

## The Metaphysics of Mercy

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Some of you might not know that in Roman Catholicism there are two general kinds of theology—natural theology (also called philosophical theology) and supernatural theology (also called revealed theology). Supernatural theology studies God by studying what God has revealed to us through Sacred Scripture and through Sacred Tradition, which together form the deposit of the Catholic faith. In contrast, natural theology relies solely upon our natural human powers to learn about God.<sup>1</sup> Natural theology is part of the branch of philosophy called *metaphysics*, which investigates the being of natural things. And it was from metaphysical investigation that some philosophers were able to reason to an ultimate cause of the being of natural things, which is God.<sup>2</sup>

I mention all of this because it illustrates Roman Catholicism's commitment not just to faith, but to faith and reason. For example, in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (Faith and Reason) St. John Paul II said that “the Church considers philosophy an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith . . . reason and faith cannot be separated without diminishing the capacity of men and women to know themselves, the world and God in an appropriate way.”<sup>3</sup> He used the analogy of the wings of a bird, one wing representing faith, the other wing representing reason. Without both wings a bird cannot fly, and without both reason and faith humans cannot rise to the contemplation of the fullness of Truth.

Just as grace does not destroy but perfects nature, what God has revealed does not destroy but perfects human reason. Thus, in the Roman Catholic tradition, supernatural theology, of necessity, must make use of our natural human powers of knowing and related disciplines, such as philosophy. In this vein, St. Thomas Aquinas discusses three ways that supernatural theology makes use of philosophy in his *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*. Here I only want to focus on the first, which is that philosophy allows us to “demonstrate those truths that are preambles of faith and that have a necessary place in the science of faith. Such are the truths about God that can be proved by natural reason—that God exists, that God is one [and so on].”<sup>4</sup> This teaching was affirmed at the first Vatican Council, which said: “The same Holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason.”<sup>5</sup>

It is from this perspective, namely, what can be demonstrated philosophically about God, that I, as a philosophy professor, hope to comment on Cardinal Kasper's book, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*. One provocative metaphysical claim about God, which Cardinal Kasper makes repeatedly, is that “Mercy expresses God's essence.”<sup>6</sup> While I, of course, agree that God has shown mercy to human beings, I also believe there are strong philosophical arguments that have been used by Catholic theologians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, which can be used to refute Cardinal Kasper's position. In the short amount time I have left, I will sketch some of these.

The first stems from something Cardinal Kasper would not deny, namely, the official teaching of the Catholic Church that God's creation of the world was a free act. That is, God did not have to create anything. Now, as a philosophical thought experiment, imagine that God did not create anything. In such a case the only thing in existence would be God Himself. Now consider the following question. Would mercy exist at all in this scenario? The answer is "no." The reasoning is as follows. Mercy presupposes someone who requires mercy due to sin or some other kind of imperfection. But if only God exists then there is no one to which God can show mercy.

Now, it might be objected that God is merciful to himself, but this will not do for it would imply that God is sinful or imperfect in some way—both of which are false and heretical. Indeed, Cardinal Kasper was confronted on a similar point by Fr. Daniel P. Moloney. Speaking of the Trinity, Fr. Moloney said "The Father is not *merciful* to the Holy Spirit. He loves the Holy Spirit, but there's nothing imperfect about the Holy Spirit so that he needs the Father's mercy."<sup>7</sup> To which Cardinal Kasper responded: "Sure, if mercy would be the inner nature of God, the Father would have mercy with the Son and the Son with the Spirit. But I don't know whether there is one Catholic theologian who teaches such nonsense."<sup>8</sup>

I am not exactly sure what Cardinal Kasper meant to achieve by that response, but it seems to me that he has just reversed his position. That is, with such a response, Cardinal Kasper can no longer coherently maintain that mercy expresses the essence of God. For if mercy requires the existence of sinful or imperfect creatures, and such creatures are external to God's essence, then mercy is external to God's essence. As such, mercy cannot be an essential attribute of God, though we still can attribute mercy to God based on God's action towards creatures. To use an analogy, consider the President of the USA. As a human, his essence is expressed by rational and animal. Being President is not an attribute of his essence. However, it is correctly attributed to him because of his relation to the citizens who voted him into office.

Similarly, we attribute mercy to God when, for example, God punishes us less than we deserve. Now, it may be objected that a being can only perform the kinds of actions it does because of its essence or nature. For example, humans, but not stones, can compose poems because humans are, by essence, intelligent. If had more time I would give a longer reply, but here is a quick one. I would argue that love expresses God's essence and it is because God is loving that God can be merciful to human beings. To love someone is to will good towards that person.<sup>9</sup> And in an act of mercy God wills a good towards a person in order to alleviate his or her imperfect condition.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, an act of mercy is an act of love. Indeed, the mercy that God shows to humans is a sign of the immensity and perfection of God's love—a love which exists in God from eternity and which is the reason, but not the cause, of God's free act of creating the world.

Finally, let me briefly note that the topic of God's essence is not fully resolved by saying that God is love. For if God's love were really distinct from God's existence then there would be composition in God. But every composite being needs a cause and if God were a composite being then God would need a cause—but then He would not be God!<sup>11</sup> Therefore, as St. Thomas Aquinas argues, God's essence and God's existence are identical, which is another way of saying God is *Being Itself*.<sup>12</sup> We humans conceptually distinguish God's unity, goodness, and love, etc., but in reality these are all one in the fullness of *Being Itself*. So, in the end, *Being Itself*, not mercy, best expresses the essence of God.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, 1, ad 2.

<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Trinitate Boethii*, Q. 5, a. 4.

<sup>3</sup> St. Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 5; 16.

<sup>4</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Trinitate Boethii*, Q. 2, a. 3.

<sup>5</sup> First Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, Chapter 2, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), p. 88; see also page 51.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/03/what-mercy-is>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/03/cardinal-kasper-responds-to-first-things-review-of-mercy>

<sup>9</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, 20, a. 1, ad 3.

<sup>10</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, 21, a. 3, reply.

<sup>11</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, 3, a. 7, reply.

<sup>12</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, 3, a. 4, reply.