

Item #83 (“I am” in the Gospel of John)

In John 6,19 Jesus is pictured as walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee and drawing near to a boat manned by His disciples. They were frightened by this spectacle. To reassure them of His identity He says “It is I; do not be afraid” (John 6,20). He thus not only reveals Himself to them as Jesus but also identifies Himself as divine, for this simple phrase “I am” goes back to Exodus 3,14, where God tells Moses to reveal His name to the Israelites as “I am”. This expression “I am” is often used in John’s Gospel by Jesus to identify Himself. See John 6,35; 8,12,24; 10,7,11; 11,25; 13,19; 14,6; 15,1. It thus becomes part of the main purpose of John’s Gospel, the witness by John to the divinity of Jesus Christ. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* in Paragraph 213 gives this official interpretation of “I am”:

The revelation of the ineffable name “I Am who Am” contains then the truth that God alone IS. The Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and following it the Church’s Tradition, understood the divine name in this sense: God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from Him: but He alone is His very being, and He is of Himself everything that He is.

It was against the background of Exodus that Jesus used the expression “I am” to refer to Himself and it was against this background of Exodus that John understood it as well. In terms of Thomistic philosophy it can be said that there is no real distinction between God’s essence and God’s existence: His essence includes, among other aspects, His existence. It is His nature to be. This is not to say that the disciples of Jesus grasped all the implications of the words “I am”, but it is to say that Jesus did. (**James Swetnam, S.J., November 22, 2021**)