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Papal Titles as a Manifestation of the Primal Power of the Bishop of Rome

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The paper aims to determine in what manner official papal titles are an expression of supreme power in the Church.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The principal problem refers to the ecclesiological correlation between papal titles and primal power, as well as the ongoing changes in the understanding of power within the Church, manifested by the departure from *iurisdictio* in favour of *communio*. Methods involve source text analysis (of the Holy Scripture and ecclesiastical documents), interpretation, and comparison.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: All names of the highest office in the Catholic Church are derived from the so-called primal texts which describe St Peter the Apostle and his mission. Together with the practice of the first centuries of Christianity, they have provided a basis for establishing the dogmatic truth about the primacy of St Peter and his successors. The primacy involves supreme jurisdictional power in the Universal Church. In this context, the author proceeds to analyse current papal titles which expose the scope and the multi-faceted nature of the power exercised by the Bishop of Rome. Furthermore, the author presents modifications in the official papal titles, which are simultaneously a reflection of ecclesiastical changes in the area.

RESEARCH RESULTS: It has been established that some titles are an expression of real jurisdictional power (e.g. Bishop of Rome, Sovereign of the Vatican City State), while others carry historical and honorary importance (e.g. Primate

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of Italy) or manifest contemporary tendencies to highlight the religious character of the office (Servant of the Servants of God).

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

A departure from the secular understanding of power in favour of a religious and ministerial direction encourages further, praxeological research, as the primatial practice of individual pontificates (gestures and symbols) precedes the official primatial doctrine.

KEYWORDS:

Church, Pope, authority, primacy, bishop, service

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 20th century, the Catholic Church introduced major reforms in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. The transformation was guided by the fundamental principle of going back to its roots; it aimed to bring about a renewal founded on biblical and patristic criteria. In the ecclesial dimension, changes involved a departure from understanding the Church in terms of *iurisdictio* in favour of *communio*. Furthermore, they affected the exercise of the highest functions and offices of the church. The gesture of Pope Paul VI, who donated to charity the papal tiara, or the sign of primatial authority, should be viewed as a symbolic watershed moment in this regard. The popes who succeeded him opted against the intronisation ceremony as well. The reforms had an impact also on papal titles, which were altered to emphasise the direction of renewal: from office to service, as exemplified by the addition of the ancient formula *Servus servorum Dei* to the official list. This paper aims to present biblical motivations and theological characterisations of the pope's power included in the dogmatic formula of Vaticanum I. This goal will be achieved through an analysis of official primatial titles contained in *Annuario Pontificio* of 2006, or the year which marks Benedict XVI's renouncement of the title Patriarch of the West, which was the last instituted change to papal titlature.

PETER AND THE POPES

The source and the foundation of all primalial names and titles is Simon of Bethsaida who, by the will of Jesus, as one of the Twelve, was called upon to carry out an exceptional mission within the Church. The Catholic faith in the special role of St Peter and his successors, as well as theological descriptions of this truth, have always referred to the texts of the New Testament, which present the role of the Apostle in the original Church and in fragments explicitly describe his mission. Most importantly, these fragments include the text of the primalial promise (Mt. 16, 18-19), the bestowal of the primacy (Jn. 21, 15-17), and the fragment on the mission of teaching (Lk. 22, 31-38). The symbols of *the rock*, *the keys*, the notions of *binding* and *loosening* were believed to refer to the pastoral authority of St Peter and to his leadership which guaranteed stability and unity of the community, as well as propagation and protection of the faith. The scope of Peter's authority was to encompass all work of Christ on His mission of salvation. Consequently, it could not involve any secular power, and its conspicuously religious character made it tantamount to the divine mercy (Ratzinger, 1991, p. 12). The central meaning of the text portraying Peter as a shepherd or a pastor concerned the matter of ministry understood as participation in the authority of Christ who carried out the true mission of saving His flock. In the historical dimension, the Apostle was supposed to nourish the community with the words of the Gospel and to protect the community against false teachings and disintegration. The ministry of the Apostle should be based on the fundamental criterion of love, as implied by the three questions asked by Christ. Let us add that the love in question should be total and complete (Żmudziński, 2003, p. 23).

The third excerpt cited above from the Gospel of Luke also emphasises the Christological and ecclesial character of Peter's authority. The prayer of Jesus for the perseverance of the Apostle, as well as the order given to the Apostle to strengthen his brothers in their faith, essentially offer an answer to the question: how could a man who denied Jesus become the cornerstone of the unfaltering apostolic faith? So it is the weak Peter who is entrusted by Christ with the mission of confirming his brothers in their faith, which is a historical continuation of the mission of salvation, participatory and anchored

in the Saviour. So it is Simon Peter who becomes, by virtue of his task, whom he is not by flesh and blood, implying that his mission and authority is grounded in a divine calling and a divine intervention (Ratzinger, 1991, p. 10).

As the truth on the primacy evolved, its biblical foundation was complemented with a practical implementation, wherein successive bishops of Rome became continuators of Peter's mission. It should be emphasised that the capital of the empire became the arena of the primatial mission not for any political reasons but because of purely religious factors, including principally the evangelising presence of Sts Peter and Paul, as well as their ultimate testimony of faith given through martyrdom. This points to the existing and growing awareness of the original Church that Peter, through the testimony of his death in Rome, at the end of his long journey on the mission was united with the Roman Church in a unique relationship. Cardinal Nagy concluded this fact by asserting that Peter carried to Rome the Petrine ministry (*ministerium petrinum*) (Nagy, 1997, p. 26).

The theological reflection on the primacy and its succession developed slowly. Yet, as early as in the mid-5th century, and particularly in the era of Pope Leo the Great, it reached such maturity that, as pointed out by the commentators, it does not materially differ from contemporary contemplations and holds its ground in a comparison with contemporary theology. The thought of the era was dominated by the idea expressed in the titles *Petrus aeternus* and *Petrus perpetuus*, which assume that successive bishops of Rome are an embodiment of St Peter the Apostle. Both titles emphasise the supernatural character of the primacy, which is a function that contains an immutable truth, revealed in the words of Christ, which reaches fulfilment in the individual person of the Bishop of Rome. A more precise account of these two dimensions of primacy was achieved with the introduction of two formulas: the mission of St Peter, one-time and clearly defined in terms of doctrine, and the mission of the pope which is conducted with every new pontificate, takes into account all the circumstances, yet still fulfils that original mission (Nagy, 1998, p. 3).

Thus, the Catholic ecclesiology describes primacy as an office within the system of the Church bestowed to the pope in his capacity as the successor of St Peter. Simultaneously, the office is grounded in the apostolic tradition, and ultimately – in its institution by Christ

(Ratzinger, 1963, p. 761). Although the special mission of the Bishop of Rome encompasses a range of aspects, it primarily involves jurisdictional primacy, the charism of papal infallibility as defined during the First Vatican Council.

The Code of Canon Law defines the primacy of the power of jurisdiction (c. 331 § 1) in the following words:

The bishop of the Roman Church, in whom continues the office given by the Lord uniquely to Peter, the first of the Apostles, and to be transmitted to his successors, is the head of the college of bishops, the Vicar of Christ, and the pastor of the universal Church on earth. By virtue of his office, he possesses supreme, full, immediate, and universal ordinary power in the Church, which he is always able to exercise freely.

The substance of primacy is worded in legal terms, as the true power of jurisdiction (*potestas iurisdictionis*). Therefore, the office should not be reduced only to its supervisory, coordinative, or honorary aspects, for it involves a power to legislate, to pass sovereign judgements, and to impose sanctions for violations of the law. The power is exercised over the whole Church. The Code of Canon Law describes the power of jurisdiction with several epithets: supreme full, immediate, universal, and ordinary. They should be understood as follows:

- supreme power (*potestas suprema*) in the domain of religion is unsurpassed by any power of man, and supreme power exercised simultaneously by the entire College of Bishops always implies a connection with the figure of the pope,
- full power (*potestas plena*) encompasses the matters of the doctrine of faith and morality, as well as the social and religious order; it is circumscribed only by the natural law and the positive law of God,
- immediate power (*potestas immediata*) may be exercised personally by the pope, with no need for intermediation or permission of any sort,
- universal power (*potestas universalis*) is exercised over all members,
- ordinary power (*potestas ordinaria*) is vested in the pope by virtue of the pastoral office that he was entrusted with by Christ, with no need for anybody's authorisation or any extraordinary necessity (c. 331).

It should be remembered that the office of primacy has a multi-dimensional character, which is the consequence of the richness of ecclesial life. This wealth of dimensions is demonstrated by the long list of official titles used to describe the person serving this function. The current full title of the pope, included in *Annuario Pontificio* of 2006, is as follows: *Episcopus Romanus* (the Bishop of Rome), *Vicarius Christi* (Vicar of Christ), *Successor principis apostolorum* (Successor of the Prince of the Apostles), *Summus Pontifex Ecclesiae Universalis* (Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church), *Primas Italiae* (Primate of Italy), *Archiepiscopus et metropolitanus provinciae ecclesiasticae Romanae* (Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province), *Princeps sui iuris civitatis Vaticanae* (Sovereign of the Vatican City State), *Servus Servorum Dei* (Servant of the Servants of God). It should be noted that the substance of titles is complementary and not disjunctive. However, each title presents a different aspect of the primatial power and service.

EPISCOPUS ROMANUS – THE BISHOP OF ROME

The principal name, well ingrained in the ecclesiological and canonical discourse, is the title Bishop of Rome, found also in the ancient version as “the bishop of the Holy Roman Church” and the canonical version as “the bishop of the Roman Church.” The title implies that the successor of St Peter in the episcopacy is his successor in the primacy. It should be remembered that a pastoral function in the local Church of the Roman diocese is inscribed in the primatial ministry, in analogy to the office of bishops in particular local churches. In the canonical sense, the title should be associated with the titles Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province and Primate of Italy. Essentially, neither of the latter two adds to the jurisdictional power of the bishop and their function today is rather representative. It is worth noting that the First Vatican Council characterised papal power with yet another expression – as true episcopal power – which is absent from the teachings of Vaticanum II. However, the omission is not indicative of any change since the meaning of the term is contained in the epithets “immediate” and “ordinary.” In conclusion, every Successor of St Peter may act as other bishops in their dioceses and

exercise his power over the bishops themselves to guide and unite them (Bartnik, 1982, p. 272).

The First Vatican Council failed to provide a more accurate explanation of episcopal power in the papal ministry. However, it should be remembered that despite the primacy of jurisdiction, the pope cannot abolish the episcopacy, declare himself the only bishop of the Church, or regard bishops as his clerks or proxies. In his capacity as the bishop of Rome, he cannot be simultaneously the bishop of another diocese, either. Even though his power extends over the whole Church, it does not authorise him to administer specific dioceses. He has the right only to intervene in the matters of the universal Church (Tomaszewski, 1979, p. 26). The Second Vatican Council, by framing the mystery of the Church as *Corpus Ecclesiarum*, could give a clearer account of the absence of conflict between the most important subjects of power in the Church, as well as the original and fundamental harmony between them:

when the Catholic Church affirms that the office of the Bishop of Rome corresponds to the will of Christ, she does not separate this office from the mission entrusted to the whole body of Bishops, who are also 'vicars and ambassadors of Christ' (*Lumen gentium*, 27).

Theological texts on the topic emphasise the special nature of the relationship between the universal and the local Church, which is characteristically interpenetrative. Therefore, the ministry of the bishop of Rome does not reach particular communities from the outside but is inscribed in the heart of any particular Church (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1999, n. 6). Nowadays, there is a tendency to highlight the independence of papal power from the episcopacy, as the pope has the right to direct bishops without abolishing their rights. However, papal competencies do not hinder the exercise of episcopal power by individual pastors. To the contrary, by virtue of papal competencies, the episcopal power is affirmed, strengthened, and vindicated (*Breviarium Fidei*, 53). It should be remembered that the bishop does not reside in his diocese independently of the pope and other bishops, as implied by the universal communion of the Church. Therefore, Vaticanum II declared that

To bishops, as successors of the Apostles, in the dioceses entrusted to them, there belongs *per se* all the ordinary, proper, and immediate authority which is required for the exercise of their pastoral office. But this never in any way infringes upon the power which the Roman pontiff has, by virtue of his office, of reserving cases to himself or to some other authority (Christus Dominus, 8).

These theoretical indications were put into practice through the principle of subsidiarity, which sets forth that all that can be done by bishops on their own should be left for them to do. In contrast, the Pastor of the universal Church should intervene in the matters of a local Church only if absolutely necessary or required by some other circumstances. However, it should be noted that even these regulations lack any precision regarding their practical applications (Kubiś, 1972, p. 204).

The examples of the exercise of pastoral power over individual communities are the acts necessary or recommended for the strengthening or the protection of the unity of faith and communion: mandates for the ordination of new bishops, acceptance of their profession of the Catholic faith, assistance to all in their continuance in the Catholic faith. However, these acts also include the issuance of laws for the whole Church, the establishment of pastoral structures to serve various particular Churches, giving binding force to the decisions of Particular Councils, approval of supra-diocesan religious institutes, etc. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1999, n. 10).

It should be observed that alongside these solutions, some theological commentaries include remarks on a certain unavoidable tension between the episcopal power of the pope and the power of a local bishop. The source of this tension is the lack of clear-cut criteria that would allow to reconcile both jurisdictions, although to quote again "The Primacy of the Successor of Peter in the Mystery of the Church," the lack of any authority to which the Roman Pontiff must juridically answer for his exercise of his rights does not mean that the Pope has absolute power. Listening to what the Churches are saying is, in fact, an earmark of the ministry of unity, and the criteria of communion arising from the area of faith are the most certain check on the pope's authority (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1999, n. 10).

VICARIUS CHRISTI – VICAR OF JESUS CHRIST

This title articulates the Christological aspect of papal authority. Firstly, let us note its ancient origin. Pope Leo the Great would call himself *Vicarius Petri* but yet another title appeared – *Vicarius Christi*. The Roman synod, having elected Pope Gelasius I by acclamation, declared: *Vicarium Christi te videmus*. However, as observed by Y. Congar, the point was not to recognise the legitimacy of the pope's mandate as the vicar of St Peter or Christ, but rather to manifest the belief that the election involved some transcendental action of Christ (Congar, 1976, p. 68). This title was used also to refer to kings, bishops, and even priests to express the conviction that their actions were a manifestation of the power of Christ and St Peter. Even though it was still used to denote bishops that served outside Rome even in the 11th and the 12th centuries, such cases occurred more and more sporadically. Eventually, the title became an exclusive attribute of popes. Thus, both *Vicarius Christi* and *Vicarius Petri* has remained the names of the primatial office.

This epoch also gave rise to the title *Vicarius Dei*, used before around the 5th century to denote bishops and kings, similarly to *Vicarius Christi*. However, for instance, Pope Innocent IV used it to refer to his office as the sole entitled bearer, and thus justified the assertion that papal power is also exercised beyond the flock of the faithful. Cz. Bartnik observes that the title was rather unfortunate as it brought to mind the expression *Dictatus papae* and suggested that the pope was “half-god” (Bartnik, 1982, p. 271). It should be noted that in the Middle Ages, these titles gained legal importance as grounds for affirming the mandate received from Christ by the pope, analogous to the mandate received by any deputy from his boss for the time of his absence.

SUCCESSOR PRINCIPIS APOSTOLORUM – SUCCESSOR OF THE PRINCE OF THE APOSTLES

The title makes a direct and solemn reference to the person of St Peter the Apostle. This context is also evoked by a more popular title: Successor of St Peter. It should be observed that out of the wealth of

ideas presented by the ancient Roman Church, based on the special authority figures of Peter and Paul, the thought that the Bishop of Rome is seen as *Succesor Petri* – (Successor of Peter) was particularly elaborated. It pointed to the presence of Peter himself, living on in the pope. According to Leo the Great, on one hand, the pope is *Heires Petri* (Heir of Peter) in the sense of the Roman law, and on the other, the holder of the keys to his power, which was supposed to suggest the authority vested in the office (Schatz, 2004, pp. 53-54). As emphasised by Bartnik, the title exposes the proper and inimitable perspective on the history of salvation, wherein Peter was the successor of Christ, and the pope is but a vicar of the Apostle, only participating in his inimitable role (Bartnik, 1982, p. 271).

SUMMUS PONTIFEX ECCLESIAE UNIVERSALIS – SUPREME PONTIFF OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Pontifex, or the bridge-builder, is the core word of another group of primatial titles aimed to expose the sacerdotal function of the pope. It first appeared (4th century) as a synonym to the word bishop. It should be noted that the title *Pontifex Maximus* (the Greatest Pontiff) is directly derived from the pagan Roman tradition – it was borne by priests presiding over a religious college, and since the founding of the Roman Empire also by emperors in their capacity as religious leaders. In AD 382, emperors Gratian and Theodosius dropped the title. It is worth observing that popes have never used it to refer to themselves. Only in the 15th century, with the discovery of the monuments of Antiquity by the humanists, did the name start to emerge on tombs and statues of the popes, as well as in their biographies. For instance, during the Fifth Lateran Council, it was used in speeches addressed to the pope. The title *Summus Pontifex* (Supreme Pontiff) or *Summus Sacerdos* have nothing to do with the title *Pontifex Maximus*. Its meaning was not clear from the start, either. From the 5th century onwards, it was used to refer to any bishop. Over time, it started to denote any metropolitan, including the pope in his capacity as a metropolitan. In years 900-1050, it appeared in the signatures of papal bulls. Furthermore, it was used in letters addressed to the pope by Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, and others. Until the

end of the 11th century, the title *Summus Pontifex* was used to refer to all bishops. Then it came to denote the pope and nobody but the pope (Congar, 1976, p. 70).

In the context of the titles discussed above, Cz. Bartnik adds yet another, *Summus Episkopus*, to assert that although some of the names cited above are used by the Roman Curia even now, their contents became to some extent obsolete:

For those titles assume the Old Testamentary concept of priestly hierarchy and a new *papal* degree of priesthood in relation to the episcopacy (and the presbyterate); meanwhile, the gradation of priesthood should not be interpreted as vertical and sacramental (the holy mass said by the most ordinary parish vicar is no different from the one celebrated by a pope) but in its horizontal, ecclesiological aspect, which involves the scopes of the sacred social power; therefore, this group of titles is not correct in the entire semantic scope and the titles: *Pastor Universalis* (Universal Pastor), *Pastor Supremus* (Supreme Pastor) or *Pastor Ecclesiae Universalis* (Pastor of the Universal Church) are justified (Bartnik, 2003, p. 231).

PRINCEPS SUI IURIS CIVITATIS VATICANAE – SOVEREIGN OF THE VATICAN CITY STATE

The Vatican City State founded in 1929 under the Lateran Pacts is governed by the Fundamental Law of 2000. The Preamble of the Law defines its institutional goal as an effective guarantee of the freedom of the Apostolic See and a way to secure a real and visible independence of the Bishop of Rome in serving his mission in the world (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 2000, pp. 75-76). The relationships between the Vatican City State and the Apostolic See as subjects of international law are supposed to serve the mission of the Bishop of Rome. For many reasons, the Catholic Church found it undesirable to make the pope a subject of international law. In feudal and modern times alike, the state has ensured territorial sovereignty to the pope, who within its territory exercises secular political power in the full meaning of the term. The dependence of the state on the Bishop of Rome is indisputable. The wording of Article 1 of the Fundamental Law leaves no room for doubt: “The Supreme Pontiff, Sovereign of Vatican City

State, has the fullness of legislative, executive and judicial powers” (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 2000, pp. 75-76).

The word “supreme” indicates that the function of central organisational structures is not to “serve” the pope but to ensure him suitable conditions for serving his mission. The goal of the mission encompasses everything that arises from being the Visible Head of the Catholic Church. No other creed or religion has such an office or entity, one that embodies its unity and universality alike. The existence of this office is one the aspects that account for the organisational singularity of the Catholic Church. However, it should be remembered that it is the pope who serves the Church, with which he remains one. The pope fulfils his duties with the assistance of many subsidiary organs that he has instituted; he may act as the Apostolic See or as the Vatican City State. Both subjects of the public law are precisely a form of its action: the visible action of the Visible Head (Longchamps de Bérier & Zubik, 2008, p. 5).

It should be remembered that the term “Apostolic See” defines the central administration apparatus of the Catholic Church, with the Roman Curia at its core as a complex of central offices. Sometimes, it also refers to the place where this power is exercised. In source literature, the Apostolic See is understood as a non-territorial institution of a hierarchical structure, bearing the attributes of international identity universally recognised by the states and permitting to participate in international relations. It is also regarded as a legal personification of the Catholic Church (Czaja, 1983, p. 34). The Code of Canon Law promulgated by John Paul II on 25 January 1983 (hereinafter referred to as CIC) states that the Apostolic See (*Sedes Apostolica*), also referred to as the Holy See (*Sancta Sedes*), should mean – officially for the purposes of the canons and unless the contrary is clear from the nature of things or from the context – the Bishop of Rome, the Secretariat of State, the Council for the public affairs of the Church, and other institutions of the Roman Curia (CIC 1983, c. 361).

SERVUS SERVORUM DEI – SERVANT
OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD

This title was first used by Pope Gregory I the Great (590-604). It was in a way an answer to the hegemonic term of *patriarches oikoumenikos* (patriarch of the whole world) which started to be used by the bishops of Constantinople. Let us note that the term has evolved, just like others. For instance, St Augustine referred to himself as *servus Christi et per Ipsum servus servorum Ipsius* (the servant of Christ and through Him the servant of His servants). From the 9th century, the title *Servus Servorum Dei* is used to refer only to the pope. However, at the time, the title used to denote the highest servant, the servant of servants, and only later came to be known as a symbol of service to others. For a long time, it was also used as a conventional, official formula.

Speaking of its origin, it should be remembered that it reflected the social aspect of the pontificate of Gregory I who took action to assuage the plight of the poor and the needy. His assistance involved long-term initiatives, such as the optimisation of the administration of ecclesiastical assets and then donating their part to a charitable goal that benefits large groups of those in need: war refugees, victims of invasions or hunger, orphans and the elderly. Furthermore, Gregory I found ways to help individuals in need of aid and support by responding to name requests and searching for new cases which required his intervention – material or spiritual. As a result, the people who inhabited the lands in his jurisdiction enjoyed a sense of security and external care. The actions of Gregory I created an image of a just, compassionate person and an institution attentive to the condition of an individual, intervening to remedy injustice, and providing an example of Christian life (Kelly, 1997, pp. 96-99).

Servus Servorum Dei has appeared among the official papal titles recently, during the pontificate of Pope Paul VI, and constitutes an eloquent sign of the direction taken by the Church. The brevity of the pontificate of John Paul I frustrated the plans for reducing the number of papal titles to just three: the successor of Peter, the bishop of Rome, and the Servant of the Servants of God (Ryś, 2015, p. 3). This initiative emphasises the radical departure from the interpretation of the primatial power from the dimension of *iurisdictio* to *communio*.

CONCLUSION

The renewal of the Church after the Second Vatican Council is described with the term *ad fontes*, or a return to biblical and patristic sources. The process resulted, among others, in a departure from institutional ecclesiology, which presented the Church in legal and sociological categories, in favour of its interpretation as a living historical reality. The change also involved the emergence of new concepts relating to personalism and the history of salvation. The reform affected most important ecclesial structures, including the Bishop of Rome. The authority of the pope was presented as inherently related to the ecclesiastical mission of salvation, which implied a renouncement of titles with their historical connotations, influenced by the secular terms such as *princeps*, *rex*, *imperator* or *monarcha*. Those titles suggested an entirely mistaken interpretation of the office of the Successor of St Peter, equating him with an emperor, a monarch, or an absolute ruler. The official titles emphasised the ministerial character of the primatial mission, as exemplified by the title *Servant of the Servants of God*. The pontificates of the last five decades, in the praxeological analysis, testify to the understanding of the supreme power in the Church solely and exclusively in evangelical categories derived from the mandate of Christ and His mission of salvation.

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