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Parish Renewal in Light of the Congregation for the Clergy's Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church*

This article presents the Congregation for the Clergy's reflection on the state of the parish and conditions for pastoral care. The congregation's most recent instruction entitled *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church* presents the authors' vision for renewal of the parish community and pastoral care within the parish setting.

This article is the first of its kind to present the bases for, the conditions of, and the direction that such renewal should take. The need for renewal stems primarily from ongoing cultural changes that are taking place in the modern world. The renewal should transform the parish into a sanctuary where the Word of God is proclaimed in a way that the faithful understand. The parish should become a place of deep devotion to the Eucharist and a shelter for every person in need. In order to renew the parish, it is necessary to change parish structures. It is also fitting to introduce changes concerning the agents of pastoral care and to engage the laity in pastoral care of the parish.

Through textual and comparative analysis as well as textual criticism, the author presents the model of parish pastoral care according to the Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church*.

Key words: parish, parish community, parish renewal, pastoral conversion, evangelization.

The Code of the Canon Law states that “[a] parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor (*parochus*) as its proper pastor (*pastor*) under the authority of the diocesan bishop.”¹ Ecclesiastical law emphasizes the communal nature of the parish and bases this distinction on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which understands the Church in a twofold manner: as the universal sacrament of salvation and as God’s people.² Perceiving the Church as the people of God gives rise to understanding the parish mainly as a community of believers. This community of believers both institutionally and organizationally serves the community of the parish, which constitutes a group of God’s people.

Fostering the parish as a community of believers who strive for salvation is a difficult task. The difficulty lies mainly in the fact that parishes, which are predominantly institutional in their dimension due to the secularization to which they have been subjected, must undergo a transformation. Attempts to renew parishes began in South America in the 1960s and then proceeded to take place in Western Europe.³ In 1970s and 80s, Italy introduced such projects as: “The new image of the parish”, RENEW, “God’s people divided into small groups,” “Small servant communities,” “The parish as the community of communities,”⁴ or “The method of basic evangelizing parish cells.”⁵ Many of these groups and ideas were later introduced in other countries, including Poland.

The rapidly ongoing cultural and religious transformations that have taken place have necessitated a thorough reflection on the parish and its ministry. This is the main aim of the Congregation for the Clergy’s Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the*

¹ Code of the Canon Law, c. 515 § 1, accessed August 23, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html

² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church], sec. 9-17, accessed August 23, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

³ A. Żądło, “Współczesne próby odnowy parafii,” in *Teologia pastoralna*, vol. 2, ed. R. Kamiński (Lublin: Atla 2), 94-108.

⁴ A. Żądło, *Parafia w trzecim tysiącleciu* (Kielce: NOTUS, 1999), 93-99.

⁵ G. Macchoni, “Ewangelizacja w parafii metodą ‘ewangelizacyjnych komórek parafialnych,’” *Program duszpasterski na rok 2000/2001*, eds. E. Szczotok, R. Kempny, and A. Liskowacka (Katowice: Wydział Duszpasterski Kurii Metropolitalnej, 2000), 187-204.

Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church (July 20, 2020).⁶ This document reflects the Holy See's pastoral concern for the parish as well as for priests and their pastoral ministry. The Vatican Dicastery has already published such documents as: *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium: Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments, and Leader of the Community* (March 19, 1999),⁷ The Instruction *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community*

(August 4, 2002),⁸ and the *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests* (February 11, 2013).⁹ The document from 2020 is the Holy See's response to the contemporary needs of the parish and contains indications that will help renew the parish community.

The bases of, reasons for, and directions of the renewal

Pastoral
Theology

The Congregation for the Clergy emphasizes the importance of the Second Vatican Council's understanding of ecclesiology, which serves as the basis for proper insight into the parish. The concept of the Church as God's people highlights the communal aspect of the parish, its religious life, and of the pastoral ministry that takes place within it. In traditional societies, which are based on direct relationships, the parish was a source of religious socialization and the ecclesial mission of salvation.¹⁰ The authors of the document indicate that most parishes no longer function in this way. Due to ongoing cultural changes, especially globalization, territorial affiliation has become less important in the everyday and religious life of parishioners, especially

⁶ Congregation for the Clergy, *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church* [Instruction], Accessed August 23, 2021, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>. Abbreviated hereafter as Instruction.

⁷ Congregation for the Clergy, *Priest and the Third Christian Millennium: Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments, and Leader of the Community*, accessed August 23, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_19031999_priest_en.html.

⁸ Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community* [Instruction], accessed August 23, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_20020804_istruzione-presbitero_en.html

⁹ Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, accessed August 23, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_31011994_directory_en.html.

¹⁰ See A. Żądło, "Modele organizacji duszpasterstwa parafialnego," in *Program duszpasterski na rok 2000/2001*, eds. E. Szczotok, R. Kempny, and A. Liskowacka (Katowice: Wydział Duszpasterski Kurii Metropolitalnej, 2000), 180-181.

youth. Catholics satisfy most of their basic and religious needs digitally outside their parish communities, which calls into question the utility of parishes in their most important aims and whether they adequately meet the needs and expectations of parishioners.

The Congregation for the Clergy indicates that the two most significant cultural changes that have transformed the religiosity of contemporary Catholics, the parish, and pastoral care are mobility and the development of transportation. The parish is no longer the place where modern man satisfies his existential needs. Other areas such as work, education, recreation, free time, etc. take place primarily outside of the parish and/or affiliation with it. Satisfying religious needs also extends beyond territorial ties through listening to God's Word, receiving sacraments, involvement in religious associations that often meet outside the local parish and require territorial affiliation with the parish to a lesser extent.¹¹

According to the Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church*, the development of media, especially digital media, has led to a decrease in community bonds within the parish setting. Due to universal and quick access to information, territorial limitations are no longer important because everybody can participate in other people's lives, even if they live in remote locations. Therefore, even the place where one lives ceases to be relevant with regard to events. Because of mobility and digital communication, the world has become a global village in which everybody can access and obtain information from around the world, and distance is no longer a limitation. Perceived in this light, the parish has ceased to be the center of a man's daily and religious life. The authors of the instruction claim that contemporary people do not comprehend traditional ceremonies, so these rites no longer provide them with important content and they satisfy the needs of only a small group of people who still understand them.¹²

According to its title, the Congregation for Clergy's document *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church* indicates the direction that parish renewal should take. Such renewal should stem from the idea of pastoral conversion and involve reforming all parish structures in a missionary spirit. The first and the most important step of this reformation

¹¹ Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction, sec 10.

¹² Ibid, sec 17.

is to make the parish a community that lives by the Word of God and proclaims It.¹³ God's Word

...is the food that nourishes the Lord's disciples and makes them witnesses to the Gospel in the various circumstances of life. The Scriptures contain a prophetic impetus that makes them into a living force. It is necessary to provide instruction on how to listen and meditate on the Word of God through a variety of different approaches to proclamation, adopting clear and comprehensible means of communication that announce the Lord Jesus according to the ever new witness of the kerygma.¹⁴

The other aims of renewal in the missionary spirit are transforming the parish into a sanctuary. The Instruction indicates, "...mere repetitive action that fails to have an impact upon people's concrete lives remains a sterile attempt at survival, which is usually welcomed by general indifference. If the parish does not exude that spiritual dynamic of evangelization, it runs the risk of becoming self-referential and fossilized, offering experiences that are devoid of evangelical flavor and missionary drive, of interest only to small groups."¹⁵ The parish—and the parish church, in particular—must be the center of spiritual life, the focus of which should be the administration the sacraments and prayer. The Eucharist and its celebration are the most important and should be understood and considered the center and the source of spiritual life of every believer and of the entire parish community. The Eucharist should serve primarily to unite all the parishioners and those who visit the church when they receive Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.¹⁶ In the parish-shrine, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is of the utmost value because it enables those who seek it to re-enter into full communion with God and be reconciled with others.¹⁷

Prayer fosters closeness with God; therefore, a parish that serves as a sanctuary must provide an atmosphere that is favorable to prayer. The proper arrangement and decoration of the church as well as the proper organization of parish life should foster a prayerful atmosphere. The external structures must serve to create an atmosphere that promotes prayer, which is an encounter with God and a conversation with Him.

¹³ See M. P. Domingues, "Parafia jako miejsce ewangelizacji," in *Program duszpasterski na rok 2000/2001*, eds. E. Szczotok, R. Kempny, and A. Liskowacka (Katowice: Wydział Duszpasterski Kurii Metropolitalnej, 2000), 135-149.

¹⁴ Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction, sec 21.

¹⁵ Ibid, sec 17.

¹⁶ Ibid, sec 20.

¹⁷ Ibid, sec 30.

The authors of the document point out that not everyone is able to understand all of the rites and celebrations that take place at a parish. For many people, these rites seem mysterious or magical. For this reason, the Instruction indicates that religious formation that resembles Christian initiation should be introduced and offered in the parish setting.

The Church perceives here the need to rediscover Christian initiation, which generates new life, as it is placed within the mystery of God's own life. It is a journey that is ongoing, that transcends celebrations or events, because, in essence, it is defined, not as a duty to fulfill a 'rite of passage', but rather as a perpetual sequela Christi. In this context, it would be useful to establish a mystagogical itinerary that genuinely affects existence. Catechesis needs to be presented as an ongoing proclamation of the Mystery of Christ, the objective of which is to foster in the heart of the baptized that full stature of Christ (cf. Eph 4:13) that is derived from a personal encounter with the Lord of life.¹⁸

The third aim of parish renewal in the missionary spirit is to make the parish a place of encounter. "A Shrine, then, is analogous to a Parish in that it encompasses all the characteristics and services that ought to be found in the parish community, as it represents for the faithful the desired goal of their interior searching and a place where they can encounter the merciful face of Christ in a welcoming Church."¹⁹ Moreover, "A 'sanctuary' open to all, the Parish, called to reach out to everyone, without exception, should remember that the poor and excluded must always have a privileged place in the heart of the Church."²⁰ This is necessary because

...[o]ftentimes, the Parish community is the first place of personal human encounter that the poor have with the face of the Church. Priests, deacons and consecrated men and women are among the first to have compassion for the 'wounded flesh' of their brothers and sisters, to visit the sick, to support the unemployed and their families, thereby opening the door to those in need. With their gaze fixed upon them, the Parish community evangelizes and is evangelized by the poor, discovering

¹⁸ Ibid, sec 23. See P. M. Zulehner, *Pastoraltheologie. Bd 2. Gemeindepastoral* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1991), 148.

¹⁹ Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction, sec 31. See A. Petrowa-Wasilewicz, "Parafia przyszłości – dom otwartych drzwi," in *Program duszpasterski na rok 2000/2001*, eds. E. Szczotok, R. Kempny, and A. Liskowacka (Katowice: Wydział Duszpasterski Kurii Metropolitalnej 2000), 168-174.

²⁰ Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction, sec 32.

anew the call to preach the Word in all settings, whilst recalling the 'supreme law' of charity, by which we shall all be judged."²¹

In this way, the parish should be renewed in all its basic functions in the missionary spirit.

The reformation of parish structures

To guide the parish in its aim to meet both the spiritual needs of believers as well as the necessary pastoral requirements, the Instruction requires that previously existing parish communities be transformed into new bodies. The document favors two ways in which this transformation can take place: first, by creating a single parish by canceling a few currently existing parishes and merging them into one, and second, by appointing supra-parish bodies, such as pastoral regions or vicariates. The Instruction's indications are based on the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which foresees such situations and indicates the means of introducing such change. The Instruction points out that the reasons for such reformations can be only pastoral in nature. It clearly states:

[T]he suppression of Parishes by extinctive union is legitimate for causes directly related to a specific Parish. Some causes are not sufficient, for example, the scarcity of diocesan clergy, the general financial situation of a Diocese, or other conditions within the community that are presumably reversible and of brief duration (e.g., numerical consistency, lack of financial self-sufficiency, the urban planning of the territory). As a condition for the legitimacy of this type of provision, the requisite motivations must be directly and organically connected to the interested Parish community, and not on general considerations or theories, or based solely 'on principle.'²²

The authors of the document also state insufficient reasons for reorganizing a parish. The first is scarcity of diocesan clergy. It seems that this motive has been one of the main reasons for reorganizing many particular churches in Western Europe, especially in Germany. The decreasing number of clergy has prompted ecclesial authorities to assign individual priests to more than one parish. To help them manage this situation, a few individual parishes have been combined into an association and, where possible, groups of smaller parishes have been combined into fewer larger parishes.²³

²¹ Ibid, sec 33.

²² Ibid, sec 48.

²³ See R. Kamiński, "Parafia miejscem realizacji duszpasterstwa," in *Teologia pastoralna vol. 2*, ed. R. Kamiński (Lublin: Atla 2, 2002), 26-27.

According to the Instruction, another insufficient reason to transform a parish is because a diocese finds itself in a serious general financial situation. The Holy See requires that a parish be constant, stable, and independent. While the parish is not an independent unit within the Church, and although it exists as a part of a diocese, its constancy nevertheless is necessary for the realization of the saving ministry of the parish as well as of the universal Church that consists of parishes. This constancy is also necessary for the spiritual good of the faithful, the members of the parish community. Consequently, sacrificing a parish for diocesan business is forbidden. The Congregation for the Clergy supports the principle upheld by Canon Law: “*salus animarum suprema lex*” (The salvation of souls is the supreme law).

The Holy See’s Instruction mentions that structural reform of the parish system should stem from the state of the parish’s religious life and pastoral care. A lower number of the faithful in a parish, however, is not a sufficient reason for reform. When there is a lower number of parishioners, then there is the danger that several small parishes will be merged into a fewer larger parishes in order to “optimize” the financial circumstances of pastoral care. These include not only the financial expenses necessary to maintain the facilities and pastoral activity, but also and primarily personnel expenses—that is, the number of people employed in pastoral care and the time and effort they dedicate to providing such care at the parish. The personal politics of the diocese is given due consideration in order to properly manage the priests so that they can minister most efficiently. Priests should serve and impact the greatest number of parishioners possible. For this reason, the Congregation for the Clergy unequivocally states that pastoral care within the parish setting does not have to be profitable as far as the personnel are concerned. Moreover, fewer faithful likely enables more frequent contact and deeper relationships, which results in a better quality of pastoral care.

Financial problems must not be the reason behind the structural transformation of a parish. A poor parish community can live out its faith well despite a lack of funds, which hinders only the development of infrastructure. It is possible to provide pastoral care without facilities, with modest housing, or other such limitations; in fact, such conditions can foster fraternal love among the parishioners and deepen their sense of responsibility for each other’s salvation. The Instruction clearly indicates that personal and material difficulties should be considered temporary and that parish communities should be supported in their efforts to overcome them.

The concept of pastoral conversion includes the transformation of a parish into a missionary community.²⁴ However, changing parish structures by creating vicariates or nullifying or appointing new parish communities should only take place when the existing pastoral needs of certain ecclesial units necessitate it. According to the guidelines included in the Instruction, the reformation process should be introduced gradually. Changes must not be initiated in parishes when they are not necessary. Furthermore, the Instruction specifies that these changes should occur gradually and take into account the opinions of the faithful in each parish. The faithful receive faith from the Holy Spirit, Who enables them to express responsible opinions concerning the communities that they create. Their feedback should concern the current condition of the parish as well as the parish's history and tradition. With regard to the spiritual wealth of parishes, the faithful are often reluctant to nullify or transform their parishes. Instead, they want to preserve their identity and their community's independence, since the history and heritage of their parish have fostered the parish's spiritual development. In such cases, changes should lead to the creation of new units that resemble federations because this will allow them to preserve their own independence and identity.²⁵

The subject of parish pastoral care

New pastoral supra-parish bodies require proper pastoral care.²⁶ This primarily concerns the relationships of many parishes that are merged into a kind of federation. Preserving their previous identities, the parishes also appoint their separate pastors. However, it is also possible to entrust the pastoral care of the parish to several presbyters in order to intensify and increase efficiency. The bishop entrusts priest with pastoral care *in solidum*, meaning as a group.²⁷ The Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church* advises that this solution should be introduced whenever the spiritual good of the faithful requires it. Such an approach has been introduced widely throughout Western Europe,

²⁴ See M. Polak, "Misyjna odnowa parafii w nauczaniu papieża Franciszka," in *Duszpasterstwo w świetle nauczania papieża Franciszka*, ed. D. Lipiec (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2015), 120-121.

²⁵ Instruction, sec. 36.

²⁶ See D. Lipiec, "A Parson in the Era of Transformations," *Diacovensia* 22, no 2 (2014): 201-218.

²⁷ See R. Kamiński, "Parafia miejscem realizacji duszpasterstwa," 29.

including Germany, for example, where, due to a lack of priests, groups of several priests pastorally care for several or several dozen parishes that are joined together.

In the aforementioned instance, one of the pastors becomes the moderator *primus inter pares* (first among equals) of a group of parishes. The moderator exercises jurisdiction over the group of parishes and has unique responsibilities particular to his role: “The Moderator is responsible for coordinating the joint work of the Parish or Parishes entrusted to the group. Moreover, as their juridical representative, he is to coordinate the exercise of the faculty to assist at marriages, grant dispensations, as would Parish Priests, and give a report to the Bishop on all the activities of the group.”²⁸ Due to the priests’ communal pastoral ministry and life, the Instruction recommends that a group of priests establish certain internal rules of collaboration. These rules must be described properly and detail in print the functions of the members of the pastoral team. These functions must be rooted in a spirituality of communion among priests, which serves as the basis of their pastoral collaboration.

Furthermore, the Instruction also asserts that the diocesan bishop can entrust responsibility for certain parishes within the pastoral zone not only to presbyters but also to deacons as well as to lay or consecrated men and women. The Instruction stresses that such people are only pastoral assistants, not pastors. Only a consecrated man can be designated a pastor, while other titles should indicate the proper roles that those other than priests play in pastoral ministry. After priests, deacons have priority because the nature of their vocation and profession is strictly related to the Church and to responsibility for Her. After priests and deacons, lay Catholics can be involved in pastoral care according to their own mission in the world, which is rooted in the secular nature of their vocation. The laity should not be given priority or entrusted with the care of the parish community for any non-theological reasons (e.g., out of courtesy).²⁹

²⁸ Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction, sec. 77.

²⁹ “In that vein, it is the responsibility, first of all, of the diocesan Bishop and, as far as it pertains to him, the Parish Priest, to see that the appointments of deacons, religious and laity that have roles of responsibility in the Parish, are not designated as ‘pastor’, ‘co-pastor’, ‘chaplain’, ‘moderator’, ‘coordinator’, ‘Parish manager’, or other similar terms reserved by law to priests, inasmuch as they have a direct correlation to the ministerial profile of priests. In referring to the aforementioned faithful and deacons, it is likewise illegitimate, and not in conformity with their vocational identity, to use expressions such as ‘entrust the pastoral care of a parish’, ‘preside over the parish community’, and other

In addition to explaining the proper role of lay Catholics in pastoral functions in parishes and vicariates, the document of the Holy See explains that the laity can be assigned to individual apostolates or instituted as acolytes. Acolytes are particularly important in cases where diocesan clergy are scarce. This concerns not only the laity's role as common lectors, acolytes, or lay extraordinary ministers of the Eucharistic, but also (and in rare circumstances) their role in the administration of Baptism, the celebration of Christian funeral rites, and assistance at marriages as delegates appointed by the Bishop.³⁰ The Instruction highlights issues concerning the lay apostolate of Catholics and explains them based on information contained in other church documents in order to foster the proper interpretation and implementation of the Church's teaching on pastoral ministry.

The Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church* primarily discusses the lay apostolate of Catholics in parishes and vicariates. It indicates that lay parishioners exercise responsibility for their parish mainly through their participation on parish finance councils and parish pastoral councils. The laity share responsibility with the clergy, who are entrusted with pastoral care for the spiritual and material good of the community.³¹ The Vatican document states that both of these councils serve as consultative bodies that support the pastor in his responsibilities and pastoral care. The fact that the pastor oversees both councils emphasizes the consultative nature of these bodies. Consequently, these councils do not serve a jurisdictional function. Taking into account the ongoing changes in parish structures that occur in the process of renewing a parish, the document asserts that every parish should appoint a parish finance council. Whether a parish pastoral council should be appointed in the parish depends on the local conditions—that is, with regard to the real good of each parish community. Where it is necessary, one local parish pastoral council should be appointed per parish or for the vicariate. The Instruction asserts that pastors should not appoint these councils only *pro forma*;

similar phrases, that pertain to the distinct sacerdotal ministry of a Parish Priest.” Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction, sec. 96.

³⁰ See W. Przygoda, “Laikat i formy apostołstwa świeckich,” in *Teologia pastoralna* vol. 1, ed. R. Kamiński (Lublin: Atla 2, 2000), 412-416.

³¹ See D. Lipiec, “Bariery w komunikacji i poprawa jej skuteczności we wspólnocie parafialnej,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 66, fasc. 6 (2019): 147-159.

rather, the council members must be able to influence religious life in the parish and what pastoral care looks like.³²

Conclusion

The idea of renewing the parish community presented in the Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church* refers to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which conceptualizes the Church as a mission. In light of the contemporary crisis of parishes as institutions, the Church's primary aim is to transform parishes into missionary communities. The missionary spirit as a feature of the parish reflects its inner dynamism and renewal of the religious life of its members. Externally, a missionary spirit is connected with the outward dynamism that fosters proclaiming the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Through pastoral conversion of the parish community, pastoral care shifts away from being devoted to the few most faithful members of the parish community toward all the baptized and unbaptized in order to lead all members to full union with God. This requires adapting the parish structures to new challenges, a renewed relationship with the agents of pastoral care, and transforming the forms and methods of pastoral ministry in order to bring them into alignment with Christian mystagogy.

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³² “So that the service of the Pastoral Council might be efficacious and fruitful, it is necessary to avoid two extremes: on one hand, that of the Parish Priest presenting to the Pastoral Council decisions already made, or without the required information beforehand, or convoking it seldom only pro forma, and on the other hand, that of the Council in which the Parish Priest is only one of the members, deprived de facto of his role as Pastor and Leader of the community.” Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction, sec. 113.

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