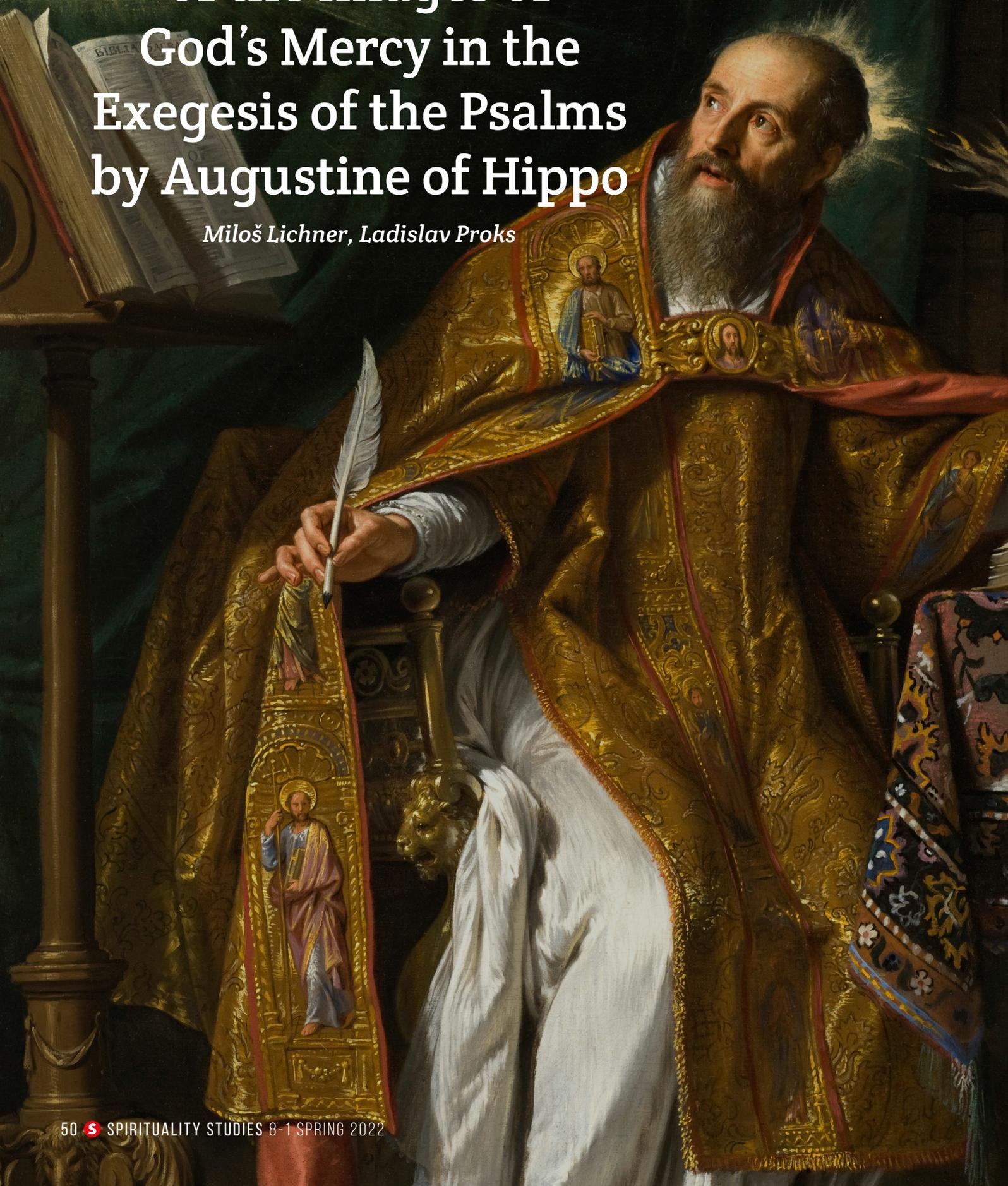


VERITAS

# Selected Aspects of the Images of God's Mercy in the Exegesis of the Psalms by Augustine of Hippo

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**The study deals with selected aspects of the images of God's mercy in the homiletic exegesis of the biblical Book of Psalms (Lat. *Enarrationes in Psalmos*) by early Christian author Augustine of Hippo (354–430). This is a continuation of a project of exploration of his homilies that have not yet been sufficiently examined. Augustine uses homiletic commentaries to the Psalms as an effective and comprehensible tool of communication for the transmission of fundamental spiritual impulses regarding God's mercy to the audience. On the basis of various topics, we present the images that Augustine paid the greatest deal of attention to: Images of Christ as a good Samaritan, as a physician, the Gospel image of a hen and its wings, the image of the Eucharist as an extension of the Incarnation of God's Son and finally the perception of God's mercy in relation to the image of the Eucharist as a milk for children. These images have not yet been explored from the point of view of the images of God's mercy in Augustine's commentaries to the Psalms.**

## 1 Introduction

Augustine focused on the topic of God's mercy in his systematic works as well as in his sermons and commentaries to the books of the Bible. The online CAG database shows that 934 out of 2,744 references to *mercy* mentioned in his works can be found in his homiletic commentaries to the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament – *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. One-third of all references come from Augustine's great collection of sermons. Several Latin terms found in the textual tradition represent only synonymic diversity: *exposition, sermo, enarratio, tractatus* (Augustinus 1911 in CSEL 57, 453). Unlike his *sermons for believers* (Lat. *sermones ad populum*), which do not represent systematic exegesis of any concrete biblical book but only preaching related to a given liturgical text during the Christian liturgy, Augustine's homiletic commentaries to the Psalms and the Gospel of John take the form of systematic exegesis (Mohrmann 1954, 97–107). In our study we provide an analysis of the topic of God's mercy in this complete and most extensive work of Augustine of Hippo.

Literary corpus of *Enarrationes* consist of 205 sermons to the Psalms. The related commentaries were written between the years 392 and 422 (Fiedrowicz 1997, 20). There are Psalms to which Augustine wrote only one sermon, and there are others with two or three sermons. However, we can also find an exception in the corpus of 32 sermons to Psalm 118 (nowadays Psalm 119; Andoková *et al.* 2019, 35). Some homiletic commentaries to the Psalms were written as sermons and preached by Augustine, but there is also another part consisting of sermons dictated according to the wishes of his friends (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 40, 1664). Sermons represented a crucial and most important means of communication for Augustine, through which he presented fundamental thoughts on the spiritual richness of Christianity. Augustine presented not only literary but also spiritual exegesis, because the entire Sacred Scripture, including the Psalms, speaks about the mystery of the merciful love of Jesus Christ towards his Church (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 39, 1111). Augustine often used symbolical images (Poque 1984), which have not been explored from the point of view of God's mercy in homiletic commentaries to the Psalms mentioned above; therefore, we decided to focus on them in our study.

We start with an explanation of the methodology and the author's perception of mercy. Afterwards, we focus on an analysis of the most significant images of God's mercy, through which the sermonizer communicated the crucial content of Christian spirituality.

## 2 Methodology

In the past, scholars used to give preference to Augustine's systematic tractates, while his sermons were seen only as sources of secondary significance. In modern times, however, sermons are considered to be essential spiritual-theological material. According to Augustine, preaching was one of the tools used by God to spread his Word and to lead believers into spiritual adulthood, ensuring their maturity in the area of comprehension of faith. The theologian of Hippo often used sermons to address the most serious spiritual and theological problems of his time. Christine Mohrmann affirms that Augustine merged theological knowledge with spiritual experience in his sermons (Mohrmann 1961, 42). As we have already pointed out, we have limited the studied corpus to the commentary to the Psalms. We have explored the sermons in a synchronous way, which means the reading of a particular sermon in its final version as a literary and theological text within the closed corpus, because any implementation of chronological procedure is impossible in most cases. We use a hermeneutic method of so-called "emerging topics", which allows us to avoid the scholastic approach within which the texts are usually approached with prearranged spiritual-theological theory and the work consists of mere effort to confirm it. The method we have chosen is based on a holistic and continuous approach to all texts, where relevant thoughts and topics emerge from reading the text, and the frequency of their appearance is directly associated with their weight and importance. The advantage of this method lies in the fact that the topics and their relevance are substantiated by the text itself, without any attempt of readers to push through their own interest and ideas (Borgomeo 1972, 16–17).

### 3 God's Mercy

The term *miser cordia* has been documented in classic Latin with semantic enrichment under the influence of the Sacred Scripture (Pétre 1938, 384). God is presented as merciful, and we find many expressions related to mercy in the Psalms. Christ declared that mercy is one of the main attributes of God (Luke 6:36 and Matthew 5:7). Augustine generally understands mercy as an expression of God's mercy towards people. It is the initiative of God to protect humans from poverty and enable them to participate in God's life, in the resurrection of Christ. He explains that *mercy* (Lat. *miseri cordia*) actually consists of two terms: *misery* (Lat. *miseria*) and *heart* (Lat. *cor*): "Who would not know that the word *mercy* means one's feeling of misery as a result of compassion with someone else's misery." (Augustinus 1992 in CSEL 90, 56). The life of Christ, his redeeming death on the cross and his resurrection are thus seen as the greatest sign of God's mercy for man (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 280). Augustine uses several images for introducing God's mercy in Christ (*Enarratio in Psalmum 90*): rock, lion, lamb, bull, good Samaritan, physician, and hen. Naturally, each of these images has a certain interpretational value, but without any special emphasis that would lower the value of any other image: "If Christ was a true rock, he would not be a lion, and if he was a lion, he would not be a lamb: but he is the lion [Revelation 5:5] and the lamb [John 1:29] and the rock [Acts 4:10–11] at once; he is also the bull and any other similar identity, because he is not rock, lion, lamb nor bull in the literal sense. He is Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of all people. The above denominations represent only metaphorical, not real images of Christ." (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 39, 1285). The CAG database of Augustine's texts confirmed that good Samaritan, physician, hen and its wings, Eucharist as an extension of the Incarnation of God's Son and as a milk for children are among the most frequent images. They will be analyzed to understand Augustine's way of communication of fundamental content of Christian spirituality regarding God's mercy for sinful man.

### 4 Good Samaritan

Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke (10:30–37) is probably the best-known image. This parable became even more actual after Pope Francis used it in his last encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, which is practically based on the exegesis of St. Augustine, influenced by St. Ambrose or Origen (Kulisz *et al.* 2021, 180–190).

Let us recall that in the second *Enarratio* to Psalm 30, Augustine offers Christological-soteriological explanation of events, clearly identifying Christ with Samaritan who demonstrated his mercy on mankind (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 197). In Origenian line he interconnects Hebrew name for Samaritan *šōmrōn* with other Hebrew term *šōmer* – "guardian" from Psalm 121:4 (Roukema 2004, 63–64). Hence, Augustine identifies Samaritan with *guardian* and in *Enarratio 68* he clearly states: "Samaritan means guardian in Latin, but who is the guardian if not our Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ? He was raised from the dead and dies no more [Romans 6:9], the guardian of Israel never slumbers nor sleeps [Psalm 120:4 LXX; nowadays Psalm 121:4]." (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 39, 925).

Augustine, as well as tradition on which he based his teaching, were convinced that Christ rightfully saw himself as Samaritan. Augustine, just like Origen before him, always sought the relation between the verses from the Gospel of John 8:48–49 and the Gospel of Luke 10:30–37 (Augustinus 1954 in CCSL 36, 373). In the Gospel of John, Christ is accused of being Samaritan and being possessed. Augustine recalls that Christ denied the latter (being possessed), but he did not deny that he was Samaritan. Augustine believes that this way he might have hinted that he considered himself to be Samaritan or *guardian* (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 197).

In the commentary to the longest Psalm 118 (nowadays Psalm 119) Augustine introduces a new aspect of the perception of Samaritan. In *Enarratio 15* he comments on the verse 54 of the Psalm and retells the story of Samaritan in anti-Pelagian spirit (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 40, 1713) to emphasize that Christ not only took care of a wounded man but installed him in a new situation where he can perform God's deeds of justice, clearly underlining God's redeeming work. Commentary to just *regulations* (Lat. *iustificaciones*) can be found in earlier *Enarratio 6*, where Augustine writes that it's not the words but the deeds of justice, i.e., deeds of the righteous commanded by God. They are described as divine although we are the ones who perform them, because we perform them only thanks to the gift of mercy granted to us by God (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 1679).

## 5 Physician

Similarly to previous image of good Samaritan, the image of Christ – divine physician has been interpreted from various points of view. In *Enarratio* 18 Augustine explains why we needed heavenly physician and his deeds. By sickness he means pride and the whole plan of redemption revolves around this topic: “*Because of this vice, because of the great sin of pride, God came in humility. This great sin is the reason, this horrible sickness of souls that made the almighty physician descend from heaven and become the servant. This sickness that exposed him to disdain and hang him on the wood. We needed such a strong medicine to cure this swell.*” (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 112).

Hence, Augustine sees the Incarnation as a medicine for fallen man who bears the consequences of the original sin (Urbančok 2021, 52). There are several Psalms dealing with the topic of physician, but *Enarratio* 50 (penitentiary Psalm; Andoková *et al.* 2021, 45) is the most obvious. God’s mercy mentioned by the psalmist is nothing else than a medicine given to us by the divine physician: “*Have mercy on me, says David, according to your mercy. Heal my big wound with the power of your medicine. My evil is great, but I find the refuge in the Almighty. Such a lethal wound would lead me to desperation if I would not have found such a physician. Have mercy on me according to your mercy, and in abundance of your mercy destroy my sin. To say destroy my sin means to say: have mercy on me, my Lord. Abundance of your mercy has the same meaning as:*

*according to your great mercy. Because your mercy is great, your mercy is abundant, and your great mercy is the source of its abundance.*” (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 602).

Prayer of the psalmist clearly underlines the need of physician’s intervention, his power, and the trust in his help (Dufka 2019, 27–29). Augustine’s interpretation contains the quote from the Gospel of John 8:1–11 regarding the encounter of adulterous woman who was taken to Jesus. The event becomes symbolical, and the woman becomes the image of the sick, the image of misery, poverty. Jesus becomes the symbol of mercy: “*only adulterous woman with the Lord, sick with the physician, great poverty with great mercy remains.*” Physician does not offer punishment but cure for the sickness. Augustine adds that the woman was confused, which – as he believed – was a sign of acknowledging of her sin (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 604). Augustine also mentions hand of the physician in which the psalmist puts his trust: “*He wants all his faults to be washed away, putting his trust in hands of the physician, in his great mercy for which he begged at the beginning of the Psalm: destroy my iniquity.*” (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 610).

## 6 Hen and its Wings

In some of his *enarrationes* Augustine quotes Matthew 23:37 and the image of hen who wants to gather its young under her wings becomes the symbol of the connection between mercy of the Son and humiliation of the Incarnation of the God's Son. In *Enarratio* 58 he writes: "*He became weak to death, he put on the weakness of our body to gather the young under his wings in Jerusalem like hen who becomes little with its little ones.*" (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 736). Augustine emphasizes an interesting fact: hen becomes weak with its weak ones. Hence, his explanation in the commentary to the respective Psalm: "*I am talking about the fact that is known to all those who listen to my word because they often witnessed it themselves: look how her voice deteriorates, her body is covered with bristles, she drags her wings on the ground and her feather keeps falling out; she feels a certain weakness for her young and this kind of weakness emerges from her maternal love.*" (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 736). Augustine calls it maternal weakness: "*Lord gathered all the nations like hen gathers its children, through becoming weak for us. He accepted our body, the body of humanity, by surrendering to the fact that he would be crucified, ridiculed, hung on the Cross, pierced with lance. All of this is a result of maternal weakness, and it does not mean the loss of majesty.*" (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 736).

As Augustine reminds in *Enarratio in Psalmum* 90, fact that hen wants to gather its young under her wings indicates her effort to protect them from enemies. Thus her wings become

a hideaway for her children: "*If hen protects its young under her wings, how much more you will be protected under the wings of God from devil and his angels, from heavenly powers that keep hovering around you like vultures to carry away weak bird.*" (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 39, 1258).

The image of hen, however, evokes other meaning, too. We find it in homiletic commentaries to Psalms, it is a symbol of protection in the image of God's wings. In *Enarratio* to Psalm 16 (nowadays Psalm 17) he interprets the eighth verse "*hide me in the shadow of your wings*", writing that "*by the wall of your love and your mercy you will protect me from enemies who torture me*" (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 93). Mercy is thus introduced in two images – as the wall and the wings, meaning protection in both cases. It is interesting that the word "wall" is used to describe mercy only in this passage and only by Augustine. The image of God's wings is also associated with the theme of rest. Rest relates to words like water, relief, recovery of man. For instance, in *Enarratio* 35 (nowadays Psalm 36) Augustine quotes verses 8–10: "*How precious is your mercy, O God! The children of Adam take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the rich food of your house; from your delightful stream you give them drink, for with you is the fountain of life and in your light, we see light.*" In Augustine's work we find 135 quotations of Psalm 35, mainly verses 8–10.

## 7 Images of the Eucharist as an Extension of the Incarnation

The corpus of commentaries to Psalms offers two more images of God's mercy – the bread of angels and the milk for children, where the Eucharist is spiritually interpreted by Augustine as an extension of the Incarnation of the God's Son.

Every action of God is merciful and anticipates *maior misericordia*, always responding to a *great spiritual misery* of man (Lat. *magna miseria*; Augustinus Hipponensis 1956 in CCSL 38, 604).

In this regard, Augustine develops the theme of the Eucharist as an extension of the Incarnation of God's Son: "*Such is mercy demonstrated to us by God: 'Show us, Lord, your mercy; grant us your salvation'* [Psalm 84:8]. *Grant us Christ in whom we can find your mercy. We shall tell him: Grant us your Christ. He has given him to us, that's true, but still let's tell him: grant us your Christ, because we'll tell him: 'give us today our daily bread'* [Matthew 6:11]. *And what is our bread if not the one who said: 'I am the living bread who came down from heaven?'* [John 6:51]." (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 39, 1167).

Thus, according to Augustine Christ is the mercy of God and the living bread. In everyday reciting of the Lord's prayer and our request for daily bread we do not ask God to provide us only with material bread to satisfy our hunger, but also with heavenly bread, the Eucharist. The Incarnation thus enabled the Eucharist. The bishop of Hippo reminds us in *Enarratio* 130 that Christ, the living bread, is the Word of God in the first place: "*You know that Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Word of God, according to the word of John: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him and without him nothing came to be'* [John 1:1–3]. *Hence, he is the absolute bread, the bread of angels* [Psalm 77:25]. *Behold! The bread has been prepared for you.*" (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 40, 1905).

The passage shows that the bread prepared for man is identified by Augustine as the mystery of the Word of God. To be able to understand this mystery, one must grow spiritually (Dojčár 2019, 46–48). This growth is associated with the image of milk for children. In already mentioned *Enarratio* 130 Augustine describes it in the following way: "*Grow through this milk to arrive to the bread. Are you asking how this milk may help you grow? Start trusting in the fact that Jesus Christ has adapted to your weakness and stick to it strongly.*" (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 40, 1905).

## 8 Maternal Milk for Children

According to Augustine, the Word of God becomes not only the living bread but also the milk through Incarnation. In *Enarratio* 30 he described it in the following way: "*[A]nd just like mother who feeds her infant with milk after digesting food that her newborn baby is not able to digest, feeding the infant with her milk containing all that he would get sitting by the table but in a more suitable way because it is given to him through the body of his mother, the Lord came and put on human body to make milk of his wisdom for us.*" (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 197).

The image of milk enables Augustine to relate it with the concept of mercy. In *Enarratio* 30 he speaks about *materna misericordia* in relation with this milk: "*Because you are my strength and my refuge and for your name you will become my guide who will feed me. Not for my merits but for your name, to celebrate you, to prevent me from losing the way, not because I would deserve it. You will be my guide and you will feed me so that I am strong enough to eat the food of angels. Because the One who had promised us heavenly bread fed us with milk and demonstrated his maternal mercy.*" (Augustinus 1956 in CCSL 38, 197).

## 9 Conclusion

Book of Psalms accompanied Augustine during his conversion and subsequent spiritual growth (Augustinus 1981 in CCSL 27, 137). The method used for work with homiletic commentaries to Psalms underlined the essential images of God's mercy through which Augustine communicated spiritual message to his listeners. According to the author, God's mercy is the means through which God leans down to lead man to the full communion with him. The Incarnation of God's Mercy in Christ represents the clearest expression of God's mercy. He is the Samaritan healing people so that they can continue in their spiritual journey towards God. Thus, Christians should not rely on their own achievements, but in humble trust let Christ heal them. God not only cures people; just like hen protecting its nestlings, he protects people during their spiritual pilgrimage. The Eucharist has always

been perceived as a spiritual food on the way of spiritual growth and Augustine could communicate the necessity of its regular ingestion through the images of bread and milk.

Hence, in such an innovative and comprehensible way he used common images known to his audience to present important spiritual themes. It's a part of new reading of early Christian texts marked by the effort to unveil the secret of Augustine's ability to speak to common people and convince them about fundamental accents of Christian spirituality like unconditional and humble trust in God's merciful help that totally rejects human vanity. Augustine's theology is always a *theology of dependence* on God: Man depends on God in everything and exists only within one's relationship with God.

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