

APPOINTING AND BEARING FRUIT (JN. 15:16): UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF PRIESTLY FORMATION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

*Priestly formation in the Catholic Church in Nigeria is founded on theological and practical pillars. This is rooted in John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." In the Catholic priesthood, formation is framed as both a divine appointment and a process of shaping ministers who can bear lasting fruit in service to God's people. However, despite the prolonged formation that candidates to the priesthood undergo, there are at times priests who do not bear adequate testimony with their lives. Sequel to that, the research examines the four pillars of formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral, so as to explore how they are supposed to be deeply imbued in the seminary training. Nevertheless, contextual realities in Nigeria, including cultural expectations, widespread influence of the use of social media, and other social challenges, sway formation. These realities often mitigate the effect of formation. The researcher adopting a qualitative methodology style draws from *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (2016), and Nigerian scholarly contributions to unravel the inner dynamics of priestly formation. It concludes by recommending holistic integration, emotional intelligence development, and ongoing institutional adaptation as pathways to authentic formation. Finally, it reiterates the fact that priestly formation in Nigeria must remain Christocentric and ecclesial, ensuring that those appointed by Christ be truly exemplary and bear fruit that endures.*

Keywords: Appointing, Choosing, Priestly Formation, Fraternity

Introduction

Priestly formation lies at the heart of the Catholic Church's mission, since the quality of the priesthood significantly shapes the vitality of ecclesial life. In Nigeria, where the Catholic Church is experiencing remarkable growth in vocations and expanding pastoral responsibilities, the question of how future priests are formed acquires pressing importance. Not minding all the rigours in the formation process, at times there are

evidences of priests not living up to their calling. This manifested in lukewarm attitude in the daily lives of some priests. The biblical text of John 15:16 provides a rich lens for theological reflection: “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.*” This verse highlights two inseparable dynamics of vocation: divine appointment and enduring fruitfulness.

The idea of “appointment” underscores that priestly vocation originates in God's initiative, mediated through the Church, and discerned within the candidate's freedom and responsibility. Formation, therefore, is not merely professional training but a transformative journey of configuring candidates to Christ, the Good Shepherd. The call is inherently linked to “fruit-bearing,” which represents the spiritual, pastoral, and missionary outcomes expected of ordained ministry. For the Nigerian Church, where priests often serve large, diverse, and resource-challenged communities, fruitfulness demands both rootedness in spirituality and practical pastoral competence.

This research explores the dynamics of appointment and fruit-bearing as they illuminate the theology and praxis of priestly formation in Nigeria. It first situates the biblical text within its theological context, then engages magisterial teachings such as *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. The study also examines contextual factors shaping formation in Nigeria—cultural values, societal challenges, and ecclesial expectations. Ultimately, it argues for an integrated model of formation that ensures priests remain authentic witnesses to Christ, capable of bearing lasting fruit in the contemporary Nigerian Church.

John 15:16 declares: “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*” This verse serves as a theological anchor for understanding priestly vocation and formation in the Catholic Church. “Appointment” denotes the divine call, while “bearing fruit” signifies the enduring impact of a well-formed priestly life. In Nigeria, where the Catholic Church continues to grow dynamically, the effectiveness of priestly ministry depends heavily on the quality and authenticity of formation. In fact, priests are the closest collaborators of the bishops. In fact, bishops “by the gift of the Holy Spirit which is granted to priests in sacred ordination, have in them necessary collaborators and counsellors in the ministry and function of instructing, sanctifying and governing the people of God” (Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* n.7). Christ remains the foundation of the priestly ministry. When pastoral or administrative tempest arises, it becomes the proper time to cry out: “Lord, save us we are perishing” (Matt. 8:25) as the apostles did in their own time. The research examines the contextual dynamics, challenges and prospects of priestly formation in Nigeria with a view of seeing how to let it bear more positive fruit.

Unravelling the Missionary Dynamics of Choosing and Appointing

There is no denying the fact that choice assumes priority in time over appointing. One is primarily chosen before he is detailed for a particular assignment. In the dynamics of

missionary exercise, choice is preceded by calling, which is predicated upon listening. It is he/she who listens that hears the call. The one who hears and answers is disposed for choosing. Nonetheless, the ways of the Lord are infinite, and He can even choose a defiant persecutor like Saul, turned Paul, as His instrument of evangelization. It is from those that are chosen that appointments are made and missionary engagement is initiated. To that effect, appointing cannot precede choosing, rather appointing proceeds from choosing.

When Jesus Christ chooses *philo*i (friends) in place of *doulo*i (slaves), it goes to establish the fact that it is not a relationship of dependence of a master rather it is a relationship of intimate and equal associates that enjoy the unconditional love of the Master. Thus, it singles out and establishes a clear apostolic difference. According to Moloney (1998:629), the disciples are the *philo*i of Jesus for whom he lays down his life in love (Jn. 15:13). They are branches engrafted in the Master and sent out to bear abundant fruit. In the same vein, priests are Christ's special disciples chosen from the People of God and sent to minister to His flock. Therefore, the Congregation for the Clergy (2016:n.33) states that, “as a member of the holy People of God, the priest is called to cultivate his missionary zeal, exercising his pastoral responsibility with humility as an authoritative leader, teacher of the Word and minister of the sacraments, practicing his spiritual fatherhood fruitfully.” It is not a worldly authority that is more of authoritarian than authoritative. It goes with the desire of lording it over others.

The priestly authority is rather “exercised in a spirit of service as '*amoris officium*' and unpretentious dedication for the good of the flock” (Congregation for the Clergy, 2013: n.25). It therefore calls for proper human engineering as regards the priest's relationship with his parishioners. It demands due respect and undiluted courtesy and humaneness. To that effect, the pulpit should at no point be used as a platform for political campaign or dishing out unpleasant verbal mudslinging or preaching oneself. Maximum respect is never optional; rather it has to be an undebatable code of conduct. In the same token, “the specificity of the ministerial priesthood ... is defined not on the basis of its supposed “superiority” over the common priesthood, but rather by the service it is called to carry out for all the faithful so they may adhere to the mediation and Lordship of Christ rendered visible by the exercise of the ministerial priesthood” (Congregation for the clergy, 2013:n.6). It is against that backdrop that people always want the priest to be a true man of God in all its ramifications. “God is the only treasure which ultimately people desire to find in a priest (Congregation for the clergy, 2013:n.6). It is also in this way that we bear fruit that will last.

Importantly, in the rabbinic context, disciples attached themselves to the rabbi; on the contrary, the disciples of Jesus do not have that privilege of personal initiative in the choice. They are rather chosen by the Lord, appointed, and sent to bear fruit. Indeed, “priests are called by virtue of the sacrament of Orders to share in concern for the mission: 'The spiritual gift that priests have received in ordination prepares them, not for any narrow and limited mission, but for the most universal and all-embracing mission of salvation' (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n.10). To that effect, John Paul II (1990:n.67) insists that “all priests must have the mind and the heart of missionaries – open to the needs of the Church

and the world”. This need of the life of the Church in the modern world must be felt and lived by each priest. This is why each priest is called to have a missionary spirit.”

“Bearing Fruit that will Last”: Towards Pastoral Prosperity

The emphasis on bearing fruit that will last sharply implies that there are fruits that do not last. In that vein, Catholic priests are warned against such fruits as preaching themselves and not Christ, seeking their own gratification instead of leading the people to God, not living exemplary life, undue materialism, and indulging in liturgical aberrations. On the contrary, they must have to embrace *fruits of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)*. In the words of Leo XIV (2025), they must undertake to be credible and exemplary priests. Although they have to be aware of the limits of their human nature, but all the same they have received an extraordinary grace. They have always to be aware that they have been entrusted with a precious treasure of which they are the ministers, the servants. And fidelity is required of the servant. None of them is exempt from the suggestions of the world, and the city, with its thousands of offerings, could even draw them away from the desire for a holy life, inducing a levelling down in which the profound values of being a priest are lost. In that regard, Christmyer (2012) admonishing Christians in general maintains that, “when we abide in him, when his life flows through us, we become fruitful with works of kindness and charity and self-donating love. Sometimes we are stomped on, crushed, and fermented. We are consumed as we pour ourselves out for others. But that fruit lives on. It remains in the sweetness and joy it gives others.”

In fact, 'fruit that will last' refers to the supernatural character of this fruit, which leads to building the kingdom of God and bringing glory to God, and not to oneself. “Fruit that will last” only comes about as God works through us by the Holy Spirit. The role of the priest is simply to abide, to remain, in Him. As they do this, as they give up their independence and submit to Him in a moment-by-moment way, they make it possible for God to work through them and produce the fruit that will last” (<https://sermons.logos.com/sermons/123164-fruit-that-will-last> accessed 19/7/2025).

Furthermore, pastoral productivity is manifested more vividly in the allegory of the vine. It brings before us the importance of fruitfulness in the Christian life, which is anchored on abiding in Christ. It also involves the strenuous but unavoidable service of pruning out branches that are not bearing fruit. Surely Morris (1995) adds that,

a vine does not yield timber (Ezek. 15). In a vineyard, fruitfulness is not simply desirable; it is imperative; that is the whole point of the vineyard; it is what the vineyard is for. Pruning is resorted to to ensure that this takes place. Left to itself a vine will produce a good deal of unproductive growth. For maximum fruitfulness, extensive pruning is essential. This is a suggestive figure for the Christian life. The fruit of Christian service is never the result of allowing the natural energies and inclinations to run riot.

All in all, pastoral fruitfulness is achieved through prayers. In a homily during the Mass with seminarians, novices and their Formators, Pope Francis (2013) emphatically affirms that,

evangelization is done on one's knees.” Listen well: “evangelization is done on one's knees. Without a constant relationship with God, the mission becomes a job.” “If we look towards Jesus, we see that prior to any important decision or event he recollected himself in intense and prolonged prayer. Let us cultivate the contemplative dimension, even amid the whirlwind of more urgent and heavy duties. And the more the mission calls you to go out to the margins of existence, let your heart be the more closely united to Christ's heart, full of mercy and love. Herein lies the secret of pastoral fruitfulness, of the fruitfulness of a disciple of the Lord!

Would that the spread of the gospel is based on the strength of number of pastors; would that the spread of the gospel is guaranteed by the prestige of the institution or availability of human and material resources but rather it is by allowing the love of Christ to permeate the inner recesses of the priest and being led by the Holy Spirit and being totally engrafted in His cross. In the words of Leo XIV (2025), priests need personally to experience the closeness of the Master; to know that they have been seen, loved and chosen by the Lord by pure grace and without merit on their part, because it is above all their own personal experience that they then exude in our ministry.

Pastoral prosperity is not by mere human effort, rather, it is Lord who grants the harvest. According to St. Paul, “Paul planted, Apollo watered, but God gives the increase” (1Cor. 3:6).

Understanding Priestly Formation

The Catholic Church understands priestly formation as a holistic and lifelong process rooted in Christ's call to discipleship and configured to his mission as Shepherd and High Priest (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1992). Formation is not merely academic or ritual training but a transformative journey, enabling the seminarian to mature into a priest who is both appointed by Christ and able to bear fruit that endures (Jn. 15:16). This framework consists of four interrelated pillars, a stage-based process, and an integrated Christological-ecclesial orientation.

The Four Pillars of Formation

According to *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (2016), priestly formation rests on four interconnected dimensions:

Human Formation: This dimension, which is considered to be the foundation, emphasizes personal maturity, relational capacity, and integrity. Priests are called to be “bridges” rather than “obstacles” to others' encounter with Christ (PDV, no. 43). Formation

lacks its basic ingredient if proper consideration and attention is not given to the human dimension of formation. When understood in that light, human formation goes to promote the integral growth of the person be it physically as it concerns the nutritional, health and aspect of physical activities for the upkeep of individual person; be it psychologically as it concerns the constitution of the a stable personality based on emotional stability self-control and overall mature and well-integrated sexuality; be it morally especially as it concerns the proper formation of conscience with the view of becoming a responsible person capable of making adequate use of his/her reason in making right decision and judgement (*Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* n.94). In fact,

The whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation. (...). Future priests should therefore cultivate a series of human qualities, not only out of proper and due growth and realization of self, but also with a view to the ministry. These qualities are needed for them to be balanced people, strong and free, capable of bearing the weight of pastoral responsibilities. They need to be educated to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and, especially, to be balanced in judgment and behaviour (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 43)

In Nigeria, this entails fostering authenticity and resilience amid communal living, cultural diversity, and societal pressures. However, the priest must arm himself with the necessary human qualities that will draw people to him. Consequently, John Paul II (1992: n,43) states that, “the priest should be able to know the depths of the human heart, to perceive difficulties and problems, to make meeting and dialogue easy, to create trust and cooperation, to express serene and objective judgments.” To achieve these objectives, the entire formation process must be holistic.

Spiritual Formation: Spiritual formation remains the engine house of priestly formation. Anchored in prayer, sacraments, and fidelity to the Word of God, spiritual formation configures the seminarian to Christ the Good Shepherd. It must be conducted in such a way that students may learn to live in intimate and unceasing union with God the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

Those who are to take on the likeness of Christ the priest by sacred ordination should form the habit of drawing close to him as friends in every detail of their lives. They should live his paschal mystery in such a way that they will know how to initiate into it the people committed to their charge. They should be taught to seek Christ in faithful meditation on the word of God and in active participation in the sacred mysteries of the Church, especially the Eucharist and the Divine Office, to seek him in the bishop by whom they are sent and in the people to whom they are sent, especially the poor, little children, the weak, sinners and unbelievers. With the confidence of sons they should love and reverence the most Blessed Virgin Mary, who was given as a mother to the disciple by Jesus Christ as he was dying on the cross. (*Optatam Totius* n.8)

Nigerian seminaries constantly emphasize holistic training of seminarians and greatly frown at a disposition that goes contrary to that.

Intellectual Formation: This provides philosophical and theological depth and equips seminarians to engage Scripture, tradition, and contemporary realities critically. With such background knowledge, they are then able “to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and more suitably presented” (*Gaudium et Spes* n.44). “It seeks to enable them to enter into fruitful dialogue with the contemporary world, and to uphold the truth of the faith by the light of reason, thereby revealing its beauty” (*Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* n.116).

In Nigeria, intellectual formation responds to pluralistic challenges, especially Islam. Ukpebor (2021) stresses the necessity of interreligious literacy for effective mission. In the words of John Paul II (1992), the intellectual formation of candidates for the priesthood finds its specific justification in the very nature of the ordained ministry, and the challenge of the “new evangelization” to which our Lord is calling the Church on the threshold of the third millennium shows just how important this formation is. (PDV n.51). Since intellectual formation plays a vital role in the formation of priests, Bonaventure (1891) still cautions thus: “Let no one think that it is enough for him to read if he lacks devotion, or to engage in speculation without spiritual Joy, or to be active if he has no piety, or to have knowledge without charity, or intelligence without humility, or study without God's grace, or to expect to know himself if he is lacking the infused wisdom of God.”

Pastoral Formation: This dimension integrates the others, preparing seminarians to shepherd God's people with compassion and skill. It includes supervised parish placements, catechesis, and social outreach. In Nigeria, this involves addressing poverty, interethnic tensions, and youth evangelization (Enyinnaya, 2015). It is not a pastoral that is aloof from the people. Rather, it is a pastoral formation that aims at letting the pastor always feel the existential pulse of his flock. This could be achieved by letting him lower himself to the extent of assuming the “smell of the sheep”; in this way, the sheep are willing to hear his voice (Francis, 2013).

All in all, John Paul II (1992) maintains that,

Pastoral formation is the goal of the entire formation. The formators must seek ways to truly prepare the candidate to be able to work effectively in the pastoral field: pastoral formation certainly cannot be reduced to a mere apprenticeship, aiming to make the candidate familiar with some pastoral techniques. The seminary which educates must seek really and truly to initiate the candidate into the sensitivity of being a shepherd, in the conscious and mature assumption of his responsibilities, in the interior habit of evaluating problems and establishing

priorities and looking for solutions based on honest motivations of faith and according to the theological demands inherent in pastoral work” (PDV, no. 58). Above all, it demands bearing eloquent testimony with one's own life.

Trinitarian Communion: The Hinge of Priestly Unity

The mystery of the trinity reveals the mutual coexistence of the divine persons, reflecting a collaboration founded on communion. This involves an interpenetration and mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. Such divine interpenetration is rooted in love; for “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” (1Jn. 4:16) Love has to be the foundation of collaborative ministry. It is in the context of this Trinitarian collaboration that we have to understand the mystery of love and communion that has to guide those who participate in Eucharistic celebration.

The Trinitarian collaboration reflects the mystery of love, communion, and indeed the dynamics of unity that ought to exist among the priests. This dynamics of unity is manifested in communion in which “each priest is united to the other members of the priesthood by specific bonds of apostolic charity, ministry and fraternity” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n.8). In fact, he is inserted into the *Ordo Presbyterorum* (order of presbyters) constituting that unity which can be defined as a true family in which the ties are not of flesh or blood, but come from the grace of Holy Orders (Congregation for the clergy, (2013). It is through this rich interconnection of relationships which arises and is deepened by the communion with the Blessed Trinity that the nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood is adequately defined” (John Paul II, 1992).

It is pertinent to understand at this juncture that “the capacity to cultivate and live deep priestly friendships proves to be a source of serenity and joy in the exercise of the ministry, a decisive form of support in difficulties, and valuable help for growth in the pastoral charity which the priest must exercise in a particular way towards those confreres in difficulty and in need of understanding, assistance and support.” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* n.8). It is necessary to always bear in mind the words of John Paul II (1993) that “Jesus calls on the priestly community to be the reflection of and participation in Trinitarian communion: what a sublime ideal!” In this regard, Leo XIV (2025) cautions that, “it is necessary to learn to live as brothers within the presbyterate, and with our bishops.... We must work hard on ourselves in order to overcome individualism and the desire to overtake others, which makes us competitors, so that we learn gradually to build human and spiritual relationships that are both healthy and fraternal.” When we lose sight of this bond of priestly unity, we can at times fall victim to cacophonous tunes in the orchestra of priestly fraternity.

Reinvigorating the Sacramental Brotherhood

Fraternity involves recognizing and embracing the inherent dignity and worth of every person, fostering relationships based on love, unity, and solidarity. Fraternity brings

individuals together for a common goal and frees them from the prison of individualism and rivalry. According to Obiora (2024:33), priestly fraternity is an integral and historical aspect of the Catholic Church. It is deeply rooted in the Church's tradition and theology, and goes to emphasize the importance of brotherhood and mutual support among its clergy. The concept of priestly fraternity finds its origin in the early Christian community, reflecting the sense of kinship and unity that existed among the apostles and early disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is important to note that fraternity is rooted in the very nature of the priesthood, which is a communal vocation. Priests are called to be witnesses to Christ and to the Gospel, and they do this best in fraternity with one another (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9). This fraternity is a sign of the unity of the Church and of the universal priesthood of Christ (*Sacerdotalis Coelibatus*, 17). It is also essential for the effective evangelization of the world (*Redemptoris Hominis*, 43).

In the wisdom of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, adequate attention was given to the necessity of relaxation for priests. Thus, making them remember that rest is part of work and relaxation is not a wasted time; but a moment of uplifting the spirit, sharing pastoral experiences and seeking solutions to some pastoral challenges, and in some cases, it is a moment of dousing the heat of pastoral tension. Therefore,

it is good that priests gather willingly to spend together peacefully some moments of relaxation and rest, remembering the words with which the Lord himself invited the apostles exhausted by toil: "Come to a deserted place and rest a while" (*Mk* 6:31). Furthermore, to ensure that priests can mutually assist one another in fostering their spiritual and intellectual life, collaborate more effectively in ministry, and possibly avoid the dangers of solitude, a certain common life or community of life should be encouraged among them (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* n.8).

Unfortunately, today, undue attachment to social media has made it difficult for the relational spirit of some priests. Atomic individualism is dangerously creeping in. Priests must be convinced that their "fraternal communion, especially in common life, constitutes witness in keeping with what Jesus made so clear in his prayer to the Father: may the disciples be one so the world "may believe that you sent me" (*Jn* 17:21) (Congregation for the clergy, (2013: n.40). As we currently live in a world of artificial intelligence, priests should not throw overboard their humanness. That is why Leo XIV (2025) fraternally urges priests to remember that "no algorithm can ever substitute an embrace, a glance, a true encounter, neither with God, nor our friends, nor our family. Think of Mary. She, too, set out on an arduous journey to meet her cousin Elizabeth. It was not easy, but she did it, and that encounter gave rise to joy." Nothing can replace the fraternal encounter with fellow priests. In fact, priestly fraternity is founded in the bond of ordination. For,

Priests by virtue of their ordination to the priesthood are united among themselves in an intimate sacramental brotherhood.... Even though priests are assigned to different duties, they nevertheless carry on one priestly ministry for men. All priests

are sent as co-workers in the same apostolate, whether they engage in parochial or extra-parochial ministry.... All, indeed, are united in the building up of the Body of Christ, which, especially in our times, requires manifold duties and new methods.... Each one, therefore, is united in special bonds of apostolic charity, ministry, and brotherhood with the other members of this priesthood. (Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* n.8).

Priests are therefore companions to other priests and equally called to be pastors to fellow pastors, especially in the administration of the sacrament of reconciliation and in bringing solace in the moment of spiritual challenges.

Conclusion

This Johannine perspective Jn. 15:16 encapsulates both the mystery and mission of the priestly vocation. It reminds us that the priesthood is not a career but a divine election that carries an enduring commission. It further illuminates the entire process of priestly formation as the Church's participation in God's creative and redemptive initiative. It is God who calls, yet it is through the Church's structures of formation that this call is discerned, nurtured, and embodied in men prepared to serve as instruments of Christ's love and reconciliation in the world.

The dynamics of priestly formation in Nigeria reveal a Church that is both gifted and challenged, chosen and sent. The call to *appointing and bearing fruit* demands fidelity to divine initiative, courage in confronting structural and cultural obstacles, and creativity in pastoral engagement. For Nigerian seminaries to sustain this balance, they have to ground their formation in Scripture and Magisterium. Such a solid foundation helps them to respond effectively to the concrete realities of their people. In this way, they continue to produce priests who embody the Gospel in word and deed, priests who bear the fruits of holiness, justice, and peace that endure. Such priests, rooted in Christ, nourished by the sap of the Spirit, ensure that the Church in Nigeria remains not merely a community of growth, but a communion of lasting fruitfulness for the life of the world.

Recommendations

1. The priestly formation has to be rooted in the cultural background of the candidates aspiring to the priesthood and ultimately geared towards holistic formation.
2. Since candidates to the priesthood are expected to be pastors of souls, they have to be grounded in proper development of emotional intelligence.
3. Formation is a dynamic process and as such needs to be reformed and readapted in response to the signs of the time. Sequel to that, there is need for regular adaptation geared towards authentic formation.
4. Priestly formation in Nigeria must ensure that those appointed by Christ be truly

imitators of Him in all ramifications and thus be able to bear fruit that endures.

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