The Sermon as a Therapeutical Gift of the Soul for Body Healing

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Le christianisme ne se concentre pas seulement sur la santé de l'âme, mais aussi sur celle du corps, donnant aux chrétiens une série des enseignements et des règles pour empêcher les maladies corporelles et spirituelles, parce que le corps humain est appelé à la résurrection et de l'immortalité, pour qu'il profite de la vie et du bonheur éternels avec l'âme. "La morale chrétienne est la première hygiène. La vie morale fournit la meilleure santé" dont l'être humain a besoin, comme l'a déjà déclaré il y a quelque temps le professeur de théologie Il. V. Felea. Garder la santé du corps et de l'âme est un devoir fondamental de tous les chrétiens, comme nous est enseigné par l'Eglise du Christ qui prie pendant tous les services pour la santé et pour notre salut, en nous souvenant sans cesse que le Christ est le docteur des âmes et des corps.

Mots clés: le péché, la maladie, la vertu, la santé, la vie éternelle

After life, the greatest gift that God has given to us is health. It is like happiness: it is not appreciated ot noticed until we lose it. Most people are weakening their health in the first part of their lives to ensure their basic needs and to collect wealth that they will invest to regain their health. Another category of people are those who destroy their health because of a lifestyle full of passions and parties, wasting fortunes inherited or acquired without any effort; they don't even have the time to get back this invaluable gift offered by life, about which the biblical wise men were talking about: „Better is the poor, being sound and strong of constitution, than a rich man that is afflicted in his body. Health and good estate of body are above all gold, and a strong body above infinite wealth. There is no wealth better than health of body and there is no greater joy than the joy of the heart" (Jesus Sirach 30, 14-16).

Christianity focuses not only on the health of the soul but also on the health of the body, giving the christians a series of teachings and rules to prevent body and spiritual disease, because the human body is called to resurrection and immortality to enjoy eternal life and happiness together with the soul. „Christian morality is the first hygiene. Moral life provides the best health"[1] the human being needs, stated some time ago the theology professor Il. V. Felea. Keeping the health of the body and soul is a fundamental duty of all Christians, as taught by the Church of Christ which prays during every service for our health and salvation, constantly remembering us that Christ is the Doctor of souls and bodies.

[1] Pr. Ilarion V. Felea, *The Spirit of Truth*, Work awarded by the Romanian Academy, Second enlarged Edition, Diecezana Arad, 1943, p. 176.

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1. The disease as a way of man's punishment and straightening

The disease is a state of abnormal existence, being something bad, because all God has created „was very good" (Genesis 1, 31). God has created all in a good way and for the man's wellness. Evil occurs accidentally in the world because of our disobedience to the Creator, by doing sins; this led to a separation from God and to the onset of diseases and problems. In other words, God has created the good, whereas the evil has been brought into the world by the man, through the sin, that destroys the natural state of things as the Holy Fathers of the Church explain: „Evil does not come from the good. For if is out of good it will not be bad ... evil is not farther than the good and stranger and more lifeless than something that doesn't exist.... it is corruption of the existing ones ... because it is corruption, evil makes things even worse"[2].

King Hezekiah became very ill because of the sins he has committed. God sent the prophet Isaiah to him to tell him that he would die. But the king prayed to God with tears of repentance, persuading the will of the Heavenly Father, who sends the prophet again with the following message: „I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the Lord. And I will add unto thy days fifteen years... " (IV Kings 20, 5-6). We learn from this biblical episode that the Jewish king was first healed in his soul through sincere repentance and just after that he was physically cured. The mentality of the Jews was firmly anchored in the belief that God punished moral deviations but He forgave those who repented for their sins, „Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds" (Hosea 6, 1).

During the messianic miracles, after the invalid who has been sick for 38 years was healed, the Savior tells him the following: „See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John 5, 14). We infer from this proverbial statement that the cause of his illness was the sin and the solution that the Savior recommended was to stay away from the sin. Christ did the same with other sick people, whose sins were first forgiven and after that He healed them (Matthew 9, 2; Mark 2, 5); these are wonders through which He taught us that diseases are the consequences of sins and health is a consequence of the cleanliness of the soul; there is a close link of cause and effect between these two.

The first stage of healing the physical disease is to understand and be aware of this spiritual diagnosis, through the indispensable word of the priest who, in his sermons and in his advice provided in the Sacrament of Confession shows the sick man that he first got sick spiritually because of the sins he has commited and then got sick physically, as an inevitable consequence of these sins, „for the wages of the sin is death" (Romans 6: 22). By getting away from God we break the gracious communion with Him through the Sacrament of the Eucharist as „the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6, 22), and his soul remains

[2] Dionisie Pseudo-Areopagitul, *About divine names*, IV, 19, translation by Prof. Priest D. Stăniloaie, Paideia Publishing House, 1996, p. 152-153.

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uncured and powerless against temptations as the body remains weak and powerless against viruses and microbes if it is not fed and vaccinated.

From the prayers the priests utter during the Holy Unction, we find that God heals those who repent in their hearts and forsake their sins, so that God's grace they receive works both on the soul and on the body in unity, as Father D. Stăniloae explains: „The very healing of the body is felt by the sick man as a grace given to him as an entire human person. The body is full of the energies of the soul, the soul works through the body and the soul cannot work without it. Therefore the grace does not work on the body without working the soul, as well. The grace works on the soul by making it stronger and cleaning it of sins and reassuring its consciousness; this work has a strong effect on the body as well, to make it an instrument of the good work of the soul and to strengthen the soul"[3].

The fact that God allows us to suffer as a way of straightening ourselves is a truth revealed to us by the wise Solomon, who comforts those who suffer with his parental urge: „My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent His rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, as a father the son he delights in" (Proverbs 3, 11-12). This fatherly advice is taken by St. Paul, who explains God's rebuke as a discipline offered by the father to his son „God is treating you as His children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined, then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all" (Hebrew 12, 7-8). If we respected our parents, who punished us for different benefits, the more we ought to obey the Father of spirits, as St. Paul urges us, because he wants „to partake of His holiness" through our straightening. A more complex explanation in this respect is given to us by St. Varsanufie and St. John, who emphasize that „the diseases coming from lack of care and lack of order in our lives are from the state of mind. And those sent to the man for correction are sent for disobedience. So it's up to you to live carelessly and fall into the former, until you step back in order; and to get rid of the disease sent for correction through repentance. As for the bad events (accidents), some of them are sent because of us being careless while others are to straighten us, to repent. But it's a feature of the spiritual man to be able to distinguish them"[4].

Convinced of the truth regarding his illness, through the kerygmatic power of the word, the sick man will begin the process of healing from his physical disease with the healing of his soul, through repentance and suppression of sin. This is the second phase of healing the disease: the time of coming back to the self of the spiritually poor man, who returns with all his being to God, whom he left for this

[3] Professor priest Dumitru Stăniloae, *Dogmatic Orthodox Theology*, Third volume, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, București, 1978, p. 204.

[4] Saint Varsanufie and Ioan, *Spiritual Letters*, translation, introduction and notes by Prof. Priest Dumitru Stăniloaie, in "Filocalia", Eleventh volume, Publishing House of the Diocese of Roman and Husi, 1990, p. 588.

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world's goods. This time coincides with the beginning of his justification and his healing.

The Holy Fathers have the same attitude, because they found the cause of diseases in the physical sins and in the neglect of the soul, as St. John Chrysostom explains in his homilies: "When our body is sick, we do everything we can and we struggle to get rid of suffering; but when our soul is sick, we postpone and we don't bother to do anything. That is why we do not get rid of any physical illnesses, because the necessary things aren't considered important while the unnecessary things are considered important. We leave aside the source of sins and we clean the rivers. Let us drain the source of sins and we shall stop all the streams of the physical diseases"[5]. St. Gregory of Nazianzus recommends us to collect the benefits of suffering because "it's good it serves you as an opportunity for philosophizing ..., detaching yourself from its chains and reckon it as a higher way to the good that awaits you"[6] making of the physical disease a spiritual gain, bringing us closer to God who, as St. John Chrysostom teaches us, "allows the disease not as a form of humiliation, but as a way to make us better, wiser and fully subjected to His will, for these are the bases of our salvation"[7].

This is the third moment of healing through a positive attitude towards suffering, the sick man discovers the good side of his illness in the words of Christ: "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (John 11, 4). Out of the many biblical examples of acceptance of illness and healing through faith and patience, we mention the most representative one: the case of Job the righteous, who thanks God both for the good and for the bad, praising His great mercy; thus he overcomes the direct temptation of the evil through his illnesses and troubles that God sent to him, becoming worthy of God's mercy, who healed his body and saved his soul.

Unfortunately we live in a world overrun by pain caused by the willful wickedness of an increasing number of individuals who lack faith in God and love for people; nevertheless they are selfish and they want hegemony; they also have "their personal suffering- caused by anxieties, separation or loneliness - inducing depression and psychosomatic disorders, along with manipulating the masses with political and media lies for material or ideological purposes alongside with inducing the crowd a scheduled subculture" and culminating in "dreadful tragedies that occurred and continue to happen in our history: genocides, wars, torture, hunger, contempt, disdain"[8]. This disease of the human spirit is very dangerous because the contaminated people know and talk about eternal values that should

[5] St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew, Omilia XIV*, translation, introduction, clues and notes by priest D. Fecioru, in " Church Fathers and Writers", volume 23, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994, p. 169-170.

[6] Jean-Cloude Larchet, *Christianity in front of disease, suffering and death*, Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 65.

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 66.

[8] Claude Hiffler, *We are in the world but not of the world*, as cited in Tatiana Petrace, *Bioethics and the mystery of man*, Byzantine Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 10.

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govern this world, but they don't guide any of their decisions or actions according to their axiomatic coordinates; thereof, they cause illness to those around them: they mutilate with words the souls of those spiritually uncured and they divert the natural destiny of the weak and helpless people with their acts, which in turn will cause so many illnesses in the future.

The natural and legitimate question that is put in front of these existential circumstances is the following: What should be done and who should do it? The most complete response was formulated by the Greek Metropolitan Hierotheos, who gives us the remedy of healing and identifies masterly the therapist able to cure the disease of this world: "The healing must focus on the mind. The blind mind covered by dark must be lit and revived. Of course, the man who has a sick soul is full of passions, possessed by thoughts and fantasies. It is worthy of notice the way in which the parents describe the healing and the revival of mind. There are generally four factors that work for the healing of the mind: true faith, awareness of the disease, the presence of a healing priest and finally the perfect method to revive the mind, which is called asceticism ... And of course we cannot conceive salvation independently of the healing of the mind. For salvation is not something abstract; it is not an escape from the world, but a fellowship and union with Christ and with the Holy Trinity, since the energy of the Trinitarian God is common. So the Church can heal the man by his ascetic and holy life" [9].

2. The healing through the word

We conclude that for the healing of a physical disease it is important to recover the soul, the mind of the sick person respectively, which must be enlightened and revived with teachings and principles of healthy life, according to the ancient dictum: "Mens sana in corpore sano". A fundamental aspect is the dependence of the four factors that can ensure the achievement of this goal with the miraculous power of the word; these factors are mentioned by the Metropolitan Hierotheos.

a. We gain *true faith* through the word because „faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Romans 10, 17). Generally all the people state that they believe in God, but few are those who embody it in their lives, proving it to be true. The difference between the faith we confess and true faith is a matter of will: the one who believes in God knows what to do, and the one who has true faith fulfills what he knows he has to do, molding his entire life after his true and working faith in Christ. Therefore, to strengthen our will we need the Christian word which is transmitted to us by our parents, by the RE teacher, culminating with the evangelical message of the priest. Endowed with such a desire generated by true faith, the sick man prays unceasingly to God and partakes of the divine grace through the sacraments, thus having all chances of healing, according to the research of the famous doctor Alexis Carrel, because „the

[9] IPS. Hierotheos Vlachos, *Illness and healing of soul in the Orthodox tradition*, Sofia Publishing House, București, 2007, p. 86-87.

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spiritual energy of the soul that prays unceasingly is a physiological mechanism everyone of us has and that requires healing; this „mechanism" cannot be cured neither by philosophy nor by any of the positive or social sciences known to us. Such healing can only be acquired thanks to the ascetic teachings of the Holy Fathers. Those who are not healed do not know that this mechanism exists". [10]

b. *The awareness of the disease* of the soul is the best diagnosis that the sick man himself discovers, through his relationship with the priest and through the teachings he receives during the alive sermons in the St. Mass and through the electrifying speeches he occasionally listens to at funerals or weddings; all these methods arouse in his soul the Christian conscience which has remained for years without any echo. It is the moment when he knows not only that „In this world you will have trouble" but he also wishes and dares to overcome them because "I have overcome the world" (John 16, 33).

It is the firm belief in the help he expects from God, being convinced that „a Christian is not allowed to get tired, to fall into acedia, as if he cannot get closer. All the work develops secretly, in his heart. All threats remain outside of us. As the sea, over which the wind whistles and rises the waves, while it remains quiet down deep, something similar may happen to the soul, as well. Outside the world the soul can get lost, but deep down the soul is anchored in God"[11].

The faithful sick man, unlike other sick people, begins the healing of his disease with an inner healing, helping the suffering body with the power of his soul, a soul that understands the suffering through Christ's suffering and accepts it through the parable of saints and martyrs. With his faith alive he will give suffering a noble meaning, making it a means of beautification of the soul and strengthening of the character, managing to get closer to God, as David the psalmist teaches us: „The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 33, 18). The accepted suffering will become a school of salvation because „the one who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24, 13).

c. *The healing priest* is the doctor who cares primarily for the soul of the sick, unlike many doctors, who usually deal with the healing of the body; that is why they do not take care of people „but bodies or organs, and therefore sick people suffer because they are treated like inanimate objects, reduced to simple general „cases" and a series of numbers, resulted out of measurements and medical tests"[12]. As a reaction to this kind of nameless medicine, the Christian-type medicine „not only looks at the body, but at the man, too - in his heart and mind, which, connected with the body, make it good or evil; even more, this type of

[10] Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, Învierea Publishing House, the Archiepiscopate of Timișoara, 1998, p. 37.

[11] Archmandrite Simeon Kraiopoulos, *The mystery of suffering*, Bizantină Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007, p. 205.

[12] Jean-Cloude Larchet, *This is my body…* Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 34.

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medicine regards him as a person, with his spiritual life, as a singular situation, because his way of being, his construction and destiny are completely unique"[13].

This is also demonstrated by the prayer uttered by the priest before the Sacrament of Confession, which ends with the words „... take heed, but, since you have come to the doctor, do not go back uncured" because all the sins the penitent confesses are forgiven through the gracious work of God in the Sacrament of Confession, aimed at healing the sick man. Therefore, the believer is convinced that he confesses his sins to God and the spiritual recipe that he receives from the priest is divine.

The homiletic works of the great preachers and the pastoral tradition of the church testify that the priests from ancient times have understood and practiced many of the techniques of the behavioral therapy, capturing „key elements of psychoanalysis in an elementary form, such as: the dynamic of rejection, the therapeutic value of release under the domination over the self, the mediation of conflicts between impulses and superego by the analytical self, religiosity as an assertion of needs, creative transformation. In Christianity, many therapeutic approaches have been implemented for centuries, approaches that are considered today contemporary inventions"[14]. Many hospitalized sick people say they feel an inner pain when the doctor does not speak to them, or avoid talking about their health, even though they deal with their physical treatment and they have a very mood very good when the doctor talks to them. This state of mind of the patient is justified because „the man, being under the pressure of great stress, manages to express his feelings through verbal communication and there will be slight chances to develop pathological psychological phenomena. One of the many purposes of the psychotherapy is to help man become aware of his feelings and express them through verbal communication"[15]. We can observe in this situation the great power of the word the priest uses to heal the souls of the physically sick people and gives them hope that their physical healing is possible.

The healing power of the word lies not only in uttering it, but in its obedience, as well. The sick man expects from us to visit him at home or in hospital, to talk to him, to make him feel loved, comforted and encouraged in the hope of healing. However, he also needs our patience and our silence because „our silence may as well make him feel that we are next to him. Silence often helps even more than the most beautiful words, especially when it is accompanied by our prayer for the one in distress"[16]. Listening to the sick man, the priest and the doctor show their love and their respect towards him, but in the same time they manage to better

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 34.

[14] Thomas Oden, *Historie soul care*, "Christian Consulting Today", 1996, p. 49, apud Priest Vasilios Thermos, *Man at the horizon. Orthodox Psychology and Psychiatry*, Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, p. 183.

[15] Pavlos Kimisis, *Conversations… with a psychiatry*, Pashalidis Publishing House, 1985, p. 26-27, as cited in Priest Vasilios Thermos, *Man at the horizon. Orthodox Psychology and Psychiatry*, Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, p. 131.

[16] Jean-Cloude Larchet, *Christianity facing the disease…*, p. 89.

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understand his needs and to better know his unrest, thus finding multiple remedies for his healing.

Both the priest and the doctor must not deceive the sick man with words without real coverage, which give him wishful thinking. This does not mean discouraging the sick but providing him with a true hope. The Holy Fathers have recognized the healing power of medical science, but they revealed the supreme power of God in giving life and healing. St. Basil believes that „It is senseless for someone to put all hope of healing only in the hands of doctors, as we have the examples of so many unfortunate sufferers who do not avoid calling the doctors saviors".[17] The sick people today are aware of this issue, as evidenced by the syllogism uttered by many of them: „The doctor cuts but God heals".

Dealing with the physical dimension of the disease, more and more doctors are convinced that they must fulfill their duty towards their patients as simple mediators, as servants of God who put their medical knowledge in the service of people, but they do not neglect its spiritual dimension and recognize the healing power of God, whom they seek for help through the doctor's prayer: „Lord Jesus Christ, Son and Word of God, who, embodying you have taken our infirmities and our sicknesses, who in Your great mercy and as a sign of closeness to Thy Kingdom, have healed and stil cure a lot of sick people, weak people or people controlled by demons, come with thy healing power and cure those who ask for Your healing, because you who have said: *you cannot do anything without Me*. Please Lord, make the physical disease of the sick one be an opportunity to heal their soul, to increase their faith, hope and love."[18] The doctor confesses Christ before the people through the beneficial work of his hands over the bodies of the sick ones, along with the priest who prays for their soul and soothes their hidden pains. With a faithful doctor and a convinced missionary, the sick man will feel God's presence- „the doctor of souls and bodies who heals the great sufferings and all disease and infirmity among the people ..." (Euchologion, p. 165) as confessed so many times during the Holy Unction, he now strongly believes that He is the source of his healing.

d. The *suitable method* to heal the body through the soul is the perfect remedy recommended by the Holy Fathers: „if you take the *Precious Blood of Christ* with boldness all disease can be destroyed. Together with the Precious Blood of Christ we have to *carefully listen to* the divine Scriptures, *be merciful* and *hearken* the sermon. All these will kill the passions that harm our soul. Only then we will truly live"[19]. This sacramental treatment aims to heal the body by restoring the communion with God; by hearkening the sermon we want to spiritually strengthen the soul to keep this Eucharistic communion, keeping it aside from the corruption of sin. In this respect the canons of the church, especially the 102 Trullo canon,

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 93.

[18] Professor Pavel Chirilă, Priest dr. Mihai Valică, *The Christian Hospital*, Christiana Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p. 44.

[19] St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew, Omilia IV*, quoted translation, p. 60.

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draw attention to the fundamental duty of the shepherd of souls, who must "bring back the lost sheep and heal the one bitten by the snake; neither (yet) push it towards the abyss of despair nor weaken the way to softening or disregarding life; but by all means he should stand against suffering (passion) either using the harshest and sharpest medicines or using the softest (bearable) and the mildest ways and to fight for the scarring of the wounds, searching for the results of repentance and wisely caring for the man called to the above glow"[20].

From the aforementioned we can notice that the healing recipe used 2000 years ago is still valid today: „Do not sin anymore from now on..." If we want to be healthy we must keep away from the sin, be sober, flee from fornication, drunkenness, greed, hatred and all the passions that break the divine communion with God. He who wants to be physically healthy must have a good and forgiving soul. Rersearch has statistically showed that the evil-hearted people and those controlled by the passion of envy and hatred are prone to disease. The guarantee of health is an ordered life, a moral one as „ the pure soul makes the body healthy. And a crystal clear life will bring us a health as strong as the diamond"[21]. To reach the perfection of such a life we need the word of the Church of Christ, preached „with and without time" by preachers who have a clean life as the path towards eternity that the christians discover.

Healing the body through medical science seeks to prolonge the biological life on earth of the sick man; but the healing of the body through a pure soul aimes at continuing the immanent life by acquiring the Kingdom of heaven. Only this earnest desire of the man to gain the Kingdom of God „distinguishes between the various human characters rather than the aspiration to a colourless normality"[22].

In the context of an increasingly secularized world, where the diseases increase in number with the famous medical discoveries, where communication between people is done with great ease and the people's communion around an ideal is getting increasingly difficult, the only institution that can address this situation is the Church, because „ For the man of today, tired, prisoner of time, slave of his own immediate and tyrannical needs, who „has dug his own broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jeremiah (2, 13) for the oppressed or the excluded - as Jeremiah the prophet predicted, the Church could be a place of rest, refreshment and silence, a place where the body turns into spirit without ceasing to be flesh and where the light of icons is reflected on their faces. In this space, and beyond it, through the prayer and the Holy Sacraments, the world, the love, the work and the time we live in can be blessed. In the holy space of the church we find the light - that no struggle from outside the world couldn't turn off - thanks to the breath of

[20] Archdeacon Professor Ioan N. Floca, *The Canons of the Orthodox Church. Notes and comments*, Sibiu, 2005, p. 178.

[21] Priest Petru Bogdan, *Life in Christ*, Diecezana Arad, 1943, p. 159.

[22] Priest Vasilios Thermos, *Man at the horizon. Orthodox Psychology and Psychiatry*, Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, p. 40.

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the Holy Spirit which crosses it".[23] Therefore, more than ever, the Church of Christ preaches the evangelical life-giving word not only by traditional means, but also by modern ones; we say prayers for the sick ones during all religious services and we regularly organise the Holy Unction for „the healing and deliverance from all passion and filthiness of body and soul and of all evil. As it is to fully glorify Thy holy name, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, both now, and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen".

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[23] Claude Hiffler, *op. cit*., p. 33-34.

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