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# **A Pastoral Approach to Persons With Same Sex Attractions Who Desire to Live a Chaste Life**

by

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*The author has written extensively on pastoral concerns encountered in matters of same sex attraction. He is the author of Homosexuality and Hope and the Director of "Courage", an organization offering help in these matters. The following is an address to the Catholic Medical Association annual meeting in 2001.*

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Why this discussion? Do we not already have enough writing on the pastoral care of persons with Same Sex Attractions (SSA)? I think, in the light of forty-eight years of pastoral work with such persons, I can contribute some insights to fellow priests and counselors who desire to guide SSA persons to a life of interior chastity. So many need sound moral guidance from priests and counselors in the Roman Catholic Church, but there are so few priests and lay counselors involved in this necessary ministry.

You may have noticed that I have avoided the terms "homosexual", "gay", and "lesbian", and for good reason. An individual is more than a sexual inclination. An individual is a PERSON, i.e., a creature made to the image and likeness of God, with intelligence and free will destined for eternal life, and, when baptized into Christ, a brother or sister of Christ. To say that one is a homosexual is to reduce oneself to a sexual tendency, and one is far more than that in the mystery of his personhood.

The term "gay" is even more a reduction of one's own wondrous complexity. Often, young people using this term have no idea of its meaning. It means that one regards his gayness as the most important mark of his identity. Whether he is born this way or not does not matter to him. "This is the way I am, and always will be. I must associate with people like myself, and eventually find an ideal partner with whom I can settle down in

a 'monogamous relationship'. I will work to bring about a society where same sex unions are given the same privileges as heterosexual marriages."

The term "lesbian" has come to have the same connotations as the term "gay". All three forms of self-identification fail to describe who we really are as persons. This is not a merely academic question. How you regard yourself as a person has much to do with how you see yourself and the personal goals which you set for the future. Your self-image greatly influences your behavior.

Again, using the term "persons with same sex attractions" places the emphasis on the uniqueness of the person rather than on a tendency which may change as the person matures. In contemporary discourse persons speak of their homosexual "orientation". This term is understood to mean that one's sexual orientation is immutable. But such is not the case with many individuals, particularly with teenage persons who may seem so sure of themselves in declaring their lesbianism, only to gravitate in a few years into a love relationship with a person of the opposite sex. The difficulty with labeling self is that it restricts one's options and vision.

The Vatican Congregation on Faith and Doctrine, October 1, 1986 *Letter to Roman Catholic Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* sums up this discussion so well: "The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation. Everyone on the face of the earth has personal problems... Today the Church provides a badly needed context for the care of the human person when she refuses to consider the person as "heterosexual" or "homosexual" and insists that every person has a fundamental identity: creature of God, and by His grace, His child and heir to eternal life" (section 16, PCHP).

Thus, the condition of homosexuality does not take away from one's God-given dignity as creature of God and, when baptized, a brother or sister of Christ, destined for eternal life with Him. On the human level, moreover, one should regard himself as heterosexual with a homosexual problem, to use the thought of Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, author of *Healing Homosexuality*.

One should avoid the temptation to hate oneself, to indulge in self-pity, and to be angry with God, because one has been led to believe that God made him homosexual. This tendency to regard self as worthless is really a form of homophobia, which is an unreasonable fear and sometimes hatred of persons with same sex attractions. In this situation the individual is afraid that he is a person with same sex attractions.

It should also be noted that many Americans have unreasonable fears of persons known to be homosexual, because the homosexual condition is confused with pedophilia, or is associated with AIDS, or is thought to be freely chosen by the person. The Church, however, exhorts us to provide

the person of same sex attractions with a special pastoral care, treating them with love and respect: "The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action, and in law" (PCHP, *S. Congregation of Faith*, sect. 10).

So much for the psychological understanding of homophobia. The term "homophobic", however, is exploited by gays and lesbians to describe anyone who teaches that homosexual acts are seriously immoral. The term has become political.

### **Definitions of Homosexuality and Homosexual Behavior**

Homosexuality is a persistent genital attraction to another person of the same sex. "Persistent" indicates that the physical attraction carries over into adulthood. It is well-known that many teenagers who think they are homosexual become physically attracted a few years later to persons of the other sex. It may happen that a person has a predominant attraction to persons of his own sex, and a weaker attraction to persons of the other sex, or that he has a predominant attraction to persons of the other sex, and no significant physical attraction to their own.

When an adult person perceives that his predominant attraction is towards members of his own sex, he may regard himself as a person with same sex attractions. This does not mean that he will always have such attractions. Contemporary research indicates that some individuals do regain their heterosexual inclinations (about one out of three adults), but the majority remain with homosexual inclinations.

The inclination to homogenital acts is not sinful unless one freely consents to these desires. I have never met anyone in forty-five years of pastoral practice who chose to have such inclinations. For this reason the Church calls these inclinations an "objective disorder", objective in the sense that they develop in the psychological makeup of the individual. A disorder, because if one yields to these desires, one commits an act which is *always* a serious violation of the law of God. Now it may be difficult for many to understand this teaching.

Some gay and lesbian individuals insist that the inclination and the behavior cannot be separated. These individuals often believe that they were born with this inclination and that it is natural to them and therefore ought to be expressed with someone of their own sex in homogenital acts to whom they are physically and emotionally attracted. Again, having become addicted to homogenital acts in their childhood and youth, they believe that they cannot control their sexual desires. If, however, they have come to admit that there is a distinction between inclination and act, they still believe that they are incapable of controlling such desires. One notices

a similar despair in alcoholics, situations where there is the nagging fear that one is not able to be chaste.

In other instances such individuals may have been brainwashed by gay propaganda. In all these situations there is the nagging fear that one is not able to be chaste. St. Augustine describes in his *Confessions* a similar fear of his ability to overcome a habit of lust.

Perhaps one needs to see the difference between these desires and those between a man and a woman. Genesis 1(vv. 27-28) and 2(vv. 18-24) speaks of God creating man and woman, ordering them to increase and multiply, and to form a union of two in one flesh. In other words, God placed in man and woman this natural attraction to draw them together, so that they would be willing to make a permanent commitment to one another in a two in one flesh union which would lead to children and family. By way of contrast, same sex couples are not able to have a true physical union, and their attempts to do so are not capable of bringing a child into existence. Such acts distort the meaning of human sexuality.

Speaking of definitions, gay propaganda speaks of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals (glbt). Already, I have discussed the terms gay and lesbian, but I want to explain the other designations. "Bisexual" simply describes a form of behavior. One is physically attracted to genital acts with both sexes in varying degrees. One will look in vain in the scientific literature for a precise definition of bisexuality. A.P. MacDonald also raises questions concerning listing bisexuality as homosexuality (*J of Homosexuality*, "Bisexuality," Haworth Pr. N.Y. [1981], 21, ff.).

From my research and pastoral work over many years I have concluded that the term merely describes external behavior, while revealing very little about the internal dispositions of the person. I have observed in such behavior the criteria of homosexuality, namely, the person having genital relations with both sexes is emotionally attracted to persons of his own sex for sexual gratification, and not emotionally attracted to persons of the other sex for sexual gratification. In my judgment, this person is homosexual; if, on the other hand, he is emotionally attracted to a person of the other sex, while merely seeking physical pleasure from a person of his own sex, often with fantasies of the other sex, he is heterosexual. Emotional attraction to a person of the same sex expressed in physical desire for union seems to be the main criterion of the homosexual inclination.

### **Objective Morality of Homosexual Desires and Acts**

I must distinguish objective morality from the responsibility of the person giving consent to such desires and acts. In my book, *The*

*Homosexual Person, New Thinking in Pastoral Care* (Ignatius Press, 1987), I present arguments from Holy Scripture, Divine Oral Tradition, natural moral law, and authentic Church teaching concerning the intrinsic immorality of homosexual desires and acts. In these pages I sum up the arguments, turning first to Holy Scripture as it has been understood in the Divine Oral Tradition of the Church. Through the centuries the magisterium is the voice of Divine Oral Tradition interpreting the Written Scriptures. After all, the Scriptures came from Divine Oral Tradition whose content was larger than the Scriptures. Now let us look at Scripture for its view on homosexual desires and acts:

(1) Genesis 1, 27-28 and 2, 18-24. At the end of the first chapter it is written that God created the human; male and female He created them, and then He told them to increase and multiply. In chapter two we read the poetic description of the creation of Eve, followed by God presenting her to Adam, and Adam's response: "Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. For this reason a man shall leave father and mother, and cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh" (vv. 23-24).

(2) In the New Testament Jesus reaffirmed the monogamous, heterosexual norm of sexuality found in Genesis. The context is the Pharisees questioning Jesus whether a man may divorce his wife on any pretext whatever. Jesus answered: "Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made them male and female and that He said: 'This is why a man must leave father and mother and cling to his wife and the two become one body. They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So then what God has united, man must not divide'?" When the Pharisees, then, asked Him why Moses allowed divorce, Jesus replied that it was "...because you were so unteachable... but it was not like that from the beginning" (Mt. 19; 3-8). Please note that Jesus quotes both Gen. 1:27 and 2:24, thereby repeating their teaching about the meaning of human sexuality.

(3) The author of Ephesians (5:21-33) also reaffirms the marital union as the norm of human sexuality, stressing its sacramental dimension: "As Christ loves his Church, so a man ought to love his wife." This section is the clearest statement on the Church's understanding of Christian marriage. After describing the relationship of husband to wife, Ephesians concludes: "And for this reason, a man shall leave father and mother and cling to his wife."

## Natural Moral Law

Natural moral law philosophy supports our scriptural norms of human sexuality. The natural attraction between adult men and women leading to friendship and commitment, marriage, and the desire for children is a universal phenomena of the human race — the way men and women express their natural sexual desires. The two in one flesh union of man and woman with the hope of children and family is the natural meaning of human sexual-genital expression. That is why the vast majority of the human race exercise their natural right to marry. Persons with homosexual desires, however, have no such right to homogenital acts, because these acts are a complete distortion of the purpose of human sexual-genital expression. There is no true physical union, no power of procreation, no complete giving of one person to another and no true family.

In this regard, the distinguished Oxford University scholar John Finnis sums up the Natural Moral Law arguments:

1. The commitment of a man and a woman to each other in the sexual union of marriage is intrinsically good and reasonable, and is incompatible with sex relationships outside of marriage.
  2. Homosexual acts are radically and peculiarly non-marital, and for this reason intrinsically unreasonable and unnatural.
  3. Furthermore, according to Plato, if not Aristotle, homosexual acts have a special similarity to solitary masturbation and both types of radically non-marital acts are manifestly unworthy of the human being and immoral.
- "Law, Morality, and Sexual Orientation," *Notre Dame L. Rv.* (1994), 69: 1049-1076.

Finnis adds that sexual acts:

cannot in reality be self-giving unless they are acts by which a man and a woman actualize and experience sexually the real giving of themselves to each other — in biological, affective, and volitional union in mutual commitment, both open-ended and exclusive — which, like Aristotle and Plato and most people we call marriage.

*Ibid.*, 1067.

The arguments, then, for the objective immorality of homogenital acts can be reduced to this syllogism:

- From divine revelation and natural moral law, it is proven that the two purposes of marriage are (1) the permanent commitment of a

life, while the heterosexual person can choose marriage, or a chaste celibate life in the world, or the consecrated life in a religious order, or priesthood.

The second difficulty for persons with same sex attractions occurs during adolescence when the individual becomes aware that he is "different" from his peers. Why isn't he attracted to the other sex, as his peers are? Why isn't she attracted to boys? Feelings of shame rise as they struggle with same sex lust. But there is no one to discuss their secret life with; as a consequence, they often flee into the world of sexual fantasy where they find temporary relief in the practice of masturbation. Today through the Internet they can find websites which cater to their fantasy life.

On the other hand, heterosexual youth have little difficulty discussing sexual temptations with their peers or with older counselors. They realize that they suffer the same sort of sexual temptations as their companions. They can seek spiritual direction. With prayer, they can practice the virtue of chastity.

The third difficulty for persons with same sex attractions is that in their family background there are traumas which the child, and later the adolescent, underwent, which remain deep in the emotional life, rendering the practice of chastity more arduous.

Despite all these difficulties, however, persons with same sex attractions do learn to live chastely. That is the truth shining through the two-part video produced by Courage: "Portraits of Courage." Part one is entitled "Out of the Darkness," and Part II, "The Cry of the Faithful." The video witnesses to the truth that by the grace of God, and not by our unaided natural virtues, we are able to live chastely, no matter what our state in life. St. Augustine sums up the teaching of the Church on chastity: "God does not command impossible things, but in commanding, He admonished us both to do what you can do, and to seek His grace to do what you cannot do" (Harvey, *The Moral Theology of the Confessions of St. Augustine* [Catholic U Press, 1951], pp. 147-254).

This truth that God always gives the individual the graces to do whatever God commands is the solemn teaching of the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent. Many today, some within the Church, attempt to make the person with same sex attractions an exception to the law of chastity binding all human beings.

In light of the solemn teaching of the Church, Courage was born at the invitation of the late Cardinal Cooke in New York City, in 1980. Courage stresses chastity of the heart by using the Five Goals of Courage:

1. To live chaste lives in accordance with the Roman Catholic Church's teachings on homosexuality.

2. To dedicate our entire lives to Christ through service to others, spiritual reading, prayer, meditation, individual spiritual direction, frequent attendance at Mass, and the frequent reception of the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist.
3. To foster a spirit of fellowship in which we may share with one another our thoughts and experiences and so ensure that none of us will have to face the problem of homosexuality alone.
4. To be mindful of the truth that chaste friendships are not only possible, but necessary in a chaste Christian life, and to encourage one another in forming and sustaining them.
5. To live lives that may serve as good examples to others.

While it is possible for a person with same sex attractions to live a chaste life in the world by the power of divine grace, as many do, it becomes easier — not easy — when one is a member of a spiritual support group in which the overriding goal is to live a life of chastity while supporting one another in chaste friendships.

As Courage spread into approximately 80 dioceses of the United States and into five diocese of Canada, as well as into England, Northern Ireland, Poland, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand, it has developed a website: [couragerc.net](http://couragerc.net). Its message reaches hundreds every day. It has a list serve which is visited by hundreds, many with homosexual attractions who live in places where, unfortunately, there is no Courage group. Courage in cyberspace! Dave Morrison, onetime gay activist, and now Courage leader, moderates the list serve participants.

Again, as Courage has become better known throughout the country, many parents who had sons or daughters in the gay lifestyle have sought help from the priest leaders of Courage. The parents were heartbroken that their grown son or daughter had rejected the teaching of the Catholic Church on the grave immorality of homogenital behavior, and have turned to Courage leaders for spiritual guidance. They need spiritual support for themselves.

This led to the formation of ENCOURAGE, which includes not only parents of gays and lesbians, but also abandoned spouses, and relatives. Usually Encourage groups meet monthly with a Mass, followed by a meeting in which they discuss the spiritual dimensions of their relationship with their son or daughter.

### **Sexual Addiction from a Moral and Pastoral Perspective**

There is a vast and controversial literature on the psychology of addiction which I shall not touch upon; others have done so. Patrick

Carnes, for example, has written two, *Out of the Shadows* and *Contrary to Love*, both published by Compare in Minneapolis.

I shall confine my discourse to two working definitions which I have found pastorally beneficial. I understand compulsion or addiction as a mode of behavior found within the thought and feeling patterns of an individual or in his relationships with others, which indicates that the individual is out of control. Often, this is despite the fact that he has consciously tried to rid himself of this behavior, with little or no success.

Step one of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, refers to addiction when it says, "I am an alcoholic and I am powerless over this condition." This step can be adapted to persons with same sex attractions who have lost control over pornography or masturbation, or both. Their number is legion. Having failed to overcome his behavior, such an individual tends to sink into despair. Serious elements in his life, his spouse, family, and his job are threatened. If he ADMITS that he is powerless over this addiction, he will be ready for outside help.

There is a second descriptive definition of addiction which sheds light on the meaning of addiction: "a state of compulsion, obsession, or preoccupation that enslaves a person's will or desire. Addiction sidetracks and eclipses the energy of our deepest, truest desire for love and goodness. We succumb because the energy of our desire becomes attached, nailed to specific behaviors, objects, or people. Attachment... is the process that enslaves desire and creates the state of addiction (quoted by Fr. Harvey in *The Truth about Homosexuality*, p. 144; taken from *Addiction and Grace* [Harper and Row, 1988], p. 14).

The first definition deals with the observable fact that the addict has lost control of his life in a significant area of his life; and the second definition searches the interior sources in the homosexual addict for this behavior, concluding that *attachment* is the process that enslaves desire and creates the state of addiction.

This leads to the question, how responsible for his behavior is an addictive person with same sex desires? I would respond that he has the responsibility to seek proper help to regain the freedom of his will through prayer and spiritual support groups. Both Sexaholics Anonymous (S.A.) and Courage can help him to regain self-respect, a strengthening of the will by the power of grace, and in the course of prayer, what I call chastity of the heart, i.e., learning to be chaste out of love of Christ.

Having acquired a desire to be chaste, persons with same sex attractions can form friendships with others who share their ideals. At first, the path to chastity will be difficult because of the enslaving power of habits of impurity; the effects of lust on the mind and the body do not leave immediately. That is why it is important that one spend time in prayer each day, and that one attend Mass on weekdays as well as Sundays.

## **What is the Attitude of Courage Towards "Change?"**

To answer the question a distinction must be made concerning the word "change". With regard to persons with same sex attractions the word is usually used to denote becoming heterosexual. But the word can also mean the transition from lust to chastity. This is the more important change because it is the transformation from the state of lust to the state of grace and because everyone is bound to chastity.

The desire to come out of the condition of homosexuality is an option, but not an obligation. Courage encourages individuals to seek the proper means of coming out of the condition, such as good therapy, prayer, and group support, but this is not the purpose of Courage meetings. Courage seeks to develop in its members chastity of the heart, or an interior life of prayer. Courage also offers the caution that the restoration of heterosexuality does not always happen to those seeking it. More recent studies estimate that one out of three using programs like those of the National Association for Research and Therapy Concerning Homosexuality (NARTH, Jos. Nicolosi, Executive Secretary, Encino, CA) is able to restore the natural gift of heterosexuality.

### **Pastoral Approaches: One-on-One and Group Method**

Both the one-on-one approach and the group method are useful. Many members seek individual guidance as a follow-up to their participation in the group counseling sessions. In some situations individual guidance is found in the confessional, usually with a regular confessor. In my twenty-one years of Courage counseling I have learned that individual spiritual direction needs to be supplemented by group support experience.

The group experience facilitates the development of virtues and skills in the individual which would not have been developed in one-on-one counseling (See Harvey, *The Homosexual Person*, chapter 7, 119-164). Members will tell their leader, often a priest, that they want to be part of a group using the Twelve Steps, as adapted for persons with same sex attractions. The third goal of Courage illustrates the value of group support. It is the only goal that can be achieved by the group together. From the constant sharing of experiences each member draws strength to practice virtue. No longer does he feel alone. It is also noteworthy that the members themselves wrote the Five Goals, which are read at every meeting.

## **Format of Courage Meetings**

In the *Courage Handbook* various formats are suggested: (1) The most frequent form is a discussion period in which one member relates his experience of one of the Twelve Steps in terms of his own life. An example would be a member describing his bout with pornography. (2) A guest speaker speaking on loneliness; or a member gives a testimonial; (3) a monthly Mass, followed by a short meeting; (4) videotape with discussion. The sessions begin and end with prayer, sometimes by the priest leader or by the members. The formal meeting lasts about 75 minutes. If possible, members have a brief social after the formal meeting is concluded. In New York, this happens in a nearby diner. The social is particularly valuable for newcomers.

## **The Spread of Courage in the United States and Elsewhere**

During the first five years of Courage, it spread slowly on the East Coast: New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, D.C. In the middle eighties it spread into Toronto, British Columbia, and in the early nineties into other parts of America and Canada. By the nineties it came to Northern Ireland, England, Poland, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand.

As of 2001, it began reaching out through the Internet to Central and South America and to wherever one finds the Internet. As already mentioned, our website, [couragerc.net](http://couragerc.net), has a list serve where hundreds interchange messages and questions about Courage. As I write, two more American dioceses are planning to establish a Courage unit. But what about individuals who want a Courage unit, but have not been able to find one in their diocese?

## **Contact Points for Courage Members in Isolation**

Courage receives many requests from priests and laity looking for help for themselves, a friend, or a son or daughter. Our central office in New York sends packets of information to all who seek help. By phone, local or long distance, Courage priests counsel individuals to find a priest loyal to the magisterium to give them spiritual direction; sometimes priests call us, and we recommend that they provide their counselee with a plan of life.

Such a plan is found in *Introduction to the Devout Life*, by St. Francis de Sales, and in a booklet which I wrote called *How To Redirect Your*

*Spiritual Life, For Today's Homosexual*, published by the Daughters of St. Paul, Boston, MA.

But suppose there is no contact point in the state where a person with same sex attractions lives? In that case I recommend that the individual find a trustworthy friend in whom to confide. This will help him to avoid feelings of loneliness and isolation which could lead him back into some form of fantasy and lust, tending toward masturbation and acting out. It will be good for him to pray with this close friend.

In the case of such an isolated person it would be better for him to go to a Protestant Exodus group who hold to the necessity of chastity or to go to Homosexuals Anonymous, rather than to seek help from a support group who are silent about the importance of chastity. One can combine direction from a Catholic counselor with membership in such a group. De facto, many Catholics with same sex attractions have been able to be chaste in a Protestant spiritual support group. It was the only place where they found help. Exodus International, P.O. Box 2121, San Rafael, CA 94912, is an umbrella organization, networking Protestant groups throughout the country, while Homosexuals Anonymous is interdenominational. Both are cooperative with Courage.

### **The Position of Courage with Regard to Teenagers**

Parents often call to inquire whether Courage works with teenagers. In the sense that our priest leaders interview them individually, we do work with them; but we do not allow them to become Courage members for several reasons. A teenage boy telling everyone he is gay, or a sixteen-year-old girl claiming to be lesbian is no proof that one is really homosexual. In the literature concerning homosexuality in adolescence, many authors do not categorize teenagers as gay or lesbian because they hold that such individuals have not reached adulthood. Thus, in *Homosexuality, Symbolic Confusion?*, Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse defines homosexuality as *an adult* preference for persons of the same sex. In my pastoral work I have seen some teenagers set aside their homosexual behavior in their adult years.

Another reason would be the complex nature of adolescence. It seems to me that one-on-one counseling from both the psychological and pastoral points of view is the better way to proceed. Finally, lawyers have advised me that the risk of litigation in conducting spiritual support meetings for teenagers with same sex attractions is too high. But there are ways to help such teenagers.

One way I have already mentioned is individual spiritual direction. The videotapes on chastity by Mary Beth Bonacci are very helpful. A third

way is Courage's biennial conferences for youth leaders in which well-known speakers address homosexuality, its behavior, and the necessity of chastity.

There are other spiritual support groups within the Church which have been set up to help persons with same sex attractions, but counselors and priests ought to challenge them to make sure that they really advocate the practice of chastity according to the authentic teaching of the Church. In reading the literature of these groups I have found *no program* for the practice of chastity.

There are also Protestant groups, such as Regeneration, in Baltimore, which hold that homosexual behavior is always immoral and which teach chastity. Before Baltimore's Cardinal William Keeler approved the formation of a Courage, many Catholic persons with same sex attractions found help in Regeneration. Again, there is an organization, Sexaholics Anonymous, which I have already mentioned. It aims primarily to help anyone who is involved in compulsive sexual acts, including homosexual acts. Now worldwide, its Theology of Sexuality is in accord with the Church.

I have explained the teaching of the Church on the condition of homosexuality, on the objective immorality of such acts, and the responsibility of the person involved in such acts. I have described Courage as a spiritual support system which teaches its members how to develop prayer of the heart, which leads to chastity of the heart. Such chastity leads to good friendships that help to preserve chastity. God's grace works in this struggle.

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