

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM:
THE ROLE OF METAPHYSICS
IN MYSTICISM



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Jean Ingres, *Jesus Returning the Keys to Peter*, 1820.

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Clockwise from top left: *St. Gregory of Nyssa* (by Francesco Bartolozzi), *St. Thomas Aquinas* (by Peter Paul Reubens), *St. Augustine of Hippo* (uncredited), and *St. Catherine of Siena* (uncredited).

Who do you say that I Am: The role of metaphysics in mysticism

Cesar Hernandez

Short-form presentation, given August 28, 2025

Metaphysics, the study of being as being, is central to Catholic mysticism. Sacred Scripture hints at the inherent relationship between metaphysics and mysticism when Christ asks his Apostles, “Who do you say that I am?” and Simon Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responds to Simon Peter, saying, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my heavenly Father.”¹ This narrative is metaphysical because Jesus divulges ineffable mysteries about his existential nature: He is the beginning and the end, the one who has been since Abraham, the Creator of existence. Furthermore, it is mystical because through his profound love for Christ, Peter attains the wisdom of Christ’s nature through divine grace. Thus, it is necessary for every Christian to prayerfully examine the question “Who do I say God is?” because through truth, love flourishes.

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, he writes in his spiritual book, *The Life of Moses*, “[...] truth is the sure apprehension of real Being,”² which implies a necessary knowledge of God. Therefore, this paper aims to inform Catholic Christians that a brief understanding of metaphysics, primarily in the domain of God as Being, translated within Catholic mysticism, is paramount in practicing a holistic spirituality. We will discuss the following arguments: 1) an examination of fundamental metaphysics; 2) an examination of the anthropological tie to the Divine 3) an examination of metaphysics in Catholic Mystic writings; and 4) an examination of the Eschatological reality of man through the lens of Catholic mysticism and metaphysics.

Examination of Fundamental Metaphysics

Metaphysics is a philosophy, a wisdom, a truth. As Catholic Christians, we must acknowledge that God not only built humanity to worship him in liturgy, but

also through reason. Therefore, understanding the philosophy that undergirds the Catholic theological tradition will equip us to apprehend the more profound truths of the spiritual life. Metaphysics originates from the Greek *meta*, meaning “after,” and *physika*, meaning “physics;” literally, it is “after physics.” Metaphysics, in its technical definition, means the study of being as being or simply things that exist, and its primary goal is to understand universal principles and causes that account for the existence of beings, despite their multiplicity. Though we are many, we are one. Ultimately, what we seek to extract from metaphysics is how it understands the substance of God, how his substance is present within all beings, and how this presence of divine substance seeps into the mystical life.

Concerning being, insofar as a thing exists, it is a being. When you meander upon a trail, you see numerous beings, from rocks to plants to animals to the sun or the stars, all of which participate in the act of existing, even a seemingly non-acting rock. And within existence is an inherent hierarchical structure of being, which says some beings exist more than others. For example, it is better to be a plant than a rock, it is better to be an animal than a plant, it is better to be a human than an animal, and it is better to be God than a human. For human beings, we surpass any existing on earth because of our unique spiritual image.

It is common for metaphysics to overlap with natural theology—the theological application that seeks to know God from reason alone. In metaphysics, we acknowledge God as the uncaused cause and as Being itself, which is why Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks “of God as pure Subsisting Act of Existence that is, but is beyond all limiting essences and forms, all *whats*”³ According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, all things participate in God insofar as they exist; however, this does not mean that all things are God, because nothing is

¹ Matthew 16:13-17. New Catholic Bible, henceforth.

² Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses: Classics of Western Spirituality*, Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson trans. (New York: Paulist Press Inc., 1978), 60.

³ W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and The Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 27.

Being itself. From this truth, many ideas of God's nature arise; for example, God is infinite, not limited, God is spiritual, not material, God is "isness" itself, not a what. Adversity in the spiritual life is recognizing a lack of seeing God with one's eyes. Thus, a reason why metaphysics is indispensable to mysticism is that it helps us see unobservable truths, which deepens faith and, consequently, love with a personal Divinity. In St. Catherine's Dialogue, God tells his daughter, "Open your mind's eye and look within me, and you will see the dignity and beauty of my reasoning creature."⁴

Examination of the Anthropological tie to the Divine

Human beings have a hylomorphic constitution—we are body and soul. Through this unique spirituality, man has an intimate bond with God. Now, the question is, what are the powers that provide proof of a mystical and ontological bond?

In metaphysics, the theory of transcendentalism argues that all beings share similar ontological qualities. Everything is a being; therefore, everything is in some way similar insofar as they exist. Transcendentalism comes from the Latin *transcendere*, which means to "leap over." Besides God, everything that exists has "whatness." Thus, because all things participate in existence, every being is given some quality that mirrors God. Consider the parent analogy; a parent is not their child, nor is a child their parent, but they have similar attributes; this is our relationship with God. Or consider the wall analogy; we are human beings, a what. God leaps over this wall to grace us with his attributes because we, the existents, participate in him, existence itself. A Thomist would generally say that everything engages in oneness, goodness, beauty, and truth because God is the source of these attributes. Furthermore, because humanity is made in the unique image and likeness of God, we are given special graces, such as infinity, the immortality of the soul, free will, and an intellect capable of knowing divine things. God bonds himself intimately with humanity through the mutual inclusivity of his sacred image. In considering this metaphysical relationship between God and man, the soul should rejoice in exploring its existential nature because this philosophy becomes the building block for attaining invisible heavenly realities and, thus, becomes the

height of mystical knowledge, where one becomes entranced by the spiritual and present nature of God's Being.

Examination of Metaphysics in Catholic Mystic Writings

Mysticism comes from the Greek *myo*, which means "to conceal or hide." In its technical definition, it studies how a person attains an intimate relationship with the divine through contemplation, corporal or spiritual work, or ascetic practices. In mysticism, the invisible and divine truths are spiritual but real, which is why metaphysics, or literally "after physics," is so prominent in mysticism; metaphysics is not merely a concept in mysticism but a reality allowing us to know God on a profound level. Many mystical theologians and doctors of the Church write, explicitly or implicitly, about spiritual truths when diving into the hidden realm, which naturally carries metaphysical undertones. It is Saint Catherine of Sienna who urges her readers to open the mind's eye and to dwell in "the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God's goodness toward her [the soul], since upon knowledge follows love."⁵ Saint Catherine of Sienna rightly shows us that the end of metaphysics on earth is searching for God through hidden truths, which involves closing off the physical senses to allow the soul to recognize God's empowering presence.

Any spiritual work of the saints includes some metaphysical connotations; for example, in Saint Gregory of Nyssa's work, *The Life of Moses*, he states, "It is therefore undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection, since, as I have said, perfection is not marked off by limits: The one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit. How then would one arrive at the sought-for boundary when he can find no boundary?"⁶ It is a beautiful paradox that utilizes transcendentalism and the nature of God to comprehend the deeper theological realities rooted in our being. God not only allows humanity to participate in infinite grace, but he also makes goodness a ceaseless gift. Saint Gregory's writings provide metaphysical logic to assure people that there is always room to grow in God's grace. If Saint Gregory were still here, he would tell all of us to continue growing in God's likeness, mainly because our image of God and our participation in infinity permit continual growth in spirituality.

⁴ Saint Catherine of Sienna, *The Dialogue: The Classics of Western Spirituality*, Suzanne Noffke trans. (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, Inc., 1980), 71.

⁵ Saint Catherine of Sienna, *The Dialogue: The Classics of*

Western Spirituality, Suzanne Noffke trans. (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, Inc., 1980), 71.

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses: Classics of Western Spirituality*, 31.

Though these concepts written by brilliant Saints are complex and sometimes challenging to understand, various personalities in the Church's history exemplify the effective application of these ideas. Saint Mother Teresa says, "'If we recognize [Jesus] under the appearance of bread,' she explained, 'we will have no difficulty recognizing him in the disguise of the suffering poor.' This is why Mother Teresa would say, 'I have an opportunity to be with Jesus 24 hours a day.'"⁷ What is the end of metaphysics and mysticism on earth? Allowing spirituality to become actualized in ordinary life. For Mother Teresa, Jesus is truly present in every individual because their souls mirror the image of God and, therefore, by association, Christ. Saint Mother Teresa exemplifies how profound truths, a philosophy now becoming actuality, can heighten one's spirituality, which increases the soul's love for God and others.

Examination of the Eschatological Reality of Man through the Lens of Catholic Mysticism and Metaphysics

We have discussed the role of metaphysics in mysticism, but we must question the end of this philosophy through the lens of mysticism. The role of metaphysics through mysticism deepens one's love for God because worship of God is possible in virtually any place; God is always present because all things participate in him, existence itself. Thus, through divine truth, humanity can deepen its relationship by appreciating God's creation, salvation, and his magnificent grace. However, the end of metaphysics involves an eschatological lens, or the ultimate destiny of our souls. According to Norris W. Clarke, "But since each finite good is only a participation in and hence image of the infinite Divine Goodness, each one's search for the good is implicitly a search...for union with the ultimate fullness and Source of all goodness, which is God himself." The spiritual life includes many trials and hardships, and there is a metaphysical reason for these adversities. We recognize that God is existence itself. Humanity only participates in him, which implies an inherent lack and unfulfillment within us. Saint Augustine acknowledges this unfulfillment when he states, "For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee." But how can humanity be fulfilled if God is infinity itself? Can we

ever be fulfilled? Do not worry, my friend, I will help alleviate your existential crisis.

Humans have transitory desires on earth that fulfill what they believe is lacking in their lives, and that desperate desire for something good, beautiful, or true will never cease. Therefore, considering the final cause of human beings, nothing in the world or the universe can satiate fulfillment. Saint Gregory answers our problem by saying it must be a Being without limit. The source of our image, of our longing, must be the answer, which is God. God is the only person who can truly satisfy our wholeness, even though humanity can never be whole, a very fascinating paradox! If we remember, Saint Gregory of Nyssa says that fulfillment for God is not a limit, but an unending progression. Therefore, the true end of metaphysics from a mystical hermeneutic is a constancy of renewal, which can be defined as that which offers constant delights, pleasures, and love without becoming old or stale. Furthermore, the eschatological reality is not only being in this constancy of renewal with God, but also to be consumed by the substance of God's beauty, goodness, and truth. In heaven, one sees God face to face, and now the things we find good, beautiful, or true are not merely abstract concepts or vestiges; we are observing them in their totality! Truly, God shows us his great love for us by surpassing logic. My friends, the eschatological reality is not only necessary, but the most extraordinary gift we can acquire!

Conclusion

To conclude, do not worry, no ordinary Christian needs to take collegiate-level classes on metaphysics (it is traumatizing); nevertheless, some fundamental metaphysical truths must be understood if one seeks a relationship with the Almighty that reaches the mystical heights graced upon the Saints. Because God is existence itself, an existential awakening of the soul to divine and invisible truths is necessary to know God more sincerely. The saints show that if any person desires to awaken their spirituality, worshipping God's presence, his Being, in all aspects of life is crucial to developing their relationship with the Triune God. When a person understands themselves more in the context of God and being, the seeds of wisdom are planted, and through that wisdom, love flourishes.

⁷ Brandon Vogt, "Bl. Teresa of Calcutta" in *Saints and Social Justice: A Guide to Changing the World*, Brandon Vogt ed.

(Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2014), 23.

Who do you say that I Am: The role of metaphysics in mysticism

Cesar Hernandez

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Sacred Scripture hints at the inherent relationship of metaphysics and mysticism when Christ asks his Apostles, “Who do you say that I am?”

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the Prophets.” “But you,” he said to them, “who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Then Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my heavenly Father.”¹

Christ’s question resembles the notorious moment in the book of Exodus where God unveils his existential nature, “I Am Who I Am.”² The divine, the glorious I Am, always existed and was never created. Christ reveals a similar image by claiming to be the Son of God. Subsequently, by claiming to be the Son of God, Jesus divulges ineffable mysteries about his person: He is the beginning and the end; the one who has been since Abraham; the Creator of existence—and only through divine illumination could Peter attain such wisdom. The above passage demonstrates that the fullness of spirituality necessitates an integration of metaphysical knowledge and mystical participation, preceded by grace. Peter’s proclamation invites him into a

profound spirituality, where knowledge strengthens divine intimacy.³ In light of the above, it is necessary for every Christian to prayerfully examine the question “Who do I say God is?”

Understanding who God is and how he is ontologically tied to humanity’s being is a truth that not only transcends the Christian’s mind toward heavenly thoughts but also strengthens the spiritual life⁴ on earth and reveals beautiful truths about the eschatological reality of Heaven. According to the Cappadocian Father, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, “In my view the definition of truth is this: not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being,” and “[...] truth is the sure apprehension of real Being.”⁵ Gregory’s teachings require further analysis, but our primary focus for the moment is the term “being” and its application in the mystical life.

This paper aims to inform Catholic Christians who may lack knowledge about God, thereby strengthening the vigor of their spirituality. A brief understanding of metaphysics, primarily in the domain of God as Being, translated within Catholic mysticism, is paramount to practicing a holistic spirituality. The following arguments aim to awaken Catholics’ existential awareness, which in turn will shed light on their ultimate end, namely, union with God. Therefore, the following will be briefly discussed: 1) an examination of fundamental metaphysics; 2) an examination of the anthropological tie to the Divine; 3) an examination of metaphysics in

¹ Matthew 16:13-17. New Catholic Bible, used henceforth.

² Exodus 3:14

³ Thomas Merton, *A Course in Christian Mysticism: Thirteen Sessions with the Famous Trappist Monk*, Jon M. Sweeney ed. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), 46.

⁴ Ralph Martin, *The Fulfillment of All Desire: A Guidebook for the Journey to God Based on the Wisdom of the Saints*, (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2006), 11-12. In the study of Catholic Mysticism, there are three spiritual stages: purgative, illuminative, and the perfect way. The purgative way is characterized by a renunciation of sin, a turning toward virtue, increased prayer, and weekly church attendance; it is sometimes viewed as an imperfect love because the person who begins the

spiritual life only loves or serves God to avoid the punishment of hell. The illuminative way is marked by a desire to love others more, practicing virtue more often, easily surrendering to God, and an increasing desire for union; it may also accompany imperfect love, as some people might only love God’s consolations, rather than Him alone. The last stage is the perfect way, where a person has habitual union with God, and is marked by deep joy, profound humility, and a constant desire to serve God; the person in the last stage has a perfect love for God, or a love that seeks the other for their own sake.

⁵ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses: Classics of Western Spirituality*, Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson trans. (New York: Paulist Press Inc., 1978), 60.

Catholic Mystic writings; and 4) an examination of the Eschatological reality of man through the lens of Catholic mysticism and metaphysics.

Examination of Fundamental Metaphysics

Like many patristic theologians of the fourth century or the medieval theologians of the thirteenth century, it was common to utilize the intellectual processes of Greek philosophers to support their theology, a union of faith and reason.⁶ It was Saints Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine who incorporated Platonic thought to argue God as Goodness and Being itself. Similarly, it was Saints Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure who tackled and integrated Aristotle's complex empirical philosophy to translate God within the natural world. To follow in their footsteps, the Catholic Christian must internalize that God not only built humanity to worship him in liturgy, but to worship him through reason. Therefore, understanding the philosophy that undergirds the Catholic theological tradition will equip Christians to apprehend profound truths of the spiritual life.

The role of metaphysics, as the title of this paper suggests, is fundamental to mysticism, especially if one considers the philosophy's root meaning. Metaphysics originates from the Greek *meta*, meaning "after," and *physika*, meaning "physics;" thus, it is "after physics." Metaphysics, in its technical definition, means the study of being *qua* being—that is, insofar as it is being—and its primary goal is to understand universal principles and causes that account for the existence of beings, despite their multiplicity. In essence, metaphysics is the study of everything that exists. As a philosophy, many consider it convoluted because it can lead to complicated contradictions, which this paper will not address. Instead, what it seeks to extract from metaphysics is how it can understand the substance of God, how his substance pervades all beings, and how this permeation of divine substance seeps into the mystical life.

Concerning being, insofar as a thing exists, it is a being. Etymologically speaking, or in its fundamental form, a being is "that which is." When one meanders upon a trail, one comes upon numerous beings, from rocks to plants to animals to the sun or the stars, all

these things exist or are beings because they participate in "isness." Furthermore, there is an inherent hierarchical structure of being, which establishes that some beings participate in existence more than others. For example, it is better to be a plant than a rock, it is better to be an animal than a plant, it is better to be a human than an animal, and it is better to be God than a human. Thus, some beings participate more in being through their qualities of life, which is why they "exist more" than others (e.g., an animal can walk, a plant cannot; or a human is capable of abstraction and apprehension, an animal is not; furthermore, God is omniscient, and humanity is not). Human beings surpass any existing thing on earth because of their spiritual image.

It is common for metaphysics to overlap with natural theology—the theological application that seeks to know God from reason alone. Metaphysics suggests that an endless source of causes is illogical, which permits theological argumentations such as Thomas Aquinas' five proofs. The most fundamental among Thomas Aquinas' proofs is the Argument from Causality, which posits that since an infinite regress of causes is illogical, an uncaused cause [God] is necessary and must be the cause of all other beings.⁷ Furthermore, according to W. Norris Clarke, S.J., a Thomistic scholar:

[...] Since for him [Thomas Aquinas] the fundamental component of being is the act of existence itself, which lies beyond all limiting essences and forms, pervading them all but irreducible to any one of them. Hence he can speak of God as pure Subsisting Act of Existence that is, but is beyond all limiting essences and forms, all whats.⁸

Because God is the cause of all things that exist, Thomas Aquinas defines God as Being itself. As mentioned in the introduction, Gregory of Nyssa states that to have a proper understanding of truth is to know what Being is. The Being Gregory is referring to is God. God is not only Creator, but Being itself, from which all things source their quality of "isness," which is why it is indispensable to acquire a proper understanding of Being and truth. Metaphysics, through the Catholic lens, enquires into the

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, "The Philosophical Tradition," in *Life of Moses: Classics of Western Spirituality*, Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson trans. (New York: Paulist Press Inc., 1978), 3-5. "Philosophy has become religious in the Hellenistic age, and in late Roman times it had become contemplative and ascetic. The ascetic life in Christianity was a direct continuation of the contemplative life of Greek philosophy."

⁷ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2 Ed., Fathers of the English Dominican trans. (New York, Cincinnati, Chicago: Benziger Brothers, 1920) I-I, q.2, a.3, co.

⁸ W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and The Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 27.

most fundamental truths in existence: that God is existence itself and, as existents, humanity is rooted in him. Therefore, God's essence pervades everything even though he is not everything.⁹ Or, as Thomas Aquinas explains, all things participate in God insofar as they exist; however, this does not mean that all things are God, because nothing is Being itself.

If such a Being as God exists, many attributes accompany him that are apophatic. Apophatic theology, also known as negative theology, is an approach to understanding God by apprehending what he is not; for example, God is good, not evil, God is infinite, not limited, God is spiritual, not material, God is "isness" itself, not a what, and so forth. However, many of these attributes are transparent and unobservable to the human eye; adversity in the spiritual life is recognizing a lack of perceiving God. Thus, metaphysics is indispensable to mysticism because it helps realize the structure of existence, which means observing and rationalizing things beyond the unseen, thereby gaining a spiritual advantage in knowing personally the living God.

One might question, if metaphysics provides knowledge of God, why does one need scripture, the Church, or the mystics to know God better? Any person grappling with the intricate truths of metaphysics will have to distinguish between the metaphysical God, a distant concept, and the God of the Bible as presented by the Gospels, who is personal and loving. Metaphysics, as a philosophical discipline, supports the foundation of Catholic mysticism; still, it cannot be used definitively in knowing a personal God, mainly because an interpersonal relationship is the core of Christian spirituality. Many theologian-philosophers arrive at this incredible reality because God is more than a concept; he is a person. Treating God as merely an idea would disrupt the foundation of love between the Christian and God. Saint John Paul II poetically and beautifully states:

*God and the universe dwelt at the heart,
but the universe was losing light,
slowly becoming the song of his Reason,
the lowest planet.*

*I bring you good news of great wonder, Hellenic
masters:*

*it is pointless to watch over existence which slips
out of
our hands, for there is a Beauty more real
concealed in the living blood¹⁰*

Examination of the Anthropological tie to the Divine

The fact that human beings are supernatural is evidence of a superior bond between humanity and God. Now, the question is, what are the powers that provide proof of a supernatural and ontological bond?

In Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy, humans are believed to have a tripartite soul, comprising nutritive, sensitive, and rational aspects for Aristotle, and appetitive, spirited, and rational aspects for Plato. Both philosophies conclude that the rational soul separates human beings from animals. Humans are capable of complex intellectual abilities such as abstraction and apprehension, which surpass the intelligence of animals. The rational act and its abilities are evidence of a spiritual component within man, an invisible spirituality that can think infinitely, even though it is not infinite itself. For example, concerning infinity, one can think of various objects from experience and can abstract, universalize, and think about the "objectness" of these things without using the senses. How is such grace given? Where does it come from?

In metaphysics, there is a theory and concept called transcendentalism,¹¹ which argues that all beings share similar ontological qualities. For example, everything that exists shares the quality of "isness," or being. Transcendentalism comes from the Latin *transcendere*, which means to "leap over." Everything that exists within time and space, or within the limits of being created (including demons and angels), has "whatness." A human being is kept from having the existential nature, Being itself, due to its "humanness." Transcendentalism is like a parent and their child; a child is not the same substance as their parent, but they are given similar characteristics or qualities that provide them with similar likenesses. Similarly, this analogy applies to the relationship between humanity and God. Saint Bonaventure, in his work *The Journey of the Mind to God*, states: We may behold God in the mirror of visible creation, not only by considering creatures as vestiges of God,

⁹ Catholicism is a theistic religion, not a pantheistic religion. Many enter the heresy of pantheism when they say God is everything. If God were everything, then all beings would be omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. Because all beings omit these powers, God is not everything in its most literal sense. God is also not non-being because such a thing does not exist; however, God possesses so much being that it seems he is beyond being, which is a mystery

that human minds cannot fully comprehend.

¹⁰ Saint John Paul II, "Song of the Hidden God," in *The Place Within: The Poetry of Pope John Paul II*, Jerzy Peterkiewicz trans. (New York: Random House Inc., 1982), 11.

¹¹ This theory is not referring to the 20th century movement, Transcendentalism, but Thomistic Transcendentalism, which are two vastly different ideas.

but also by seeing Him in them; for He is present in them by His essence, His power, and His presence.”¹² So, God in his Creation, leaps over this “whatness” and permeates every being with his attributes, which is why it is typical for Thomists to say everything is ontologically one, active, true, good, and beautiful.¹³ Though identifying things as ontologically good, true, or beautiful does not mean reducing oneself to the quality itself, a person is not an attribute in itself. No, only the person who is Being itself maintains the quintessence of goodness, beauty, truth, and oneness itself, which is God.

Human beings are linked to God’s goodness, beauty, and truth, and participate more in these qualities because “God created man in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”¹⁴ When referring to the infusion of transcendental properties, there is a proper manner of speaking about the relationship between the property itself and beings; primarily, that a being participates in that property. The only being that is perfectly consubstantial with the attributes of God is Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, who shares in the totality of God’s substance, for they are God. However, there is more to be said about the special dynamic between God and humanity, particularly in the context of transcendentalism. Through these transcendentals, God permits humanity to continually grow in them because humanity has an elevated mode of being—these enhanced powers are due to the intellect and will. Through God’s unique graces upon man, they find themselves understanding complex ideas like infinity, spirituality, or divinity. It is through the intellect of man that God makes himself known. God not only makes his image known through his footprint within humanity’s soul. Bonaventure explores this concept of the divine tie to the soul by examining man’s spirituality through Aristotelian logic.

Apprehension is the ability to imprint upon the mind information of objects acquired through the senses, and to think of these sense objects without using the senses, while making judgments about them.¹⁵ Through apprehension, man “abstracts, therefore, from place and time and motion, and for this reason it

is immutable; nor can it have any limits in space and time; it is absolutely spiritual.”¹⁶ Thus, by concluding his argument that man is spiritual, Bonaventure concludes with this statement:

*Yet, all these activities are vestiges in which we can perceive our God... and through this impression it leads us to its starting point, that is, to the object to be known, this process manifestly suggests that Eternal light begets itself a Likeness, a coequal consubstantial, and coeternal Splendor. We can perceive that He who is the image of the invisible God and the brightness of his glory and the image of his substance, Who is everywhere is by His first generation like an object that generates its similitude in the entire medium, is united by the grace of union to the individual of rational nature...*¹⁷

Through the rational powers of the human soul, specifically, intellect and will, God bonds himself intimately with humanity through the mutual inclusivity of his divine image. Jesus Christ makes it clear in Matthew 16:13-17 that the ability to recognize his divinity is a power granted by God. Considering this, we further analyze that through God, humanity can conceive of divinity, and it is through the intellectual and willing soul that God provides his children knowledge for anyone who seeks wisdom of his Being.

Now, what are Catholics to do with this knowledge of God’s innate tie to the soul? John Paul II states,

*The distant shores of silence begin at the door. You cannot fly there like a bird. You must stop, look deeper, still deeper, until nothing deflects the soul from the deepest deep.*¹⁸

John Paul II is exhorting one to authentic and focused contemplation of the soul. If God truly mirrors the soul, one will rejoice in digging deep into their existential nature. Metaphysics is not merely a conceptual tool, but it becomes a building block for perceiving heavenly realities. Because metaphysics is a philo-

¹² Saint Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M. trans., Stephen F. Brown ed. (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hacket Publishing Company, 1993), 11.

¹³ W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and The Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 290-302. W. Norris Clarke, S.J., explains why all existence is one, active, true, good, and beautiful.

¹⁴ Genesis 1:27.

¹⁵ Aristotle, “*De Anima*” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon ed. (New York: Random House Inc., 1941), 580. One might be reminded of Aristotle’s analogy of the wax: “By a ‘sense’ is meant what has the power of receiving into itself the sensible

forms of things without the matter. This must be conceived of as taking place in the way in which a piece of wax takes on the impress of a signet of bronze or gold, but its particular metallic constitution makes no difference...”

¹⁶ Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M. trans., and Stephen F. Brown ed. (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hacket Publishing Company, 1993), 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., 13-14. 580.

¹⁸ John Paul II, “Song of the Hidden God,” in *The Place Within: The Poetry of Pope John Paul II*, Jerzy Peterkiewicz trans. (New York: Random House Inc., 1982), 3.

sophical study of invisible realities or spiritual things, it becomes the height of mystical knowledge, where one becomes entranced by the spiritual nature of God's Being.

Examination of Metaphysics in Catholic Mystic Writings

As a technical study, mysticism is the philosophical approach to understanding how one attains union with the divine through contemplation, corporal and spiritual works, or ascetic practices. The word mystic comes from the Greek *myo*, which means "to conceal or hide." Catholic mysticism carries a comparable attitude to the technical study. Still, it adheres to three fundamentals that make it theologically ordered: orthodoxy (proper Church teaching), orthopraxy (proper practice), and personal experience (visions, supernatural powers given by God, such as levitation, or physical graces, such as stigmata).

Metaphysics is tied to mysticism insofar as it studies truths beyond sense perception. Thus, when contemplating spiritual ideas, metaphysics is indispensable. Many theologians and doctors of the Church implicitly consider "being" when diving into the hidden realm, and many of their writings carry metaphysical undertones. Why? To reiterate, metaphysics is a study transcending observable things; numerous Saints utilize this philosophy to understand how to be with God, who is purely spiritual and, therefore, unseen by human eyes. From Saint Gregory of Nyssa's apophatic mysticism of unknowing to Saint Bonaventure's consideration of God's footsteps within the natural world, these theologians utilize a metaphysical framework because they understand the invisibility of God's nature.¹⁹ However, something invisible does not indicate a lack of something. Truly, in the mystic's mind, inconspicuous truths are spiritually sensible, intelligible, and real.

Where do metaphysics and mysticism meet in the Saints' writings? Anything spiritual possesses metaphysical connotations; for example, in Saint Gregory of Nyssa's work, *The Life of Moses*, he speaks of the connection between God's infinitude and humanity. God is infinite, humans are not, but they can participate in infinitely good things. If humans continually join in that goodness, will they reach a limit? No,

because God is infinite, human beings can constantly participate in goodness and keep flourishing in it without any ceasing, which results in no limit. As Saint Gregory states: "It is therefore undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection, since, as I have said, perfection is not marked off by limits: The one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit. How then would one arrive at the sought-for boundary when he can find no boundary?"²⁰ It is a beautiful paradox, utilizing metaphysical truths of transcendentalism and the substantial nature of God to contemplate theological realities within the spiritual and physical life. Or consider Saint Bonaventure's metaphysical writings, which state, "It is possible to contemplate God not only outside us and within us but also above us: outside through vestiges of Him; within, through His image; and above, through the light that shines upon our mind."²¹ According to Bonaventure, active metaphysical participation, even if implicitly, includes an active existential awareness of life because God is truly embedded in all things that exist. Recognizing God's Being rooted in existence is an example of how metaphysics melds into the spiritual life; it is an implicit use of reason and faith to adore God.

Although the concepts written by these brilliant Saints are complex and sometimes challenging to understand, various personalities in the Church's history exemplify the effective application of these ideas. Saint Mother Teresa says, "'If we recognize [Jesus] under the appearance of bread,' she explained, 'we will have no difficulty recognizing him in the disguise of the suffering poor.' This is why Mother Teresa could say, 'I have an opportunity to be with Jesus 24 hours a day.'"²² What is the vision for the inclusion of metaphysics and mysticism? Allowing spirituality to become actualized in ordinary life. For Mother Teresa, Jesus is truly present in every individual because their souls mirror the image of God and, therefore, by association, Christ. Transcendentalism is so prevalent in Mother Teresa's spirituality that it allows her to participate in heaven each day. She would not recognize this profound and wonderful truth if she had not an understanding of Christ as God, and how he saturates himself into humanity's being.

While Saint Teresa of Calcutta exemplifies the practical application of metaphysics and mysticism, St Catherine of Sienna exemplifies how knowledge of God

¹⁹ Recall the Nicene Creed: "I believe in One God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible..."

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses: Classics of Western Spirituality*, 31.

²¹ Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, 28.

²² Brandon Vogt, "BL. Teresa of Calcutta" in *Saints and Social Justice: A Guide to Changing the World*, Brandon Vogt ed. (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2014), 23.

strikes wonder and ardent passion for God: “O eternal Mercy, you who cover over your creatures’ faults! It does not surprise me that you say of those who leave deadly sin behind and return to you: “I will not remember that you had ever offended me.” O unspeakable mercy!”²³ Catherine is not using metaphysics to understand that God is mercy; instead, her recognition of God as mercy itself—a metaphysical awakening—inebriates her soul with ardent wonder, which deepens love for her Creator; her awareness transcends to ecstasy. And therefore, she writes, “Then that soul [herself] stood before God as if intoxicated and, unable to restrain herself...”²⁴ Saint Catherine of Sienna exemplifies how a philosophy now becoming actuality can heighten one’s spirituality, which increases the soul’s desire for God. If metaphysics is appropriately used through Catholicism, God, who is truth itself, allows people to worship him through his mystery, which elevates the soul’s love: the primary goal of Catholic mysticism.

Examination of the Eschatological Reality of Man through the Lens of Catholic Mysticism and Metaphysics

We have discussed the role of metaphysics in mysticism, but we must question the end of this philosophy through the lens of mysticism. The role of metaphysics through mysticism deepens one’s love for God because worship of God is possible in virtually any place; God is always present because all things participate in him, existence itself. Thus, through divine truth, humanity can deepen its relationship by appreciating God’s creation, salvation, and his magnificent grace. However, the end of metaphysics involves an eschatological lens, or the ultimate destiny of our souls. According to W. Norris Clarke S.J., “But since each finite good is only a participation in and hence image of the infinite Divine Goodness, each one’s search for the good is implicitly a search...for union with the ultimate fullness and Source of all goodness, which is God himself.”²⁵ The spiritual life includes many trials and hardships, and there is a metaphysical

reason for these adversities. We recognize that God is existence itself. Humanity only participates in him, which indicates an inherent lack and unfulfillment. Saint Augustine acknowledges this unfulfillment when he states, “For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”²⁶ Although metaphysics poses a fundamental dilemma about the existential nature of humanity, it can only provide the answer through its union with mysticism.

Although humanity lacks wholeness, God is the answer to this predicament. Humans can only participate in good, beautiful, or truthful things, but these are transitory acts, and their feeling of fulfillment will cease. So how does fulfillment work in heaven? Saint Gregory answers this question: It must be a being without limit. God’s infinitude is the only gift that can truly satisfy a human being’s wholeness. And yet, as Saint Gregory of Nyssa writes, fulfillment for God is not a limit, but unending progression.²⁷ Therefore, the true end of metaphysics from a mystical hermeneutic is a constancy of renewal, which can be defined as that which offers constant delights, pleasures, and love without becoming old or stale. God is an infinite being with unceasing love. Saint Catherine of Sienna’s theology acknowledges God’s endless grace when she calls him a mad lover: “You, deep well of charity, it seems you are so madly in love with your creatures that you could not live without us!” On earth, a person can continue growing in God by participating in his goodness, beauty, and truth, but in heaven, it is given endlessly.

Recall Plato’s Symposium, when he writes, “‘This, my dear Socrates,’ said the stranger of Mantinea, ‘is that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute; a beauty which if you once beheld, you would see not to be after the measure of gold, and fair boys and youths, whose presence now entrances you.’”²⁸ The end of metaphysics and mysticism helps reason that the ultimate

²³ Saint Catherine of Sienna, *The Dialogue: The Classics of Western Spirituality*, Suzanne Noffke trans. (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, Inc., 1980), 71.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and The Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 304.

²⁶ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 2nd Ed., F.J. Sheed trans., Michael P. Foley ed. (Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 3.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses: Classics of Western Spirituality*, 31. “For perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness.”

²⁸ Plato, “Symposium” in *Philosophies of Art & Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 76.

See also, Plato, “Symposium” in *Philosophies of Art & Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 73. “... she replied, ‘and if, as has been already admitted, love is of the everlasting possession of the good, all men will necessarily desire immortality together with good: Wherefore love is of immortality.’”

end of these studies is seeing God face to face.²⁹ Where beauty, goodness, and truth were mere vestiges in the natural world, the soul now sees these attributes in its totality. Through an existential awakening, the soul recognizes that its desires lie in the ultimate source of creation; in heaven, no soul will truly turn away from that which is the source of all that is holy. Thus, the eschatological reality is not only necessary but is the most extraordinary gift man can acquire, which surpasses the secular idea of perfect limits because, for God, perfection is ceaseless growth in him.

Conclusion

This brief paper has enumerated the following: 1) insofar as anything exists, it participates in God, who is Being itself; 2) human beings are rational creatures capable of abstract thinking and apprehension (intellect), and capable of complex action (will), and therefore participate in a higher dimension of being; thus, humanity is ontologically tied to the divine insofar as it bears the image of God; 3) Catholic mysticism informs us that a metaphysical understanding of the

Divine is necessary for spiritual growth because it helps the soul recognize an existential and indispensable need for the One that can fulfill the soul's innate incompleteness, which deepens humanity's love for the One that fulfills them; 4) hence, a fuller realization of bearing a distinct image of God helps Christians uncover more profound eschatological truths of Heaven, which involves a necessary constant renewal in God's infinite love and grace.

To clear any confusion, no ordinary Christian needs to academically study metaphysics to deepen their spirituality; nevertheless, some fundamental metaphysical truths must be understood if one seeks a relationship with the Almighty that reaches the mystical heights graced upon the Saints. Because God is existence itself, an existential awakening of the soul is necessary for love to flourish. The saints show that if any person desires to awaken their spirituality, worshipping God's presence, his Being, in all aspects of life is crucial to developing their relationship with the Triune God. When a person understands themselves more in the context of God's Being, the seeds of wisdom are planted, and through that wisdom, love flourishes.

²⁹ Saint Catherine of Sienna, *The Dialogue: The Classics of Western Spirituality*, Suzanne Noffke trans. (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, Inc., 1980), 63.