for the pope to come down hard on academic freedom as it is practiced in American Catholic institutions of higher learning. As we've seen thus far, the smack down is not Benedict's method of instruction. Here I give you some quotations from his address. (*Hyperlink to full text available on blog*)

I hope that even from these few portions of a longer text you will see that the pope is not calling for a critique of courses or syllabi but rather for a long hard study of the mission and goals of Catholic education. Where does the institution root its mission to students and to society? How does a Catholic institution's mission shape its work with students, its commitment to the goals of academia? Certainly a Catholic college or university should be able to be distinguished from secular counterparts - but how? A chapel on campus or an office of campus ministry cannot satisfy as a response to this probing question.

Finally, if education is the pursuit of truth, how does the Catholic institution of higher learning embrace that enterprise in the spirit of the gospel? in light of the heritage of Catholic morality? with a view towards the Church's responsibility to justice in society?

Although the audience here is a few levels above a parish faith formation program and its directors and catechists, there is here food for thought for parochial ministers, especially as we face the challenges ahead of us in American parish life.

It is my great pleasure to meet you and to share with you some thoughts regarding the nature and identity of Catholic education today.

Education is integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News. First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth.

God's revelation offers every generation the opportunity to discover the ultimate truth about its own life and the goal of history. This task is never easy; it involves the entire Christian community and motivates each generation of Christian educators to ensure that the power of God's truth permeates every dimension of the institutions they serve.

It is timely to reflect on what is particular to our Catholic institutions. How do they contribute to the good of society through the Church's primary mission of evangelization?

All the Church's activities stem from her awareness that she is the bearer of a message which has its origin in God himself: in his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known the hidden purpose of his will. It is my great pleasure to meet you and to share with you some thoughts regarding the nature and identity of Catholic education today.

A university or school's Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students. It is a question of conviction - do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear? Are we ready to commit our entire self - intellect and will, mind and heart - to God? Do we accept the truth Christ reveals? Is the faith tangible in our universities and schools? Is it given fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through prayer, acts of charity, a concern for justice, and respect for God's creation?

We all know, and observe with concern, the difficulty or reluctance many people have today in entrusting themselves to God. It is a complex phenomenon and one which I ponder continually. While we have sought diligently to engage the intellect of our young, perhaps we have neglected the will. Subsequently we observe, with distress, the notion of freedom being distorted. Freedom is not an opting out. It is an opting in - a participation in Being itself. Hence authentic freedom can never be attained by turning away from God. Such a choice would ultimately disregard the very truth we need in order to understand ourselves. A particular responsibility therefore for each of you, and your colleagues, is to evoke among the young the desire for the act of faith, encouraging them to commit themselves to the ecclesial life that follows from this belief. It is here that freedom reaches the certainty of truth. In choosing to live by that truth, we embrace the fullness of the life of faith which is given to us in the Church.

Drawing upon divine wisdom, she sheds light on the foundation of human morality and ethics, and reminds all groups in society that it is not praxis that creates truth but truth that should serve as the basis of praxis. Far from undermining the tolerance of legitimate diversity, such a contribution illuminates the very truth which makes consensus attainable, and helps to keep public debate rational, honest and accountable. Similarly the Church never tires of upholding the essential moral categories of right and wrong, without which hope could only wither, giving way to cold pragmatic calculations of utility which render the person little more than a pawn on some ideological chess-board.

We witness an assumption that every experience is of equal worth and a reluctance to admit imperfection and mistakes. And particularly disturbing, is the reduction of the precious and delicate area of education in sexuality to management of 'risk', bereft of any reference to the beauty of conjugal love.

In regard to faculty members at Catholic colleges universities, I wish to reaffirm the great value of academic freedom. In virtue of this freedom you are called to search for the truth wherever careful analysis of evidence leads you. Yet it is also the case that any appeal to the principle of academic freedom in order to justify positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church would obstruct or even betray the university's identity and mission; a mission at the heart of the Church's munus docendi (work of teaching) and not somehow autonomous or independent of it.

Teachers and administrators, whether in universities or schools, have the duty and privilege to ensure that students receive instruction in Catholic doctrine and practice. This requires that public witness to the way of Christ, as found in the Gospel and upheld by the Church's Magisterium, shapes all aspects of an institution's life, both inside and outside the classroom. Divergence from this vision weakens Catholic identity and, far from advancing freedom, inevitably leads to confusion, whether moral, intellectual or spiritual.

-ConcordPastor

Reflecting on the Papal Visit – 10

On Friday afternoon, Benedict XVI met with 5 victims of clergy sexual abuse from the Boston area, three men and two women. They prayed together and each of the five had time alone with the pope to speak with the pope. As reported by Tania deLuzuriaga in the Boston Globe today (4/20/08):

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley became emotional yesterday as he recounted to reporters the dramatic and unprecedented meeting earlier this week between Pope Benedict XVI and five people from Boston who had been sexually abused by priests.

Asked how difficult the meeting was for him personally, O'Malley paused for a long moment and appeared to tear up.

"Just seeing the book makes a great impact," he said, referring to a handmade document he gave the pontiff listing the names of nearly 1,500 alleged victims of clergy sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Boston. As the pope slowly turned the pages, the cardinal mentioned that some of the victims died from suicide or drug abuse. "I know the Holy Father was touched by it as well" he said at a news conference... held yesterday.

O'Malley, who has met with hundreds of Boston-area abuse victims, quietly brokered the historic meeting, writing three times to the Vatican to request the audience in the months after Benedict decided not to visit Boston during this week's trip to the United States.

"I was anxious to dispel the idea that the Holy Father was avoiding coming to Boston because of the sex abuse crisis," O'Malley said. "I also wanted him to appreciate that this is such a serious issue and we needed to hear from him about this," he said... Asked what lies ahead for the Boston Archdiocese, O'Malley said he hopes that people who are concerned about the safety of children will "see us as allies."

"The sexual abuse problem is not something that's just a Catholic problem or a church problem, it's a human problem," O'Malley said. "Certainly the fact that the church dealt with it so poorly in the past was the scandal. But I'd like to think that our Catholic people now are sensitized and working very hard to try and bring about reconciliation and to make our church just the safest place possible."

"I was very, very moved by the whole experience," O'Malley said. "The Holy Father spoke about the pain he felt and the shame. He said that for so long he's been praying by those who have been damaged, touched, and hurt by the whole experience. . . . It was a very moving and a very reassuring experience. The Holy Father feels very deeply what these survivors have gone through..."

While only a part of the far-ranging agenda of the papal visit, Benedict's comments on the sexual abuse crisis were, I believe, much more than anyone expected. Such commentary and the meeting with victims are long overdue but in some cases, it's never too late to do what needs to be done. That, of course, is not to suggest that now everything that needs to be done has been accomplished. The work of attending to and healing from the sexual abuse crisis will be a concern for the Church for generations to come. Still, incredibly important steps were taken this week.

It would, however, be a mistake to think that these were the first steps. The Boston Globe reports that Sean O'Malley has met with hundreds of victims in his tenure as Archbishop of Boston. These meetings are, of their nature, personal, confidential and often not matter for publication. Yet one continues to hear that "the bishops refuse to even talk to the victims."

Rome wasn't built in a day and the Vatican seldom moves on anything overnight. It should come as no surprise, then, that the meeting on Friday needed to be "brokered" by Cardinal O'Malley through a series of exchanges between him, the nuncio in Washington, Archbishop Sambini, and the offices of the pope. Such a process may reveal less about the Vatican's hesitancy on this all of this and more about how Rome operates. As I've said to a number of people, "Please don't be too surprised when the Vatican acts like the Vatican and the pope speaks like the pope."

Telling and compelling was O'Malley's presentation to Benedict of the handmade book containing the names of 1,500 alleged abuse victims from the Boston archdiocese. As the pope paged through it, the archbishop of the epicenter of the abuse scandal told him of the victims who died of suicide and drug abuse. I mused in my first post in this series on who packs the papal suitcases for a trip such as this. Imagine packing for the return and taking such a document home with you...

"The book" is second only to what victim Bernie McDaid told the pope in the chapel where the meeting took place: "I basically told him that I was an altar boy ... a young boy praying to God at the time that I was abused. I told him it wasn't just sexual abuse, it was spiritual abuse, and that I wanted him to know that. And then I told him that he has a cancer growing in his ministry and needs to do something about it. And I told him I hope he hears me right, and that I touched his heart."

Bernie McDaid has it right: there's a cancer in the ministry of the Church and it needs treatment.

What treatment comes of this past week's words, prayers and deeds I cannot predict. As I noted in an earlier post, I do not anticipate the Vatican relieving bishops of their diocesan posts - nor am I convinced that such action would necessarily satisfy the anger and demands of some. We can never go back to "business as usual." It will always be different. How we continue learn from and make changes based on this tragic history is both in process and remains to be seen.

I am very grateful for what was revealed and communicated this past week in Benedict's comments, talks and homilies and for Sean O'Malley's role in shaping a critically important healing moment in the life of the Church. At each celebration of the Eucharist I pray for "Benedict our pope and Sean our bishop..." Over the past 24 hours I prayed those words at four Masses with my parish community. Not since Sean O'Malley came to Boston and Joseph Ratzinger was elected pope did I pray those words with such gratitude and hope.

-ConcordPastor

Reflecting on the Papal Visit - 11

On Friday, Benedict XVI addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations which is observing the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The pope reminded that "This document was the outcome of a convergence of different religious and cultural traditions, all of them motivated by the common desire to place the human person at the heart of institutions, laws and the workings of society, and to consider the human person essential for the world of culture, religion and science."

Of all his addresses over the course of the apostolic visit, I found this one to be the least accessible which is not a critique of the speech but rather a statement about my lack of familiarity with the issues involved. (Perhaps some readers can bring

more expertise to understanding this stop on the papal visit.) Human rights, of course, are the heart of the matter here and from my several readings of the text, I found this portion significant and, I think, consonant with the pope's thrust here.

Human rights, of course, must include the right to religious freedom, understood as the expression of a dimension that is at once individual and communitarian – a vision that brings out the unity of the person while clearly distinguishing between the dimension of the citizen and that of the believer. The activity of the United Nations in recent years has ensured that public debate gives space to viewpoints inspired by a religious vision in all its dimensions, including ritual, worship, education, dissemination of information and the freedom to profess and choose religion. It is inconceivable, then, that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves – their faith – in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one's rights. The rights associated with religion are all the more in need of protection if they are considered to clash with a prevailing secular ideology or with majority religious positions of an exclusive nature. The full guarantee of religious liberty cannot be limited to the free exercise of worship, but has to give due consideration to the public dimension of religion, and hence to the possibility of believers playing their part in building the social order. Indeed, they actually do so, for example through their influential and generous involvement in a vast network of initiatives which extend from Universities, scientific institutions and schools to health care agencies and charitable organizations in the service of the poorest and most marginalized. Refusal to recognize the contribution to society that is rooted in the religious dimension and in the quest for the Absolute – by its nature, expressing communion between persons – would effectively privilege an individualistic approach, and would fragment the unity of the person.

-ConcordPastor

Reflecting on the Papal Visit - 12

On Saturday, the pope celebrated Mass at St. Patrick Cathedral in New York City for priests, religious and seminarians. Again, the message was positive, uplifting and supportive. One thing I especially appreciated was the sense in the homily that the pope and those of us "on the front lines" are in the same ministry, facing the same difficulties, in need of the same hope:

We are called to proclaim the message of hope and to embody it in a world where self-centeredness, greed, violence, and cynicism so often seem to choke the fragile growth of grace in people's hearts...

Perhaps we have lost sight of this: in a society where the Church seems legalistic and "institutional" to many people, our most urgent challenge is to communicate the joy born of faith and the experience of God's love...

The pope used the cathedral itself as a reference point for his homiletic reflections:

(Let us look at) the stained glass windows, which flood the interior with mystic light. From the outside, those windows are dark, heavy, even dreary. But once one enters the church, they suddenly come alive; reflecting the light passing through them, they reveal all their splendor...

It is only from the inside, from the experience of faith and ecclesial life, that we see the Church as she truly is: flooded with grace, resplendent in beauty, adorned by the manifold gifts of the Spirit. It follows that we, who live the life of grace within the Church's communion, are called to draw all people into this mystery of light.

This is no easy task in a world which can tend to look at the Church, like those stained glass windows, "from the outside": a world which deeply senses a need for spirituality, yet finds it difficult to "enter into" the mystery of the Church. Even for those of us within, the light of faith can be dimmed by routine, and the splendor of the Church obscured by the sins and weaknesses of her members. It can be dimmed too, by the obstacles encountered in a society which sometimes seems to have forgotten God and to resent even the most elementary demands of Christian morality. You, who have devoted your lives to bearing witness to the love of Christ and the building up of his Body, know from your daily contact with the world around us how tempting it is at times to give way to frustration, disappointment and even pessimism about the future. In a word, it is not always easy to see the light of the Spirit all about us, the splendor of the Risen Lord illuminating our lives and instilling renewed hope in his victory over the world...

Ah, yes! The frustration, disappointment and even pessimism about the future: I know them well - as do many of my readers in all walks of the Christian life. Benedict went on:

For all of us, I think, one of the great disappointments which followed the Second Vatican Council, with its call for a greater engagement in the Church's mission to the world, has been the experience of division between different groups, different generations, different members of the same religious family. We can only move forward if we turn our gaze together to Christ! In the light of faith, we will then discover the wisdom and strength needed to open ourselves to points of view which may not necessarily conform to our own ideas or assumptions.

It is easy to allow differences and divisions among us to preoccupy us to the point that we come near forgetting the heart and focus of our mission: proclaiming Christ and him crucified...

And, yet again the pope took the occasion to speak to the pain of the sexual abuse crisis in the Church:

Here, within the context of our need for the perspective given by faith, and for unity and cooperation in the work of building up the Church, I would like say a word about the sexual abuse that has caused so much suffering. I have already had occasion to speak of this, and of the resulting damage to the community of the faithful. Here I simply wish to assure you, dear priests and religious, of my spiritual closeness as you strive to respond with Christian hope to the continuing challenges that this situation presents. I join you in praying that this will be a time of purification for each and every particular Church and religious community, and a time for healing...

And near the end of the homily, a call for those in ministry to be the first in modeling humility and the spirit of reconciliation:

If we are to be true forces of unity, let us be the first to seek inner reconciliation through penance. Let us forgive the wrongs we have suffered and put aside all anger and contention. Let us be the first to demonstrate the humility and purity of heart which are required to approach the splendor of God's truth. In fidelity to the deposit of faith entrusted to the Apostles, let us be joyful witnesses of the transforming power of the Gospel!

Again, this message comes in eminently accessible language and imagery. I urge you to read the full text. ([Hyperlink available on blog](#))

-ConcordPastor

Reflecting on the Papal Visit - 13

Prayer of Benedict XVI at Ground Zero, April 20, 2008

O God of love, compassion, and healing, look on us, people of many different faiths and traditions, who gather today at this site, the scene of incredible violence and pain.

We ask you in your goodness to give eternal light and peace to all who died here—the heroic first-responders: our fire fighters, police officers, emergency service workers, and Port Authority personnel, along with all the innocent men and women who were victims of this tragedy simply because their work or service brought them here on September 11, 2001.

We ask you, in your compassion to bring healing to those who, because of their presence here that day, suffer from injuries and illness. Heal, too, the pain of still-grieving families and all who lost loved ones in this tragedy. Give them strength to continue their lives with courage and hope.

We are mindful as well of those who suffered death, injury, and loss on the same day at the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Our hearts are one with theirs as our prayer embraces their pain and suffering.

*God of peace, bring your peace to our violent world:
peace in the hearts of all men and women and peace among the nations of the earth.
Turn to your way of love those whose hearts and minds are consumed with hatred.*

*God of understanding,
overwhelmed by the magnitude of this tragedy,
we seek your light and guidance as we confront such terrible events.*

*Grant that those whose lives were spared may live so that the lives lost here
may not have been lost in vain.
Comfort and console us, strengthen us in hope, and give us the wisdom and courage
to work tirelessly for a world where true peace and love reign
among nations and in the hearts of all.*

-ConcordPastor

Reflecting on the Papal Visit - 14

The pope's message today at Yankee Stadium in NY is as masterful a piece of weaving the scriptures into a homily as you will find. Once again, I direct you to Rocco's place for the complete text.

One paragraph particular stands out as I read Benedict's homily because it so clearly addresses us on the parish level as we deal with the disappointments and tensions of parish closings and mergers in dioceses around the country, including the Archdiocese of Boston:

Today's first reading, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, speaks of linguistic and cultural tensions already present within the earliest Church community. At the same time, it shows the power of the word of God, authoritatively proclaimed by the Apostles and received in faith, to create a unity which transcends the divisions arising from human limitations and weakness. Here we are reminded of a fundamental truth: that the Church's unity has no other basis than the Word of God, made flesh in Christ Jesus our Lord. All external signs of identity, all structures, associations and programs, valuable or even essential as they may be, ultimately exist only to support and foster the deeper unity which, in Christ, is God's indefectible gift to his Church.

We all have a long way to go in understanding and accepting this message but it contains an undeniable truth. The future of the Church in America will, no doubt, witness more change in our "external signs of identity" and we will need to continue to learn that our unity is rooted not in these but in the Word of God, made flesh in Christ Jesus our Lord.

-ConcordPastor

Reflecting on the Papal Visit - 15

On a radio talk show last week I heard a caller say of the pope: "He thinks he's God - and he's not!"

While not trying to read Benedict's mind, I'm confident that he doesn't think he's God. Nor does he think he's Jesus. What our Church does teach is that he's the Vicar of Christ. I wrote about this in an earlier post:

Catholics understand the pope to be Christ's Vicar on earth. From the Latin vicarius, vicar means "one who acts in the person of." The pope's ministry is to act and speak in the person of Christ among us. That is also the bishop's ministry in the diocese and the pastor's ministry in the parish. By virtue of our baptism, each of us is missioned to act and speak in the person of Christ in our daily lives. But the pope deserves a capital V on his title - not because of who he is personally but because of the office that is his. Thus, his words and deeds have a special claim on our attention as Catholic Christians.

What is this "office" that Benedict holds that puts such a serious claim on our attention?

While the pope does not believe he's God or Jesus, he does believe, as the Church teaches, that he is Peter among us, the people of God. The pope's ministry is often called the Petrine ministry since he is first among equals in the college of bishops as Peter was first among equals in the circle of apostles gathered around Christ. (After Christ's name, the name Peter is the one most frequently mentioned in the Christian scriptures.)

It will remain only a curiosity for many, but in the ecclesiology of Catholicism, the bishop of Rome is the successor not of Jesus but of Peter. In this way, it was Peter who came to visit the Church in America last week.

While I'm familiar with all of this, I'm trying to think it through again as I ponder the impact of Benedict's visit. Who was this 81-year-old man in strange costume, from mitred head to red-toed shoes, who won the hearts of Americans both in and outside the ranks of Catholics? Although it waited until Benedict was back in Rome for nearly two days, even The Boston Globe editorialized (4/22/08) positively about the papal visit. Morrissey Boulevard opines that the pope:

...connected with Americans of many faiths through his simple preaching and pastoral work. Whether addressing diplomats at the United Nations or praying with victims of clergy sexual abuse in a Washington chapel, he took exquisite care to uphold the dignity of every person... it was Benedict who advanced healing in shaken parishes from coast to coast by expressing the church's deep shame and contrition... It's not every visitor who stays less than a week and leaves his hosts thinking about a kingdom of justice and peace.

Benedict's preaching was simple or, as I described it, eminently accessible. And the pastoral work accomplished through his words, presence, encounters and gestures was capped by his prayerful, positive and appreciative tone, even when about the business of critiquing and challenging us and our culture.

As accessible as his speeches were, they managed to communicate volumes more than their relative brevity might suggest. In fact, his talks and homilies provided a series of pastoral plans for the Church's ministry in America nationally and parochially. As poignant and personal as his encounter with the abuse victims was, there was something about it that was larger than life. It was so much more than a man, even a very important man, meeting with five of his flock. Who was this man? What makes his words and deeds so powerful? There is a dynamic here that exponentially raises simple moments to the level of critically important events and there is the intuition of millions of people that there is in this man something more than the man himself. Although only people of faith, perhaps only people of the Catholic faith might name it as such, the energy here is not simply that of Benedict XVI, born Joseph Ratzinger, but rather the energy of Peter, of the office of Peter, of that long line of ministers *called pontifex maximus and servus servorum Dei*: greatest bridge-builder and servant of the servants of God.

It's not just the man, or his vestments, or the cadre of cardinals trailing him everywhere he goes. It's the understanding that somehow this man connects us (builds a bridge) across some 2,000 years of history back to Peter: the man upon whom Christ promised to build his church; the man who thrice denied the Lord in Jesus' hours of greatest need; the man commissioned by Christ to "feed my lambs, feed my sheep." It was precisely the pope's coming among us as one who desiring to build bridges and to serve the servants of God that won our hearts over - not to him- but to something greater, larger, deeper than him.

You see, that's the thing here! What we experienced last week was greater, far greater than the sum of its parts. In Catholic theology we call that a symbol. A symbol is a word-event that gathers together in itself and shares of itself more than the word and event could possibly hold within itself. In that sense, the papal visit was sacramental: an outward sign, a gift of Christ, through which God's people received grace and blessing.

If The Boston Globe can, if only for a day, lay aside its animus towards the Church and acknowledge a gift of grace when it pours forth in a message upholding the dignity of every person in a kingdom of justice and peace, can anything less be expected of us Catholics?

-ConcordPastor

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