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## „God of Life” by St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustin

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“We believe in the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, in the Resurrection of bodies, and in Life everlasting.” (St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, XVII,4)

### Abstract

This study tries to identify the presence of the expression “God of life” and of the notion “life” in some of the most significant writings of St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine. This analysis of an expression and notion from the WCC Assembly theme “God of Life lead us to justice and peace” tries to highlight the importance of patristic writings for the ecumenical theology and to encourage further reflections of this kind, having patristic studies as a starting point.

### Keywords

God of life, life, St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Buda, *God of Life lead us to justice and peace. An Orthodox Interpretation of the 10<sup>th</sup> World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly Theme from Biblical Perspective*, in „Teologia” XVII (2013), nr. 1, p. 32-44.

## Introduction

The theme of the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches – “God of Life lead us to justice and peace” – is analyzed and reflected from various perspectives. As member of the World Council of Churches staff, I already published a reflection of the Assembly theme from an Orthodox perspective using mainly biblical sources<sup>2</sup> and an analysis of the Busan Assembly theme in the context of previous World Council of Churches’ Assembly themes, as well as in the context of the themes of other Assemblies organized these year by several Regional Ecumenical Organizations.<sup>3</sup> A third study focused on the expectations of the Orthodox related with the Busan Assembly has been presented as a conference at Munich University and submitted for publication.<sup>4</sup>

While writing the above mentioned studies and preparing similar conferences which have the purpose to reflect on the Assembly theme – like the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation that took place in Kos. Greece, between 11<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> of October 2012<sup>5</sup> - I gradually realized that the theme of Busan Assembly could and should be reflected also from a Patristic perspective. For everybody who is a little familiar with the writings and thinking of Church Fathers, it is obvious that they wrote a lot about God, justice and peace. After some research and reflection, I came to the idea to write a study on the way how “God of Life” and the notion of life in general appear by the Church Fathers. Such a research, having as object all Church Fathers, would double go over the space normally affected for a paper

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Buda, *Das Motto der 10. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen im Vergleich zu vorangegangenen Versammlungsthemen und seine Aktualität innerhalb des gegenwärtigen ökumenischen Kontextes* in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 62 (2/2013), p. 158-167.

<sup>3</sup> *Orthodoxie und Ökumene im Blick auf die 10. Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen (ÖRK) in Busan, Südkorea* will be published in *Revistateologică* S.N., anul XXIII (95), iul.-sept. 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel Buda, *World Council of Churches. Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation: An Orthodox Contribution to the 10th Assembly of the WCC „God of Life, lead us to Justice and Peace” Kos, Greece, 11-17 October 2012* in *Revista Teologică*, S. N., anul XXII (94), Oct.-Dec. 2012, p. 250-252.

<sup>5</sup> See in this sense the papers contented by the volume *Jean Chrysostome et Augustin. Actes du colloque de Chantilly 22-24 Septembre 1974*, Charles Kannengiesser (ed.), Ed. Beauchesne, Paris, 1975.

published in a periodical. Therefore I decided to restrict my research at two Church Fathers which are most representative for Eastern and Western Christianity: St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine. Such a restriction and association is also possible because there are many theological similarities between these two Church Fathers.<sup>6</sup> I also choose to reflect on “God of Life” only in three of the most significant writings of St. John Chrysostom and Augustine. In case of St. John Chrysostom, I limited my research at the following exegetic writings: *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* and *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*. For St. Augustine, I focused on *Confessions*, *The City of God* and *On Christian Doctrine*. Some concluding remarks will conclude this short study.

### “God of Life” by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom<sup>7</sup> wrote an impressive number of exegetical homilies. Those exegetical homilies which explain New Testament’s books have a very rich theological content, highlighting at the same time an incredible biblical knowledge which the author possessed. The *Homilies on the Gospel of John*<sup>8</sup> content several references to life from various perspectives. Jesus Christ is the “one who speaks from the very treasures of the Spirit, he is come bringing to us sublime doctrines, and the best way of life and wisdom.”<sup>9</sup> Reflecting on “Light” and “Life” as names associated with Jesus Christ, St. John Chrysostom wrote: “He calls Him both “Light” and “Life,” for He hath freely given to us the light which proceeds from knowledge, and the life which follows it.”<sup>10</sup>

Jesus Christi is Life and has a life eternal as the Father, being co-existent with Him. St. John Chrysostom writes against the Arians who

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<sup>6</sup> For an extensive presentation of St. John Chrysostom’s life, writings and doctrine, see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. III *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature From the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon*, Christian Classics, Notre Dame, IN, p. 424-482.

<sup>7</sup> I used here the English translation of *Homilies on the Gospel of John* realized by Philip Schaff, NPNF vol. 114.

<sup>8</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homil. II, 2, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homil. II, 8, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homil. IV, 3, p. 33.

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deny the co-eternity of the Father and of the Son, the followings: “And how again, since He is “Life,” was there ever when He was not? For all must allow, that Life both is always, and is without beginning and without end, if It be indeed Life, as indeed It is. For if there be when It is not, how can It be the life of others, when It even Itself is not?”<sup>11</sup> St. John Chrysostom asks himself what it means “Life” as a name attributed to Jesus? It means keeping together all things and enlightening all things.<sup>12</sup> “Life” means in this context bringing into existence and spiritual progress.

Commenting the words of the Gospel according to John “What was made, in Him was Life,” St. John Chrysostom makes efforts to demonstrate that “Life” is here associated with the Son and not with the Holy Spirit, as some heretics were teaching:

“They say that the Spirit is called “Life.” But this “Life” is found to be also “Light,” for he adds, “And the Life was the Light of men.” (Ver. 4.) Therefore, according to them the “Light of men” here means the Spirit. Well, but when he goes on to say, that “There was a man sent from God, to bear witness of that Light” (vers. 6, 7), they needs must assert, that this too is spoken of the Spirit; for whom he above called “Word,” Him as he proceeds he calls “God,” and “Life,” and “Light.” This “Word” he says was “Life,” and this “Life” was “Light.” If now this Word was Life, and if this Word and this Life became flesh, then the Life, that is to say, the Word, “was made flesh, and we beheld” Its “glory, the glory as of the Only-Begotten of the Father.” If then they say that the Spirit is here called “Life,” consider what strange consequences will follow. It will be the Spirit, not the Son, that was made flesh; the Spirit will be the Only-Begotten Son.”<sup>13</sup>

The words “what was made in Him was Life” applies to all things created, especially to the human being who “is not pure life, but is capable of receiving life.”<sup>14</sup> The words “And the Life was the Light” implies not only the creation of all For the word “Life” here refers not merely to the act of creation, but also to the providence (engaged) about the permanence of the things created; it also lays down beforehand the doctrine of the

<sup>11</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homil IV, 3, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homil. V, 1, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homil. V, 1, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homil. V, 3, p. 38-39.

resurrection, and is the beginning of these marvelous good tidings. Since when “life” has come to be with us, the power of death dissolved; and when “light” has shone upon us, there is no longer darkness, but life ever abides within us, and death cannot overcome it. So that what is asserted of the Father might be asserted absolutely of Him (Christ) also, that “In Him we live and move and have our being.” (Col. i. 16,17) As Paul has shown when he says, “By Him were all things created,” and “by Him all things consist”; for which reason He has been called also “Root” and “Foundation.”<sup>15</sup>

The Son has life in himself as the Father:

“He possesseth not, says he, the gift by participation, but is Himself the very Fountain and very Root of all good, very Life, and very Light, and very Truth, not retaining within Himself the riches of His good things, but overflowing with them unto all others, and after the overflowing remaining full, in nothing diminished by supplying others, but streaming ever forth, and imparting to others a share of these blessings, He remains in sameness of perfection.”<sup>16</sup>

St. John Chrysostom offers an explanation to the verse “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.” (John 14: 6): “if I am ‘Life’ also, not even death shall be able to hinder you from coming to Me. ... if I am also ‘Life,’ though ye die ye shall obtain what I have told you.”<sup>17</sup>

Authentic life in Christ has for St. John Chrysostom a strong eschatological dimension. In order to give an image of this eschatological dimension of life in St. John Chrysostom’s homilies on the Gospel of John, it is enough to mention that the expression “eternal life” appears 40 times and “everlasting life” 21 times.

In the *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*<sup>18</sup> St. John Chrysostom explains a book that tells us the story of the first historical development of the Church of Christ. Jesus Christ is called “The Prince of Life” (Acts 3, 14). St. John Chrysostom’s explanation of this expression is related with the Resurrection: “In these words he establishes the doctrine of the

<sup>15</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homil. XIV, 1, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homil. LXXIII, 2, p. 404.

<sup>17</sup> I used here the English translation of *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* realized by Philip Schaff, NPNF vol. 111.

<sup>18</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, Homil. IX, p. 83.

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Resurrection.”<sup>19</sup>Hence “the Prince (or Author) of Life must be He Who has Life from Himself.”<sup>20</sup>

The Book of Acts, as explained by St. John Chrysostom, describes the way how “present life”<sup>21</sup> or “life present”<sup>22</sup> shall be conducted in order to be a preparation for “eternal life”<sup>23</sup> or “life to come.”<sup>24</sup> There is also a Christian “way of life”<sup>25</sup>, “manner of life”<sup>26</sup> “rule of life”<sup>27</sup> or “mode of life”<sup>28</sup> based on Jesus Christ commandments, which once needs to follow in order to taste “eternal life.” For St. John Chrysostom, there is an intimate connection between God as granter of life God’s following by human beings: “if God grant life, I trust that we shall soon bring you over to this way of life.”<sup>29</sup> Following God implies suffering and even martyrdom: “Suffer affliction in this life for Christ’s sake: there is nothing equal to this rest”<sup>30</sup>

The *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*<sup>31</sup> put very strong emphasis on the moral dimension of life. Jesus Christ’s followers are called to be examples for the all world: “let us astound them by our way of life rather than by words”<sup>32</sup> urges St. John Chrysostom his auditorium. In doing so, Christians are genuine followers of Jesus Christ who intimately unites his believers:

<sup>19</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, Homil.IX, p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> This expression appears 32 times in the Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles of St. John Chrysostom.

<sup>21</sup> This expression appears 16 times in the Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles of St. John Chrysostom.

<sup>22</sup> This expression appears 9 times in the Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles of St. John Chrysostom.

<sup>23</sup> This expression appears 8 times in the Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles of St. John Chrysostom.

<sup>24</sup> This expression appears 7 times in the Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles of St. John Chrysostom.

<sup>25</sup> This expression appears 11 times in the Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles of St. John Chrysostom.

<sup>26</sup> This expression appears twice in the Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles of St. John Chrysostom.

<sup>27</sup> This expression appears once in the Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles of St. John Chrysostom.

<sup>28</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, Homil. XI, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, Homil. XV, p. 140.

<sup>30</sup> I used here the English translation of *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* realized by Philip Schaff, NPNF vol. 112.

<sup>31</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, Homil. III, 9, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, Homil. VIII, 7, p. 67.

“And accordingly, there are many images whereby He brings us into union. Thus, if you mark it, He is “the Head,” we are “the body:” can there be any empty interval between the head and body? He is “a Foundation,” we “a building:” He “a Vine,” we “branches:” He “the Bridegroom,” we “the bride:” He “the Shepherd,” we “the sheep;” He is “the Way,” we “they who walk therein.” Again, we are “a temple,” He “the Indweller:” He “the First-Begotten,” we “the brethren:” He “the Heir,” we “the heirs together with Him:” He “the Life,” we “the living:” He “the Resurrection,” we “those who rise again:” He “the Light,” we “the enlightened.” All these things indicate unity; and they allow no void interval, not even the smallest.”<sup>33</sup>

For St. John Chrysostom, there is a „perfect Christian life“<sup>34</sup> accomplished by following the Christian „rule of life“<sup>35</sup> which is “pure” “angelic”, severe” or “strict” and which leads to “life eternal”<sup>36</sup> or “eternal life”<sup>37</sup> or “future life”<sup>38</sup>.

### “God of Life” by St. Augustine

One of the most well-known books of St. Augustine<sup>39</sup> is his *Confessions* which contains strong auto-biographical aspects, presenting at the end also some reflections of the author on the book of Genesis. St. Augustine himself described *Confessiones* as follows: “The Thirteen Books of my *Confessions* whether they refer to my evil or good, praise the just and good

<sup>33</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, Homil. XIII, 6, p. 104.

<sup>34</sup> This expression appears 5 times in St. John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on First Corinthians* and 5 times in St. John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Second Corinthians*.

<sup>35</sup> This expression appears twice in St. John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on First Corinthians* and twice in St. John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Second Corinthians*.

<sup>36</sup> This expression appears once in St. John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on First Corinthians* and once in St. John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Second Corinthians*.

<sup>37</sup> This expression appears once in St. John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on First Corinthians* and once in St. John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Second Corinthians*.

<sup>38</sup> For an extensive presentation of St. Augustine’s life, writings and doctrine see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. IV *The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature From the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon*, Christian Classics, Notre Dame, IN, 1986, p. 342-462

<sup>39</sup> *Retractions*, II, 6.

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God, and stimulate the heart and mind of man to approach unto Him.”<sup>40</sup> *Confessiones* contents indeed deep reflections on the relationship between God and human being, including the dimension of perceiving God as Creator and God of Life. In the second chapter of his *Confessiones*, St. Augustine reflects on how “the God Whom We Invoke is in Us, and We in Him.

“And how shall I call upon my God - my God and my Lord? For when I call on Him I ask Him to come into me. And what place is there in me into which my God can come - into which God can come, even He who made heaven and earth? Is there anything in me, O Lord my God that can contain Thee?... Or, as nothing could exist without Thee, doth whatever exists contain Thee? Why, then, do I ask Thee to come into me, since I indeed exist, and could not exist if Thou wert not in me? Because I am not yet in hell, though Thou art even there; for “if I go down into hell Thou art there” (cf. Ps. 139: 8). I could not therefore exist, could not exist at all, O my God, unless Thou wert in me. Or should I not rather say, that I could not exist unless I were in Thee from who are all things, by whom are all things, in whom are all things? (cf. rom. 11: 36) Even so, Lord; even so. Where do I call Thee to, since Thou art in me, or whence canst Thou come into me? For where outside heaven and earth can I go that from thence my God may come into me who has said, I fill heaven and earth? (cf. Jer. 23: 24)”<sup>41</sup>

St. Augustine lauds the protection and the eternal providence of God that took care of him since his infancy. In this context, he speaks about “God, who gavest life to the infant.”<sup>42</sup> He describes further his early life in which God had no place. At the end of that description, Augustine concludes: “Such was my life! But was it life, O my God?”<sup>43</sup> The answer is obviously negative. However, continues Augustine, “even as a boy I had heard of eternal life promised to us through the humility of the Lord our God.”<sup>44</sup> This worked like a call in the soul of St. Augustine. The theme of seeking for God and the happy life promised to God’s followers is

<sup>40</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, II, 2 in NPNF 101, p. 46.

<sup>41</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 12, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, III, II, 4, p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI, 17, p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XX, 29, p. 208.



dominant in *Confessions*. Augustine asks himself: “How, then, do I seek Thee, O Lord? For when I seek Thee, my God, I seek a happy life.”<sup>45</sup> For Augustine “a happy life is not visible to the eye, because is not a body” and cannot be experienced in a bodily way.<sup>46</sup> The happy life means “to rejoice unto Thee, in Thee, and for Thee; this it is, and there is noother.”<sup>47</sup> Rejoice in God “is the only happy life.” A happy life is “joy in the truth. For it is in Thee, who art <the truth>”<sup>48</sup> Augustine describes the “human life” which means for him in this context life without God or empty of God as not being “real life”,<sup>49</sup> but a “miserable life”, full of corruption.<sup>50</sup>

In his reflections on the Holy Trinity, Augustine names it “fountain of life”<sup>51</sup> and calls his God “my God, my life, my holy joy.”<sup>52</sup> Jesus Christ who is at the same time God and man is an efficacious mediator between God and man. He is the one who “had power to lay down His life and power to take it again” (cf. John 10:18).<sup>53</sup> Jesus Christ is “the Word of Life” above us in which we as Christians could appear as “lights in the world.”<sup>54</sup> The word of God is “the fountain of eternal life”<sup>55</sup> and is “holly” having “the word of life”. At the end of *Confessions*, the seventh Day is presented as the image of “eternal life”.

In *The City of God*<sup>56</sup>, which is the most well-known work of St. Augustine, once meet expressions like “this life”, “next life”<sup>57</sup> or “future life”<sup>58</sup> applied both to Greek-Roman pagan religions as well as to

<sup>45</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XXI, 30-31, p. 209.

<sup>46</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XXII, 32, p. 210.

<sup>47</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XXIII, 33, p. 210.

<sup>48</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XXVIII, 39, p. 212-213.

<sup>49</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XXXVI, 59, p. 222.

<sup>50</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII, IV, 5, p. 275; XIII, XVI, 19, p. 283.

<sup>51</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, IV, 4, p. 47; See similar expression in the same book of *Confessions*: XIII, 20, p. 54: “O God, my life”; XVII, 27, p. 58: “O my true Life, my God”; XVII, 26, p. 207: “O Thou my life, my God”; book XI, XXV, 34, p. 266 “O my God, life of poor”.

<sup>52</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XLII, 69, p. 228.

<sup>53</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XVIII, 22, p. 284.

<sup>54</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, CXXI, 31, p. 290. The same expression appears also in Letter XXVII, 4, p. 351.

<sup>55</sup> I used here the English translation of *The City of God* realized by Philip Schaff, NPNF vol. 102.

<sup>56</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, I, 9, p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, I, 12, p. 25.

<sup>58</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, I, 29, p. 39.

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Christianity. Servants of God named also “family of God” do not “refuse the discipline of this temporary life, in which they are schooled for life eternal.”<sup>59</sup> In St. Augustine’s understanding, “gods took no steps to improve the morals of their worshipers” while the true God, the God of Christians, prepares his followers for a “virtuous life.”<sup>60</sup> While the Romans did not receive a real “rule of life” from their gods,<sup>61</sup> who did nothing to reform the “corrupt life” of their worshipers,<sup>62</sup> the precepts of “Christian religion” promote a “just and virtuous life.”<sup>63</sup> “Incomparably more glorious than Rome, is that heavenly city in which for victory you have truth; for dignity, holiness; for peace, felicity; for life, eternity.”<sup>64</sup> It is a “city in which alone eternal and blessed life can be enjoyed;”<sup>65</sup> a “country where are eternal life and felicity”<sup>66</sup>

Augustine tries to prove that the vicissitudes of this life are depending not on the favor or hostility of demons, but on the will of the True God. Augustine believes in a foreknowledge of God:

“we conclude that there are no efficient causes of all things which come to pass unless voluntary causes, that is, such as belong to that nature which is the spirit of life. For the air or wind is called spirit, but, inasmuch as it is a body, it is not the spirit of life. The spirit of life, therefore, which quickens all things, and is the creator of everybody, and of every created spirit, is God Himself, the uncreated spirit.”<sup>67</sup>

Augustine brings a series of arguments to demonstrate that the gods of the pagans never inculcated holiness of life.<sup>68</sup> As followers of God of

<sup>59</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, II, 4, p. 47.

<sup>60</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, II, 16, p. 57.

<sup>61</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, II, 22, p. 64.

<sup>62</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, II, 19, p. 60.

<sup>63</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, II, 29, p. 72.

<sup>64</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, III, 17, p. 88.

<sup>65</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, V, 18, p. 152. See also V, 19, p. 153.

<sup>66</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, V, 9, p. 140.

<sup>67</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God* II, 6, p. 48.

<sup>68</sup> “It is not without significance, that in no passage of the holy canonical books there can be found either divine precept or permission to take away our own life, whether for the sake of entering on the enjoyment of immortality, or of shunning, or ridding ourselves of anything whatever. Nay, the law, rightly interpreted, even prohibits suicide, where it says, “Thou shalt not kill.” This is proved especially by the omission of the words “thy neighbor,” which are inserted when false witness is forbidden: “Thou

life, Christians are not allowed to commit suicide in any circumstances.<sup>69</sup> A “true religion may not be deserted on account of the urgencies of the present time, but may be more clung to in most confident expectation of eternal life.”<sup>70</sup> “God “is to be worshipped with a view to eternal life... everyone should be a Christian for the sake of eternal life.”<sup>71</sup>

Augustine summarize the first five books of *The City of God* as following: “In the five former books, I think I have sufficiently disputed against those who believe that the many false gods, which the Christian truth shows to be useless images, or unclean spirits and pernicious demons, or certainly creatures, not the Creator, are to be worshipped for the advantage of this mortal life, and of terrestrial affairs...”<sup>72</sup> He announce also that the rest of the monumental *City of God* is dedicated to the demonstration that it is a vain to “hope that eternal life” could come from the pagan gods.<sup>73</sup> The God of Christians is described as “the true God, the giver of eternal life”<sup>74</sup> and the Christians as “people of God to whom the mystery of eternal life was revealed.”<sup>75</sup> The pagan gods are unable to bestow eternal life as they cannot afford help with respect to the temporal life:

“Moreover, how can he give eternal life who cannot give happiness? For we mean by eternal life that life where there is endless happiness. For if the soul live in eternal punishments, by which also those unclean spirits shall be tormented, that is rather eternal death than eternal life. For there is no greater or worse death than when death never dies. But because the soul from its very nature, being created immortal, cannot be without some kind of life, its utmost death is alienation from the life of God in an eter-

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shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” Nor yet should anyone on this account suppose he has not broken this commandment if he has borne false witness only against himself. For the love of our neighbor is regulated by the love of ourselves, as it is written, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” (*The City of God*, I, 20, p. 32-33). In the next chapters of the first book of his *The City of God* Augustine make constant efforts to reject the position of Romans regarding suicide.

<sup>69</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, V, 24, p. 158.

<sup>70</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, V, 25, p.159- 160.

<sup>71</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, VI, Preface, p. 162.

<sup>72</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, VI, I, p. 164.

<sup>73</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, VI, 4, p. 167.

<sup>74</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, VI, 11, p. 179.

<sup>75</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, VI, 12, p. 180.

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nity of punishment. So, then, He only who gives true happiness gives eternal life, that is, an endlessly happy life.”<sup>76</sup>

The pagans use to worship Vitummus the god who “confers life” or “the life giver” (vivificator)<sup>77</sup> the Christians worship only one God who is the creator of everything and the Life-Giver: “We worship God, - not heaven and earth, of which two parts this world consists, nor the soul or souls diffused through all living things, - but God who made heaven and earth, and all things which are in them; who made every soul, whatever be the nature of its life, whether it have life without sensation and reason, or lifewith sensation, or life with both sensation and reason.”<sup>78</sup>

God is not only the life-giver, but also the life-blessor. For obtaining a “blessed life”, man needs the mediation which is possible to be accomplished only by Christ alone.<sup>79</sup> All the saints, both under the law and before it were justified by faith in the mystery of Christ’s Incarnation.<sup>80</sup> The Incarnated Son of God promised “life eternal.” St. Augustine witnesses the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ as being the “universal way” of salvation for the entire human kind by quoting the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel, especially “In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”<sup>81</sup> Augustine highlights other Biblical quotations which emphasize the universal character of Christ’s salvation: “And hence, when our Saviour, so long after, had taken flesh of the seed of Abraham, He says of Himself, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14, 6);<sup>82</sup> Jesus Christ “He is in Himself living, for He has life, and is Himself the Life which He has.”<sup>83</sup> In conclusion, for Augustine, the “highest good is God”<sup>84</sup> and „life eternal is the supreme good.”<sup>85</sup> We can conclude that for Augustine, God and life to whom “eternal life” is an indispensable part, are inseparable. Therefore God is for him “God of life.”

<sup>76</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, VII, 3, p. 183.

<sup>77</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, VI, 29, p. 207.

<sup>78</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, IX, 17, p. 255-260.

<sup>79</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, IX, 25, p. 283-285.

<sup>80</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, X, 29, p. 289-290.

<sup>81</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, X, 32, p. 293-294.

<sup>82</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XI, 10, p. 304.

<sup>83</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, VIII, 8, p.

<sup>84</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, IX, 4, p.

<sup>85</sup> I used here the English translation of *On Christian Doctrine* realized by Philip Schaff, NPNF vol. 102.

*On Christian Doctrine*<sup>86</sup> which is „a compend of exegetical theology to guide the reader in the understanding and interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures, according to the analogy of faith,”<sup>87</sup> the theme of life is approached from several perspectives. St. Augustine speaks about “this life of mortality” which implies that “we” as human beings “wandered far from God” and therefore in order to have a real life, we need “to return to our Father’s home.”<sup>88</sup> God is a living God, is life itself. Everyone who stays in God is far away from death and conduct a life in beauty, being ready for eternal life:

“And since all who think about God think of Him as living, they only can form any conception of Him that is not absurd and unworthy who think of Him as life itself; and, whatever may be the bodily form that has suggested itself to them, recognize that it is by life it lives or does not live, and prefer what is living to what is dead; who understand that the living bodily form itself, however it may outshine all others in splendor, overtop them in size, and excel them in beauty, is quite a distinct thing from the life by which it is quickened; and who look upon the life as incomparably superior in dignity and worth to the mass which is quickened and animated by it. Then, when they go on to look into the nature of the life itself, if they find it mere nutritive life, without sensibility, such as that of plants, they consider it inferior to sentient life, such as that of cattle; and above this, again, they place intelligent life, such as that of men. And, perceiving that even this is subject to change, they are compelled to place above it, again, that unchangeable life which is not at one time foolish, at another time wise, but on the contrary is wisdom itself. For a wise intelligence, that is, one that has attained to wisdom, was, previous to its attaining wisdom, unwise. But wisdom it self never was unwise, and never can become so. And if men never caught sight of this wisdom, they could never with entire confidence prefer a life which is unchangeably wise to one that is subject to change. This will be evident, if we consider that the

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 515.

<sup>87</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 4, p. 523.

<sup>88</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 8, 8, p. 525.

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very rule of truth by which they affirm the unchangeable life to be the more excellent, is itself unchangeable: and they cannot find such a rule, except by going beyond their own nature; for they find nothing in themselves that is not subject to change.”<sup>89</sup>

Incarnation is perceived as the way “to show us a pattern of holy life in the form of our own humanity”<sup>90</sup> but also to “restore us to life” through Christ’s mortality.<sup>91</sup> It is not only that Christ “laid down his life for us”, but also he gave us His Holy Spirit to be able to overcome “the adversities of this life”.<sup>92</sup> Christians are called to put away “former habits and former ways of life”<sup>93</sup> and do the good in order to receive “eternal life.”<sup>94</sup> A “happy life” on earth is possible only in enjoying God and such a life is a foretaste of “eternal life.” St. Augustine introduces the following explanation:

“For He says: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life;” that is, by me men come, to me they come, in me they rest. For when we come to Him, we come to the Father also, because through an equal an equal is known; and the Holy Spirit binds, and as it were seals us, so that we are able to rest permanently in the supreme and unchangeable Good. And hence we may learn how essential it is that nothing should detain us on the way, when not even our Lord Himself, so far as He has condescended to be our way, is willing to detain us, but wishes us rather to press on; and, instead of weakly clinging to temporal things, even though these have been put on and worn by Him for our salvation, to pass over them quickly, and to struggle to attain unto Himself, who has freed our nature from the bondage of temporal things, and has set it down at the right hand of His Father.”<sup>95</sup>

The third book of *On Christian Doctrine* contents an exegesis of the biblical text “The letter killeth, but the spirit give the life” (II Cor. 3, 6). Linked to this is “the purity of life” which “has reference to the love of

<sup>89</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 11, 11, p. 525.

<sup>90</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 14, 13, p. 526.

<sup>91</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 15, 14, p. 526.

<sup>92</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 19, 18, p. 527.

<sup>93</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 21, p. 527.

<sup>94</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 22, 20, p. 527. For the use of „happy life” see also 37, 35, p. 552; 39, 58, p. 553.

<sup>95</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, III, 10, 14, p. 560.

God”<sup>96</sup> and leads to “eternal life.”<sup>97</sup> Eucharist plays a central role, both for “the purity of life” and for “eternal life”.

### Concluding Remarks

1. The theme of life in relationship with God is central in the patristic writings we briefly analyzed here. Human life is genuinely understood as being God’s gift. In patristic understanding, life is not limited at its biological existence but is intimately linked with salvation and eternal life. “God of life” is equally understood from a Trinitarian and Christological perspective. A pneumatological perspective is also not missing, yet it is not well developed.

2. Another important dimension of life understood as God’s gift is the ethical dimension. Authentic life means permanent contact with God which is maintained also through observing God’s commandments. Eternal life is reachable only by following God’s will, as discovered to human being by revelation.

3. It is our duty to further reflect St. Augustine’s thoughts on life in relationship with Greek-Roman pagan religions. Even if his reflections are mainly polemical, they could be inspiring for the inter-religious dialogue and cooperation today, especially for the context of Asia, where the Busan Assembly is going to take place.

4. An important dimension of our reflection on “God of Life” is the eschatological one. This dimension is usually undermined or even forgotten today, yet it was clearly highlighted in the patristic writings analyzed here. A closer reflection on ecumenical themes from a Patristic perspective shall strengthen their eschatological dimension, which is urgently needed for an authentic seeking of Christian unity.

5. There is the hope of the author of this modest article that this research will stimulate a more coherent use of Patristic writings in ecumenical reflections.

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<sup>96</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, III, 11, 17, p. 561.

<sup>97</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, III, 16, 24, p. 563.