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Pope Francis: A Leader of ‘New Normal’

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to show that in the person of Pope Francis there are rays of hope for the world, humanity and Christianity. The hypothesis is that Pope Francis is providing an inspiring and timely leadership not only for the Roman Catholic Church but also for the whole world to shape the future in the new normalcy. More than ever, in the new normal situation, the world and believers are looking forward to an able guidance from their leaders. Hence, it is necessary to identify the essential qualities of a leader in the time of crisis. Pope Francis’ leadership is assuring hope to face the new normalcy and inspiring other leaders also to commit themselves for the betterment of whole human race. The paper will first briefly deal with the concept of ‘new normal’ and continue to examine Pope Francis’ leadership dimensions during the major global events that forced the world to gradually sink into new normal situation.

Introduction

Christianity as a religion, as an institution and as a new culture has survived two millennia in the history of the world. In some way or other its doctrines and values dominate the whole of Europe, Americas and Pacific-Oceania; even in Asia and Africa it is slowly

Rohan: A Leader of 'New Normal'

diffusing its efficient presence by multifaceted missionary, social and educational activities.

The endurance of Christianity in the world is recorded in the annals of history with many upheavals and controversies. From its very beginning, Christianity faced many crises including persecutions, heresies, divisions, and pervasive effects of violence, poverty, and pandemic situations. The effects of such predicaments sometimes threatened even their very existence in some places. However, it has surpassed all of them and vindicated its presence in the whole world.

Christianity has outlasted the Roman civilization and other nations and empires that arose in human history after its establishment. Positively it has been a force of good and righteousness in the world, exercising a profound moral influence over human society. Negatively it has participated in bloodbaths by way of crusades and colonization. However, positively or negatively, for better or for worse, it is holding a prominent position in the world.

It is obvious that the world as a whole has moved into a new era of existence during this twenty-first century. The volatile growth in science and technology has introduced the fourth phase of the industrial revolution which is a combination of physical, biological, and digital technologies. It has introduced new emerging technologies like cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), internet of things (IOT), big data analytics, nano-technology, bio-technology, robotic-technology, etc. In the face of such drastic growth and transformation the world order is in a dilemma situation and the social, political, economic and cultural systems are in a state of confusion. The climate change and the threat to the environment caused by the advancement in science and technology, the Covid-19 pandemic that had its outbreak in the latter part of 2019, the Russian - Ukrainian war that commenced at the beginning of 2022 and the worldwide economic crisis created by the above events are new phenomena posing threats to humanity

and leading it into an unprecedented new era of existence. Such current crises in the world order have outdone the conventional and traditional ways of life and created new normal situations for humanity. Human beings are forced in a way to adjust, to be acquainted with, and to sojourn with this new normalcy.

In this background, an appropriate question is being asked by many scholars and researchers, ‘Whether Christianity is ready to face this new normalcy and make itself relevant to the contemporary world?’ It is generally accepted that Christianity has faced its decline in the West due to adverse materialistic tendencies. Further, it is also observed that due to the renewal and upraise of the local religions of Asian and African continents, Christianity is in a swooping state in them.

In the midst of the above described alarming state of the world, of humanity, and of Christianity, this paper examines whether there is hope and a future for them. The purpose of this study is to show that in the person of Pope Francis there are rays of hope for the world, humanity, and Christianity. The hypothesis is that Pope Francis is providing an inspiring and timely leadership not only for the Roman Catholic Church but also for the whole world to shape the future in the new normalcy. As for the methodology of the research, deductive reasoning is employed based on the writings and interviews of Pope Francis from the time of his papacy in 2013. In addition, historical and observatory analyses are also made basing on his activities such as travels, communications, and meeting the religious and secular leaders, and the feedback given from within the Church and outside.

More than ever, in the new normal situation, the world and believers are looking forward to an able guidance and help from their leaders. Hence, it is necessary to identify the essential qualities of a leader in the time of crisis. Pope Francis’ style of leadership is assuring hope to face the new normalcy and inspires other leaders also to commit themselves to the betterment of the whole human race. The paper will first briefly deal with the

concept of a 'new normal' and continue to examine Pope Francis' leadership dimensions during the major global events that forced the world to gradually sink into the new normal situation.

1. The 'New Normal'

The second decade of the twenty-first century has brought unprecedented changes in the *weltanschauung* of social, political, environmental, and economic affairs. These changes have started challenging drastically even the very existence of the human race. This situation has forced world leaders and organizations to introduce or adapt measures, which were deemed temporary at the initial stages. However, these temporary, unconventional, and ad hoc remedial measures have gradually become permanent and people are eventually forced to live with them, which in nutshell describes what the 'new normal' is. Thus 'new normal' is a previously unfamiliar or a typical situation that has eventually become standard, usual or expected. In this way, 'new normal' is differentiated from the abnormal. El-Erian states that 'new normal' is a current situation that is created by the upcoming new natural or artificial circumstances in the world that are different from what has been traditionally experienced or done before, but has become usual or typical (El-Erian, 2010:4). When the forced changes on the normal situation are not accepted or accommodated, they become and remain abnormal.

The phrase 'new normal' was first used in 2008 when the whole world faced a financial crisis that brought dramatic economic, cultural and social transformation. It caused precariousness and social unrest, impacting collective perceptions and individual lifestyles. Besides the economic crisis, climate change and the threat to the environment which is a common home for all creatures have also created a new normal situation. Though conventional regulatory efforts by governments and non-governmental organizations have generated some environmental improvements, climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity and other significant challenges still remain and force the whole

population of the world to adjust to new normalcy (Albert C. Lin, 2018:35). The expression of ‘new normal’ has started over again to be widely used during the Covid-19 pandemic to point out how it has transformed the fundamentals of human life (Jeff Clyde, 2021:344). In the whirlwind of the pandemic with shocking and unexpected effects the conventional lifestyle of people all over the world has been changed.

Moreover, there are many other natural and artificial events that have changed the customary patterns that human beings adopted in their life. However, to limit the scope of the paper, only the economic crisis, climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic are taken as principal precursors of the ‘new normal’ in the contemporary world together with the response of Pope Francis in his papacy in order to demonstrate him as a leader of the ‘new normal.’ He, besides his commitment to renew the Catholic Church as its elected leader, also initiated alarming the world regarding the business economy, environment, and destiny of the world in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic as significant concerns of his papacy (Robert M. Whaples, 2017:328).

2. Pope Francis - An Economic Reformer and Provocateur¹

Among the notable changes and significant progress in different areas which have important consequences for human life during the contemporary era, economy and business levy greater impact on overall global human condition. Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and in many of the Papal audiences commented regarding the fatal nature of them for the contemporary world. Through his writings and addresses, he makes the people be aware of the crisis situation created in the ‘business-economy’ which lacks a truly human purpose and extends an urgent call for positive action. He compares

¹ This title was used by Joseph F.X. Zahra in his “Newsbook” of January 8, 2014.

contemporary economics to idolatry. “The worship of the ancient golden calf (Ex. 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose” (EG 55). First of all, he gives a realistic outlook to humanity worn out by the dilemma in financial and economic affairs. In the so-called advanced economic status achieved in the world, the recent financial crisis has left humanity astray and made life worse for millions in rich and poor countries with personal debts, and loss of business and jobs. Thus he stresses having a human face to economic development.

Pope Francis’ realistic outlook at humanity battered by the experience of a deep financial and economic crisis is clearly expressed in his *Evangelii Gaudium*. For him “business is a vocation, and a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life; this will enable them truly to serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all” (EG 203). He draws the attention to the economic divergence between the “haves” and the “have-nots” which has also created a social inequity, and states that impersonal globalization and the advancements in science and technology are not enough. As an economic reformer, Pope Francis gives four crucial warnings with regard to the dictatorship of the business economy. He turns down the economy of exclusion, warns about the new idolatry of money (consumerism/overspending on non-essentials/waste), opposes the financial system which rules rather than saves, and rejects economic inequality which spawns violence (Pope Francis, 2015).

To face the ‘new normal’ created by the crises in economic and business enterprises Pope Francis as a practical leader proposes an urgent action plan in his Exhortation with some viable solutions. His action plan ensures hope which is basically a Christian value that from the crisis situation there would be a churning shift towards an improved quality of life, stability in the

society, and the preservation of the common good. According to him, the ability of an economic system to contribute to the common good incorporates three foundational principles based on the Social Teaching of the Church: the common good itself, subsidiarity, and solidarity. (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, No.186). Based on this, Pope Francis' action plan proposes the following list of actions; education which provokes critical thinking and encourages mature development models with moral values (EG 64); reorganization of the structures of the Catholic Church which has the potential to serve as a champion of solidarity (EG 65); strengthening and empowering the family which is a spontaneous and natural subsidiary model (EG 66); dialoguing with cultures, society, reason, and science (EG 133), and with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church (EG 238), and the transformation of business models that understand the value of seeking common good by creating constructive relationships with stakeholders (EG102).

Pope Francis did not forget to address the perennial and worldwide issue of poverty which is a historical phenomenon right from the initial stages of human development. He analyses in a practical manner how could the structural cause of poverty be solved (Robert M. Whaples, 2017:329). According to Pope Francis, increasing the economic help to poverty-stricken people or nations is only a temporary solution. The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of this sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and which can only lead to new crises" (EG 202). Therefore, he is inviting the economists and financiers to re-think the economic and social policies based on the principles of self-responsibility and self-help. This will lead to the formation of proactive economic policies that promote productive diversity and creativity. However, he pays attention that in all such endeavours human dignity is at the center rather than financial speculation aimed at creating quick profits. Later in his second

encyclical *Laudato Si* he recalled that “the financial crisis of 2007-08 provided an opportunity to develop a new economy, more attentive to ethical principles, and new ways of regulating speculative financial practices and virtual wealth” (LS 189). This is how he revives the Christian hope that the world will surpass the current economic and financial crises if properly human person-centered decisions are taken based on human and Christian values.

3. Pope Francis - An Advocate and Protagonist of Climate Comradeship

The drastic change in the overall climate and environment of the planet has endangered the Mother Nature, the common home of all creatures. The climate crisis is a phenomenon caused due to the selfish, exploitive, and unilateral use of natural resources by human beings. Pope Francis right from the very beginning of his papacy has had a deep concern to create awareness among the citizens of the world to protect the environment and hand it over to the next generations as this is a common home that embraces the entire planet of animate and inanimate objects which are God’s creation (P. Kuriakose, 2015:32). His concern over the environment has developed as a comradeship with the climate which has become the subject of his second encyclical *Laudato Si*. The encyclical which was addressed to “every person living on this planet” (LS 03) awakens humanity from the dogmatic slumber brought about by the advanced development in science and technology during different phases of the industrial revolution. He is extending a loud invitation to all the citizens of the world to look at nature, the environment, and the integral beauty of the whole of creation in order to foster a greater fraternity between humans and nature and among humans themselves. In concise, the encyclical is better read as being about the care for creation and proper relationships (inclusive of socially just ones) within the web of creation understood through the lens of integral ecology (C. Hrynkow, 2016:382). In the words of Pope Francis “everything is interconnected, and...genuine care for our own lives and our

relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others” (LS 70). This interconnectedness is described by Pope Francis as the web of relationships. It is a delicate yet strong and resilient structure in which all parts play mutually important roles. If one part is destroyed the whole web is affected. Such independence is indicated by the fact that, when one part of a web is touched, the whole web vibrates (R. B. Leal, 2006:31).

The encyclical *Laudato Si*, a green manifesto of Pope Francis is unique in its entirety because of its comprehensive and inclusive character. The encyclical calls on different religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature and encourages religion and science to engage in an intense dialogue to benefit humanity and the environment (LS 62). Such timely commitment to the ‘common home’ is called by Pope Francis as ‘ecological conversion’ (LS 217). In his later documents, Pope Francis has further described this ecological conversion as a commitment to cease ‘mistreating nature’ through ‘abusive exploitation of natural resources’ which he links to social peace through his famous trademark rubric of ‘integral ecology’ (Pope Francis, 2020, No.4). While *Laudato Si* features exclusively the whole concept of ‘integral ecology’ its entire framework demands to deepen and broaden the compassion to care for creation and the poor in the neighborhoods and globally. It calls into question the human choices as individuals and nations urging to act right now and thereby to form moral imperatives with regard to the responsibility of preserving the environment. Though a spiritual leader of a billion souls, Pope Francis manifests his care about saving the material world and this proves himself as an integral person.

Though the main thrust of the encyclical is on climate change, the document draws connections between the challenges of climate change, economic crisis, and poverty and thus identifies a host of environmental and social concerns stemming from

humanity's relationship to the environment. Linking environmental and climate discussions with issues of social justice, poverty, and economic inequality has the potential to create an integral ecological concern (John C. Nagle, 2016:28). The encyclical represents a marked departure from conventional environmentalism to critique the dominant technocratic paradigm, exclusive anthropocentrism and market-centered development models that rely heavily on narrowly calculated costs and benefits (Albert C. Lin, 2018:37). Thus, the climate comradeship of Pope Francis envisions a prominent role for legal reform as well as personal conversion and behavioural change towards the environment.

4. Pope Francis: A Global Infirmarian during the Pandemic

The world started facing another disastrous threat in the latter part of 2019 with emergence and rise of a pandemic that is still keeping the whole world in an abnormal or new normal situation. The alert of the Covid-19 disease present in Wuhan - China was the starting point of a surge of infections that forced the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare on the 30th of January 2020, 'a public health emergency of international concern' and on the 11th of March 2020 to characterize Covid-19 as a pandemic (WHO, 2020). As a result, various measures were taken globally that disturbed the normal lifestyle of the people: state of emergency, social distancing, partial or full lockdowns, shutting down of borders, and other restrictions in accordance with the health circumstances. Social life in all of its aspects was limited or, in some cases, was completely halted, with the implications and psychological, economic, and social repercussions that these types of measures have on people (V́ctor M. Ṕrez-Mart́nez, 2022:197). The pandemic put a halt to 'the entirety of social relations and shocked the totality of policymakers, institutions, and values' (Ignacio Ramonet, 2020:95).

The actions carried out by Pope Francis during the initial stages of the pandemic were very much related to that of an

infirmarian who acted hastily and appropriately to the context. This was referred to as ‘contextual intelligence’ because he set up a dialogue between the leader’s intuition, reality, and context, where the first thing that is emphasized is that the context determines one’s action (O. Cuervo - G. Jaime, 2019:111). The consoling and encouraging communication carried out by him through social media, the moments of prayer and pious activities (*Urbi et orbi* blessing on 27 March 2020) organized by him in the Vatican and worldwide and his dialogue with the leaders of countries and various institutions to take suitable actions bear witness to his high capacity for ‘contextual intelligence’ which also contained all of the elements and circumstances to make up an evangelical witness. These context-based actions made the world feel and see in him a global infirmarian who is ever ready to respond to the beck and call of the suffering and needy people.

Pope Francis’ leadership in the outbreak of the pandemic fundamentally exposed his renewal vision of the Church. It can be said that his dynamic personality, great heart, profound wisdom, and ecclesiological vision all served him well to be an appropriate leader during the pandemic (A.E. Orobator, 2021:13). The pandemic caused fear, sorrow, suffering, death, and paralyzation of normalcy to people in a global level. In such an abandoned situation Pope Francis communicated compassion, mercy, and hope by giving a consoling accompaniment embodied in touching gestures and symbols. He made maximum use of the advanced technology available for social communication to console the ordinary and poor people who suffered in many ways due to the pandemic and expressed his solidarity with frontline healthcare workers and spiritually supported them. Before the medical scientists invented a vaccine for Corvid-19, Pope Francis discovered a spiritual vaccine to stop the escalation of the disease and to cope with its disastrous effects.

Rohan: A Leader of 'New Normal'

Consoling accompaniment was the principal antidote that Pope Francis discovered for the negative effects of the pandemic. An infirmarian's duty is not only to dispense medicine; there is much more expected - to be physically present with the patient as an attendee, as a consoler, as an accompanier, as a healer and as a counselor. Pope Francis as a global infirmarian nursed, consoled, and accompanied those affected by the pandemic. He also called upon all the Church leaders to be physically close to their flock, walking with them on their path of pain and suffering. This was already forecast in his ecclesiological view written in the *Evangelii Gaudium* that the Church ministers must take on the 'smell of the sheep.' (EG. 24) It implies that the leaders need to be with their sheep to care for and to protect them so that the smell of the sheep permeates the shepherd's body. (N. Hang, 2022:175) Based on the guidelines of Pope Francis different ecclesiastical authorities prepared strategies so that the pastoral work in the Church, in all of its phases, would not be affected by the circumstances imposed by legal and health regulations during the pandemic (F. Edward, 2021:245).

Another characteristic of an infirmarian is to be compassionate and merciful. Compassion is one's ability to be with someone in difficult and challenging situations. In the time of pandemic crisis to be compassionate was to reflect a way of life that tends to the wounds and pains of others in order to bring them consolation and to inspire the establishment of the common good, just structures, and living conditions. To be merciful is to reflect the tenderness of God. Pope Francis as a global infirmarian showed to the world his compassion and mercy. He was convinced that these are divine attitudes, flowing from the healing power of the cross. These qualities enabled him to overcome fear and to accompany the suffering people. Compassion and mercy are marked as the exercise of the ministry of consolation, the option to stand on the side of the vulnerable and poor, which clearly defined the characteristics of Pope Francis as a global infirmarian during the time of the pandemic.

Pope Francis' actions showed clearly that the pandemic has created a 'new normal' in a global perspective. Instead of cursing it as abnormal and being pessimistic with regard to the calamitous effects brought by the pandemic, he infused hope in the world which was a radical manifestation of his deep Christian faith and commitment. This reflected his ecclesiological vision, in which the primary task of the Church is to bear witness to the mercy of God and to encourage generous reactions of solidarity in order to open a future of hope. Hope brings with it the energy and commitment to build a more human and just social order which will open new possibilities for sustainable and healthy development (Pope Francis, 2013).

The heart of Pope Francis has always been with the poor and marginalized. Elected on the 13th of March 2013, though a member of the Society of Jesus, he took the name Francis in order to follow the paths of St. Francis of Assisi. This shows clearly that he wanted to opt for the poor, go out to the margins, establish a poor church, and to show concern for the natural environment. His papal motto *Miserando atque eligendo* (having mercy, he called him) contains a central theme of his papacy, that is, God's mercy and his option for the downtrodden.

Pope Francis' concern for the poor is noted in his critiques of the business economy, his continued support of refugees and migrants and his outreach to all those who were considered 'outcasts' by conventional standards. The Church of Pope Francis is for the poor, serves the poor, and centers on the poor (EG 198). This love for the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable was clearly visible during his leadership during the time of the pandemic crisis. He was convinced that it is necessary to have a conscientious and compassionate leader so that human dignity could be preserved.

In his third encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis addressed the fragility of world systems in the face of the pandemic and affirmed that it is difficult to resolve all problems that affect humanity by mere structures alone. Therefore, he stressed that

human dignity must be put out back at the centre, and on that pillar, alternative social structures have to be built (FT 168). That is why amidst the outbreak of the Covid-19 infection he called the attention of the world to the people living in the peripheries. He always demonstrated his option to stand with the poor and the vulnerable in solidarity, compassion and mercy. He worked for the rights of vulnerable workers and cared for the people at the margins and peripheries. He was concerned about the well-being of prisoners, detainees, migrants, and refugees in the face of Covid-19 infection and passionately appealed for their safety (A.E. Orobator, 2021:54).

While earnestly appealing the commitment, concern, and dedication of all those who could contribute to alleviating the evils of the pandemic, Pope Francis also admired and encouraged all those who were involved in the rescue missions. He praised the frontline healthcare workers, medical doctors, nurses, religious sisters, and priests who have exemplified the worthiest manifestations of humanity during the pandemic.

He acknowledged the heroism of many priests and frontline healthcare workers who died while serving the sick in hospitals as 'soldiers of love'. He celebrated the courage, patience, and sacrifice of parents, teachers, children, caretakers, cleaners, security workers, and essential services such as pharmacies, supermarkets, and transportation (N. Hang, 2022:178). He viewed them as people who emptied themselves to care for and save the lives of the sick and added value to their sacrifices.

Thus, as a global infirmarian, Pope Francis proved himself as a new normal leader during the time of pandemic through his consoling accompaniment, preferential love for the poor, and the celebration of human goodness. The world urgently needs a few good women and men to model what good leadership looks like, especially in a time of crisis (A.E. Orobator, 2021:55). Pope Francis is one who exemplified this mode of new leadership during the time of the pandemic.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of the survival of Christianity surpassing two millennia is unique. Some interpret it as the ‘victory of Christianity’ and some others as the ‘failure of Christianity’. Amidst all of such positive and negative interpretations, one could clearly observe the divine and human elements inbuilt in Christianity. The Holy Spirit as an indwelling force has been inspiring its leaders to respond to the need of the time and go forward amidst the upheavals and controversies. St. Peter, the first leader, responded to the need for early Christianity and convened the Council of Jerusalem to solve the issue of non-Jews becoming Christians. Likewise, it is evident in the history of Christianity, there have been leaders responding to the need of the hour of the world and Church and have given the needed leadership and guidance.

The ‘new normal’ leadership of Pope Francis that became specifically explicit during the economic, environmental, and pandemic crises indicated the joint venture of the ecclesial and secular communities for the betterment of the world at large. His voice became authoritative over the global community addressing people at all levels. Thus, he modeled an example of good leadership for the leaders of the Church as well as the secular society. The ‘new normal’ leadership that he established embodied closeness, empathy, compassion, and love. It has shown that a true leader must be ready to respond to the need of society and the cry of the universe at large by paying attention to the values and priorities. Based on this Pope Francis prioritized the well-being of others and resolutely bestowed consolation with the aim of strengthening the hope of all citizens of the world. Such leadership is prophetic and pastoral which is applicable to the global audience in leadership positions both in the Church and in the world. As John-Henry Westen, the editor of the ‘LifeSiteNews’ comments Pope Francis has become the chaplain of the new world order (J. H. Westen, 2022).

Rohan: A Leader of 'New Normal'

While examining the style and substance of the leadership of Pope Francis in the 'new normal,' it is evident that he is extending his influence beyond the Catholics in the world. He handles and addresses a wide range of religious and secular issues, sometimes controversial ones too, that have their impact on the entire global population. By handling efficiently, the recent economic, environmental, and pandemic crises of the world he certainly has established a clear leadership style that suits the new normalcy of the world.

The concept of servant leadership exemplified by Jesus Christ is as old as the history of Christianity. However, in Pope Francis, the contemporary world has seen an embodiment of this challenging leadership. His 'new normal' leadership has confronted not only the members and local leaders of the Catholic Church; it has also motivated and become a model for secular leaders as he has shown how to exercise power and influence.

Leaders are sign boards to guide the followers towards the ideals. Pope Francis from the beginning of his papacy is sending signs of hope, humanism, and inclusivity to the whole world. His papacy, with international visibility as the leader of the Catholic Church, is characterized by his humility, emphasis on God's mercy, concern for the poor and environment, and commitment to interreligious dialogue. As a leader of the 'new normal,' he is characterized as a person who is 'walking the talk.' He brings his spiritual convictions to permeate the issues that he handles, whether they are political, social, cultural or business. Thus he has proved himself to be a principled leader rather than being a populist one. In addressing the economic, environmental, and pandemic issues he had such a down-to-earth human bond and that part of his leadership sets a solid way to the 'new normal' and was more admired by the ordinary people than the rigid elite in the ecclesial and secular levels. In this way, Pope Francis has proved himself as a 'new normal' global leader to build resilience and

adapt the world to new normalcy amidst the economic, environmental, and pandemic crises.

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Rohan: A Leader of 'New Normal'

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