

# Incorruptible Dominicans

Mrs. Kathy Olohan, OP

*When I went on pilgrimage to Lourdes and Fatima, I had the unexpected pleasure of venerating the relics of three incorruptible French saints: St. Vincent de Paul, St. Catherine Laboure, and St. Bernadette.*

The dictionary has two definitions of incorruptible: The first is “incapable of being morally corrupted, especially of being bribed or motivated by selfish or base interests.” The second, “not subject to decomposition.”

In studying the lives of our Dominican saints, it becomes quite obvious that, had they not been morally incorruptible, they would not have been physically incorruptible.

Those who are physically incorrupt are rare among the scores of saints, and so I would suggest that the Dominicans that I am going to tell you about represent a high percentage of the saints upon whom God has bestowed this amazing, mind-boggling, miracle.

My information comes almost exclusively from the book by Joan Carroll Cruz entitled “The Incorruptibles.” In the introduction she writes that there are three classes of preserved bodies: the deliberately preserved, the accidentally preserved, and the incorruptible.

The Egyptians, since 3000 B.C., found means to preserve the bodies of their pharaohs and other people of wealth. Civilizations in Tibet, South America, Babylon, all devised means of embalming that fall into the category of deliberately preserved. Although these mummies survive to this day, they are rigid and darkened. (28)

The accidentally preserved are called natural mummies. They are sometimes produced in dry, cold air, such as the boy found in 1954 on a mountain peak in Chile. It is thought that he was numbed by a narcotic and left to freeze as an Inca sacrifice. Hot, dry climates in Egypt, Peru, and Mexico have also produced natural mummies. Bodies of Iron Age men were found in the peat bogs of Denmark, Ireland, and Scotland, preserved by the humic and tannic acid in the peat. (31)

Incorruptible bodies date only from the Christian era. Aside from the miracle that preserves them from decomposition, there are three other exciting qualities that frequently accompany incorruptible saints: bright light sometimes enshrouds the saint’s room or burial place for a time; a fragrance, called the odor of sanctity, fills the air around their bodies; and some bodies perspire blood or oil. Since 1920 oil has been flowing continuously from the hands and feet of Blessed Mattia Nazzarei (who died in 1320). (37)

As early as the eighth century, St. John Damascene recognized this phenomenon when he wrote: “Christ gives us the relics of saints as health-giving springs through which flow blessings and healing. This should not be doubted... Why should it seem incredible that healing medicine should distill from the relics of saints?” (37)

And so down through the centuries, believing pilgrims have flocked to the bodies of the saints, begging for cures, and receiving them.

## **Saint Dominic (1170 - 1221)**

Although many miraculous events accompanied the death of St. Dominic, his sons were in no hurry to canonize him. Their thought was, “Of course he’s a saint. Everyone knows that.” But when it became necessary to enlarge the Church of St. Nicholas where he was buried, it also became necessary to move the saint’s body. And so, on May 23, 1233, twelve years after he died, his grave was opened in the presence of the chief fathers of the general chapter then assembled at Bologna, together with the bishops, prelates,

and magistrates who had come to be present for the occasion. In her *Life of St. Dominic*, Augusta Theodosia Drane describes the scene as follows:

Rodolph of Faenza, who had been so dear a son to the great patriarch, was the first to commence raising the stone. Hardly had he begun to remove the mortar and earth that lay beneath when an extraordinary odor was perceptible, which increased in power and sweetness as they dug deeper, until at length when the coffin appeared and was raised to the surface of the grave, the whole church was filled with the perfume. The bystanders knelt on the pavement, shedding tears of emotion as the lid was raised, when there were once more exposed to their eyes, unchanged, and with the same look of sweetness and majesty they had ever worn in life, the features of their glorious father. (230-231)

It was Blessed Jordan who raised the body of the beloved father from the coffin. Eight days afterwards, this was once more opened to satisfy the devotion of some nobles and others who had been present on the previous occasion; then it was that Jordan, taking the saint's head between his hands, kissed it, and so holding it in his arms, he desired all the fathers of the chapter to approach and gaze at it for the last time. One after another they came, and kissed the features that still smiled on them like a father. All were conscious of the same extraordinary odor. It remained on the hands and clothes of all who touched, or came near the body; nor was this the case merely at the time of the translation. Flaminus, who lived 300 years afterwards, wrote in 1527: "This divine odor of which we have spoken, adheres to the relics even to this present day." (232)

St. Dominic was canonized in July, 1234, by Pope Gregory IX, a close friend to both Dominic and Francis of Assisi, whom he also canonized. (1232)

*Sources:*

The *Life of St. Dominic*, Augusta Theodosia Drane (1823-1894), Tan Books, 1988

**Google Medieval Sourcebook: The Golden Legend: St. Dominic (1275)**

**Blessed Bertrand of Garrigua  
(unknown -- 1230)**

St. Dominic founded his order in 1216. Blessed Bertrand of Garrigua, by happy coincidence, became acquainted with St. Dominic while both were laboring for the conversion of the Albigensians. From the first, he became Dominic's closest associate, participated in the saint's many apostolic labors, and was his inseparable companion on many journeys. He was counted among St. Dominic's original group of followers who formed the nucleus of the Order of Preachers.

Bertrand also witnessed many of Dominic's miracles, which he kept secret until after the saint's death, in deference to his wishes.

Bertrand was provincial of Provence, which included at the time all of southern France, and he died at the Abbey at Bosquet.

Twenty-three years afterwards, his body was found completely incorrupt during the first exhumations. Another exhumation took place at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The body, still perfectly intact, was transferred to the Church of the Freres Precheurs d'Orange.

What the Lord had preserved miraculously, the Protestants deliberately destroyed during the religious wars of 1561. The church and the body of the saint were burned and there are no relics of this Beatus in existence. (82)

**St. Albert the Great  
(1206 -- 1280)**

St. Dominic died in 1221, when Albert was fifteen. St. Albert became a Dominican while studying at the University of Padua. He was called “the Great” even by his contemporaries, so renowned was he for his encyclopedic knowledge in both the natural sciences and in philosophy. He laid the foundation for the proper use of reason in matters of faith, and his distinguished pupil, Thomas Aquinas, built on this foundation. (90)

He was described as “a man no less than godlike in all knowledge, so that he may fitly be called the wonder and miracle of our age.”

In the last two years of his life, his strength of mind failed him and he was frequently afflicted with loss of memory. He died peacefully at Cologne without illness, sitting in his chair among his brethren. He was buried in a temporary vault in the Dominican church at Cologne near the high altar while a permanent tomb was being prepared.

Three years later, when the new tomb was completed in the choir, the transfer of his remains took place and the body was found at this time in a state of perfect preservation and exhaling a delightful fragrance. His remains were carefully replaced in the old coffin which was deposited in the new vault, and there he remained for two centuries. (91)

Over the centuries, as the University of Cologne grew to impressive proportions, the number of Albert’s devotees also increased, and the tomb in the Dominican church no longer seemed suitable for a saint and scholar so highly acclaimed. An elaborate mausoleum was constructed and Albert’s body was transferred to this more worthy tomb in 1483.

Records at the Church of St. Andrew, which now possesses the remains, indicate that Albert’s body at that time was reduced to a skeleton. Witnesses, however, were astonished to discover a delightful perfume about the body. The relics were placed in a glass case at this time and remained in it for many years. After this translation, miracles of healing and many visions were recorded.

Over 300 years later, in 1804, the relics of the saint were removed from the damaged Dominican church and taken to the crypt of St. Andrew’s Church. His bones are wrapped in silk and rest in two cases which bear the seals of the Archbishop of Cologne.

The heroic quality of Albert’s virtues was recognized by Pope Gregory XV during his beatification in 1622. Throughout the centuries, Albert was regarded as a Doctor of the Church, and this title was officially conferred on him in 1931 by Pope Pius XI. (92)

**St. Agnes of Montepulciano  
(1268 -- 1317)**

For twelve years, St. Agnes of Montepulciano and St. Albert the Great lived on this earth at the same time. St. Agnes seems to have been born wise. At the age of nine, she prevailed upon her parents for permission to join a group of holy nuns in Montepulciano who were called the Sisters of the Sack because of their coarse garments. Her intelligence and holiness so impressed the Sisters that they elected her bursar at the age of fourteen.

The following year she joined a group of the sisters who were founding a new convent of the order, and she was soon elected their abbess. This required a special dispensation from Pope Martin IV who alone was able to authorize the appointment of a fifteen-year-old! (106)

Agnes was blessed with many extraordinary graces, such as visions and levitation. One of the more

extraordinary occurrences which are recorded is the formation of white cross-shaped particles, described as manna, which frequently fell on her and the area where she was kneeling in prayer. She had the gift of prophecy, performed many miracles, and is known to have mysteriously supplied food for the convent.

After her convent was placed under the rule of St. Dominic, it flourished under the guidance of the saint who served as its abbess until her death at the age of forty-nine.

St. Raymond of Capua, confessor of Catherine of Siena and St. Agnes's first biographer, records that, following her death, it was intended that she be embalmed, but that never happened because a precious liquor issued drop by drop from the extremities of her hands and feet. The Sisters collected it in a vase of crystal and still preserve it. This liquor is similar to balm in color.

Among the countless pilgrims who visited the incorrupt remains of the saint was Catherine of Siena. Raymond of Capua records the incident which follows:

...she had entered the cloister and approached the body of St. Agnes, with almost all the nuns of the convent and the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic who had accompanied her. She knelt at her feet and prostrated to embrace them piously. But the holy body that she intended honoring, unwilling that she should stoop to kiss it, raised its foot, in the presence of the whole assembly. At this sight, Catherine, much troubled, prostrated profoundly and gradually restored the foot of Agnes to its usual position. (107)

Another remarkable miracle occurred during a later visit to the shrine by St. Catherine who had traveled there in the company of her mother, Lysa, and two nieces. This time Catherine remained at the head of the saint for a long time in prayer; then, both Catherine and Agnes, as well as the others present, were covered in a fine white manna which fell like heavenly dew and covered all present with such abundance that Lysa filled her hands with it.

The body of St. Agnes remained whole and incorrupt until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when it was placed inside the walls of the main altar of the church. The parts of her body which remained unharmed, including the arms, hands, legs, feet, and brain, are enclosed in a figure representing the body of the saint. Her body has been in the possession of the Dominican Fathers since 1435 and can be seen by pilgrims who visit the Sanctuary of St. Agnes in Montepulciano, Italy. (106-108)

### **Blessed Margaret of Metola (1287-1320)**

Blessed Margaret and St. Agnes of Montepulciano lived during the same time period in Italy. Little Margaret was a dwarf: blind, hunchbacked, and lame. Her parents kept her hidden throughout her childhood. When she was sixteen she was taken from Metola to the miraculous shrine at Citta-di-Castello, where a cure was anticipated. No miracle happened, and the child was left there, abandoned. She was cared for by various families and earned her board by attending to small children. Her cheerfulness, based on trust and love of God, endeared her to everyone. She became a Dominican tertiary and devoted herself to the sick, dying, and prisoners. She died at age thirty-three, and after her death, more than 200 miracles occurred in confirmation of her sanctity.

Preliminary steps toward her beatification were undertaken by the Dominican Order, but her cause was almost forgotten until, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, 300 years after her death, her incorrupt body was discovered, perfectly preserved.

Many miracles followed upon the discovery of her body, and on October 19, 1609, the Church officially recognized Margaret's sanctity, pronouncing her a beata and designating April 13 as her feast day.

Margaret's body, which has never been embalmed, is dressed in a Dominican habit and lies under the high altar of the Church of St. Domenico at Citta-di-Castello, Italy. After 650 years, the arms of the body are still flexible, the eyelashes are present, and the nails are in place on her hands and

feet. (111)

**Blessed Imelda Lambertini**  
**(1322 - May 12, 1333)**

Imelda, the daughter of Count Egano Lambertini and Castora Galuzzi, was born in 1322 at Bologna, Italy. When she was not yet ten years old, she begged her parents to be allowed to enter the Dominican convent. Once in the convent, she began to plead to receive Holy Communion, but was always told she was too young. Fourteen was the customary age at that time. At the convent, she took on many jobs, scrubbing floors, attending the gate. She did all that was asked of her for the glory of God.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of May in 1333, Imelda attended Mass with the community. She remained in place at the end of Mass, gazing at the tabernacle. One of the nuns noticed a white Host suspended over her head. She notified the priest who hurriedly came and took the Host from the air and placed It on a paten. He had no choice but to give the Host to Imelda: It was obviously God's will that she receive her First Holy Communion. Imelda's heart burst with joy and she died then and there.

Her beautifully incorrupt body can be seen in the Church of St. Sigismund at Bologna, Italy.

Imelda is patroness of First Communicants.

<http://www.catholicapologetics.info/library/gallery/incorrupt.htm#Lambertini>

**Saint Catherine of Siena**  
**(1347 -- 1380)**

Blessed Margaret was dead only 27 years when Catherine Benincasa was born. Catherine was her parents' 23<sup>rd</sup> child; her twin sister, Jane, who died in infancy was the 24<sup>th</sup>. Always a pious child, she had a vision of Our Lord near the Dominican church at the age of six. From then on, her spirituality was no longer that of a child. She determined to join the Order of St. Dominic, and over the vigorous opposition of her mother, she became a tertiary at the age of seventeen. For three years she lived in seclusion, dressed in the habit of the Sisters of Penance. Later, she devoted herself to all the works of mercy, visiting the sick, the dead, the imprisoned, the poor.

Catherine experienced possibly all the mystical gifts. She delivered many from the devil's possession, performed many miracles of healing, and enjoyed an extraordinary intimacy with Our Lord and His Mother. She experienced a mystical espousal in which Our Lord gave her a golden ring set with four precious stones and in the center, a superb diamond. She, of course, was the only one who saw it. And she was the only one who knew that she bore the stigmata.

She labored tirelessly for the interests of the Church and is credited with persuading Gregory XI to return the Papacy to Rome from Avignon. Distressed over the terrible schism which afflicted the Church, she offered herself as a victim to God and died in Rome at age 33.

Blessed Raymond of Capua, her confessor, records that he got permission from the Pope to have her head separated from her body and sent to Siena, where it is honored to this day. Other parts of her body were sent to various Dominican convents. In 1430, fifty years after her death, Saint Antoninus, the prior of the church containing the saint's relics, ordered that the body be placed in a stone sarcophagus, artistically embellished. Over the years, more parts of the saint's body were given as relics to enrich the churches of the Order. In 1501 one rib was given to the convent of St. Mark in Florence, and in 1575 a shoulder blade, to the Dominican Sisters in Rome.

St. Catherine's body, what's left of it, now lies in a beautiful sarcophagus beneath the high altar of the Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome. When I visited Rome, I didn't know where Catherine was buried, but wandering into the Sopra Minerva, I saw Dominican priests and information about her in the entry to

the church. It took me a while to realize where I was and that I had inadvertently discovered St. Catherine of Siena! To the left of the altar containing her body is Michelangelo's "Christ with the Cross," and near the sacristy is a room decorated by Perugino called the Room of St. Catherine, whose walls are actually those of the convent cell which she occupied during her stays in Rome. I assisted at Mass in this room, having arrived just in time.

Catherine was canonized by Pope Pius II eight-one years after her death, although she was venerated as a saint even during her lifetime. In 1939 Pope Pius XII gave her to Italy, along with St. Francis of Assisi, as its patron saints. In 1970 Pope Paul VI declared her a doctor of the Church, and in 1999, Pope John Paul made her the patron saint of Europe. (119 - 123)

### **Saint Antoninus (1389 -- 1459)**

Eight years after the death of Catherine of Siena, another Dominican saint was born. And it was Saint Antoninus who, while serving as prior of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, had the incorrupt remains of St. Catherine of Siena enshrined there in the artistic golden sarcophagus which has been admired by generations.

After serving for a number of years as vicar-general of the Dominican convents of the strict observance, he returned to his native Florence and established the Convent of San Marco, the interior of which was glorified by the frescoes of his dear friend, Blessed Fra Angelico. As a token of his esteem, Pope Eugene IV and the entire college of cardinals assisted at the consecration of this church which has always been considered one of the artistic glories of Florence. The library of San Marco, which the saint made accessible to scholars, is thought to have been the first public library in Europe. (135)

Although he glorified the Church of Saint Marco, when he became Archbishop of Florence, he divested the Episcopal palace of all that suggested pomp or luxury. He reduced his household staff and was able to distribute more funds to the poor. He was known as the "father of the poor" and "the people's prelate."

Pope Pius II presided at the funeral of the saint, which was delayed for eight days. During that time his body remained not only flexible, but intensely fragrant. His body remains perfectly intact to this day in the Dominican church of San Marco. He was declared a saint in 1523, sixty-four years following his death. (136)

### **Blessed Osanna of Mantua (1449-1505)**

Blessed Osanna of Mantua joined the Third Order of St. Dominic at age fourteen, but she was not allowed to make solemn profession until the last year of her life, when she was fifty-five. The obstacles which constantly delayed her profession were her ecstasies and raptures she experienced in prayer. She was unable to hide these from the other tertiaries, and was frequently persecuted by them for what they considered pretense and sanctimonious affectation. They also disliked the fact that she was acclaimed for her sanctity, and that people of distinction came to her for spiritual guidance.

Osanna begged Our Lord to let her participate in His sufferings, and He answered her prayers by imprinting on her, first, the marks of the crown of thorns, and secondly, by the marks of the stigmata. The stigmata was scarcely visible in life, but after her death, it became quite pronounced, as was also the case with St. Catherine of Siena.

Sometime after her burial in the Church of St. Domenico, her incorrupt body was translated to the

Cathedral of Mantua, where it still reposes in a crystal shrine beneath the altar of Our Lady of the Rosary. During the summer of 1965, her body was examined once again, and all witnesses testified that the body, which is hazel brown in color, is dried and darkened and wrinkled with age, but still admirably preserved. (157)

### **St. Louis Bertrand (1526 - 1581)**

St. Louis Bertrand is believed to be a relative of St. Vincent Ferrer. On the day of his birth, he was baptized in the same font in which Vincent Ferrer was baptized 150 years before him. He was received into the Dominican order at the age of 19 and was ordained before he was 22. He filled many offices within the order, most notably, that of master of novices. By the practice of outstanding virtue, self-denial and penance, he furnished for the novices a perfect model for their imitation. (184)

In 1562 he was sent to work among the Indians in the northwestern part of South America. During the seven years he was there, working with many different tribes, he was favored with the gift of tongues. His preaching was accompanied by many miracles and prophecies. He once raised a girl to life by the application of a rosary. He attributed to Our Lady all the miracles manifested through him.

After returning to his native Valencia, he occupied administrative posts within the order, and won the esteem and friendship of St. Teresa of Avila. After a long and painful illness, he died at age 55. During the process of his beatification, witnesses testified that shortly after his death a heavenly perfume arose from his body. Moreover, a light which glowed for several minutes proceeded from his mouth and illuminated his whole cell. And before his funeral, seraphic music was heard in the church.

The body of St. Louis Bertrand, which remained incorrupt for over 350 years, was maliciously destroyed during the Spanish Revolution of 1936. (185)

### **St. Catherine De Ricci (1522 - 1590)**

St. Catherine de Ricci and St. Louis Bertrand were contemporaries. She left behind a patrician lineage to enter the Dominican convent at Prato, Italy, when she was 13. Born Alexandrina of Ricci, she was given the name Catherine at her profession, and with her new name, she embraced a life of severe penances, but one also distinguished by unusual mystical experiences. She endured many physical afflictions, which seemed to be aggravated by ordinary medical treatment.

During Holy Week of 1542, when Catherine was 20, she experienced the first of her ecstasies, in which she saw enacted, in sequence, the scenes of Our Lord's passion. These ecstasies were repeated every week for twelve years. They began at midday every Thursday and ended on Friday at 4:00. On Easter Sunday of her twentieth year, Our Lord appeared to her, took a ring from His finger, and placed it on the forefinger of Catherine's left hand as a symbol of their mystical espousal. She would also be given His stigmata and bore the wounds of Jesus in her hands, feet, side, and on her head, those of His crown of thorns. (197)

Another mystical phenomenon attributed to Catherine were her conversations with St. Philip Neri while he was in Rome and she, in her convent at Prato. While they had exchanged a number of letters, they had never met, except through their mystical visits. Five reputable people testified that they had witnessed these meetings of the saints.

Even though it seems that Catherine's life was preoccupied with the mystical, she also held positions of authority in her community. While still very young, she was selected as novice mistress and then sub-prioress. Later, at the age of 38, she was appointed prioress in perpetuity. She is said to have been happiest when working among the poor and sick of the city.

After a lengthy illness, Catherine died on the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Mother, February 2, 1590, at age 68. She was canonized in 1747.

The Basilica of Prato possess the incorrupt remains of the saint who has been designated the patroness of the city. The darkened but still beautiful relic of St. Catherine lies in an ornate reliquary which is exposed for public veneration below the major altar of the basilica. (198)

### **St. Rose of Lima (1586 - 1617)**

From childhood St. Rose undertook fasts, performed penances, and was favored with many visions and mystical experiences. Her parents prevented her from embracing the cloistered life, but she found consolation in the little hermitage which she had built in the garden of her home. At the age of 23, Rose joined the Third Order of St. Dominic, took St. Catherine of Siena as her patroness, and increased her fasts and mortifications. She worked to help her parents, yet set aside a room in her house where she helped destitute children and the elderly. Her prayers were credited with saving Lima from an invasion of pirates. But despite all this, she was once brought to the attention of the Inquisition.

St. Rose died on the day she had predicted, but it was impossible to hold her funeral for several days, owing to the crowds of mourners. Her body was buried in the cloister of St. Dominic's Church where it was found entire, fresh, and fragrant eighteen months later. However, in 1630, thirteen years after her death, her body was found somewhat wasted and desiccated. (225)

The relics of the saint are now conserved in two locations. In the Dominican Church of Santa Domingo, there is a special altar dedicated to the Peruvian saints, on which rest three golden chests containing the skulls of St. Rose and St. Martin de Porres, and the remains of Blessed John Macias. The rest of her relics are kept a few blocks away in the small church which was built on the very grounds on which Rose lived. This basilica also houses many of the objects which the saint wore or used during life.

St. Rose was canonized by Clement X in 1671. She was promptly proclaimed the patroness of Peru, the Indies, the Philippines, and of all America.

### **Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901 - 1925)**

Our only incorruptible Dominican saint of modern times is Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati of Turin, Italy, who achieved sanctity in only twenty-four years. He was born into a wealthy family of great prominence, but Catholic in name only. From adolescence he cultivated his spiritual life on his own, devoting himself to prayer and the sacraments, but also to works of mercy. He led an austere penitential life, giving to the poor the money his family gave him for his personal use.

Pier Giorgio was fun-loving and out-going, always laughing. A sportsman by nature, he loved mountain climbing and horseback riding. His mother was an accomplished artist, and he inherited from her an appreciation of art, music, the theater, and literature. Dante was his favorite author and he could recite lengthy passages from The Divine Comedy.

Pope John Paul II called him a man of the eight beatitudes at his beatification. It was principally through the Society of St. Vincent de Paul which he joined in 1918 that he would demonstrate his love and care for the poor. He was also politically active, supporting Christian Democratic principles at a time when Fascism ruled Italy.



At age 21, Pier Giorgio joined the Fraternity of St. Dominic and took the name Jerome in honor of Girolamo Savonarola, the Dominican Renaissance reformer whom he admired. He also had great devotion to St. Catherine of Siena.

On June 7, 1925, he went mountain climbing for the last time. He felt a stiffness in his limbs, but thought he could work through it. But on June 29, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the effects of polio began to permeate his body. Early on the morning of July 4 he received the Sacrament of Extreme Unction and at 7:00 in the evening, he died. His father, mother, and sister were with him and noticed a gust of wind suddenly blow along the corridor outside his room at his death.

When his cause was introduced and his body interred in 1981, Pier Giorgio was found to be incorrupt. His body at that time was transferred from the family tomb to the Cathedral of Turin where it is now enshrined. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1990. In 2008 his body left Turin for the first time since his death in 1925 when he was transported to Sydney, Australia, to serve as an example and inspiration to the young men and women attending World Youth Day.

Pier Giorgio Frassati: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dominican Blessed, reprinted with permission from Saints in the Making, Felicity O'Brien, Chapter 3, pp. 43-59, Veritas Press, Dublin, 1988. Distributed in the United States by Ignatius Press.

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