

Father Charles Brandt : 25 years an Island Hermit

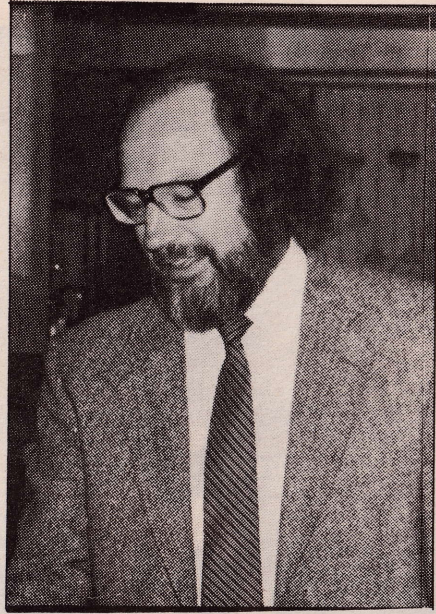
ON NOVEMBER 21, 1966 Bishop Remi De Roo ordained Charles Brandt as a diocesan hermit priest. In so doing he was part of a movement following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to re-establish a tradition lost to the Roman Catholic Church for 200 years.

The bishop explained at the time (in a *Victoria Daily Colonist* article by Barney McKinley reprinted elsewhere in this issue of ICN), "The ordination of a hermit priest would emphasize a facet of religious life, neglected by the Western church for years and would restore a balance such as is still maintained by Eastern and Oriental branches".

Father Brandt was part of a hermit colony, the only one in North America at the time. The then-41-year-old former U.S. Air Force

navigator was one of a number of hermits who gathered under the leadership of Dom Jacques Winandy in September 1964. The Belgian Benedictine monk and scripture scholar approached the young bishop and was successful in establishing the colony near Mer-ville in the Comox Valley on an abandoned farm site.

FATHER BRANDT HAS since relocated to Black Creek where he is self-employed as an expert in paper conservation, working his own lab at the hermitage. He is also a leader in the growing environmental movement on Vancouver Island and conducts spiritual retreats on Christian Meditation at retreat centres such as Queenswood, where he was interviewed on November 24 at the close of a three-day Christian Meditation retreat attended by 32 meditators.



Charles Brandt

A recent photo taken at a talk given by Father Brandt.

Near the end of the sixties the colony of hermits was becoming a bit too much like a community for the comfort of the hermits, so they separated to move elsewhere. For example, Dom Winandy moved to Mayne Island for a period before returning to his native Belgium, where he continues the contemplative life in a 14th century hermitage.

Another member, Bernard de Aguiar still lives a contemplative lifestyle as a potter on Hornby Island. This former member of the Trappist Monastery at Gethsemani in Kentucky was a secretary to Thomas Merton prior to his migration to Vancouver Island. De Aguiar has since become laicized and is attached to the Emmaus Christian Community, a cluster of Roman Catholic families in the Comox Valley who have lived Christian Intentional community for the last decade as part of their faith journey.

BISHOP DE ROO IS still an enthusiast for the type of priesthood and spiritual leadership exemplified by Father Brandt. At a recent celebration with friends at Queenswood enjoyed by the hermit who calls Queenswood his second home, Bishop De Roo reiterated many of the themes of his original homily from the 1966 ordination.

The hermetic or hidden spiritual life of the monk, for the bishop, speaks eloquently to a world which ignores to its peril the benefits of silence, contemplative prayer, centred meditation practices and a living witness to the unseen. The fruits of these pursuits — borne out in Father Brandt's principal activities, have proven prophetic — living in harmony with nature, pursuit of higher spiritual consciousness and a profound sort of conservation that integrates all levels of life.

Not surprisingly the fruit of his life has not gone unnoticed in recent years by the media, which serves as a sort of unconscious antenna for positive developments of the future. A popular television program such as 'On the Road Again' recently featured the hermit pioneer. As he stated in the show, Charles Brandt's first great hero was Henry David Thoreau, whose classic volume *On Walden Pond* is a cornerstone for much of the spirituality of the modern environmental movement.

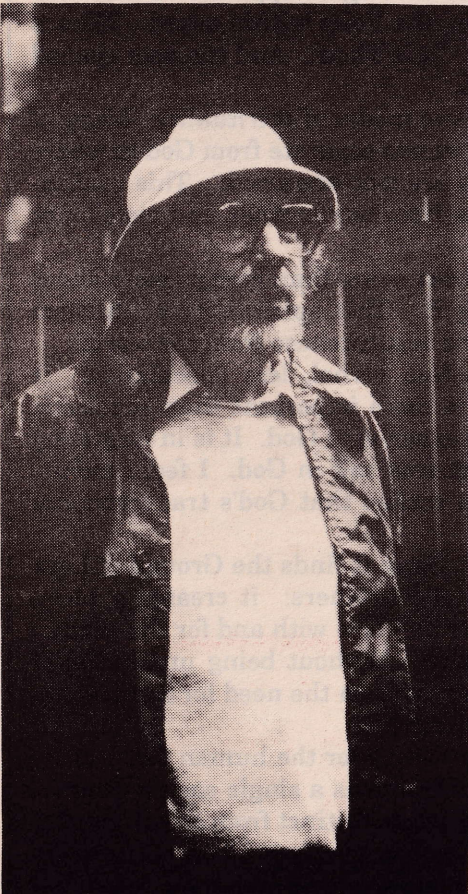
Father Brandt is quoted quite extensively in the recent Diocesan Synod book, *Forward in the Spirit, Challenge of the People's Synod* (see excerpt elsewhere this section). He describes the new consciousness which he and many contemplative leaders believe is critical if the world is to survive its present spiritual and technological crisis.

HE SERVED AS A guest at one of the synod formal weekends and contributed to decision A.55, a visionary environmental decision cited by Bishop De Roo in his final assessment of the directions spelled out by synod developments, in an interview cover story of *Island Catholic News* in September.

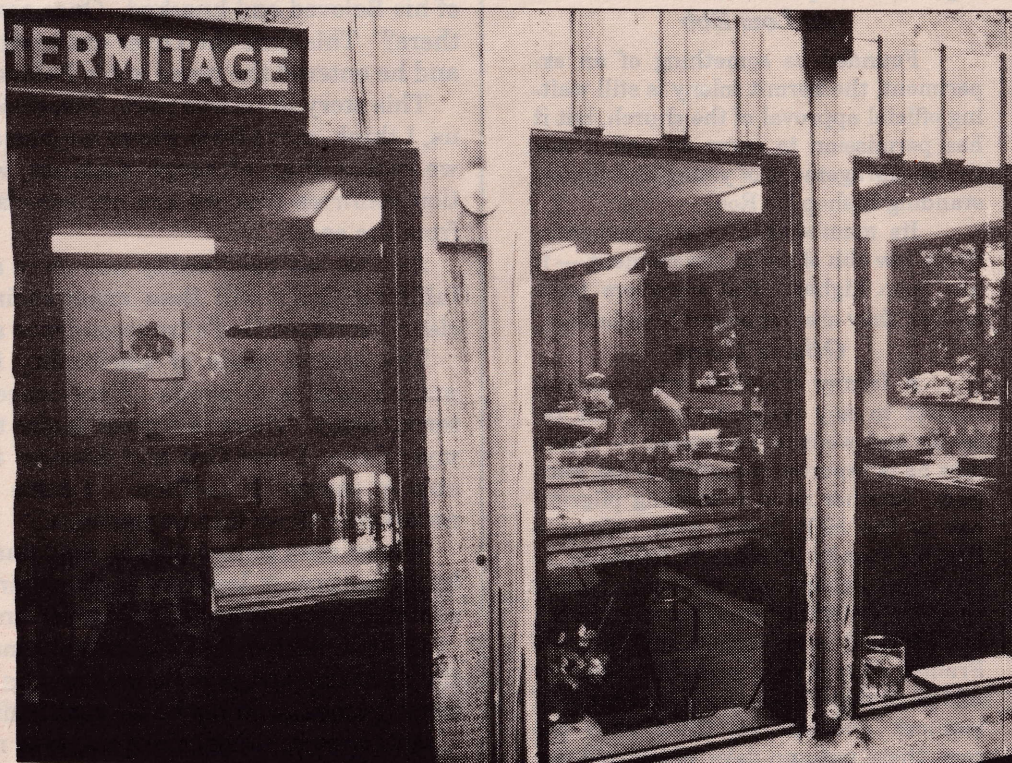
Father Brandt himself is an advocate of theologian Thomas Berry, who has done important work on the new cosmology which calls for a level of spiritual transformation that Father Brandt says can only be successfully achieved through deep meditation practices. He has dedicated his life toward teaching and practicing Christian contemplation and he looks forward to doing the same for the next twenty-five years of priesthood as Vancouver Island's hermit Catholic priest.



AT QUEENSWOOD for the 25th anniversary celebrations, Father Brandt is joined at meal (where he leads Grace) by close friends and associates: left to right, Eileen Carey, SSA; Cecelia Christian, SSA; Rev Robert Paré, pastor of Holy Cross Parish, who worked with Charles in Campbell River; Father Brandt; Marguerite Lalonde, SSA; Betty Janelle, SSA.



Outside his hermitage at Black Creek.



HERMITAGE — Father Brandt working inside his paper conservation lab at the hermitage.

Charles Brandt



Hermit-Monk's Ordination First in Two Centuries

The Daily Colonist, Victoria, B.C. — Wed. Nov. 23, 1966

By BARNEY MCKINLEY

COURTENAY — A hermit-monk was ordained as a priest at Canadian Martyrs Church here in the first such ceremony in the western world in perhaps 200 years.

The history-making ordination of former United States Air Force navigator Charles Brandt, a 41-year-old member of the hermit colony, the only one in North America, located on an abandoned farm 14 miles north of here, was described by Most Rev. Remi De Roo, Roman Catholic Bishop of Victoria, as an "outstanding event".

Live Alone

Bishop De Roo, who has encouraged and supported the unique twentieth century hermitage since its founding in September, 1964, said the ordination of a hermit-priest would emphasize a facet of religious life, neglected by the western church for years and would restore a balance such as is still maintained by eastern and Oriental branches.

He said Father Brandt and the other solitary hermits of the Hermitage of St. John the Baptist, each of whom lives alone and apart from his fellows on the primitive hermitage acreage, would provide a silent witness, "reminding us of the striving of the pilgrim church to walk in the steps of Christ".

Bishop De Roo said he decided to ordain the hermit-priest, even though hermits usually come from the laity, "because he can exercise in his own way a ministry of service in a neglected field of religious life — the teaching by example rather than by words.

It is believed the ordination is the only one of its kind in the western church at the present time.

Long Hours

The members of the hermit colony, who spend long hours in prayer, meditation, theological and Bible study, rarely communicating with their fellows, were not to be called on for parish work, except briefly and in case of dire necessity, the bishop said.

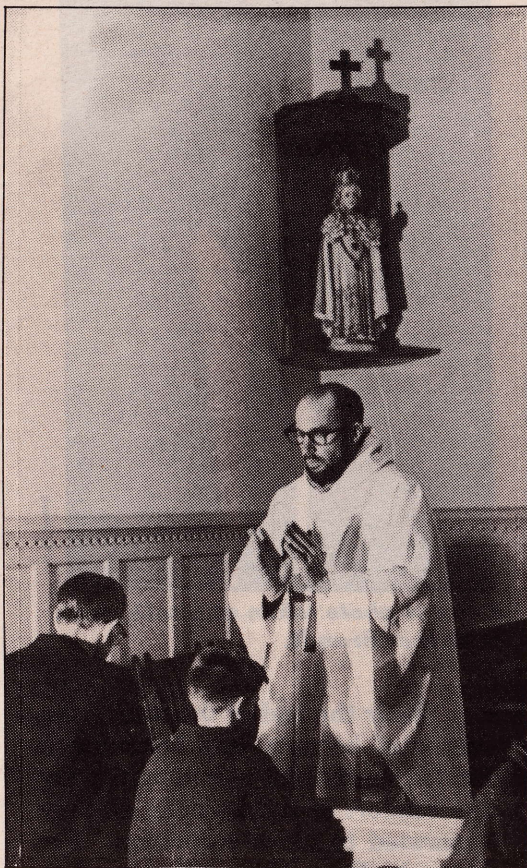
Father Brandt's elevation to the priesthood was witnessed by his father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Alvin R. Brandt, and his sister, Mrs. Ella Mae McCue, who journeyed by train and bus from Kansas City to the wilderness region where his small hermit's cell is located.

The 41-year-old hermit, who returned to his life of solitude and prayer after the ordination, is a former Anglican priest, who joined the Catholic Church in 1956 and spent several years in a Trappist monastery in the United States before joining the Vancouver Island hermit colony in March, 1965.

Built Hut

He was in the U.S. Air Force from 1943 to 1946 and took his bachelor of science degree in 1948 before turning to church life. He was ordained in the Anglican Church in England in 1951 and returned then to the United States in 1951 already resolved to lead a life of contemplation and prayer.

Testimonial to his determination is a hut, painstakingly built of railroad ties that still stands on a hill on the property of an Anglican priest friend in Connecticut. The solitude seeker transported the ties up the hill by jeep and spent much of the year there before joining the Roman Catholic faith.



The newly ordained Father Brandt gives blessing on November 21, 1966 at Canadian Martyrs Church, Courtenay.

At the hermit colony near Courtenay he earns money for his needs by operating a book bindery, mending valuable university books, among other jobs. The work is in obedience to a colony principle that each hermit must earn his bread, preferably by the work of his hands.

His hermitage is of mostly salvaged wood from old farm buildings, but solidly built for the rain falls heavily on the hillside site and in winter the snow lies deep. It has electricity because it is needed for the book binding, but the furnishings are plain. A small separate room, where today he will celebrate his first mass with relatives and friends in attendance, is the chapel where a silver vigil lamp will burn through the night vigils that are part of the hermit's life.

At Low Ebb

Founded as something of an experiment, the hermit colony is still waiting official approval of the church, but it has permission to carry on and it has the encouragement of young and understanding Bishop De Roo.

Its membership is at a comparatively low ebb of six at the moment — it has been higher. But members come and go, they are not bound to remain.

Others Come

A former member, who was not subject to any religious vows, left recently and went to Vancouver — where now he is reported planning to get married. Another is on a walking pilgrimage to the Holy Land, after taking a first big step by jet plane to Belgium.

But others are arriving, among them an American member of a church brotherhood who comes by way of France, after a long sojourn in central Africa, to this Vancouver Island scene of hemlock and spruce, filled with the roar, these autumn days, of the cold waters of Wolf Creek and the rain-swollen Tsolum River.

Rev. Jacques Winandy, the Belgian Benedictine monk, who founded and is spiritual leader of the hermit colony, acquired the site after a six-year

search that led him from Switzerland to the West Indies to the United States. The land was searched out by a Victoria real estate man and the deal financed by an anonymous benefactor in Milwaukee.

Must Guard

There is little regimentation, for the hermits feel, in the words of Father Winandy, that they must guard against the strong tendency of Westerners to organize, standardize, centralize and legislate every detail of life.

But he denies the hermits are selfish individualists who have merely turned their backs on society.

"Our flight from the world is not an egotistical withdrawal from the responsibilities of society," he insists. "Each of us is ready to meet his obligations whenever they are presented to him. But if they do not exist none of us will look for them — we consider the

company of men a distraction from our aim."

The man who founded the Western world's first hermit colony since before the French revolution of 1789, defines the hermit's life as the renunciation of sin and the search for God — in a day when there are others who say God is dead.

But you can't be a hermit just because you want to live an untroubled life, he warns possible candidates.

He says that is an unhealthy and un-Christian action.

"We do not leave the world because we hate men or despise the things God has made," he says. "We leave it because men and things are subject to error, ignorance and sin."

In their solitude the hermits, if they are true to their aim, pray for the world and all who suffer. But they pray alone.

A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

Fr. Charles Brandt, reactor
Black Creek

"Integrate spirituality and prayer into life"

— A Synod decision.

In all things there is a "hidden ground of Love". These are the words of Thomas Merton, my mentor in the life of prayer. He was one of the guides who inspired me to live as a hermit these last 25 years.

In my Anglican days, Dom John Chapman's *Letters* taught me Christian meditation, and a protégé of his, Evelyn Underhill, also was a source of inspiration. Later, it was through the writings of Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB, I found my way into the Catholic church. In 1989 I spent two months in Father Bede's Ashram, Saccidananda, South India. There "the hidden ground of Love" confirmed me in the path of "praying always".

I have come to realize that while we are distinct from this Loving Ground, the cosmic Christ, we are not separate from Him. Here lies the basis for contemplative prayer. On this foundation we build a life of prayer. To see how to "pray always" is not necessary since this stream of love, is always flowing between Jesus and the Father. We simply have to become aware of this constant Stream of Love.

A Sufi story speaks to this: One day a Lover approached the home of his Beloved. He knocked on the door. A Voice within responded to the knocking: "Who is there?" The Lover answered: "It is I". The Voice within spoke, almost sadly: "There is no room here for me and thee." The Lover went away and spent much time trying to learn the meaning of the words of his Beloved. Sometime later he once again approached the home of his Beloved and knocked. Once again, the Voice within asked: "Who is there?" This time the Lover answered: "It is Thou". And the door opened and he entered the home of his Beloved.

This story in its two parts describes two modes of spirituality. Many of us, I think, move from where we sense we are separate from God to where we realize that, although **distinct**, we are **not separate**. This realization confirms that we are not separate from our brother and sister, nor from the earth.

At first, my spirituality was more about doing than being: more about fulfilling God's will than experiencing it. This spirituality of dualism clearly stressed God's transcendence and separateness from the world.

The second mode of spirituality is less verbal, less speculative. It prefers silence to words. Experience is more important than scholastic terminology. There is a great desire to experience God. It is in forgetting myself that I find God and discover my true self in God. I feel comfortable in saying "It is Thou". I come to realize that God's transcendence necessarily flows into immanence.

Where does contemplation lead one? Since it finds the Ground of Love in all reality, it leads to one's sisters and brothers: it creates a social consciousness; it leads to a deeper unity and love with and for the earth.

Contemplation leads to transformation. Without being unmindful of the need for change in behaviour, the stress is on the need for a change in consciousness, coming to see reality differently.

As Thomas Berry points out, it is necessary for the human community and the earth community to go into the future as a single sacred community. The key to this is recognition that while distinct from the Ground of Love, we are not separate. Then we realize our unity and communion with every human being, with the earth and with the universe.

Excerpt from *Forward in the Spirit. Challenge of the People's Synod.*

Excerpted from a 1967 Catholic Digest on Island Hermits

THE CATHOLIC DIGEST / MAY, 1967

over. I hope God will leave me here until my death."

The search for the hermitage had begun after his resignation from Clairvaux, where he had been abbot for ten years.

On the Canadian island he found approval and encouragement from the young and progressive Bishop Remi J. De Roo, whose diocese covers the island. The deal for the site, about 140 miles north of Victoria, capital of British Columbia, was completed within a month. The C. N. Montague real estate firm of Victoria, which handled the deal, entered it as one of the most remarkable on its books. Money for the purchase and for the critical first days of the colony came from an



Hermit Matthew Casey built this round cell for himself. He got a bargain in two-by-four's, but they were all six feet long. So he used them as uprights in his dwelling, which is remote from the huts of other hermits.

Jim Ryan photos



Father Winandy and Bishop De Roo, whose Victoria diocese covers the entire island, discuss the future of the colony. The bridge is high to overarch the spring floods.

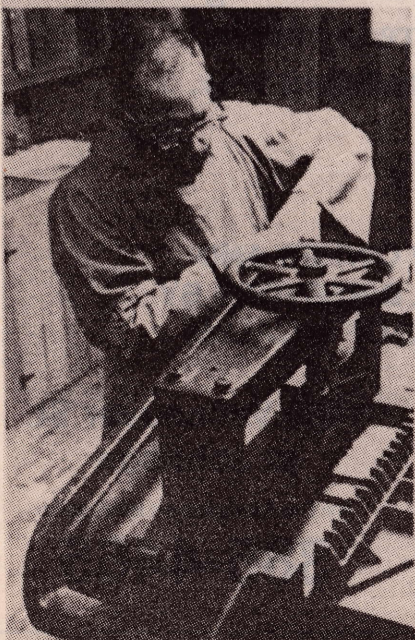
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THE HERMITS OF VANCOUVER ISLAND



Hermit Jacques Brandt lives here. His dwelling is mostly of salvaged lumber; nevertheless a snug shelter. It houses bookbinding equipment, his bunk, and plain furniture.

THE CATHOLIC DIGEST / MAY, 1967



planning to get married. And though it hopes some day to have official Church approval as the Hermit Order of St. John the Baptist, the colony at present has only permission to carry on as an experiment.

Earning their own way poses a problem for some. They find it difficult to add a money-earning job to the daily tasks of gardening, cooking, washing, mending, cleaning, chopping wood.

Bishop De Roo has issued instructions the hermits are not to be called on for diocesan duties except briefly and in case of dire necessity.

One of the Vancouver Island hermits who has a good source of income

The colony rule is that members must earn own bread so hermit Brandt works at bookbinding. He has the luxury of electricity, but only because it is necessary for his work.

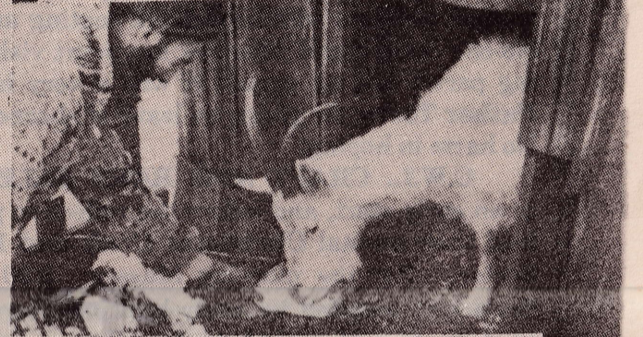


Belgian Benedictine Father Jacques Winandy, founder and spiritual leader of the new hermit colony on Vancouver Island, meditates in wilderness solitude.

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This flimsy but adequate bridge across the Tsolum river was built by the hermits with the help of a district logger. It is the only physical link between the colony and the outside world.

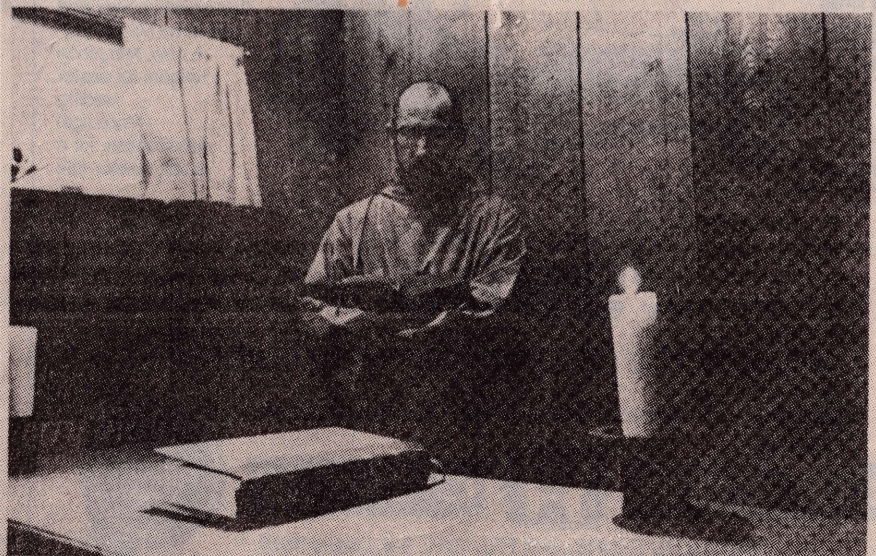


is Father Charles Brandt, a former U. S. Air Force navigator from Kansas City, who operates a book bindery in his dwelling.

Brother Matthew Casey, a 28-year-old Trappist from Syracuse, N.Y., is among the colony's more resourceful. He is now on a pilgrimage to Rome and Holy Land on foot, after a first step by jet plane to Belgium. But last summer he earned \$1,000, with Father Winandy's blessing, as a fire spotter at a lonely forest protection tower.

The energetic Brother Casey, who is expected back at the colony after his pilgrimage, is also noted for arriving with two hens and a nanny goat.

Hermit De Aguiar is a colony pioneer, the only member who arrived with the founder, Father Winandy. He gazes at turbulent Wolf creek, flowing through hermitage grounds.



Notice rough plank walls of hermit cell. This is in chapel of Father Brandt, who was once a U.S. Air Force navigator.

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