
The Changing Stages of Priestly Formation in Seminaries

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ABSTRACT The sixth edition of *The Program for Priestly Formation* (PPF6) is the governing document for Catholic seminary formation. This edition, based on the *Ratio Fundamentalis* (2016), is a major shift in how seminary formation is being conceived. Besides the PPF6 and the *Ratio*, Pope John Paul II's influential post-synodal exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis (I Will Give You Shepherds)* is also examined. Focusing on the human aspects of formation, the PPF6 lays out a 7–10 year program of studies. While not downgrading the academic aspects of seminary education, the emphasis on forming a holistic, well-rounded priest configured to Christ is causing some upheaval in Catholic seminaries. This session examines the context of Catholic seminary formation, explores the foundational documents governing seminary formation, and presents two case examples of the real-world application of that discernment. The seminaries highlighted are St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver and Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology in the Milwaukee area.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the context of Catholic seminary formation in light of the foundational documents that govern this process, *The Program for Priestly Formation* (PPF6) and the *Ratio Fundamentalis* (2016) and presents two case examples of the real-world application of that discernment. The seminaries highlighted are St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver and Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology in the Milwaukee area. Each of our seminary situations is a little different, and so let us begin by setting some context for each of our institutions.

CONTEXT

Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology is run by the Priests of the Sacred Heart, also known as the SCJs or Dehonians, and is located in a suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We have about 30 sponsors, both diocesan and religious orders. The FTE for spring 2023 was 108, and there are about 130 people enrolled. Residential students number around 20 and about 60 students are commuters from St. Francis de Sales Seminary, which is the diocesan seminary for Milwaukee and the provincial seminary for Wisconsin, with students from all five dioceses in the state. St. Francis students take the academic classes at Sacred Heart and receive their human, spiritual, and pastoral formation at St. Francis from their own formators. This is a very similar situation to the North American College in Rome, where the students take their academic classes at universities in the city and do the other aspects of their formation at the NAC. Seminar-ians at Sacred Heart graduate with the MDiv degree.

We have an English and Cultural Studies program, which includes both English language studies and learning about North American culture. The students in this program tend to be priests already, many of whom are members of the Priests of the Sacred Heart. There are several seven-week sessions held throughout the year, and once they have completed their studies they return to their ministries throughout the world. We also offer a Master of Arts in Theology degree which has three pathways: traditional day classes; a cohort model meeting one night a week using a flipped classroom method and a monthly Apostolic Saturday; and an online degree offered to selected candidates in formation for the SCJs in India. For this program, they study for the MDiv locally while also taking their MA courses with us, to prepare for possible further studies in Rome. The average age of all our students is 37; our residential seminarians are second-career, or “older” vocations, and the average age is 44. The St. Francis de Sales seminarians are closer to the traditional-aged seminary student at 31.

There are three full-time librarians, all of whom have faculty status; one part-time circulation assistant; and one or two student shelvees during the course terms. There are around 85,000 physical volumes, a sizable collection of serials in both print and full-text, and we have been increasing our digital resources for databases, ebooks, and the like over the last five or so years.

Saint John Vianney Theological Seminary is a diocesan Seminary that operates under the auspice of the Archbishop of Denver and is located in Denver, Colorado. During the 2022–2023 academic year, the full-time enrollment was 108 seminarians studying for ordination to the priesthood and 35 men in permanent deacon formation. In the Priestly Formation Division, we are fully residential using the Parish House model, which means that 108 FTE means that there were 108 seminarians in formation. The Seminary served 14 sending dioceses from around the world in addition to the Archdiocese of Denver. Seminarians from international sending dioceses came from Uganda, Vietnam, and the Kiribati Islands. In addition to the sending dioceses, seminarians also come from a handful of religious orders, including the Capuchin Franciscans, the Servants of Christ Jesus, the Disciples of the Heart of Jesus and Mary among others. The average seminarian at Saint John Vianney is between 20–30 years old.

Four staff comprise the library, totaling 3.5 FTE. One, the Director, has faculty status. A Reference Librarian, a Cataloging Librarian, and a part-time Circulation Assistant round out the four. During the academic year, the first-year seminarians spend three hours per week assigned to volunteer in the Library. There are 172,000 physical volumes, access to digital resources including JSTOR, EBSCO, the Library of Latin Texts and the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae among others. Current subscriptions total more than 100 print journals and newspapers.

SETTING THE STAGE/GOVERNING DOCUMENTS

The *Ratio Fundamentalis* (*The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, December 2016) is the document from the Dicastery for the Clergy which lays out formation for all Catholic seminaries worldwide. An important line from the *Ratio Fundamentalis* is “The fundamental idea is that Seminaries should form missionary disciples who are ‘in love’ with the Master, shepherds ‘with the smell of the sheep,’ who live in their midst to bring the mercy of God to them” (RF, 4). The central focus of the latest version of the *Program of Priestly Formation* draws its impetus from that portion of the *Ratio*, reflecting on the lived experiences of seminaries and the Church in the United States in these opening decades of the twenty-first century.

The biggest change made in this international governing document is adding the Propaedeutic stage prior to seminary forma-

tion. This stage places a greater emphasis on human and spiritual formation. Intellectual formation is still important, but it tended to overshadow other aspects of formation. In the propaedeutic stage, it is seen as less critical. This addition is in reaction to the worldwide scandals of abuse which came out in the early 2000s, seen as a result of improperly formed human beings.

One issue when interpreting these norms is the difference in attitude towards law. The American approach sees laws as a minimum for righteousness; if the document says “should,” we really have to try to meet that, almost on the level of a requirement. The European approach to such norms is more “Platonic” — they are an ideal for which to strive.

Another universally authoritative document to Seminary formation is *Pastores Dabo Vobis (I Will Give You Shepherds)*, the 1992 post-synodal exhortation by Pope John Paul II. In 1990, the 8th Synod of Bishops occurred, with the theme “The Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day.” As is usual, the pope wrote up this post-synodal exhortation, laying out a program to address the discussions of the synod. This document introduced the concept of “pillars” of formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. It began the turn to an increased focus on the other parts of formation, in addition to the purely intellectual. These facets have always been a part of Catholic seminary formation, but the non-academic were given more emphasis, and the human and spiritual aspects were distinguished from each other. The image might be that of a four-legged stool or table, with the academic leg being very strong (because easily measurable), and the other legs little twigs. The synod itself, and possibly this document, may have been in answer to 1983–86 Vatican visitations of seminaries caused by earlier formation crises.

PROGRAM FOR PRIESTLY FORMATION, SIXTH EDITION

The *Program for Priestly Formation*, sixth edition, is also known as the PPF6 or the PPF. It applies the international norms of the *Ratio Fundamentalis* to formation in the United States, as established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. It became effective in the fall of 2022, with an implementation date of August 2023. The PPF will be a “lived document” for the near future, as there have been rumors of another edition in a few years.

The call to priesthood in this document is essentially communitarian in nature. It is within the community of the family, parish, or ecclesial movement, or through interaction with an institute of consecrated life or society of apostolic life, that a vocation to priesthood is discovered. This vocation is discerned and nurtured within the seminary community. “This community leads the seminarian, through ordination, to become part of the ‘family’ of the presbyterate, at the service of a particular community” (*Ratio Fundamentalis*, 3).

The library is mentioned in paragraph 362 of the PPF6: “As an essential resource for seminarians’ life of study and reflection, the library collection of books and periodicals should be carefully maintained and appropriately expanded. Excellence in education at the graduate level demands access to a strong, professionally staffed library with print, nonprint, and electronic resources, as required by accrediting agencies.” (PPF6, 362)

The new *Ratio* has changed the vocabulary used to describe seminary formation. (See table 1.) Previously, under the influence of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, we used the term *Levels* of formation; so someone might be in a Pre-theology program, before entering Theology, whereas now they are in *Stages* of formation. To follow the previous example, the student would be in the Discipleship stage before entering the Configuration stage. We will discuss these in more detail shortly.

LEVELS	STAGES
Pillars	Dimensions (still Human, Spiritual, Intellectual, Pastoral)
Outcomes	Benchmarks

TABLE 1 New Terminology

There is also the move from describing the various parts of formation from *pillars* to *dimensions*. They remain the four aspects of human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral, but these are now seen as more integrative. The human and spiritual dimensions are always listed prior to the Intellectual. Finally, the *Ratio* and the PPF6 move from an outcomes-based evaluative method to a benchmark method. This has the feel of going from a “scientific” or “objective” way of evaluating students to a more fluid or observational method.

FROM LEVELS TO STAGES

There are now four stages of formation for priesthood: Propaedeutic, Discipleship, Configuration, and Vocational Synthesis. The Propaedeutic stage is the new addition, and is envisioned as lasting at least one full year, and could be up to three years. The Discipleship stage was formerly known as Pre-theology, with an academic focus on philosophical studies, with a minimum of 2 years. The Configuration stage coincides with the theological studies and should last about three and a half to four years. Finally, there is the Vocational Synthesis stage, which occurs after the seminarians receive diaconal ordination, lasts about six months, and occurs away from the seminary. These stages add up to a seven- to ten-year program — longer than current formation.

A chart was created by two of the faculty members at Sacred Heart to help the seminary revise its program of studies to conform to the new PPF. (See chart 1.) It lays out the stages and highlights the benchmarks for each dimension as listed in the document.

Program for Priestly Formation, 6th Edition - Overview			
<p>1-3 years (131) Individual, Residential Priest Formator (99, 103) Pastoral Placement (121) Distinct Community (127) Retreats</p> <p>Human (191) - Self awareness to self-knowledge</p> <p>Spiritual (235) - Foundational Spiritual Life</p> <p>Intellectual (129-30, 268-271) - Reduced Courseload - Catechesis - Biblical Literacy - Lectio Divina - Prayer and Spirituality - No Philosophy</p> <p>Pastoral (373) - Cultural Competency - Pastoral Experience</p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Propaedeutic (postulancy, novitiate)</p>	<p>At Least 2 Years (132, 307)</p> <p>Human (192-197) - Self-control - Affective Maturity - Self-care - Self-direction</p> <p>Spiritual (236-238) - Vocational Discernment - Consistent Participation in Communal Spiritual Exercises and Liturgies</p> <p>Intellectual (272-290) - Liberal Arts & Sciences - Philosophy (ancient, medieval, modern, contemporary, logic, epistemology, nature, metaphysics, natural theology, anthropology, ethics) (306) - Theology / Catechism - Classical & Foreign Languages (311)</p> <p>Pastoral (374-375) - Pastoral Knowledge - Pastoral Skills</p> <p>Ends with Candidacy (134)</p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Discipleship (pre-theology)</p>	<p>3.5-4 Years (147) Pastoral Placement(s) (376)</p> <p>Human (198-199) - Affective maturity - Self-care - Self-discipline - Self Gift</p> <p>Spiritual (239-242) - Devotion - Chastity - Vocational Conviction</p> <p>Intellectual (291-292) - Graduate Theology</p> <p>Pastoral (376-378) - Pastoral Opportunities - Integration of Intellectual - Servant Leadership - Homiletics - Prudence & Discernment</p> <p>Ends with Ordination to Diaconate (145)</p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Configuration (theology)</p>	<p>Minimum 6 Months (144) Individualized (148) Integration and Transition (137) Adjust to Life of Ministry (138) In Home Diocese (139) Under Pastor/Supervisor (140)</p> <p>Human (200-201) - Self-confidence - Self-governance & Self-reliance - Spiritual Fatherhood</p> <p>Spiritual (243-245) - Devotion - Collegiality - Chastity</p> <p>Intellectual (293-294) - No Academic Work (146)</p> <p>Pastoral (379-384) - Pastoral Knowledge - Pastoral Skills - Pastoral Discernment - Pastoral Charity</p> <p>Ends with Ordination to Priesthood (138)</p> <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Vocational Synthesis (diaconate)</p>

Overview Chart created by Dr. Gary Klump and Dr. Benjamin Stone for PPF6 Task Force at Sacred Heart; used with permission.

CHART 1 Overview Chart of PPF6

The Propaedeutic Stage

“The propaedeutic stage allows for flexibility in accord with the principles of the *Ratio Fundamentalis*, adapted to particular needs of seminarians and ecclesiastical entities” (RF, 131).

This stage is a time to instill a sense of Catholic culture prior to seminary formation. “A significant imbalance is present between the lifestyle promoted by contemporary society and priestly formation” (PPF6, 119) — perhaps an understatement. The goal at this stage is “an intense and profound vocational discernment” (PPF6, 122), such that it “should conclude with the seminarian’s making a firm resolution to dedicate himself to the work of priestly formation or, alternatively, ‘to follow a different path in life’ as a faithful lay Catholic” (PPF6, 122).

Several models are suggested. Men with a college degree would have one year at this stage, with two or more years at the discipleship stage. Those without an undergraduate degree could do a one-, two-, or even three-year propaedeutic stage, followed by two to four years at the discipleship level.

St. John Vianney in Denver seeks to lay the “basic groundwork” of vocational discernment and formation. This initial twelve-month period is structured to provide a “more intensive preparation” (PPF6, 119). Though this new stage is now mandated to all seminaries, we are privileged to have done this for the last 23 years (previously known as the Spirituality Year). This dedicated period of time seeks to withdraw men from the world in order to deepen their interior life with Jesus Christ and prepare them for the years of formation to come. Two important milestones of the year are the poverty immersion in January and the 30-day silent retreat that concludes the year in June. Men in the propaedeutic year at SJVTS reside in a separate community located in a separate building on the north side of the seminary campus.

Sacred Heart will begin this stage in the fall. Because of the type of relationship we have with St. Francis de Sales Seminary and accreditation restrictions, there will be the same program at two locations. While academics is not to be primary at this stage, there will be 18 credits of academic work in order to fulfill visa requirements. The intent is to help students become used to a more intensive life of prayer and communal living. Our residential students will be living in a separate building on campus with their own formation faculty,

with minimal interaction with the rest of the seminary community; a similar situation will obtain at St. Francis de Sales' location.

Both libraries are adding to collections of “cultural” resources — more on literature, art, Catholic culture and their relationship to growth in spiritual life. While propaedeutic year seminarians have access to the library, we will also be in touch with the director of formation to see in what other ways we can support this stage, perhaps by providing curated collections during the year.

The Discipleship Stage

Two years are the minimum time at this stage. From paragraph 132, this stage “...has at its core the goal of growing in an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ through the life of meditation and contemplation, as well as the training of one’s character in Christian virtue, so as to lay a solid foundation for future stages.” The study of philosophy occurs during this stage (PPF6, 132). Also: “The seminarian intensely discerns his vocation to the priesthood during the discipleship stage, and thus he can clearly articulate his call and his conviction to be a priest” (PPF6, 132).

At Saint John Vianney, the second stage of formation moves the men from the propaedeutic house to the two communities of the main seminary building. Here their formation passes through a period of two to three years, seeking to provide a “systematic and rigorous formation that has as its core the goal of growing in an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ (PPF6, 132).” This period builds on the foundation of the prior stage and is dedicated to the discernment and confirmation of the priesthood; one that culminates with the call to candidacy by the bishop. The central academic focus of this stage is philosophical studies. It contains a variety of theological, linguistic, and liberal arts courses. From a pastoral perspective, men engage apostolates that focus upon the corporal works of mercy. From a “civilian” educational perspective, the men complete this program with a BA in Philosophy from the University of Mary (Bismarck, North Dakota) and/or a BPhil from the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome.

Sacred Heart offers two options for the Propaedeutic and Discipleship stages. (See chart 2.) Besides the philosophy courses, seminarians study Catholic thought, culture and literature, languages, and history. There will also be a capstone project of some kind, allowing students to earn an MA in Catholic in Catholic Studies by the end of this stage.

SAMPLE THREE-YEAR COURSE PLAN (PROPAEDEUTIC & DISCIPLESHIP STAGES)Blue = Propaedeutic; Red = Discipleship; *Italics* = MA in Catholic Studies

PROPAEDEUTIC STAGE	
FALL	SPRING
Catholic Doctrine I (2 crs.)	Catholic Doctrine II (2 crs.)
Catholic Spiritual Tradition & Priestly Identity I (2 crs.)	Catholic Spiritual Tradition & Priestly Identity II (2 crs.)
Reading Sacred Scripture I (2 crs.)	Reading Sacred Scripture II (2 crs.)
<i>Catholic Heritage I: Sal Terrae</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Catholic Heritage II: Sint Unum</i> (3 crs.)
Total credits: 9 (max allowed by PPF6)	Total credits: 9 (max allowed by PPF6)

DISCIPLESHIP STAGE (with Philosophy Concentration for M.Div./STB seminarians)	
FALL	SPRING
<i>Ancient Philosophy</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Medieval Philosophy</i> (3 crs.)
<i>Logic</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Philosophical Anthropology</i> (3 crs.)
<i>Metaphysics</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Introduction to Philosophical Ethics</i> (3 crs.)
<i>The Catholic Imagination</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Catholic Literature</i> (3 crs.)
Total credits: 12 (plus language or other)	Total credits: 12 (plus language or other)
FALL	SPRING
<i>Modern Philosophy</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Contemporary Philosophy</i> (3 crs.)
<i>Epistemology</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Natural Theology</i> (3 crs.)
<i>Catholic Thought & Culture</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Catholic Studies Capstone Seminar</i> (4 crs.)
History of Church Universal I (3 crs.)	History of Church Universal II (3 crs.)
Total credits: 12 (plus SS510, language, or other)	Total credits: 13 (plus DT511, language, or other)

SAMPLE TWO-YEAR COURSE PLAN (DISCIPLESHIP STAGE ONLY)Red = Discipleship; *Italics* = MA in Catholic Studies

DISCIPLESHIP STAGE (with Theology & Tradition Concentration for individualized ordination track)	
FALL	SPRING
<i>Catholic Doctrine I</i> (2 crs.)	<i>Catholic Doctrine II</i> (2 crs.)
<i>Catholic Spiritual Tradition & Priestly Identity I</i> (2 crs.)	<i>Catholic Spiritual Tradition & Priestly Identity II</i> (2 crs.)
<i>Reading Sacred Scripture I</i> (2 crs.)	<i>Reading Sacred Scripture II</i> (2 crs.)
<i>Ancient Philosophy</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Medieval Philosophy</i> (3 crs.)
<i>The Catholic Imagination</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Catholic Literature</i> (3 crs.)
<i>Cath. Stud. Elective (or Catholic Heritage I)</i> (3 crs.)	<i>Cath. Stud. Elective (or Catholic Heritage II)</i> (3 crs.)
Total credits: 15	Total credits: 15

FALL	SPRING
<i>Modern Philosophy (3 crs.)</i>	Contemporary Philosophy (3 crs.)
<i>Epistemology (3 crs.)</i>	Philosophical Anthropology (3 crs.)
<i>Metaphysics (3 crs.)</i>	<i>Catholic Studies Capstone Seminar (4 crs.)</i>
<i>Catholic Thought & Culture (3 crs.)</i>	History of Church Universal II (3 crs.)
<i>History of Church Universal I (3 crs.)</i>	Scriptural Foundations (3 crs.)
Total credits: 15	Total credits: 16

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CHART 2 MA in Catholic Studies Proposal (Sacred Heart)

Configuration Stage

“In the configuration stage, the seminarian models his life on the self-donation of Jesus Christ, Shepherd and Servant, as he prepares more immediately for Holy Orders. ... Formation in priestly spirituality involves a heartfelt dedication to his ecclesiastical entity in loving obedience” (PPF6, 135).

The Configuration stage is envisioned to last three and a half instead of four years. According to paragraph 136: “The configuration stage ... challenges him to acquire a proper priestly spirituality; ...a greater awareness and personal assumption of priestly identity as he conforms himself to the sentiments and attitudes of the Son, understood as self-offering for the pastoral care of the sheep.” (PPF6, 136) During this stage, seminarians receive the minor orders of Lector and Acolyte, as well as participate in active service to the poor.

At St. John Vianney, the third and most substantial stage of seminary formation seeks to aid the man “to model his life on the self-donation of Jesus Christ ... as he prepares more immediately for Holy Orders” (PPF6, 135). Throughout these years, seminarians move off-campus to what are known as “Parish Houses.” The basic idea behind this is to provide a deeper formative experience by living in a “family-style” community. Furthermore, the proximity to parish life affords a deeper immersion in the pastorate, as the men of this stage now focus their pastoral ministry in the context of the parish itself. The principal course of study in this stage is theology, though it likewise contains languages, history, law, and a variety of practicums. This stage, lasting three and a half years, concludes with the election and ordination of the seminarian to the transitional diaconate.

At Sacred Heart, our situation is somewhat different due to the relationship with St. Francis de Sales Seminary. At St. Francis, seminarians are assigned to a “teaching parish” for their entire time in seminary, while still living at St. Francis. However, Sacred Heart’s residential seminarians have a different type of formation. We have developed “affinity groups” for non-intellectual formation in keeping with our mission of specialized formation. Depending on the needs of sponsors and students, they may be grouped by diocese, or type of expected ministry (rural, urban, etc.).

Among the work for the upcoming year in faculty council meetings will be another review of the curriculum. Sacred Heart currently requires 117 credit hours for the M.Div. We did a substantial review of scope, sequence, content, and essential course syllabi from 2012-2016, and so we don’t anticipate as significant an overhaul this time around. Because the Configuration stage is seen as a three and a half-to four-year program, we may begin to use May sessions in order to complete all coursework.

Vocational Synthesis Stage

“The purpose of the vocational synthesis stage is to allow a deacon to enter into the life of a cleric, incorporating the entirety of the formation he has received from the moment of Baptism until his reception of Holy Orders. ... The vocational synthesis stage is not a period of discernment for the priesthood. ... Therefore,... it is a preparation for the final judgment regarding the conferral of the Order of Priesthood...” (PPF6, 138).

This stage lasts approximately six months and begins with the diaconate ordination. Paragraph 137 of the PPF states: “Goal is to help the deacon make this essential transition before assuming the full responsibilities of priestly life...” This stage is distinct from a traditional pastoral year, but more like a mentorship period. It *must* take place outside the seminary building (RF, 75), from the time of leaving the seminary until priestly ordination (RF, 74).

For Denver, the final stage of priestly formation begins after the man’s ordination to the diaconate. At this point, with his studies and seminary formation complete, he moves from the seminary and spends a final six months in preparation for the priesthood in a non-academic setting. Men from outside Denver will return to their home dioceses. While concluding their studies at SJV, resources such as spiritual direction and counseling will continue to be provided. In

particular, we intend to offer a two-week intensive course covering a variety of priestly practicums and offering a canonical retreat before priestly ordination. As the diocese (and specifically the pastor) assumes the responsibility of formation in this stage, SJV likewise intends to offer support and a basic framework by which a true vocational synthesis can occur. In the end, the key to the final stage is that by immersion in the pastorate, the man may begin to integrate the formation he has received and allow it to catalyze into a priestly gift of self. At SJVTS, the vocational synthesis stage will be introduced in the spring of 2027, as provided for by the new PPF.

For Sacred Heart, the question will be how to supervise and/or certify that students are ready for ordination after six months. They are no longer in the seminary setting, probably geographically distant, and the local diocese may not have the support structure in place for proper formation. Fortunately, there is some leeway for implementing this stage. For the St. Francis students, this is less of an issue due to the nature of the Teaching Parish in their formation.

For both of our seminaries, this will be a year of adjustment, learning, and adaptation, and we look forward to seeing how this new edition of the *Program of Priestly Formation* will affect both the seminarians and the people whom they are ordained to serve.

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