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Toward a Synodal Parish: Practical Methods for Fostering Synodality

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Abstract

Pope Francis has recovered synodality as the method for being church in our fragmented and yet globalized world. Broadly, synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church. This requires a spiritual and pastoral conversion towards receptive listening to all voices and an honest reading of the signs of the times. This paper proposes five practical methods to be employed in parishes by their pastoral teams. It draws from pedagogical practices from interfaith studies as well as elements from the Spiritual Exercises. By applying the methods, parishes discover living sources of moral wisdom in the experiences of listening that nourish siblinghood and sprout missional action.

Introduction

With preparations for the 2023 Synod of Bishops on synodality underway, it is imperative to present practical ways of becoming a synodal church. If synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church,¹ then we need practical methods of listening to all voices, of honestly reading the signs of the times, and, importantly, of paths of spiritual conversion toward creative and courageous pastoral action. Pope Francis proclaims: “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”² While “the parish is no longer the primary gathering and social

¹ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, March 2, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html

² Pope Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

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center,”³ Pope Francis and many church leaders see a “renewed parish” as a site for synodality and synodal formation.⁴

The International Theological Commission’s 2018 document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*⁵ is essential, as it outlines the history and theology of and a spirituality for synodality; however, the document does not include specific methods for its cultivation in the parish. In the United States in recent years, synods have been held in Detroit⁶ and San Diego. Both have been rich experiences of reading the signs of the times in their locales, and both have led to clear directions for the mission of the church in their respective contexts. However, neither synod offers a clear methodology for consultation, let alone the formation of a synodal people.⁷ Moreover, while Bishop Robert McElroy in a 2019 article provides a compelling argument for the need for synodality in the U.S. church, he does not provide a specific method for how that is to be done at a parish level.⁸ In May 2021, the Vatican shared its vision for the synod. Rather than a one-time event, there will be a two-year process of consultation at the diocesan, continental, and universal levels. The method, which includes discussion, remains to be defined, and there seems to be no plan for forming Catholics to engage in such a process.

In this paper, I will propose practical methods for parishioners to be formed synodally. I draw from proven pedagogical practices from interfaith studies as well as elements of the

³ Congregation for the Clergy, *Instruction: The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church*, July 20, 2020,

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>

⁴ See *ibid.*, ITC *Synodality*, and Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation: Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

⁵ Hereafter, *Synodality*

⁶ See “Synod 16,” Archdiocese of Detroit, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://info.aod.org/articles/synod-16>.

⁷ While the 2016 synod in the Diocese of San Diego does offer “Questions for Deliberation at the Synod” it does not offer a specific methodology for equipping parishioners for contributing their experiences. See “Synod on the Family,” The Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://www.sdatholic.org/office-for-family-life-and-spirituality/synod-on-the-family/>.

⁸ Robert McElroy, “Bishop McElroy: US church is adrift, synodality can renew it,” *The National Catholic Reporter*, November, 7, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/bishop-mcelroy-us-church-adrift-synodality-can-renew-it>.

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Spiritual Exercises from St. Ignatius.⁹ It is my hope that these practical methods of forming synodality, intentionally carried out by a committed pastoral team, will bring forward living sources of moral wisdom from the experiences of listening, especially to the poor, marginalized, and the earth, that sprout missional action, while fostering siblinghood that Pope Francis calls for in *Fratelli Tutti*.¹⁰

Step One: Setting the Groundwork and Casting a Vision

The first method sets the groundwork for the formation of a synodal parish. It begins with the discernment and decision of the pastoral team: pastor, other pastoral workers, and the parish pastoral council. It continues with a systematic presentation to the parish of what synodality is, why it is important, and the upcoming formation opportunities. This may include preaching, announcements, bulletin inserts, and other means of communication.

Setting the groundwork must involve placing the Eucharist at the center of synodal formation, as *Synodality* suggests.¹¹ From what the document calls “the Eucharistic synaxis” or the gathering around the Eucharist, the faithful develop dispositions that enable them to become aware that they are members of one Body of Christ, sent to encounter the poorest and most excluded.¹² This is primarily done through preaching. The pastor normalizes the reality of diversity of life experiences, theological views, political views, and even ideologies that exist within the parish. The priest provides models from scripture, the tradition of the church, and

⁹ These include a careful reflection of personal experiences including one’s emotions, of ordinary life, an attentiveness for a call and a thoughtful response, an awareness of the presence of God, a recognition of one’s uniqueness and unique context, and a movement towards selflessness and social justice. See “Ten Elements of Ignatian Spirituality” IgnatianSpirituality.com, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/what-is-ignatian-spirituality/10-elements-of-ignatian-spirituality/>.

¹⁰ While the focus of this paper is the formation of individuals within a parish, these methods may be applied between parishes and even at a diocesan level.

¹¹ ITC, *Synodality*, 6, 47, 70, 77, 108, 109.

¹² ITC, *Synodality*, 108.

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contemporary experiences of how individuals have navigated through differences. The goals here are to foster trust in God whose body has many views and to accept the Body of Christ as it is—diverse and yet united by the same spirit. Parishioners can be asked to agree to a covenant that articulates these goals.

With the basic groundwork of education and spirituality, the pastoral team can begin to define concrete goals that it seeks to achieve in the parish synodal experience. It can begin with reflecting on the parish's strengths, charisms, and areas of growth. It can continue with listening to parishioners in surveys and through dialogue in town hall meetings to discern the most pressing pastoral needs. After envisioning the goals, the parish team develops sign posts that name destinations on the synodal path. For example, one goal may simply be to affirm and celebrate the reality that the parish includes members who come from different ethnicities, backgrounds, and life experiences who hold different theological, political, and other ideological views. Another goal may be to acknowledge and celebrate the reality that amid these differences, we trust that the Holy Spirit continues to knit the parish together in unity.

Step Two: Self-Reflection and Listening

This method has two parts: self-reflection and listening. First, individual parishioners who choose to participate are invited to self-reflection. Participants journal their response to reflection questions built with elements of *Synodality* and the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises:

- a. Describe in detail a time when you encountered someone different from you (rich, middle-class, poor, or in between, someone who determined the margins or marginalized, or someone with opposing views than you, for example) that led to a transformational experience: your thoughts, feelings, and actions changed before the interaction and after. Describe what changed in how you relate to them and why this experience or person had the ability to transform.
- b. In general, how do you see yourself in relation to others, especially those who hold differing views than yourself?

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- c. What are your reasons for listening to the voices of others?
- d. Describe a time when you chose not to listen to another. What were your reasons? In general, what are reasons not to listen to the voices of others?
- e. What are strategies that may help someone to overcome an inability to listen to others?
- f. When you listen to the voices of others, what themes do you hear?
- g. When you listen to the voices of others, what structures of sin do you find?
- h. What comes to mind and to heart when you compare your responses in light of the belief that Christ is in the poor, that we are to love our enemies, that we are all siblings in God's family, that we members of the Body of Christ, and that we are called, equipped, and empowered to continue Christ's mission of healing and reconciliation?

As with the Spiritual Exercises, the goal here is to build self-awareness, to evaluate ourselves in light of God's grace, and to open ourselves to this grace. While guilt, pain, shame, and powerlessness may surface, these can be seen as fertile ground for forgiveness, healing, self-acceptance, and action. The ultimate goal of this method as well as the others is to help participants ground themselves in their senses in order to be responsive to the needs of others. Chapter Four of *Synodality* "refers to spiritual and pastoral conversion and to the communal and apostolic discernment that are necessary for an authentic synodal experience of Church."¹³ This is key; love of God and neighbor is related to love of self, as we also see in *Fratelli Tutti*'s interpretation of the Good Samaritan.

In the second part of this method, parishioners who have done the self-reflection join small groups in which participants are invited to share their responses. They may share as little or as much of their responses to the questions for self-reflection as desired. Listeners are not to respond to individual sharing; rather, they are encouraged to jot down notes and to be "mindfully aware of their breathing, physical sensations, and emotions."¹⁴ This space of sharing is one of vulnerability. Policies and procedures should be articulated to ensure the safety of the space.

¹³ ITC, *Synodality*, 10.

¹⁴ Wakoh Shannon Hickey and Margarita M. W. Suarez, "Meeting Others, Seeing Myself: Experiential Pedagogies in Interfaith Studies," in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 115..

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Moreover, facilitators must allot enough time for sharing so that all voices are heard in the small group and for the Holy Spirit to speak in the silence.

Here, the sharing of the response to the first question has much potential. Matthew Maruggi and Martha E. Stortz make a compelling argument for the unique role of narrative reflection as a signature pedagogy for interfaith studies. They follow Catholic moral theologian Richard M. Gula who claims that all transformation involves a repatterning of the imagination to attend to stories that make life worth living.¹⁵ In light of that, Maruggi and Stortz articulate an outline for an introductory course, an upper-level course, and a keystone course in interfaith studies that builds on narrative reflection pedagogy. While parish-level, intra-Catholic dialogue may not be as thorough and complex as an academic interfaith course, it is a proven method for making clear the diversity of individual experiences. I have adapted and integrated questions from the courses developed by Maruggi and Stortz with the questions from the self-reflection:

- a. Having heard the experiences of other participants who connected with someone different than them in terms of race, class, gender, oppression or held differing views, what resonates for you?
- b. Having heard how others fundamentally relate to others, what resonates for you?
- c. Having heard participants' reasons for listening to others, what resonates for you? What are common reasons among your group?
- d. Having heard participants' reasons *not* to listen to the voices of others, what resonates for you? What are common reasons among your group?
- e. Having heard strategies that help other participants overcome their inability to listen to others, what resonates for you? What are common reasons among your group?
- f. Having heard themes in listening to others, what comes to mind and heart for you?
- g. Having heard the structures of sin that are apparent, what comes to mind and heart for you? How might they be addressed by you, by this parish, by others? What obstacles stand in the way?
- h. What comes to mind and heart when you compare your responses in light of the belief that Christ is in the poor, that we are to love our enemies, that we are all siblings in God's family, that we members of the Body of Christ, and that we are called, equipped, and empowered to continue Christ's mission of healing and reconciliation?

¹⁵ Matthew Maruggi and Martha E. Stortz, "Teaching the 'Most Beautiful of Stories: Narrative Reflection as a Signature Pedagogy for Interfaith Studies,'" in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 87.

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Responding to these questions can be done individually or collectively. Either way, we find aspects of the Spiritual Exercises evident. First, while the Gospels may not necessarily be used or referred to, we hear the good news in the gospels that are the lives of the participants. Second, we hear examples of personal and social or structural sin. Third, we hear examples of transformation and discipleship. All this continues the deepening of knowledge of the other, connection with them, contemplation of God's will, and faithful action.

Step Three: Apostolic Dialogue—Humility, Empathy, Reflexivity, and Love

Rationale

The next two methods are adapted from three experiential pedagogies presented by Wakoh Shannon Hickey and Margarita M. W. Suarez. Worth noting are the goals of such pedagogies: humility, empathy, and reflexivity. For the authors, “intellectual and cultural humility means recognizing one’s own perspective or knowledge is limited.”¹⁶ Empathy entails imagining oneself in the place of others to understand them more fully.¹⁷ Reflexivity comes from the social sciences. It requires the researcher to become aware of their own social location—for example, their race, sexuality, gender, age, socioeconomic class, education level, religious background (or lack thereof), ethnic and cultural heritages, and regional upbringing.¹⁸ Hickey and Suarez recognize these three goals as necessary for tempering critical inquiry and as examples of transformation.

We find parallels to these goals in *Synodality*. First, the document recognizes humility as “an essential attitude in synodal dialogue.”¹⁹ Second, while it does not use the term empathy, it

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 110.

¹⁸ Hickey and Suarez, “Meeting Others, Seeing Myself,” 109-110.

¹⁹ ITC, *Synodality*, 112.

quotes another important document from the ITC, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, which provides a theological explanation of the necessary “attitudes summed up in the formula *sentire cum Ecclesia*; ‘to feel, sense, and perceive in harmony with the Church,’ which is, ‘the key to their walking together.’”²⁰ This definition certainly connotes empathy.

With respect to reflexivity, the teachings and ministry of Pope Francis have exposed various forms of privilege and sought to address them. From the first day of his papacy, he challenged the privilege of the papacy and the clergy. He has brought to the fore clericalism, a sin which stands opposed to synodality. He has challenged the privilege of certain dioceses to have cardinals, preferring to name cardinals from dioceses in the peripheries. He has spoken out consistently and regularly against racism, sexism, and to a degree homophobia. In *Laudato Si*, he exposed “the scandalous level of consumption in some privileged sectors of their population and [the need] to combat corruption more effectively.”²¹ Using the language of social location can help further expose and address privilege and oppression. While the remaining methods discussed below include this type of reflection, it can also be addressed in examinations of conscience, reconciliation liturgies, and other liturgies.

A rich scriptural foundation for these methods is the story of the Good Samaritan. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis offers a call to action in his interpretation of the story. How we act politically, socially, or religiously is determined by whether or not we embrace the injured stranger on the side of the road. And, when we do so with humility, empathy, reflexivity, and

²⁰ International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, June 2014, 90, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter: Laudato Si*, May 24, 2015, 172, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

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love, we are “rebuilding our wounded world.”²² Francis reminds us that the story is not “morally abstract”²³ and that failure to love is a failure of our own dignity, making us a robber or a passerby.²⁴

Contemplative Dialogue

Sid Brown’s “careful conversation,”²⁵ what we might call apostolic dialogue, takes place after a period of group sharing. Here, participants select a conversation partner and engage in a careful conversation. Based on Brown, Hickey, and Suarez’s experience, the activity works best when participants with differing views are paired. This would be ideal in the parish setting. Here too, policies and procedures that foster a safe space for dialogue must be articulated, applied, and assessed. Most importantly, participants must be aware of the boundaries and limitations of each other and themselves. While participants are invited to lean into challenging perspectives, they must also be aware of when such perspectives are too difficult to bear. In Hickey and Suarez’s adaptation, “participants are encouraged to give mindful attention to their breathing, physical sensations, and emotions, and to refrain from interrupting; to answer from your emotions, not your intellect—usually with the first thing that comes to mind.”²⁶

In the entire process, but here in particular, it is helpful to keep in mind Pope Francis’ call for parrhesia: “The parrhesia of the Spirit required by the People of God on its synodal journey is the trust, frankness and courage to ‘enter into the expanse of God’s horizon’ in order to ‘ensure that a sacrament of unity exists in the world and that man is therefore not destined for dispersion

²² Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter: Fratelli Tutti*, October 3, 2020, 67, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

²³ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁵ Hickey and Suarez, “Meeting Others, Seeing Myself,” 114.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

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and confusion.”²⁷ This fourth method is an occasion for parrhesia—an open, honest, and courageous sharing—and should be framed by facilitators within the theology presented here. First, hearing a differing view brings us into the expansiveness of God’s horizon. Second, hearing a differing view is not to lead to dispersion but to unity, as “the lived and enduring experience of synodality is, for the People of God, a source of the joy promised by Jesus, a catalyst of new life, the springboard for a new phase of missionary commitment.”²⁸

Finding joy in another’s differing view is no doubt challenging, especially in a time of deep polarization; and yet, this is a task of synodality. The key to finding joy may be in a commitment to the Christian journey and mission of encounter. The document on synodality ends with the image of Mary and the disciples at Pentecost. It is a reminder that the Holy Spirit accompanies the People of God on their “synodal pilgrimage... pointing the way and teaching us the beautiful, tender, and strong style of this new phase of evangelization.”²⁹

Walking a Mile in Someone’s Shoes

An adaptation of Hickey and Suarez’s precept exercise, walking a mile in someone’s shoes invites participants to imagine or live out a belief held by another. Participants journal their experiences of imagination and after a period of time are invited back to their small groups to share them. In some respects, this resembles *Lectio Divina*, as participants actively engage their contemplative imaginations, in this case, from the perspective of their conversation partner.

It is important to name that this exercise may prove to be difficult for participants, especially in cases of vastly differing views or for those who have endured trauma. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis recognizes the wounds from historical divisions and the difficulty to accept forgiveness and reconciliation, “since they think that we are ignoring their pain or asking

²⁷ ITC, *Synodality*, 121.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

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them to give up their memory and ideals,”³⁰ and yet he calls all people to be merciful and forgiving as God is. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis is instructive about forgiving those who are oppressive:

Forgiveness does not entail allowing oppressors to keep trampling on their own dignity and that of others, or letting criminals continue their wrongdoing. Those who suffer injustice have to defend strenuously their own rights and those of their family, precisely because they must preserve the dignity they have received as a loving gift from God. If a criminal has harmed me or a loved one, no one can forbid me from demanding justice and ensuring that this person – or anyone else – will not harm me, or others, again. This is entirely just; forgiveness does not forbid it but actually demands it.³¹

This teaching makes clear the boundary in our engagement with the oppressor, and it can be applied to contemplative dialogue. The dignity of the participants must be preserved, and a dialogue may come to an end if one feels unsafe.

Pope Francis proposes that “the best way to move on” is to find authentic reconciliation “in conflict, resolving it through dialogue and open, honest and patient negotiation.”³² He invokes Pius XI: “Conflict between different groups ‘if it abstains from enmities and mutual hatred, gradually changes into an honest discussion of differences founded on a desire for justice.’”³³ These teachings are programmatic on the synodal path and should be applied even in an honest exercise of imagining oneself in the place of the other. In so doing, we can become aware of social location, privilege, and oppressions and struggle toward faithful missional action.

³⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 100.

³¹ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter: Fratelli Tutti*, October 3, 2020, 241, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

³² *Ibid.*, 244.

³³ *Ibid.*

Step Four: Synodality in Action

The sixth method draws from the practice of ethnographic fieldwork. In this case, parish participants move from dialogue and imagination to a more incarnational practice. As they feel comfortable, and having built trust with their conversation partners, each may invite the other to their home for a meal. While this is an informal encounter, the guest is mindful of the context as an ethnographer. According to the custom of the host, they welcome the guest into their home. They might give the guest a tour, introduce them to family members, and offer them a refreshment. Conversation flows organically. After the experience, the guest reflects on the visit and journals their thoughts. After a period of time, the participants switch roles.

The intention here is obvious: to provide context and to deepen the knowledge of the other in a less formal atmosphere. Certainly, the necessary precautions and procedures should be taken for this encounter to be safe and enriching. Following this, participants return to their small groups and share their experiences. They then return to the original questions for self-reflection and consider how they have grown. They may consider creating a new narrative of encounter and transformation building off of their experiences. In a final gathering, facilitators summarize experiences, insights, challenges, and movements that have come from the entire experience. They present this to the pastoral team as a testimony of the synodal formation, the fraternity built, and as a source of moral wisdom. The pastoral team takes this as a springboard for missional action in the parish.

Step Five: Toward a Deeper Synodality

A final step for synodal formation involves assessment and recommendations for the parish. This may follow after the pastoral team has carried out strategies for addressing specific needs arising from the synodal formation. I suggest some starting points for a rubric:

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- a. Are there indications that parishioners relate to one another as siblings, concerned, receptive, and responsible for their needs?
- b. Are there signs that parishioners respect differences and are open to dialogue with one another?
- c. Are parishioners more involved in the life and mission of the parish?
- d. What else must be done to foster synodality and a deepening of it? What worked, what did not?

Such an assessment is essential if we are to continue to journey and grow on the synodal path. It would be helpful to frame the questions within an Ignatian Examen and to apply the results in the parish within later formation experiences, reconciliation liturgies, or at other appropriate times.

Most importantly, parishioners who have had formation for synodal life must now name and plan to carry out ways in which God is calling them to respond. Parish teams must be responsive to organizing and empowering the many responses that emerge. This may include connection with already existing ministries or development of new ones, which may require coordination with neighboring parishes or organization at the diocesan level.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed several practical methods to cultivate synodality in the parish with application at the diocesan and other levels. Embedded in these proven approaches are elements of discernment found in St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises: a careful reflection of personal experiences including one's emotions, a careful reflection of ordinary life, an attentiveness for a call and a thoughtful response, an awareness of the presence of God, a recognition of one's uniqueness and unique context, and a movement towards selflessness, community, and social justice. These are crucial in addressing Pope Francis's observations of the Synod on the Amazon, in which "there was a discussion... a rich discussion... a well-founded discussion, but no discernment, which is something different from arriving at a good and

justified consensus or relative majority.”³⁴ And so, it is my hope to test these methods of synodal formation and discernment and improve them accordingly. Ultimately, I aim to develop a parish manual that includes liturgies and prayers, videos, books, and other resources to enrich the formation experience. For now, I present them as a practical means to respond to Pope Francis’s call in *Fratelli Tutti*, to heal our wounded world and our wounded siblings.

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³⁴ Antonio Spadaro, “Francis’ Government: What is the driving force of his pontificate?” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/francis-government-what-is-the-driving-force-of-his-pontificate/>.

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