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Antiochian Orthodox Liturgy and Formation of Young Adults: Union with the Lord

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Abstract

This practical theological study considers what the participation of young adults in the Antiochian Orthodox liturgy in Lebanon means for their formation. We distinguish four formational categories: (1) formation through liturgical rituals, (2) formation through education and coaching, (3) formation through the energies of God in the dimensions of beauty, peace, and protection, and (4) formation *into* liturgical lives. The first two categories demonstrate the mutuality of participation and formation. In the third category, the mystical tradition yields an affect, expressed by words such as beauty, peace, and protection. This affect points to the energies of God in which the young people long to participate. This received love of God in liturgy is shared (in a diaconal way) in daily life. However, this liturgical experience remains incomprehensible for those not properly initiated through the channels of youth movements or clubs.

Keywords

Young adults, liturgy, Antiochian Orthodox Church, Orthodox Youth Movement, Lebanon, formation

I. Introduction

Twenty-five-year-old Dany had recently opened a store in Beirut when we interviewed him in the fall of 2022. We had met Dany during leadership training for the Orthodox Youth Movement (OYM) in a Greek Orthodox church. Dany's life was hectic. He tried to participate in the Divine Liturgy every Sunday and mostly entered it just before the sermon started. He found real focus in prayer difficult, he said. That same

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week, we ran into Dany in a monastery in the mountains outside Beirut. If he had questions or concerns, he went to this “peaceful monastery” (his words) to converse with “his spiritual father”—a monk who, as we discovered, focused in his conversations on the great love of God in which we live.

Grace, a twenty-two-year-old biochemistry student, spoke enthusiastically about her leadership in the youth program in the church in Beirut. She taught teenagers the Bible, church history, and liturgy. The program also organized fun group activities. Grace was in her fourth year of studying church music, taking weekly classes. “No, my parents don’t [sing]. But they always encourage me to do this class. I have a beautiful voice, so why not us[e] my voice? And [be] delivering words to people from God in a beautiful way.” Due to Lebanon’s dire economic situation, and the fact that many (young) people were leaving the country in search of brighter prospects, her church could no longer afford a teacher in church music. Therefore, she now had to take the class in another church, which was at a considerable distance from her house.

These two young people and many others are the reason for our research. Our study is on young people in the midst of their formative years, studying, working, forming relationships, and becoming leaders. All respondents in this study are members of a church with a historical and mystical tradition: the Antiochian Orthodox Church. Most of the young adults we examined spoke passionately about their church, its liturgy, and its educational projects, while a few maintained a degree of distance, voicing critical opinions of the hierarchy and aspects of the liturgy. Institutionalized education and spiritual counseling seem to be crucial for their participation. This research is part of a larger project where we investigate the participation of young people in Lebanon in the liturgies of a variety of churches (Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Maronite, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant). Why do they participate, and what insights and experiences do they gain in the process? This study is a practical theological study, focusing on lived religion,¹ lived faith,² or lived theology.³ According to Knut Tveitereid, “The empirical turn in theology has reconstructed the entire field of practical theology by locating the shaping of theology in empirical reality as much as in the world of ideas.”⁴ In this study, we are interested in the empirical reality of the participation of young adults in the Greek orthodox liturgy, and how they interact with this liturgy and learn through experience. So, we focus on their discoveries of meaning⁵ or meaning making.⁶ The central question in this article

1. E.g. Nancy T. Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religions: Contexts and Practices* (New York: NYU Press, 2021).

2. E.g. Gerrit Immink, *Faith: A Practical Theological Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

3. E.g. Knut Tveitereid, “Lived Theology and Theology in the Lived,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, ed. Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022) 67–77, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119756927>.

4. Tveitereid, “Lived Theology”, 67.

5. Bert Roebben, *Theology Made in Dignity: On the Precarious Role of Theology in Religious Education*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 44 (Leuven: Peeters, 2016) 30–31.

6. Robert Graham Kegan, “Making Meaning: The Constructive-Developmental Approach to Persons and Practice,” *The Personnel and Guidance Journal* 58, no. 5 (1980) 373–80.

is: What does participation of young adults in the Antiochian Orthodox liturgy in Lebanon mean for their formation?

We first clarify the domain of our study as well as some central concepts. Next, we provide the methodology. Then, we present the empirical findings. Finally, we answer the central question and discuss our findings.

2. Clarification of Domain and Concepts

In this section, we first describe some characteristics of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, and of the Orthodox Youth Movement in particular. Second, we explain what we mean by liturgical participation and the formation of young people.

2.1. Antiochian Orthodox Church and Liturgy in Lebanon

The Patriarchal See of Antioch is one of the church's oldest Christian centers. It is in Antioch that the "followers" were first called Christian (Acts 11:26). This traditional see, which covers parts of modern Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon, has encompassed a variety of ethnicities and languages and has historically experienced a number of schisms. Today, there are five different patriarchates of Antioch: three eastern Catholic jurisdictions (Maronite, Syriac Catholic, and Greek Catholic), one Oriental Orthodox (Syriac Orthodox), and one Eastern Orthodox. We focus only on the Eastern Orthodox Church, also known as Rūm Orthodox in reference to its historical connection to the Roman empire, or as the Byzantine Church or, more commonly, as the Greek Orthodox Church.⁷ It adheres to the first eight ecumenical councils and was the official church of the Byzantine empire. The Greek (Rūm) Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch stands out today among its historical autocephalous sister patriarchates (Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Constantinople) as the only one with a full Arabic hierarchy and Arabic liturgy.

Early in the twentieth century, it experienced a spiritual revival that has marked it to this day. This revival was the result of the establishment of the Orthodox Youth Movement (OYM) in 1942 in Beirut with the aim of reclaiming the church for the laity and valorizing the Orthodox faith and tradition.⁸ The Greek Orthodox Church in the See of Antioch had suffered stagnation, and its people and hierarchy had for centuries lost touch with its deep meaning of the orthodox faith. Waves of oppression, Ottoman

7. Betty Jane Bailey and Martin Bailey, *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Ḥabīb Badr, Su'ād Abū'r-Rūs Salim, Abū Nahrā Jūzif, and Majlis Kanā'is al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ, eds., *Christianity: A History in the Middle East* (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches Studies & Research Program, 2005); Antoine O'Mahony and Emma Loosley, *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

8. Theodore Pulcini, "Lay Charism and Ecclesial Renewal: The Orthodox Youth Movement Revitalization of the Antiochian Patriarchate," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2013) 177–95; Anon., 1992 – 1942 أنطاكية تتجدد شهادات ونصوص [Antioch in Renewal: Testimonies and Documents, 1942–1992] (Beirut: Al Nour Publishing, 1992).

occupation, and the work of Western missionaries had weakened it gravely. This changed when a few young university students reinvigorated it through the OYM, encouraging liturgical participation, increasing biblical knowledge among the laity, reestablishing monastic life, and refamiliarizing the youth with the patristic writings.⁹

The Orthodox faithful can join the OYM as young as five years old and are accompanied by special groups whose prayer, discussion, and activities are tailored to their needs as they journey into teenage years, high school, university, work, and family life. Though not every Orthodox Christian is part of the OYM, and other groups as well as Orthodox Scouts groups exist in individual parishes, the spirit of the OYM in general makes a pronounced mark on the Antiochian Orthodox Church. We focus mostly on the dioceses of Beirut and Mount Lebanon.

One of the tradition's "distinctive characteristics" is its "sense of living continuity with the Church of ancient times," a sense that "is summed up for the Orthodox in the one word—Tradition."¹⁰ Tradition here includes the Bible, the creeds, the ecumenical councils, the Divine Liturgy, and the writings of the church fathers and mystics.¹¹ It also includes "the service books and Holy Icons—in fact, the whole system of doctrine, Church government, worship, and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages."¹² Added to this are the "numerous unwritten" practices: "Some are embodied forms of piety" such as facing east when praying, making the sign of the cross, fasting, venerating icons, lighting candles, or the breathed Jesus Prayer, while others are unwritten: "Lived elements are simply the cumulative response to the Gospel's call to virtue and holiness: humility, repentance, and love of neighbor."¹³

The Orthodox tradition has a mystical spirituality. It declares God as a mystery that cannot be grasped, holding in himself ambiguity and tension: "unknown yet known, hidden yet revealed."¹⁴ Mysticism can be characterized as an "energetic and eager activity of the soul attempting to reach out after spiritual realities."¹⁵ The Orthodox faithful aspire to participate in the life of God, and even achieve union with God—*theosis*—without becoming God, ontologically speaking.¹⁶ Furthermore, this spirituality revolves around the concept of *philanthropia*, where God is a "lover of mankind" through a love

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9. Riad Mofarrij, "Renewal in the Antiochian Orthodox Church in Lebanon," *Studies in World Christianity* 15, no. 3 (2009) 217–35, <https://doi.org/10.3366/E1354990109000586>.
 10. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Maryland: Penguin, 1976) 203–204.
 11. Badr et al., *Christianity*, 299–314.
 12. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 204.
 13. Gaelan Gilbert, "Eastern Orthodox Tradition," in *Bloomsbury Religion in North America*, ed. Dyron B. Daugherty (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), <http://doi.org/10.5040/9781350971073.008>.
 14. Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995) 21.
 15. Joseph Raya and José de Vinck, *The Byzantine Daily Worship* (New Jersey and Ontario: Alleluia Press, 1969) 11.
 16. This can be further expressed by making a differentiation between the essence of God and the energies of God (Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 21–23). This distinction makes a mystical union between man and God possible: man participates in the divine energies and not in the divine essence (Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 125).

that is “unlimited, boundless, indefinable, inexplicable” and inspires “admiration, amazement, awe and wonder.”¹⁷ This love necessitates presence, and God makes himself present to human beings in three ways: in heaven, in the eucharist, and in his Word.¹⁸

To participate in and to live this union results in purity of the heart, a state seen not as something static but as dynamic and challenging.¹⁹ In Greek Orthodox theology, participation is possible for all, adults and children, young people being seen as full members of the church from their baptism and chrismation.

2.2. Participation and Formation

In this section, we clarify our use of the concept of “participation” and explore the ways in which “formation” is not only an educational concept but also has theological relevance. In the previous section, we have already remarked that participation is used to articulate the relationship between God and humankind. Participation has been an accepted concept in the study of worship since the liturgical renewal in the Roman Catholic Church in the second part of the previous century, emphasizing and encouraging everyone’s (visible) participation in the liturgy, as officially indicated with the terms “full, conscious, active participation.”²⁰ Our focus is not particularly on visible participation but on the motives and stimulating factors driving young adults to participate in the liturgy and their appropriations of liturgical form and content.²¹

The second central concept in this study is formation. Formation is a concept often used in the domain of education in the church, either as a synonym or to emphasize specific learning processes. Its definition varies according to its specific deployment.²² We consider formation to embrace education at its broadest, concerning not merely the acquisition of cognitive knowledge or technical skills but rather the formation of a person on an existential plane. This encompasses values, virtues, and character as well as freedom to make choices.²³ Formation is a process in which individuals as well as broader communities, including society, matter. It is also an important concept from a theological point of

17. Raya and de Vinck, *Byzantine Daily Worship*, 12.

18. Raya and de Vinck, *Byzantine Daily Worship*, 12.

19. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 141–43.

20. Roman Catholic Church, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Rome: The Vatican, 1963), article 14, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents_vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

21. Ronelle Sonnenberg, “Youth Worship in Protestant Contexts: A Practical Theological Theory of Participation of Adolescents” (Dissertation, Protestant Theological University, 2015) 74–77.

22. Jos de Kock and Ronelle Sonnenberg, “Ritual Links Worship and Learning: An Empirical and Theoretical Contribution from the Perspective of Young People Participating in the Lord’s Supper,” *Studia Liturgica* 46, no. 1 (2016) 68–84, at 71.

23. John H. Westerhoff, “Formation, Education, Instruction,” *Religious Education* 82, no. 4 (1987) 578–91; Gert Biesta, “Risking Ourselves in Education: Qualification, Socialization, and Subjectification Revisited,” *Educational Theory* 70, no. 1 (2020) 89–104, <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12411>; Bram De Muynck and Pieter Vos, “Geen vorming zonder transcendentie: De theologische horizon van een breed pedagogisch vormingsbegrip,” in *Mens*

view. A theological reflection on tradition, scripture, and humanity includes reflection on (religious) formation. De Kock and Sonnenberg define religious formation as “the process, either intended or unintended, through which a person develops a relationship with reality in terms of religious knowledge, behaviour, practices, etc.”²⁴ They explain how “the ‘shaping’ function of ritual in worship is comparable to the function of formation, namely: evoking religious learning.”²⁵ Barnard and Wepener also speak of worship as a “learning environment in which we become Christians, through the power of the ritual.”²⁶

In the Christian tradition, trust in God is related to formation, either as formation’s aim or as the process that makes formation possible.²⁷ The meeting with God, participation in his graceful love, creates a new situation that makes learning possible.²⁸ This relational component in Christian tradition is also captured by the notion of *imago Dei*. Humankind has the possibility to be relational, toward God and others, because God himself is relational.²⁹ This remains possible, after the fall of humanity, through Christ. Taking part in liturgy is to be in relation with the Living God, who makes formation possible. This relation is formative in itself. How young adults explore and give meaning to the relationship with God in the liturgy in which they participate attracts our interest, as does the ways in which this liturgical participation interacts (as, of course, it does) with youth’s broader social-religious contexts.

3. Methodology

We conducted a practical-theological study employing ethnographic methods. Over a period of four years (2019–22), we studied a number of liturgical events: vespers, Divine Liturgy, feasts, and other liturgical moments where youth are present. In addition, from 2021, we carefully followed talks and seminars streamed on Facebook and YouTube. We also conducted seven in-depth interviews with Greek Orthodox young adults and one group interview with five young adults. Two additional interviews were carried out with priests and one with a professional youth leader (all in 2021 and 2022). Interviewees were informed by a letter detailing the procedure, data management, and their rights (e.g. to withdraw from the study at any time). Willing participants then signed an informed consent form. The names of persons were anonymized in the transcripts.

Worden: Over de relatie tussen theologie en pedagogiek, ed. Wolter Huttinga and Roel Kuiper (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schippersheijn Motief, 2021) 151–70.

24. De Kock and Sonnenberg, “Ritual Links Worship,” 69.

25. De Kock and Sonnenberg, “Ritual Links Worship,” 73.

26. Marcel Barnard and Cas Wepener, “Reclaiming Space for Learning in Liturgical Contexts: Cracks in the Maxim of the Uselessness of Liturgical Ritual,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 2 (2012) 1–8, at 7.

27. De Muynck and Vos, “Geen vorming zonder transcendentie,” 162.

28. De Muynck and Vos, “Geen vorming zonder transcendentie,” 162.

29. De Muynck and Vos, “Geen vorming zonder transcendentie,” 163.

The interviews were conducted with young Greek Orthodox people (aged eighteen to twenty-seven, and one of twenty-nine) living in Beirut at the time. They were from various socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and regions in Lebanon. We searched for diversity when it came to liturgical commitment. Contact was made with respondents during participant observation and through priests and youth leaders, as well as with university students residing in a Christian college in Beirut. The young people were asked to describe their participation in liturgical moments and their reaction to specific rubrics in the Divine Liturgy, to evaluate their involvement or lack thereof in worship events or spiritual groups, and to describe the context in which they lived. For the sake of confidentiality, we use pseudonyms (abbreviated) in this article. However, it is noteworthy that the names of these young adults often referred to important saints of the Orthodox tradition, like Dimitri, Nicolas, or Irene, or biblical names like Elijah, Daniel, Rachel, or Sarah. The participants were conscious of the connotations of their names and carried them as identity markers.

Both authors are outsiders—we are Protestants, and one of us lives in Lebanon and one in The Netherlands. The data we collected were transcribed and then coded with the software ATLAS.ti, analyzed, and placed against the available knowledge about the Antiochian Orthodox Church for further insight. We coded the data with some main categories pertinent to liturgical settings and formative processes: e.g. “central values” or “significant others” or “education” or “outcomes” or “ritual” or “image of God.” These codes were accorded subcodes such as “central values: humility” or “ritual: chanting.” Finally, we distinguished four formational categories: three are about formation *through* something or S/someone, one about formation *into* something. The four categories are: (1) formation *through* liturgical rituals, (2) formation *through* education and coaching, (3) formation *through* the energies of God: peace, protection, and beauty, and (4) formation *into* liturgical lives. Responses explicitly dealt with living liturgical lives (throughout the year and amidst actual circumstances).

4. Findings

For most respondents, the Greek Orthodox tradition is a rich spiritual heritage to which they proudly belong. Two respondents were hesitant regarding the focus on the Greek Orthodox tradition: in one case due to the negative connotation of sectarianism, and in the second because of an appreciation of ecumenical trends and dispositions. We do not have statistics about the frequency of attendance, but based on the information we have, we would say that those who are members in the Orthodox Youth Movements and Scouts are faithful in their attendance and participation in the liturgical event, although some have had a pause, and other do not always attend the whole Divine Liturgy.

4.1. Formation through Liturgical Rituals

Participation in the divine liturgy meant for most of our respondents developing a relationship with reality in terms of religious knowledge, behavior, and practices, from childhood onward. This participation evokes the understanding of religious learning as

unfolding in a cognitive but also affective manner.³⁰ Partaking in the eucharist, touching the icons, listening to the homily, and fasting were mentioned as important practices. Among the beloved liturgical rituals, chanting and participating in the events of Holy Week stood out as particularly valuable.

The young people interviewed expressed their longing for certain chants and the bliss of possessing such a rich and diverse repertoire of “beautiful” hymns, troparia (single-strophe hymns), kontakia (lengthy metrical sermons), and kanōns (odes or canticles). These monophonic chants of the Byzantine world come to them from as early as the fourth century and are attributed to beloved church fathers such as Romanos Melodos and John of Damascus, both revered Syrian saints. The music itself, though called Byzantine and spread mainly in the Greek-speaking world, is probably based on Hebrew chants and derived from early Syriac liturgies.³¹ This music “is inseparable from liturgy in the Orthodox tradition,”³² and its aim is to reach out to God in a profoundly spiritual way. The emphasis is not on personal performances and the expression of emotions; rather, it is harmonized music for voices, the instrument created by God. At the end of one group interview, two young men and a young woman offered to chant for us. Despite the late hour, the repetitive power cuts endemic to Lebanon, and the long conversation we had just had about the richness of the Antiochian tradition, they clearly felt that by singing for us they were giving us a taste of their beautiful tradition.

Many respondents explained to us that while chanting’s beauty touches them, the chants also afford them the opportunity to understand religion. A twenty-two-year-old woman put it as follows:³³

I: Why did you decide to do this chanting study? It is difficult, right?

Ta: It is difficult, but it is beautiful. [Through chanting] you will know the meaning of what you are believing. For someone who doesn’t know what the Christian religion is, you will understand by the *tarateel* [Arabic for hymns] what is the meaning of religion. So beautifully, and the way they say [perform] it. And the music, it is so beautiful. I feel involved when I am chanting.

30. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Die Christliche Sitte nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche in Zusammenhange dargestellt* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1843) 509–10. We borrow this perspective from Schleiermacher, for whom liturgy consists of expressions of heightened affects and of representational action. The German *Darstellung* originates from the “erregten Gefühl”; *Gefühl* contains within it both affect and consciousness.

31. Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). It is organized in *octechos* or a series of eight *echoi* (modes), and it is still sung strictly vocally (a cappella).

32. Ivan Moody, “Music in the Orthodox Church,” in *The Orthodox Christian World*, ed. Augustine Casiday (London and New York: Routledge, 2012) 531–47, at 531.

33. I = interviewer. For anonymization reasons we used two letters from the name of the respondent.

Another woman (twenty years old) explained chanting's significance as lying not in cognitive knowledge but more in bodily knowledge, through experiencing the "vibe."

- Ra: We actually, when we say our prayers, erm, there are different chants that we say. We, it's like we are creating the sound of instruments with the voice of the chorus. Erm, I think that, the sound that comes out, it's just like divine, magical, very ... It's something very beautiful. And when you are hearing the chorus, erm while sing[ing] the prayers, while chanting, I just feel like erm, you feel the vibe, I, I don't know how to really explain it but, I just loved it, I, I really like ...
- I: Yeah, and you, when you say you feel the vibe, you point to your body. So, you feel it in your body, is that what you mean?
- R1: Yes. Yes, you feel, you can feel it from the bottom of your heart. Your whole body, that you are a part of the divine liturgy. You can feel your entire self.

Another important ritual that we encountered in the respondents' reflections was fasting. The Orthodox tradition recommends between 180 and 200 days of fasting per year, where the faithful practice abstinence from dairy products, eggs, and all kinds of meat. According to Alexander Schmemmann, fasting is "our entrance and participation in that experience of Christ Himself by which He liberates us from the total dependence on food, matter, and the world."³⁴ It is a physical exercise but also a spiritual one centered around God and accomplished through his help. The Great Lent, and in particular Holy Week, was by far the most popular fasting period among our respondents. Many were very serious about fasting, yet for some it was an arena for negotiation, as becomes clear in the following quotation from a nineteen-year-old man:

- I: Is that also part of *your* religious ... habit? Or you don't fast? Which is also possible, of course.
- Di: Usually I ... maybe ... our fasting is about a month. Maybe I do ... a week or two.
- I: Yeah.
- Di: Yes, but not ... I feel it's hard for me ...
- I: Yeah.
- Di: To cope with my studies and fast ...
- I: Yeah.
- Di: Then ... Maybe ... I have headaches, because ...
- I: Yeah. And why do you do the two weeks and not skip it at all?
- Di: Because I feel it's good. It's good for mental health, for remembering what God gave us. It's good to, to fast.
- I: Ok. Yeah. It, it, it brings a kind of focus? Is that how you ...?
- Di: Yes, yes. True.

34. Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974) 93.

Both chanting and fasting are a physical and spiritual task through which young adults are formed. However, a minority of our young people did not feel committed to the classical liturgical rituals. The length of the Divine Liturgy, or its classical language or repetitive nature, provoked their criticism; they would like to see some changes (e.g. shortening the liturgy) or explore other churches (e.g. the Protestant or Maronite Church). That said, the majority of respondents appreciated the characteristics of the Orthodox liturgy and had developed a relationship with what the Divine Liturgy stands for by participating in it, even if making time for participation was a challenge for many, due to school or daily business pressures.

4.2. *Formation through Education and Coaching/Pastoral Counseling*

The majority of respondents were active participants in a church youth group, either the OYM group or the Scout group or some other group. Some were also leaders of younger groups and took part in leadership training teams. Education was a key word in the interviews. One of the priests we interviewed spent a lot of effort on education initiatives. Education in these groups was mainly about knowledge of the Bible, the tradition, and the liturgical rituals. However, it also extended to the hermeneutic questions of how tradition relates to actual lives. A young woman of nineteen explained it as follows:

- I: And the Bible classes, were they about the New Testament and the Old Testament? Or mainly New Testament? Or mainly Old Testament?
- RI: No, it was a mix of both. It depends on the discussion, really. But usually, we focus on the New Testament. And you know, what it is about these lessons is that we each for example, they have this verse that we need to talk about, we try to discover it for our own, formulate our understanding in our own words and then we would share it. So, we learn from each other. And that was pretty much the highlight of it since we get to know each and everyone's point of view on the same verse. Yet we learn the basics about it, if you understand.

Instruction in the educational groups (OYM or Scouts) extends to areas such as liturgical skills. In the tradition of the Scouts, learning how to serve is important as well.

To the importance of these educational groups, we added the importance of spiritual guides. Several of our respondents explained the crucial role of the priests, and two explicitly referred to the monks who provided what we call pastoral counseling or coaching. These priests can function as godfathers—referred to as spiritual fathers—whom the young adults trust. The young people regularly held individual conversations with their priests in which they sought discernment, wisdom, and advice. The young woman of nineteen expressed it thus:

- RI: I have one-on-one sessions with the priest. That is, kind of personal discussions. I ask him about matters that I think about. That is what brings me closer. (...) It makes me want to know more. He clears out the vagueness, the fogginess, the ideas that are not clear. The message and the way he talks to me is what really [matters] to me.

Spiritual guides might be not only people from the community, laypeople, priests, or monks but also saints or significant figures from the past and present. Metropolitan George Khodr, one of the initiators of the OYM, stands out as one such spiritual guide, mentioned by many.

However, young people were sometimes critical when they discovered that the clergy were not familiar with the common lives of youth, for when they ruled from a distance, relatedness was impossible.

This critical attitude toward clergy and hierarchy is not surprising. It is a common theme and one of the reasons behind the establishment of the Orthodox Youth Movement in the twentieth century. There has always been a tension between some Orthodox young people in the OYM and some in the hierarchy, ever since its inception in the 1940s. Today, one finds “a parallel power or energy[,] one among the laity and another among the clergy,” and an “amicable tension” with the hierarchy of the Antiochian Patriarchate remains.³⁵

Those who are committed know that others regard the Divine Liturgy as too long, incomprehensible, and boring. It is education (autodidactic or formal) that has helped them become more dedicated to the Greek Orthodox liturgy.

4.3. Formation through the Energies of God in Beauty, Peace, and Protection

For all the respondents, even those less committed to the Divine Liturgy, participating in the liturgy was about connecting with God. Expressions like “God’s spirit with us,” “embodiment of heaven,” “attachment to the source of God,” “spiritual feeling,” “intimate union with our Lord,” and “God’s protection” articulate this connection. As a woman of twenty-three wrote:

Sh: On Sundays when we come to church, we have in the end of the mass³⁶ [*Litourgia*] one of the mysteries of the Greek Orthodox Church, what we call سر المناولة and it’s also called سر الإفخارستية [Mystery of Eucharistia in the Greek Orthodox Church] in which we participate all, and it’s the most important part of the mass [Arabic: القدّاس الإلهي], the eucharist, or Holy Communion. This is the Mystery where the bread and wine are changed by the Holy Spirit into the true Blood and Body of our Lord Jesus Christ. This gift is distributed to all Orthodox Christians who choose to partake for the most intimate union with our Lord.

This mystical union is experienced first and foremost in the eucharist, the “chief duty” and “supreme dignity.”³⁷

Participating in liturgy creates another world. In fact, one of the respondents said, “It is otherworldly; you will experience that.” Indeed, *Byzantine Daily Worship* describes the

35. Pulcini, “Lay Charism,” 179.

36. As “mass” was the word used in the interviews, we retain this in the quotations, though in the rest of the text we speak about Divine Liturgy.

37. Raya and de Vinck, *Byzantine Daily Worship*, 10.

liturgy so: “The faithful are, as it were, in another world. Around them the saints are wrapped in their icons with [a] mantle of eternity; candles flicker in a thousand hues of light; incense creates a warm atmosphere of prayer, music swells from every corner of the assembled congregation.”³⁸ What the youth describe echoes Saint Germanus of Constantinople’s definition of “the church” as “an earthly heaven in which the supercelestial God dwells and walks about.”³⁹ The OYM relies heavily on the teaching of Alexander Schmemmann who describes the liturgy as: “our entrance into the presence of Christ is an entrance into a fourth dimension which allows us to see the ultimate reality of life.”⁴⁰

Our respondents employed many other words to describe the values and outcomes of participating in the Divine Liturgy. One used the word “calmness,” another “peace”; “safe” was also mentioned, as well as “comfort,” “relief,” “happy,” “beauty,” “love,” “second home,” and the like. These words assumed even more weight when realizing that each and every one of our respondents lived in extremely stressful situations due to the protracted crisis in Lebanon. We summarized these words with the tripartite formulation “beauty, peace, and protection.” These can be overlapping values, but together they express a range of gratifications, satisfactions, and forms of meaning reported by participants. For many respondents, participating in this liturgy created a space in which to experience these values.

First, beauty was an important dimension in the experience of the young people within their liturgy. The entire liturgy was deemed beautiful, but so too were its particular rubrics, its chants (as mentioned in section 4.1), and its icons and rituals. This corresponds with the long-standing emphasis on beauty in Orthodox worship. In his “Theology of Beauty,” Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk states that “encountering and perceiving beauty is a mystical experience, through which a person transcends his/her own boundaries and faces something great and unfathomable and at the same time remarkably joyful, intimate and desirable.”⁴¹ God is beauty, he is the source of beauty, and at the same time beauty leads humans to God. In the Orthodox theology divine beauty is intrinsically linked with “world’s beauty, human beauty and artistic beauty.”⁴² God’s beauty, the archetype,⁴³ is embodied on earth, inside the church where He “dwells and walks about.”⁴⁴

38. Raya and de Vinck, *Byzantine Daily Worship*, 11.

39. Saint Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, Greek text with translation, introduction and commentary by Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984) 57.

40. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973) 27.

41. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, “Theology of Beauty,” in *Holding Fast to the Mystery of the Faith*, ed. Daniel Munteanu and Sorin Şelaru (Leiden: Brill, 2022) 13–18, at 14.

42. Merişor Dominte and Stelian Onica, “The Concept of Beauty in the Orthodox Esthetic and Iconography,” *European Journal of Science and Theology* 2, no. 2 (2006) 11–23.

43. Dominte and Onica, “The Concept of Beauty”, 13.

44. Saint Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, 57.

Peace was a second value identified, one that mostly expressed an inner experience. In the following quote, a young man of twenty-seven contrasted words like comfort, calmness, and peace with the problems and storms in the world. Liturgy as the embodiment of heaven resonated with the reassurance that things will get better:

- Rh: We only had the mass to turn to ... to enjoy its comfort and serenity.
 I: Yeah, serenity is a word that you use ... What does it exactly mean for you when you use serenity?
 Rh: [Sigh]. It means that you know, I'm not, I can be having all the problems in the world, and just enjoying mass, praying, uniting with God, will bring a calm to all the inward storms that I am having and, you know, bring away the clouds and let the sun shine.
 I: Yeah.
 Rh: Regardless of everything. And like you feel that peace within yourself and with peace at the world even.
 I: Yeah. And then this peace is brought to you because of the ... the beauty of the liturgy? Or the depth, or a combination probably?
 Rh: It's, it's, it's brought, you know, it's what the liturgy is, it's erm, just as simple as that. It's all of those things and more.
 I: Yeah. The heaven, the presence of heaven.
 Rh: Exactly. It's the embodiment of heaven, it's like your taste, like your, the closest thing you can get to experiment, experience heaven, and it's, like, you know, the reassurance that things will go, will get better. If not now, then later, and if not later, then with God.

Finally, protection completed our triple formulation. More than beauty and peace, this term contains the notion of safety. Young adults indicated the liturgy as a safe space but also made explicit references to the living God who protects. A woman of twenty-two said:

- Ta: Yes. I need something, silence, a safe place to go to. And that is why I find the church in it. Sometimes when I feel sad, I want to be alone. I am alone at home; I know that he is with me. If I go to church, I also know that he is with me. I consider the church as a safe place to go to.

Beauty, peace, and protection are three ways in which young adults experience the divine energies in the liturgy. They were elevated by these energies from (the struggle of) daily life.

4.4. *Formation into Liturgical Lives*

For most participants, liturgy was not restricted to Sunday's Divine Liturgy or other liturgical moments and rituals. A young woman, of twenty-three, was very outspoken on this point and referred to statements from her priest:

- S: The mass, it is not like we come every day to the church. From my side, I see how you treat people, how you help, how you live like Jesus told us. That is what we

say is a mass. Every Sunday we come to the church, ok, but it is not just like this. We should live our life as Jesus told us.

This attitude corresponds with the principles promulgated by the founder of the OYM, Metropolitan George Khodr, who once said the church is “not to limit its activities to its own places of worship but was to enter into all manifestations of life.”⁴⁵

A central discourse was that of helping others, of love, of serving. Another was that of humility. One of the respondents explained:

Rh: Yes, yes, like, this is a cornerstone in Orthodox liturgy. Like, to talk about humility, the importance of humility, the eminence of repentance and basically the church fathers, if there is anything they unanimously talk about and if there is anything that everyone agrees on, it’s the importance of humility and it’s, how essential it is for the conduct of a proper Christian life.

Living a liturgical life, and formation into it, stems from a certain attitude, but it also relates to daily rituals, like the Jesus Prayer. A young man of eighteen explained:

Di: What I do is not always what I want. [Says in Arabic *Ana el Khati’*], which is “I am wrong.” That is every time. When you go, in the car, to school, university, I always say it for me. That’s for me.

I: And what does it mean?

Di: O, Christ, [Arabic: *erhamni*] I am wrong. (...) I, I’m the one who is wrong [Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner].

I: Ok.

Di: I always sleep better when I say it. There is always the connection, I’m always talking to God. That’s for me.

One of the priests explained how the Jesus Prayer relates to breath, and so to the whole body, as he demonstrated the breathing in (“Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God”) and exhaling (“Have mercy upon us”). The prayer has to find a way within the body, or more specifically in the heart, as suggested by the name of this prayer, the “prayer of the heart.”⁴⁶ This continuous praying searches for stillness (Hesychasm), aiming at union with God.⁴⁷

45. Pulcini, “Lay Charism,” 186.

46. Michael Plattig, “De spiritualiteit van de Orthodoxe kerken,” in *Handbook Eastern Christianity*, ed. Herman Teule and Alfons Brüning (Leuven: Peeters, 2018) 724–38, at 728.

47. Kallistos Ware, *Act Out of Stillness: The Influence of Fourteenth-century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization* (Toronto: Hellenic Canadian Association of Constantinople, 1995) 4–7.

Not all young people connected participation in the Divine Liturgy with daily life. One respondent separated her participation in the Divine Liturgy and her daily life—to her, they are different compartments. Bridging this dichotomy felt by some is one of the purposes of groups such as OYM and the Scouts.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The central question of this article is: What does participation of young adults in the Orthodox Antiochian liturgy in Lebanon mean for their formation?

There is a multilayered contextual relationship in which participation and formation reinforce each other and are colored by the sociopolitical context of the young people. Participating in the particular liturgical rituals and the Divine Liturgy as a whole evokes religious learning in both a cognitive and an affective manner. This was notably illustrated by the way in which many respondents elaborated on a salient rubric for them, the old tradition of chanting, with many affective terms, but also reported that faith was better understood by knowing the chants. Furthermore, the liturgy was experienced by the young people as another world that was mysterious and glorious/beautiful but accessible through proper initiation (education/training), which groups like OYM and Scouts could facilitate and where spiritual mentors could guide them. Hence, education, dialogue, training, and counseling are paramount for the participation of the young people, and therefore also for their formation. Without it, the beauty of the liturgy may be lost.

Participation and formation involve the aspect of affect. This affect was found in icons, chants, hagiographies, partaking in the Eucharist, and other elements, carried from the past and made available for young people to dive into and experience anew for themselves. This affect was not the same as expressing personal emotions but rather was about participating in the energies of God and union with God. This participation, however, undeniably resulted in certain emotional experiences such as calm, peace, joy, and love. All these stemmed from the beauty and safety provided by all aspects of the liturgy. They were felt both via an auditive channel (through chanting) and via visual channels. This shows the embodied character of the liturgical participation.

We also observed among the young people both a relation with God and a relation with the world—an individual mystical experience as well as social responsibility. On the one hand, they appreciated the liturgy as a safe and otherworldly zone away from the storms of this world: political storms, economic storms, and storms due to the burdens of study, work, time constraints, or worries. On the other hand, they felt compelled to engage with the social issues emerging from those storms, not so much in a political but in a diaconal way. Liturgical participation helped the participants relate to God, but it was not just individual awareness that they gained. The young people were very aware that the liturgy should “enter into all manifestations of life,”⁴⁸ and that liturgy also affects attitudes and actions in daily life. Participating in the love of God results in sharing this love.

48. Pulcini, “Lay Charism,” 186.


Based on this research we observe that the liturgical and educational structures within the Antiochian Orthodox Church—OYM, Scouts, and youth groups—give the young people a strong understanding of their liturgical participation and formation. Nevertheless, we also gathered from some youth that the liturgy remains disconnected from the lives of young people, when the liturgical world of the Antiochian Orthodox youth remains a spiritual bubble familiar mostly to those initiated and vulnerable in the face of church and country politics.

Observing the importance of the relationship between parish priests and young people, further research would be helpful to investigate how this plays out in different parishes and how it influences the commitment of young adults.

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