



## **Instruments of Connecting: A Phenomenological Study of a Melkite Priest's Online Learning Experiences from an HRD Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

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This study involved a phenomenological inquiry into a Melkite priest's experiences with online learning during the lockdown of 2020. His particular catholic community experienced significant challenges unlike the ones experienced in Latin Rite parishes or Protestant churches because of the geographical rarity of Melkite churches in the Western world. The research involved the case study method, phenomenology, in vivo coding, a semi structured interview, deductive analysis based on the 10 laws of learning acquisition, and the use of confirmation validity. The results generated five insights for scholars to consider from a consultative standpoint: (a) the ancient idea of telos received emphasis in the participant's mind from an ontological perspective, (b) self-motivated learning received the most emphasis for online catechesis, (c) the pedagogical philosophy of education held the most use during the lockdown, (d) passive laissez-faire leadership must change to an active style within the Melkite Church, and (e) the participant insisted on the creation of a virtual interface with the global world as a key for the online delivery of Melkite education. Future research recommendations included multiple types of quantitative analyses and a multiple case study analysis performed on data collected from other Melkite clergy in different locations.

Keywords: phenomenological, Melkite, reliability, online learning, Byzantine, in vivo, virtual, interface, acquisition, Orthodox, catechesis

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The purpose of this study involved a phenomenological inquiry into a Melkite priest's experiences with online learning during the lockdown of 2020. The Melkite Catholic Church represents an eastern rite of the Catholic Church. Its members trace their heritage to the first Christians recorded in Acts 11 in the region of Antioch. However, the Melkites began the geographical transfer of their ancient liturgy and rite to the

Western world during the last 2 centuries. During that time, Melkite clergymen struggled to retain their existing parishioners, especially when the pandemic started.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau of Orthodox Christian Churches, the Eastern Orthodox population shrunk from 816,000 members to 675,000 members during 2020. The Melkite Catholics represented part of that population because they identified simultaneously as both Catholic and Orthodox members. For a particular Melkite parish to survive during the lockdown, the priest required an immediate engagement with online deliveries of divine liturgies and catechetical education. The case study reported his experiences and recommendations he made for the future of the Melkite community as a learning church in a post-pandemic world. Van Manen's (2014) framework of phenomenology provided the basis for framing the interview questions.

The researcher conducted a semi structured interview at the priest's preferred location to gather specific information while allowing the priest to provide his thoughts about related phenomena. After using in vivo coding and deductive analysis based on the laws of learning acquisition by Gilley et al. (2002), five suggestions emerged for researchers to consider: (a) the ancient idea of telos received emphasis in the participant's mind from an ontological perspective, (b) self-motivated learning received the most emphasis for online catechesis, (c) the pedagogical philosophy of education held the most use during the lockdown, (d) passive laissez-faire leadership must change to an active style within the Melkite Church, and (e) the participant insisted on the creation of a virtual interface with the global world as a key for the online delivery of Melkite education.

A major challenge that many clergymen faced during the lockdown involved the lack of support and connections in multiple dimensions of Catholic worship and divine liturgies. Mosavel et al. (2022) wrote, "Social support from family, friends, and others in the social network, including religious communities, is critical to overall health and well-being" (p. 2). This statement suggests that certain social and spiritual aspects of religious experience received neglect during the global lockdown of 2020. Furthermore, Mosavel et al. found that "despite continued engagement with their religious communities, adults participating in worship remotely may have had residual personal, emotional, and instrumental social support needs that remote worship did not mitigate" (p. 1). Mosavel et al. incorporated the use of "a self-reported cross-sectional online survey with 49 items" to assess the experiences of the participants who reported their data (p. 3). Mosavel et al. emphasized the argument that "the COVID-19 pandemic has been a critical public health issue primarily due to its impact, intensity, and unknown duration, and as such, has very direct implications for social and community connectedness and the members' greater sense of well-being" (p. 10).

In another study, the search for the cause of reduced church attendance during the lockdown became the hypothesis for evaluating the learning outcomes for churches and their clerical staff. According to Perry and Grubbs (2022), "Worship attendance during lockdown substantially increased COVID-19 infections for the minority who attended possibly as a form of protest" (p. 8). Therefore, one can reasonably conclude that both parishioners and clergymen faced significant obstacles to keeping their parishes active. This aspect holds value for the Melkite Catholic clergy and their parishioners who faced the epidemic without the strong support systems of other denominations and rites, especially ones who already conducted online teaching and spiritual learning before COVID-19 erupted. Perry and Grubbs argued, "Numerous studies now document how religious belief and behavior were not only influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic but how religion itself shaped Americans' behavioral responses and interpretations" (p. 8).

The effects of isolation combined with the perceived threat of the pandemic virus strongly impacted parishioners' motivation to attend in-person and even online deliveries of the Eucharist or catechetical learning among Melkite parishioners during the lockdown. Since the Catholic Eucharist traditionally could not have been delivered physically due to lockdown, clergy and parishioners struggled to believe that they received forgiveness from their priests through the sacraments. This problem affected the Melkite parishioners and their priests for similar reasons, but ones uniquely tied to the growth needs of the Melkite eparchy.

The Melkite Church represents an ancient framework of worship rooted in Byzantine theology and Eastern Orthodox teachings. Their Lebanese community of worship appeared in the western hemisphere during the last 2 centuries, unlike the members of Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestantism who appeared in the western world during earlier periods of the New World discovery. Bueno Da Cruz (2022) stated the following history:

The Greek Catholic community in Lebanon has as its ecclesiastical base the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, or simply Melkite Church. This Church is a Byzantine tradition institution that belongs to the Melkite-Greek Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch, based in Damascus, Syria. This church was part of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch until 1724 when a pro-Catholic branch decided to officially separate and found its church. It became united, linked to Roman Catholicism, and obedient to the pope. On the other hand, it acquired from Rome the right to possess its Patriarch and preserve the Byzantine tradition. (p. 33)

Melkites and many other Eastern Catholic communities experienced significant challenges to growing and spreading their faith and historical value in Western societies before the COVID-19 virus eruption in 2019. Much of their knowledge about Melkite history did not come from public access to reliable literature but from within their

immediate family-owned parishes. This aspect exacerbated the preexisting limitations for the Melkite communities trying to grow in the West. Roccasalvo (1992) indicated, "One cannot speak of the early Church without turning to those Eastern sages who, from the very outset, shaped the destiny of that Church" (p. 15). The lack of opportunities to learn, become aware of, and absorb key knowledge about Melkite Catholicism created a stumbling block for Melkite educators who tried to develop their parishioners' knowledge about their ancient rites and identities. The 2020 lockdown appeared to increase the lack of historical awareness in both Melkite and non-Melkite communities. This problem represented one of the priest's primary challenges during his ministry delivered remotely.

The significance of Melkite Catholicism holds strong value for those unaware of its teachings and influence since the patristic periods of Christendom. The title of a Melkite originated from Slavic and Arabic sources. The word Melkite means *the king's men*, and it refers to the descendants of the early Christians of Antioch recorded in Acts 11 (Faulk, 2007). The Melkites acted as a bridge between the Greek Orthodox Christians and the Eastern Catholics who reunited with Rome because both groups traced their origins to Antiochian and Alexandrian sees. According to Laham (2017), "The Antiochene context has provided a unique and creative context for a renewed ecumenical engagement as viewed through the developing relations between the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and the Melkite Greek Catholic Church" (p. 3). This significance provided a unique set of opportunities and challenges for the Melkite priest in this report from a human resource development (HRD) perspective.

A major challenge for the Melkite priest involved the maintenance of the collective memory that strengthened his Melkite community before the lockdown occurred. His parishioners faced the challenge of upholding their Byzantine traditions within a predominantly Protestant and Roman Catholic city. Their collective memory provided a stronghold of identity when they communed in person surrounded by the Orthodox iconography and Lebanese dialogue. Halbwachs (1950) defined the concept of collective memory as a type of human memory that functions within group contexts by giving rise to particular modes of behavior among group members within a community. Bueno Da Cruz (2022) wrote the following description:

Collective memory is a remembrance or a set of recollections common to a group of human beings in a given social context. It happens as community members seek to transmit an idea of continuity, stability, and balance through these memories even in the face of the passage of time and social changes. In addition, Halbwachs states that collective memory is more than just facts and events that are remembered by members of collectivities, as it has the function of contributing to the existence and survival of each of these groups, whether religious, economic, political, family, or group of friends. (p. 31)

Furthermore, the Melkite priest held an extraordinary presence for his parishioners who faced significant threats of loss of parishioners when he received governmental mandates to perform his liturgies and catechesis virtually. Through online deliveries of worship and catechesis, the priest struggled to influence his parishioners to continue their participation and respect regarding the sacred traditions practiced in Byzantine cultures. According to Meyendorff's (1974) arguments, the Greek philosophical roots of Byzantine theology required an active engagement between clergy and parishioners that may have been significantly ruptured during the forced transition to online deliveries. Both Catholic and Orthodox communities contain collective cultures that influence liturgical worship and catechetical learning. Malina (2005) defined this collectivistic aspect as a trait of communities whose members identify themselves within the contexts of a "tribe, village, family, or ethnic group" (p. 58). Melkite Catholics practice a liturgy that emphasizes tight-knit relationships between parishioners and group identities.

## Method

This research involved the case study method, phenomenology, *in vivo* coding, a semi structured interview, deductive analysis based on the 10 laws of learning acquisition, and the use of confirmation validity to instill transparency between the researcher's findings and the participant's intended meanings. Van Manen's (2014) phenomenology provided the philosophical perspective for designing the questions and interpreting the spoken data. The researcher asked seven questions to guide the recorded discussion.

## Case Study

The researcher chose the case study method to capture rich details about the participant and his views, experiences, and insights. Case studies provided the best opportunities for capturing key details about a person's experiences regarding specific incidents (Yin, 2009). Priya (2021) stated that four attributes signify the value of a case study:

The case study is a research strategy, and not just a method/technique/process of data collection. A case study involves a detailed study of the concerned unit of analysis within its natural setting. Case study research allows the researcher the leeway to use any method of data collection that suits their purpose. The 'unit of analysis' in case study research can be an individual. (p. 95)

This study involved the experiences of a Melkite priest whose parish served most Melkites living in upstate New York. He became a Melkite priest in 2015, which somewhat prepared him to fully perform the Orthodox liturgy with little to no help during times of absenteeism. The priest performed all sacraments of the Catholic Church from a Byzantine approach while also raising seven children, serving his wife, and teaching publicly in his local archdiocese. Most of his seminary education involved

traditional on-site environments of the Roman Catholic Church before joining the Melkite Rite. Before the lockdown, virtual deliveries of the divine liturgy received little emphasis because of the insistence on physical attendance at Catholic parishes for sacramental objectives. The Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, and mainline Protestant communities all emphasized physical attendance in church environments.

### **Semi-structured Interview**

This study involved a semi structured interview for the interviewer to ask specific phenomenological questions while allowing the participant to discuss other topics related to the key questions. This interview approach also allowed the researcher to ask questions unwritten in the study that emerged during the interview. The researcher and participant spent a total of 2 hours and 35 minutes at the participant's residence. The interview included a digital audio recorder and a notebook to record the discussion. This method of data collection received preference because it is "the preferred data collection method when the researcher's goal is to better understand the participant's unique perspective rather than a generalized understanding of a phenomenon" (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1360).

The semi structured interview involved seven questions to capture specific ideas from the participant's spoken statements:

1. What was the priest's experience like during the transition from the regular church environment to virtual/online delivery of liturgy?
2. What was his primary method of liturgical delivery, catechesis, and education to his ministry?
3. What philosophical worldview guided his sense of personal development during the lockdown time of 2020?
4. What was the primary source of education/catechesis provided during that time?
5. What types of learning approaches were advocated online?
6. Did the Melkite priest feel fully equipped to deliver his liturgical and priestly services virtually?
7. What does the priest foresee in the future of higher education for Melkite seminarians in the post-pandemic world?

### **Phenomenology**

The purposes for using the phenomenological method included the intentional design of interview questions and the exploratory pursuit of lived experiences during the 2020 lockdown. Van Manen (1990) stated, "Phenomenological research is" simultaneously "the study of essences and the human scientific study of phenomena" (pp. 10-11). Phenomenology involves a critical and methodological analysis of lived experiences

presented to human beings as mental phenomena. Van Manen (2014) also stated, "Phenomenology orients to the meanings that arise in experiences" (p. 38). This statement means that any object or thought from reflective processes could become a topic of phenomenological inquiry (Van Manen, 2014). Newton (2021) supported this notion: "A phenomenological study involves an exploratory mindset to seek the meanings of a participant's lived experiences" (p. 89).

Some studies have explored the challenge of virtual transitions for priests during the 2020 lockdown by using the phenomenological approach. For example, Hyde and Joseph (2023) used "phenomenology to explore three Christian church leaders' lived experience of community during the COVID-19 restrictions in Melbourne, Australia, focusing on what it was like to be unable to gather physically for Sunday church services" (p. 1). According to Hyde and Joseph, the methodology involved "three insight cultivators – Heidegger's notion of community as a horizon of common concern, Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of community as what is happening to us, and Emmanuel Levinas' notion of community as the experience of alterity" (p. 1). Hyde and Joseph showed "that online experiences proved surprisingly positive for many hence the need to explore how online ministry can be incorporated into the fabric of parish life" (p. 11). The researchers emphasized from the findings that "church leaders are called to re-imagine the concept of community away from the dependence on gathering physically to possibilities of online undertakings in which the core concerns that fashioned the community's original identity can continue to be pursued" (Hyde and Joseph, 2023, p. 11). Furthermore, Hyde and Joseph indicated "a need for church leaders to recognize (or continue to recognize) the possibilities for other ways in which community might be envisaged, rather than lamenting the notion of a community lost" (p. 11).

In another exploratory study, Isetti et al. (2021) used phenomenology "to assess the impact of COVID-19 on catholic pastoral care" (p. 355). The researchers conducted their work "in South Tyrol (Italy) by administering an online survey to parish priests and laypeople with an office within the local Diocese" (Isetti et al., 2021, p. 355). The data analysis revealed the respondents' beliefs "that pastoral activities have slowed down, even though contact with the faithful was kept up through phone or the Internet. The level of digitalization of the parishes has increased; however, the communication was mostly one-way and top-down" (Isetti et al., 2021, p. 355). Furthermore, Isetti et al. concluded, "that attitudes towards digital media are divergent: they are perceived as having the potential to either strengthen or weaken the relationship between the Church and the faithful" (p. 355).

### **In Vivo Coding and Analysis**

In vivo, coding refers to "drawing verbatim from participant language and placing them in quotes" to capture a participant's particular wording (Raskind et al., 2019, p. 6). The purpose for using the in vivo method involved an intention to capture and reveal

the priest's choices of words to describe his experiences as he lived them in relationship to the structured questions and his reflections on the learning needs of Melkites in the post-pandemic world. This method best fits the purposes of the study because the method enabled the interviewer to gather profound insights into the participant's thoughts and experiences during the lockdown (Saldana, 2013).

### **Confirmation Validity**

The researcher verified the interpretations of the data with the participants for the purpose of confirmation validity. The participant approved the findings via direct interaction with the researcher after he reviewed the report. Kirk and Miller (1986) contended that this type of validity in qualitative analysis involves comparisons between what the researcher reported as valuable findings and what the participant intended to convey during the interview. This approach offers a type of verification process in qualitative analysis because the interpretations can become significantly subjective if they lack confirmation from the participant. Morse et al. (2002) stated, "The mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring reliability and validity and, thus, the rigor of a study" requires a type of confirmation or verification in a qualitative study (p. 14).

### **HRD Laws of Learning**

Gilley et al. (2002) wrote "ten laws of learning acquisition" that the interviewer applied to this study (p. 320):

1. Law of learning philosophy;
2. Law of needs identification;
3. Law of the learning climate;
4. Law of the learning agent;
5. Law of the adult learner;
6. Law of the language;
7. Law of program design;
8. Law of the instructional process;
9. Law of the learning process; and
10. Law of review, application, and evaluation. (pp. 320-347)

The law of learning philosophy states that most educators hold "preferences, orientations, and perceptions of how adults learn" and that these preferences represent philosophies about how others ought to learn (Gilley et al., 2002, p. 321). This statement indicated that the participant in this study held some assumptions about adult learning and spiritual maintenance before the lockdown, and perhaps he maintained them during the lockdown while delivering his liturgical services virtually.



The law of needs identification states that proper ways of recognizing learning problems exist (Gilley et al., 2002). The process regarding how one assesses the learning needs significantly influences the results of a learning intervention. The participant in the case study needed an assessment of his parishioners' learning needs including his own during the lockdown to strategically guide his members through the unforeseeable future. Proper methods of acquiring knowledge of those needs required attention during that critical time.

The law of the learning climate states that "the atmosphere results from the teaching techniques used by the teacher and from the behavior and interaction between the teacher and students" (Anastasios, 2020, p. 2). A learning atmosphere requires a safe and welcoming environment where the educator and learners engage each other in respectful, democratic ways. In the case study, the learning climate included the actions and behaviors of the Melkite priest and his parishioners from both a liturgical and educational perspective.

The law of the learning agent states that "the learning agent is what the learning agent knows" and that what "the agent knows, he or she must teach" (Gilley et al., 2002, p. 330). The leader of learning must have a definite knowledge base of truths and believe that his or her truths have generalizable value. The recipients of those truths experience confidence and an increased desire to possess more knowledge of the particular topics of delivery.

The law of the adult learner states that "the direction of the mind upon some object requires attention" (Gilley et al., 2002, p. 333). In essence, the adult learner requires an approach to learning rooted in andragogy rather than pedagogical models. The concept of andragogy indicates that adult learners require approaches uniquely catered toward the value of the applicability of content to their organizational, occupational, or personal lives. Applicability resonates with a sense of meaning to an adult learner when the educator delivers knowledge in a way that respects the preexistent wisdom in the learner's mind (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2011).

The law of the language states that "expression of thought should be in the learners' language with plain, intelligent words common to them" (Gilley et al., 2002, pp. 337-338). This law emphasizes the idea that rules for engagement exist between adult learners and educators that require significant concern for consciousness of word choices. Word use and lengths of expression combined affect the learners' ability to absorb the intended information.

The law of program design states that "all learning activities should be based on an identified set of learning objectives" (Gilley et al., 2002, p. 339). A set of learning objectives indicates a need to create a procedure to determine learning outcomes that

reveal the successful absorption of specific knowledge. Three domains of learning require consideration: (a) psychomotor, (b) affective, and (c) cognitive (Sowell, 2005).

The law of the instructional process states that “material or information should be presented in such a manner that it motivates the learners to become absorbed by it” (Gilley et al., 2002, p. 343). In essence, instructional processes require stimulative traits that influence learners to retain key components. The instruction may or may not include a learning agent or educator.

The law of the learning process states that the final stage of learning acquisition involves “a deep understanding of the memorized words; and a developed ability to apply the information, concept, idea, or skill learned” (Gilley et al., 2002, p. 347). For a full acquisition of the intended material to be learned, the learners require deep penetration of the content in their psyches. The material must cause a type of internal transformation or cognitive change in one's worldview or set of assumptions. The law of review, application, and evaluation states that “knowledge, skills, competencies, and behaviors are best developed when learners have the opportunity to review, rethink, reproduce, and apply each” (Gilley et al., 2002, p. 347).

## Results

Six in vivo codes emerged from the data for analysis. The following phrases received reflection and deductive analysis with the use of the 10 laws of learning acquisition: (a) “the importance of philosophy and Aristotle's ‘Telos’, (b) “indispensable value of subsidiaries and physical contact,” (c) “self-motivated learning (not fully equipped to deliver online liturgies or catechesis),” (d) “needs tools designed for the direction that yields good fruit,” (e) “all students are academically inclined,” and (f) “conversations about online delivery are needed.”

## Discussion

Based on these data, several takeaways appeared that HRD specialists, catechetical agents, and clergy could use. The first point states that the ancient idea of telos “has ontological priority” in the participant's mind (Hauskeller, 2005, p. 4). The priest emphasized the importance of finding final causes rather than satisficing to avoid challenging a final authority. During the 2020 lockdown, the priest struggled with a perceived lack of support from his eparchy regarding critical inquiry of authoritative claims about the COVID threat. To maintain a healthy sense of balance and create an outspoken voice for those who disagreed with the lockdown approach, the priest influenced his online parishioners to practice a mindful type of rebellion that both respected government decisions but also allowed alternative options for consideration so that several domains of human life could thrive amid seclusion and disconnection.

The second point indicated that self-motivated learning received the most emphasis for online catechesis because the priest did not receive full development in conducting online liturgies or catechesis, especially from a Melkite perspective. Although the Latin Rite Church already prepared online deliveries before the pandemic, many Eastern Rite churches still lacked the internet infrastructure necessary for conducting online catechesis for their communities. The Melkite Church represents one of them that possesses a growing presence in the North American continent and needs further development of virtual services.

The third point emphasized the fact that the pedagogical philosophy of education received the most use during the lockdown. The organizational perspective conveyed the belief that all learners had an academic inclination to learn even during a major crisis, but the eparchy leaders demonstrated little knowledge about andragogy-based models for educating adult parishioners virtually. The Melkite priest argued that meaningful conversations about online deliveries must take place in the eparchy so that clergy develop more effective methods of delivering liturgies and catechesis in online settings.

A fourth point involved the priest's frustration with hands-off leadership from the eparchy. He argued that passive laissez-faire leadership must change to an active style within the Melkite Church that conveys assertion, courage, and a willingness to defend sacred traditions during a major crisis. An active style of leadership could involve models rooted in Bass's transformational theory, Greenleaf's servant method, Yukl's description of democratic leadership, and Adair's Three Circles Model of action-centered leadership.

The final point conveyed the participant's insistence on the creation of a virtual interface with the global world as a key for the online delivery of Melkite education. He described a metaphor for this creation titled an instrument of connection. The instrumental image included a visionary desire to create a stronger Melkite presence in the world through virtual stimuli and intended tools and resources offered through eparchy-approved web formats. The priest suggested that HRD specialists should contact the senior bishop at the Eparchy of Newton to offer implementations of online instruments and technology for Melkite churches nationwide.

Limitations of this study included a lack of quantitative analysis and the fact that this study involved a single case. To strengthen the rigor and validity, the use of descriptive statistics, conjoint analysis, and regression analysis may offer quantitative support for hypotheses needing measurement in the context of catechetical deliveries online. Multiple case studies in other Melkite parishes could provide further insights that either support the participants' experiences and insights or challenge them.

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