



Metropolitan Hilarion briefs journalists on prospects for convening Pan-Orthodox Council

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Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, gave on September 9, 2011, a multi-media press conference on 'Prospects for Convening a Pan-Orthodox Council', at the Russian international information agency RIA Novosti in Moscow.

The DECR chairman began with the background of the issue recounting how the idea of such a Council had emerged:

'This idea emerged fifty years ago when consultations began concerning preparations for a Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. For historical reasons the Orthodox Church had not assembled for such a Council in a body for centuries since the last one, the Seventh Ecumenical Council. There were regional gatherings of primates and delegates from two or three or four Churches but there was no such notion as a Pan-Orthodox Council.

In the 20th century, especially in the period after World War II when Orthodox Churches consolidated their cooperation, an idea emerged to hold a Pan-Orthodox Council for representatives of Churches to meet and discuss urgent issues and to make decisions on them'.

Metropolitan Hilarion explained to the media the process of preparing the Council:

'It was agreed to take up ten themes and the preparation for their consideration has been carried out all this time. Among them is the canonical order of the Orthodox Diaspora, that is, the mode in which the Orthodox Church should exist in places where there are different Orthodox jurisdictions, first of all in Western Europe, America and Australia. Next issues are the church calendar, unification of church fasting rules, obstacles for marriage, Orthodox attitude to the rest of the Christendom and to ecumenism, a procedure for granting church autonomy, the Orthodox Churches' attitude to topical world problems – political, social and other. The duration of the pre-Council process, 50 years, is conditioned by the existing differences among the Churches. But the differences concerning the eight topics I have enumerated have been overcome and our positions on them have been harmonized.

There are only two topics left on which our stands are not yet fully harmonized. These are the granting of

autocephaly and the diptychs. For the public at large these themes may seem 'technical' and far from people's real life. What is the granting of autocephaly? It is the matter of who and how grants independence to a particular Church. Actually, there has never been a clearly detailed procedure of the granting of autocephaly in the history of Orthodoxy. Normally, autocephaly was not granted at all as a Church would just declare it and the Patriarchate of Constantinople and other Local Orthodox Churches would recognize it *post factum*, sometimes several decades later.

Besides, there was an assumption that one Church could grant autocephaly to another. Thus, Patriarchate of Constantinople granted autocephaly to the Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian and other Churches, while the Moscow Patriarchate to the Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia and the Orthodox Church in America. The Polish Orthodox Church was granted autocephaly twice, first by Constantinople, then by the Moscow Patriarchate. So this problem remained unsettled.

Now an agreement in principle has been reached that from now on autocephaly will be granted with the consent of all the Local Orthodox Churches, that is, one Church cannot grant autocephaly to another or to one of her own parts. For a new autocephalous Church to appear there must be inter-Orthodox consent. The only remaining thing to do is to agree upon some technical details, such as the procedure for signing a tomos of autocephaly. We have not managed to come to an agreement on it as yet, though in February the inter-Orthodox preparatory commission tried to settle it for several days.

Finally, the matter of diptychs. Diptychs are the sequence order of the Churches in official lists. There are certain differences. All the Churches recognize the first five places given in diptychs to the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and Moscow. Further on there are differences. For instance, in the Church of Constantinople's diptychs the Russian Church is followed by the Serbian, Romanian and Bulgarian Churches with the Georgian Church given the ninth place; while in the Russian Orthodox Church's diptychs the Georgian Church occupies the sixth place followed by the Serbian, Romanian and Bulgarian Churches. There is no consensus on this issue as yet.

The question now is what to do next. Shall we be preparing a Pan-Orthodox Council for another fifty years? This prospect does not suit many. If we continue debates on issues leading to a deadlock, such as the problem of diptychs, the process can drag on for another fifty or more years. Therefore, after the February session of the preparatory commission, Patriarch Bartholomew sent a letter to the primates of the Churches asking them about their vision of the further course of preparations for the Council. Some primates replied that the Council could be held on the eighth agreed topics, while the two non-agreed topics could be left for the post-Council period. This was also the answer of the Russian Orthodox Church.

So, we are ready to take part in the Council on the eight agreed topics provided that the Council's

protocol, agenda, structure and the Local Churches' delegation membership are worked out, because all these matters need to be discussed since they have not been considered at all in the inter-Orthodox pre-Council process'.

Metropolitan Hilarion also spoke on the situation in the Middle East describing it as 'very urgent and vital'. In these countries, he said, 'there are political transformations threatening the very existence of Christianity in a whole number of countries where Christians have lived for centuries and have co-existed with the Muslims'. He noted,

'We are very much concerned especially about the situation in Egypt where threats and terrorist actions against Christians have never ceased since the New Year and where they have found themselves in a very difficult situation after the political changes that have occurred in the country. We are also seriously concerned about the situation in Libya and Syria where Western powers have brought great pressure to bear on the present regimes. It is absolutely unclear how these powers see the further development of the country and how they are going or if they are going at all to ensure the safety of Christians in Syria. A tragic situation has developed in Iraq where under Saddam Hussein Christians got along together with the Muslims and people of other religious traditions and where, in various estimates, there were about 1,5 million Christians. Today hardly a half of this number has remained as many were simply annihilated while others were driven away from the country. Regrettably, the situation is not improving but rather worsening.

Today this situation has attracted the attention of leaders of religious confessions and the political elite. It was not accidental that in the spring the European Parliament adopted a resolution concerning the situation of Christians in various parts of the world. As for the Church, the Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod considered on May 30, 2011, the situation of Christians in various parts of the world and adopted a special statement on the problem'.

The DECR chairman also touched upon theme of inter-Orthodox meetings. This year, he said, there were several regional meetings including one in Jordan on August 1, attended by the heads of the Churches of Antioch, Jerusalem and Cyprus and a similar meeting on August 23 in Cyprus, of the heads of the Churches of Jerusalem and Cyprus. The heads of the Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Cyprus and a representative of the Patriarchate of Antioch met on September 1 in Istanbul. These meetings focused precisely on the Middle East problem.

The Istanbul meeting also discussed the preparations for the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. A wish was voiced that the heads of the Local Orthodox Churches have a meeting previous to the Council to consider the procedure for inter-Orthodox preparatory commissions and a possible review of the decision-making procedure. Speaking about it, Metropolitan Hilarion explained that

consensus was the only way of decision-making at inter-Orthodox conferences. 'It was the working pattern of inter-Orthodox preparatory commissions and it enabled the Churches to, first, participate in the inter-Orthodox pre-Council process and, secondly, to make decisions satisfactory for all the Local Orthodox Churches'. In His Eminence's opinion, if the consensus mode is reviewed and decisions are taken by a simple majority of votes then 'any Church may face a situation where a decision contrary to her stand and self-awareness is taken. It goes without saying that this will radically affect the whole situation of inter-Orthodox relations'.

The metropolitan stressed that 'from the point of view of the Moscow Patriarchate, a review of the procedure for the inter-Orthodox preparatory commission with regard to a change in the decision-making mode is absolutely unacceptable. We will not be able to take part in any inter-Orthodox activities in which decisions are made not by consensus but by a majority of votes. It should be understood that each Church should have the right to advocate and defend her position. The point is not to give each Church the right to veto a particular decision but to ensure that the decisions are made by consensus'.

He also said that it was necessary to take into account the differences in the numerical strength of Orthodox Churches:

'The Russian Orthodox Church is estimated to include some 150 million faithful living in various countries. It is larger than the rest of the Local Orthodox Churches taken together. At the same time, each Orthodox Church, be it the multi-million Russian Church or such a numerically small Church as Polish or Czech and Slovakian or Albanian, has two delegates in an inter-Orthodox preparatory commission. We have never challenged this pattern of representation, though it by no means reflects the real configuration of the world Orthodoxy. We have never challenged it precisely and only because of the principle of consensus existing at the inter-Orthodox level. In other words, we are convinced that if at least one Orthodox Church does not agree with a particular decision the principle of consensus does not allow adopting it. In this case we are not concerned about the representation quota. If decisions were made by vote then the proportional strength of delegations should correspond to the number of the faithful in a particular Church and the representation configuration should be quite different in inter-Orthodox pre-Council commissions. The decision-making pattern and representation are tightly correlated. We have not yet been told what representation will be at the Pan-Orthodox Council itself, if it takes place'.

Metropolitan Hilarion believes that the Pan-Orthodox Council should be attended by all the diocesan bishops of every Local Orthodox Church, as was the case at Ecumenical Councils. 'In my preliminary estimates, there will be about 500 people. In the Russian Orthodox Church there are 222 bishops today'. To assemble such a number of people in one hall is not a problem, he believes. 'Such representation will be perfectly right and fair. If it is decided that the Council will not be attended by all

the ruling bishops but only a certain proportion of them, then we will have to negotiate the quotas. I do not think we can conduct a Pan-Orthodox Council if each Church including the multimillion Russian Church will have, say, five or ten delegates. This problem is still to be resolved and all these problems are included in the agenda of the Pan-Orthodox Council’.

In conclusion of his introductory remarks the DECR chairman noted that there were no serious obstacles for convening a Pan-Orthodox Council:

‘Today it is very important that a united and consolidated voice of the Local Orthodox Churches be heard. It is very important that nobody try to rock the boat of the world Orthodoxy or to drive a wedge between particular Churches. I believe the proposal for rejecting the consensus mode is potentially very dangerous because it may bring serious discord and divisions in the family of Local Orthodox Churches. We should negotiate and make only those decisions which satisfy all the Churches. No Church should try to impose her decision on the other or others. We should work in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation in preparing the holy and great Council of the Orthodox Church in the hope that this Council will become a factor of unity, not division’.

Then Metropolitan Hilarion answered questions from journalists:

Q. Your Eminence, you have mentioned the attempts to change the consensus mode. What are the motives to these people? It would be logical to rely on the world largest Church, the Russian one, in the effort to oppose these threats. And what we see are some strange statements. How are they going to achieve it technically? To manifest a consensus there must again be a consensus.

You have visited Local Churches. What are the moods in the Local Churches which have fallen under the division into ‘senior’ and ‘minor’ ones, into those who have been heard and those who have not been heard?

A. The moods in Local Orthodox Churches are very different today but I believe no Church will accept a pattern whereby some Churches will prove to be first-rate while others second-rate. When reference is made to the oldest Churches (these include the four old Patriarchates plus the Church of Cyprus) we are not at all concerned from the chronological point of view. But if these Churches are given some special right and privilege to make decisions while other Churches are treated as younger ones because of the

time of their autocephaly status and therefore minor ones, I believe none of these 'young' Churches will agree to such discrimination.

As for the repeal of the consensus mode, in fact a consensus is really needed to abandon it. As far as I understand from the communiqué of the September meeting, it is planned to convene the heads of the Local Orthodox Churches with precisely this purpose. But it is quite evident that between the heads of the Local Orthodox Churches there will be no consensus about the repeal of consensus. I think this attempt is doomed to fail. I believe that if the primates assemble they will reaffirm together their willingness to work together and to progress together to the holy and great Council, but certainly on the condition that the principle of consensus remains inviolable.

Q. Please explain the question of the revival of the Pentarchy. The Russian media have recently tackled this topic. What is it and is the Russian Orthodox Church included in the Pentarchy?

A. The Pentarchy is an ecclesiastical-political concept that existed in the second half of the first millennium in Byzantium. Basically it affirms that the Universal Church is governed by the five Patriarchates of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. At that time there lived and really worked precisely these Patriarchates. The old autocephalous Church of Cyprus was not included in the Pentarchy since its head had not enjoyed the title of patriarch. The Primate of the Church of Rome was the first in honour among the five hierarchs. It should be mentioned that the Pentarchy members had never met as a body. Therefore, this historical concept was rather theoretical. It actually ceased to exist at the time of the sad rupture between Rome and Constantinople when there was only one participant in that Pentarchy left in the West and four participants in the East.

Perhaps it is worth explaining where the primacy of Constantinople in the East appeared from after the rupture with Rome. Indeed, historically the first Church – one founded by Christ himself – was the Church of Jerusalem. And if the diptychs were ordered according to antiquity the first place would be certainly given by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem to be followed by other Churches, those of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and only after them Constantinople. But the diptychs themselves were arranged in the 4th century when Rome was the capital of the empire while Constantinople its second capital, the New Rome. The fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council – out of respect for the New Rome as the new capital city of the empire in the East – decided that the Bishop of Constantinople the New Rome be the second in honour after the Bishop of the first Rome. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem found itself in the fourth place because the Church of Jerusalem *de facto* ceased to exist after the sack of Jerusalem in 70 to revive only in the 4th century when Emperor Constantine decided to restore Jerusalem at its historical

place.

So, the second place accorded to the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the diptychs was conditioned by a purely political situation in the Roman Empire. According to the Canons of the Second Ecumenical Council, this city shall have the same privileges as the first Rome 'as the city of the emperor and the synod'.

Therefore, the so-called Pentarchy developed by virtue of historical circumstances. Its idea was exactly that the Pentarchy implicated the whole of the Universal Church. After the rupture between Rome and Constantinople this concept disappeared just as many other historical and historiosophic concepts.

Today the revival of the Pentarchy perhaps could be possible only if Rome and Constantinople united. But there is no such question on the agenda.

As for the order of the Orthodox Church, I would like to remind you that today there are fifteen Local Orthodox Churches. True, a whole number of Churches believe they are fourteen as they do not recognize the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of America. But one way or another, they are not four or five but fourteen or fifteen, and they make up the Plenitude of the Universal Orthodox Church, and nobody will say today that some five Primate are more important than other five or ten.

That is why when the synaxis of the five Primate was convened, any revival of the Pentarchy was completely out of question because the first place in it was originally occupied by Rome and the Church of Cyprus was never included in it. Patriarch Bartholomew simply convened the primates of the Churches in the Middle East to discuss the problem of the region.

Q. Your Eminence, could you clarify when the Pan-Orthodox Council can be expected to convene? May be the meeting that took place in Istanbul mentioned some specific date? Could you also clarify who is the initiator of abandoning the consensus principle ruling the common Orthodox decision-making?

A. No ideas concerning the specific date of the Pan-Orthodox Council have been expressed so far. Patriarch Bartholomew has repeatedly stated that this Council can be conducted within two or three years, and it seems to me that if there are no ill-timed initiatives such as the proposal for abandoning the consensus principle it is quite feasible to hold the Council within this period. But to hold the Council at such a short notice the Orthodox Churches should be consolidated; we should prepare this Council together. And if some try to drive a wedge between Orthodox Churches and to create additional

difficulties it will put off the date of the Council till an uncertain time.

Such a Council would be very timely now because the Orthodox Church could respond in one voice to questions and challenges posed by the modern world. Certainly we have something to discuss and we have many topics on which Local Orthodox Churches have a consensus. This Orthodox unity should not be destroyed for the sake of delusive attempts to achieve some decisions to the detriment of particular Churches.

It is very difficult for me at the moment to say who exactly initiated the abandoning of the consensus principle. But I believe this proposal is utterly unrealistic and this repeal will never take place.

Q. Please tell us whether the situation in Ukraine and Abkhazia was discussed during your meetings with heads of Eastern Patriarchates, and if it was then how?

A. The situation in Ukraine was not discussed in detail during my meetings with church heads, though it was mentioned during some meetings. As far as Abkhazia is concerned, during my talk with Patriarch Bartholomew I told him in detail what was going there and we exchanged our opinions on the situation.

Q. And the Eastern Patriarchs did not discuss it in September?

A. These points found no reflection in the final communiqué of the meeting. It would be strange if the Eastern Patriarchs discussed the problems of Ukraine and Abkhazia at a meeting devoted to the Middle East. Indeed, Ukraine is not part of the Middle East region.

Q. I listened to what you told us about the Pentarchy and refinements of the Orthodox politics. I and most of those present in this room find it very interesting. I think in the world there are several hundreds or even thousands of people who are really interested in it. But I think with horror about how it can be explained to the general reader because, first, he does not understand anything in it and, secondly, he does not see how it concerns the witness to Christ, the mission of the Church, the situation of Christians in the Middle East, and so forth. How would you answer the question of how these political and historical questions are connected with concrete problems faced by Christians and generally the world today?

A. I am convinced that the Pan-Orthodox Council will be meaningful and valuable only if it manages to say to the world what matters in people's eyes. If we assemble only to decide on our internal and, in the eyes of the people even within the Church, technical problems – for instance the procedure for granting autonomy or the order in which the Churches are arranged in diptychs – then the Council will certainly lack the effect it should have. Indeed, we should assemble in the first place to declare our unity, our consolidated position and to address ourselves to the world around us with a message. This message should concern people's urgent issues of life, not just some administrative or structural matters which we should settle between ourselves.

In this sense it is necessary to look once again into the decisions which have been made for 50 years on those eight topics which I have already mentioned. In his letter to His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew about the preparations and possible conduct of a Pan-Orthodox Council, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill says that since these documents were prepared in the 60s, 70s, 80s many of them have gone out of date not only in the subject matter but also in the language. That is to say, before we assemble for a Pan-Orthodox Council, we will have to look into these documents again and perhaps to edit them somehow. Besides, we certainly should speak out on the problems urgent for people today, especially the problem of the survival of Christians in a whole number of countries where they have become subjects of persecution and oppression today.

So I would like to express the hope that the Pan-Orthodox Council, if it really takes place, will consider not only matters of internal life and administrative order in the Orthodox Church but also the burning problems of the modern world and will make a contribution to stabilizing the situation of Christians throughout the world.

Q. In some publications about the planned Council one encounters such expressions as 'Antichrist ecumenical council' and holy fathers are cited, in particular St. Nectarius of Optina, who says that such a council will be holy only in the name but will be Antichristian in essence. What will you say about it? Could you also comment on your statement about a change to the Gregorian Calendar you made during the Church and the World program on May 21? You said then that there were no obstacles for changing to the Gregorian Calendar.

A. Judging by your words, you did not see that program. One should not retell what one knows by hearsay. The responsibility of a journalist is to say only what he himself saw, not to repeat other people's talk. I have never said that there are no obstacles for changing to the Gregorian Calendar. On the contrary, I pointed out that these obstacles do exist. First of all, an obstacle is the unwillingness of the

church people in a whole number of countries to change the existing calendar in one way or another.

The question of a new calendar was posed in the last century 20s at the Inter-Orthodox conference in Constantinople, and some local Churches agreed to change to the new calendar while others decided to retain the old one. Among them are the Churches of Jerusalem, Russia, Georgia, Serbia and Mount Athos, which is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. During that program I said this: the calendar is a certain 'sacred cow' which cannot be touched. It is not something sacred in itself because the Julian Calendar according to which we live is the secular calendar of the Roman Empire, which was not invented by Christians but inherited from Ancient Rome. The Gregorian Calendar was invented by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, and the Catholics live by it today. The calendar used by some Local Orthodox Church today is the one called the new calendar; it is not the Gregorian but the so-called New Julian Calendar. It coincides today with the Gregorian one and will coincide for some more centuries and then they will differ in one day. All this is linked with the fact that the humankind in the course of its history has continually refined astronomic data, and the Julian Calendar we use today is not correct with regard to the astronomic year. The Gregorian Calendar is not correct with regard to the astronomic year either, but this inaccuracy is smaller than that of the Julian Calendar.

Therefore, the calendar in itself is not something sacred and inviolable. The Church has the right to change it if she finds it necessary. And if there were a wish and the church people's consent, if there were a real need to do it, the Church would well decide to change to a new calendar or create some other calendar – all this is in the power of the Church. But since the Church does not have such a need, since the church people are satisfied with the calendar we use today, there is no need to raise this question and discuss it.

Today the situation concerning the calendar in the world Orthodoxy, though not ideal – because it would be desirable to celebrate according to the same calendar – but still makes it possible for local Orthodox Churches to co-exist and celebrate together even using two different calendars.

Moreover, two different calendars can be used within the same Local Church. I have already mentioned that while most parishes of the Patriarchate of Constantinople use the New Julian Calendar, Mount Athos uses the Julian one. In the Finnish Autonomous Church which is also part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, they use not only the New Julian Calendar but also a new Paschal cycle, that is to say, the Orthodox Finns celebrate Easter on the same day as the Catholics and the Protestants, not at the same time as Local Orthodox Churches. All this does not prevent Orthodox Churches from being in the full Eucharistic communion. I believe this situation will continue for long because neither the Russian Church, nor the Church of Jerusalem, nor Mount Athos has any desire or need to change the existing calendar. If there were such a need though, I will repeat, the Church would have the right to make changes to the existing calendar.

As for the fears that the Pan-Orthodox Council may prove to be 'antichrist', I would like to point out that the whole process of preparation of the Council is fairly transparent. A Pan-Orthodox Council cannot be expected to make some radical decisions not prepared and voiced beforehand.

The inter-Orthodox pre-Council process has lasted for 50 years. The issues raised are discussed openly; the decisions made within this process are published. In other words, the whole agenda of the Council will be known beforehand; and even its decisions will be known beforehand. Of course, if a proposed decision appears for some reason to contradict the interests and self-awareness of the Russian Church, she will simply refuse to participate in such a Council. This is exactly the procedure of consensus which exists today in the inter-Orthodox cooperation, enabling us to express our opinion on any question and to prevent from inclusion any question on which we disagree with a particular Local Church.

So the consensus principle in decision-making is precisely the guarantee which will prevent the Pan-Orthodox Council from becoming an anti-Orthodox council.

Q. Your Eminence, you have said that the Council will be meaningful if it responds to the challenges of today. If the Council takes place within the next 2 or 3 years, what topics should be voiced at it? What should it call the secular society, the faithful to and perhaps some marginal groups which are actively involved in public discussions throughout the world? What can the Council say on the Middle East problem?

A. It is difficult for me to outline straight off all the themes on which the Council could make statements. The topics on which an agreement has already been reached are quite relevant. But it is very important that the decisions themselves should be voiced in a language people use today, not in a language used twenty or forty years ago when the political situation was different, when people thought differently. That is to say, it is necessary to adapt the topics and language of the decisions to the present day situation.

In fact, there is a whole number of issues which have become very acute today and which have never been voiced or stood on the agenda either in the 60s or 70s or 80s. Among these problems is certainly the situation of Christians in various parts of the world. It would be strange if a Pan-Orthodox convened and said nothing on this matter.

The importance of this Council should lie in the fact that the Orthodox Church after its two millennia-long history, after centuries of persecution, would be able to testify to the fact that she is alive, she is united,

she is a guardian of the intact apostolic tradition, that she has something to say to the world, that she is in dialogue with the surrounding world including non-Orthodox Christian confessions and other religions, that she is capable of this dialogue and ready to show in this dialogue one consolidated position. If these themes were voiced, the Council would be really relevant, timely and useful not only for settling some internal administrative problems but first of all for our flock living today in various parts of the world.

Q. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill planned to go to the Middle East, to Syria and Lebanon in particular. Will this trip take place, if the political situation there is considered?

The second question is about the Russian church in Nice. What is the situation there? It is our property but the local Orthodox association does not give in the keys... What is the optimal way out of the situation and has any progress been made at the negotiations?

A. As for the trip of His Holiness the Patriarch to the Middle East, it can take place when the necessary conditions are in place there. First of all, this visit should be useful for the Patriarchate of Antioch. It should contribute to the Middle East settlement and become an expression of the Russian Church's solidarity with Christians in the Middle East, in this case with Christians in Syria and Lebanon.

It is difficult to tell now the date of this trip. His Holiness the Patriarch is ready to go there this autumn and he was ready to go even last autumn but for certain technical reasons the visit did not take place. Will it take place this autumn? – Difficult to say, but I would not exclude such an opportunity, without looking at it too optimistically though. In the present situation, it would be perhaps wiser to put it off till a later time.

As for the situation in Nice, it is to be settled in negotiations between the two sides, and in these negotiations it is necessary to show certain flexibility. The most important thing is that the Church which has now been returned to its lawful owner should function in accordance with the Orthodox tradition, for instance, that the entry fee should not be introduced. I hope that these questions will be resolved in the nearest future.

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