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From Theology to Pastoral Practice: Orthodox Hierarchs' Perspectives on Lifelong Learning for Clergy in Greece

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Abstract

To respond to the complex social challenges of the contemporary era, the Orthodox Church of Greece organizes training courses aiming to reinforce the priestly identity of the holy clergy and support their pastoral work. This paper explores the design and implementation of Continuing Education (CE) programs for the clergy of the Church of Greece, examined through the lens of adult education principles within the broader framework of Lifelong Learning (LLL). Focusing on the work of the Institute for Pastoral Education (I.P.E.), the study investigates the fulfillment of educational needs from the perspective of high-level Ecclesiastical Administration. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, three (3) in-depth interviews were conducted with Hierarchs from three (3) Metropolises representing distinct geographical and social environments: urban-multinational, provincial-multinational, and semi-urban with a significant refugee presence. The findings reveal a robust institutional will for professional development, focusing on addressing practical and functional gaps in Initial Ecclesiastical Education. The necessity for systematic Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) is highlighted, alongside the critical importance of the contextualization of programs. Overall, Continuing Education (CE) and Lifelong Education (LLE) emerge as a decisive factor in upgrading pastoral work, enhancing the clergy's capacity to respond effectively to the multifaceted challenges of contemporary society.

Keywords: clerical continuing education, pastoral practice, lifelong learning, program design, needs assessment, adult education

1.Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Orthodox Church is currently called to play an active role in the face of contemporary global challenges, such as globalization and social inequalities. In Greece, demographic, cultural, and technological shifts are shaping a new pastoral environment (I.P.E., 2025; Yiannoulatos, 2003). Parishes now operate under conditions of multiculturalism, high mobility, and digital transformation (Rammos, 2025; Tsironis, 2018). These circumstances demand a multidimensional role from the clergyman, including that of spiritual guide, administrative head, intercultural interlocutor, educator, social mediator, and agent of social cohesion (Casanova, 2009; Kalliakmanis, 2005; Koliofoutis, 2015; Mantzaridis, 2010; Stylios, 2007).

As initial theological education proves insufficient for addressing these complex issues, clerical Continuing Education (CE) has emerged as a strategic priority within the broader priority of Lifelong Learning (LLL) (Note 1) has emerged as a strategic priority for His Beatitude the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, Jerome II (I.P.E., 2025). Through structures such as the Institute for Pastoral Education (I.P.E.), the Orthodox Church of Greece organizes both general and pastoral training courses (Note 2) responding to the diverse needs of the Metropolises, combining centralized planning with local adaptation. However, the multifaceted nature of pastoral work, varying social conditions, and the heterogeneity in the levels of clerical CE/LLE highlight the need for a systematic Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) prior to the design of any educational programs.

The present study explores the institutional perceptions of three Metropolitan Bishops of the Orthodox Church of Greece regarding CE and LLE. Through in-depth interviews, this research aims to analyze how high-level ecclesiastical administration approaches the continuous education of the clergy, the methodology for assessing educational needs, and the issues related to the quality of pastoral ministry. Furthermore, it examines the role of CE/LLE in shaping a multidimensional clergyman, capable of responding to contemporary social demands.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Adult Education - Lifelong Learning (LLL), Lifelong Education (LLE) and Continuing Education (CE) of the Clergy

Adult Education, and specifically clerical education, requires an approach that takes into consideration the unique characteristics of the learners. Within the framework of Adult Education, as a distinct scientific field (Karalis, 2020, 2023; Kokkos et al., 2021; Pavlis Korres & Lefteriotou, 2024), emphasis is placed on the need for active participation, self-directed learning, and the connection with the personal and professional experience of the learners (Jarvis, 2004; Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Pavlis Korres, 2022).

CE and CPD become particularly significant for the holy clergy, as self-directed learning is linked to the increased autonomy and multifaceted responsibility of the priest in his pastoral work. As those responsible for the spiritual, administrative, and social management of their parishes, clerics assume an active role in their own development. Through this high level of responsibility, an internal need emerges to identify the areas in which they require reinforcement, seeking solutions to practical issues and functioning as self-directed learners (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015). Adults, as supported in the literature (Kaufman & Guerra-López, 2013; Kokkos, 2005), are motivated when educational content responds to real needs, while Karalis (2011) emphasizes the importance of identifying these needs through a systematic Educational Needs Assessment (ENA). ENA is considered the foundation of effective design, as it ensures alignment between existing competencies and desired outcomes (Kaufman & Guerra-López, 2013). Especially for adults with specific duties, such as the clergy, ENA ensures that educational interventions correspond to the actual conditions of their pastoral work.

At the same time, Illeris (2018) underlines that adult learning is influenced by social and cultural factors, parameters that are particularly decisive for ecclesiastical formation, given that pastoral work unfolds in diverse environments. From this perspective, international approaches to the education and development of religious ministers converge on the view that the professional educational process must consider both institutional priorities and local conditions (Judd, 2022).

In terms of instructional approaches, Brookfield (2013) underscores the importance of activating critical thinking, while relevant literature emphasizes the role of the adult educator as a facilitator who utilizes active learning methods and experiential tools (Plagisou & Ramoutsaki, 2024, 2025; Tsimboukli, 2007). The transition from initial theological education to clerical CE/LLE constitutes a pivotal point, as LLE focuses on the development of practical skills required by the multifaceted role of the cleric (Stylios, 2007). This focus addresses his needs as a spiritual leader, social counselor, and administrative manager. Consequently, the cleric -approached as an adult learner- needs to constantly seek applicable knowledge, as Adult Education theory underlines that learning is more effective when oriented toward solving specific problems (Knowles et al., 2015; Kokkos, 2005). Within this framework, applying adult education principles to priestly ministry implies that the cleric pursues CE to respond effectively to the contemporary demands of his parish.

Finally, the concept of Lifelong Learning (LLL) is inextricably linked to global social justice and the creation of active citizens (English & Mayo, 2019). This requirement for active agency also concerns the holy clergy, who are called to function as social mediators (Casanova, 2009) and agents of social cohesion within the local community. Therefore, clerical CE/LLE is part of Non-Formal Adult Education (NFAE) (Jarvis, 2005; Karalis & Lintzeris, 2022), which is characterized by flexibility and a clear orientation toward meeting specific needs. Consequently, Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) and scientifically grounded program design are integral elements of pastoral CE, linking Adult Education with practice and the institutional function of the Church.

2.2 Program Design and Educational Needs Assessment (ENA)

Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) constitutes the foundation of adult education program design, identifying the gap between “required competence” (the ability required to effectively perform a task) and “existing competence” (what the learner already knows or does) (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Gupta, 2007; Knowles et al., 2015; Kokkos, 2005; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024; Sava, 2012). The precise identification of this difference ensures the program’s effectiveness. Kanakaris and Pavlis Korres (2021) point out that the initial identification of educational needs (e.g., practical computer literacy in e-learning programs) is a prerequisite for developing effective learning programs.

Sava (2012) underlines that ENA is the core of program planning and a central responsibility of the educator. However, the effectiveness of design is contingent upon the designers’ qualifications, who must possess negotiation skills and ethical awareness to balance institutional objectives with learners’ actual needs (Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2025).

Although the process begins at the program design level, it is essentially completed within the educational group. There, the educator updates the needs of the specific group of learners, ensuring the optimal alignment of the program with the participants' requirements (Polemi-Todoulou, 2005; Poulopoulos & Tsimboukli, 2016; Sava, 2012; Tsimboukli, 2012; Tsimboukli & Phillips, 2010).

At this point, it is important to recognize the traditional culture of initial clergy training. The nostalgic reference to pastoral methods of the past highlights an era with distinct approaches to communicating faith (Orfanidis, 2025). However, the transition to the multifaceted role of the cleric in the modern parish necessitates enriching this approach through educational programs that enhance knowledge and cultivate contemporary practices (Plagisou, 2025).

Consequently, program design for adults should be participatory, based on collaboration between designers and learners. Although the principle of "working *with* and not *for* specific social groups" was developed in the literature with an emphasis on vulnerable social groups (Leftheriotou, 2014, as cited in Leftheriotou & Pavlis Korres, 2014), its methodological value extends to the whole of Adult Education. In the case of the clergy, who constitute a distinct functional-religious group with a high level of institutional responsibility (Law 4301/2014), the adoption of this participatory approach is deemed essential. It ensures that Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) is not imposed "from above" but is co-shaped, strengthening the commitment of the clergy and the effectiveness of pastoral LLE. Furthermore, the integration of adult education principles becomes imperative in e-learning environments (Pavlis Korres, 2022b).

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of three Hierarchs of the Orthodox Church of Greece regarding the Lifelong Education (LLE) of the clergy, focusing on the identification of educational needs and contextual variations. The study was guided by the following Research Questions (RQs):

1) What are the Hierarchs' perceptions regarding the gaps in Initial Ecclesiastical Education, the significance of Lifelong Education (LLE) for the clergy, and their contemporary educational needs?

2) What is the role of Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) designing clerical educational programs, according to the Hierarchs' perceptions?

3) How do the Hierarchs define Lifelong Education (LLE) for the clergy, and how do they implement CE initiatives at the institutional and local levels?

4) Which local and social parameters, according to the Hierarchs, influence the formulation of educational needs and the contextualization of educational programs?

3.2 Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative comparative case study design (Creswell, 2014, 2018), focusing on the in-depth understanding of three distinct cases. Each case corresponds to a Metropolis as a clearly defined "bounded system," following the logic of Yin (2018). The purposive sample (Creswell, 2018) consists of three (3) active Metropolitan Bishops (see Table 1), selected based on criteria of geographical differentiation (urban, rural, semi-urban environments) and their active involvement in administration and clerical educational delivery. The objective of this approach is to explore similarities and variations rather than to achieve statistical generalization of the findings. The selection of this purposeful sample is methodologically justified by the nature of qualitative comparative case study research, which prioritizes "information-rich" cases over statistical representativeness. In this context, the participants function as high-level institutional gatekeepers. Their discourse does not merely represent individual opinions but reflects the strategic orientation and administrative culture of their respective Metropolises. Thus, the depth of the data retrieved from these key informants outweighs the necessity for a larger sample size, ensuring what has been established in the literature (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 1999) as the qualitative credibility of the inquiry.

A semi-structured interview was utilized as the data collection tool, based on an original interview guide designed by the researcher. The guide's development was grounded in a synthesis of the literature review, incorporating fundamental theoretical assumptions of Adult Education and program design. This tool was developed to explore the specialized aspects of the subject under study, focusing on the specific pastoral and administrative needs of the Metropolitan Districts. For the purposes of this article, a representative segment of the data derived from the guide was utilized, focusing on four core axes:

- Institutional Necessity of LLE and evaluation of the Initial Ecclesiastical Education of the clergy (RQ1).
- The role and methodology of ENA in program design (RQ2).
- Implementation practices and contemporary educational needs of the clergy (RQ3).
- Local and social parameters as contextual factors shaping program design (RQ4).

The interviews (lasting 23–35 minutes) were conducted in person between June and August 2025, all of which were audio-recorded, video-recorded, and fully transcribed. During transcription, the participants' original discourse was strictly preserved, with minimal interventions to ensure syntactic coherence and data authenticity. According to Silverman (2015), the interpretive approach to such data allows for the emergence of institutional practices and the underlying structures governing an organization, transforming the participants' discourse from mere information into a field for critical reflection and institutional change. Table 1 presents the profile of the participants:

• The Right Reverend Metropolitan Bishop of Thessaloniki Filotheos (Participant 1 – P1)

• The Right Reverend Metropolitan Bishop of Serres and Nigrita Theologos (Participant 2 – P2)

• The Right Reverend Metropolitan Bishop of Neapolis and Stavroupolis Varnavas (Participant 3 – P3)

Table 1. The profiles of the interviewees

Code	The Right Reverend / Metropolitan District	Years of Episcopate	Clergy personnel	Socio-geographical profile	Special experience
P1	The Right Reverend Metropolitan Bishop of Thessaloniki Filotheos	2023–present	140	Urban-multinational center	Experience as an instructor in I.P.E. programs.
P2	The Right Reverend Metropolitan Bishop of Serres and Nigrita Theologos	2003–present	134	Provincial- multinational with a strong Balkan element	Extensive administrative experience and a structured ENA model
P3	The Right Reverend Metropolitan Bishop of Neapolis and Stavroupolis Varnavas	2004–present	150	Semi-urban / refugee background with intensive social work	Long-term administrative experience, emphasis on volunteer training and "pastoral craft." *(papadiki techni, in Greek)*

The selection of the three Metropolitan Bishops, based on the aforementioned criteria (geographical location, social and pastoral conditions, administrative experience, and involvement in the clerical CPD and CE), allowed for the exploration of both shared institutional perceptions and the variations arising from local, social, and pastoral factors.

3.3 Data Analysis, Ethics, Validity, Reliability

The data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013), followed by a comparative analysis of the final themes (Tsiolis, 2014) in order to explore similarities and differences across cases. The research strictly adhered to established ethical protocols (Israel & Hay, 2006). Due to their public institutional roles, the participants provided written informed consent for the identified use of their data and the inclusion of interview excerpts in the study.

To ensure the quality of the study, multiple strategies were employed to enhance validity and reliability, in accordance with the principles of qualitative research (Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Noble & Heale, 2019; Patton, 1999):

• Researcher triangulation (inter-coder reliability): Independent coding of 30% of the material was performed by a second researcher to verify thematic convergence and enhance analytical reliability (Nowell et al., 2017).

• Reflexivity: Applied throughout the research process to monitor and mitigate potential researcher personal biases (Finlay, 2002).

• Verbatim transcription: Data were transcribed precisely to preserve the authenticity of the participants' discourse and enhance transparency.

• Systematic documentation: A full record and documentation of all analysis stages were maintained, ensuring the auditability and dependability of the research process (Nowell et al., 2017).

4. Findings

The findings, derived from the thematic analysis of the interviews, are organized into four overarching thematic domains:

• The significance of Lifelong Learning (LLL) for the clergy.

• Educational Needs Assessment (ENA).

• Identification of needs and adaptation of the educational provision

• Local and social parameters as contextual factors influencing program design.

4.1 Institutional Necessity of Lifelong Learning (LLL) and Evaluation of Continuing Education (CE) (Note 3) (RQ1)

A. Gaps in initial clergy education: This section, addressing the first research question (RQ1), highlights the universal recognition of LLL as essential for the modern clergyman. This necessity arises from the changing social profile and the multidimensional role of the priest as a spiritual guide, social worker, and administrator. Within this context, the Institute

for Pastoral Education (I.P.E.) is characterized as a pivotal institutional initiative, receiving universal acceptance and encouragement from the leadership of the Metropolises.

The common finding among the Hierarchs (P1, P2, P3) regarding gaps in practical and liturgical matters suggests that the cleric, as an adult learner, seeks knowledge that is directly applicable to pastoral practice. This gap is identified at the core of Initial Ecclesiastical Education. As P3 articulates "Ecclesiastical Education is an education with a specific character [...] it is defined by its character as being ecclesiastical. And what does ecclesiastical mean? It means my relationship with the Church." (P3)

The Hierarchs identify a significant gap between theoretical instruction and pastoral practice. The first participant points out that Theological Schools offer extensive knowledge, they often remain insufficient "…in the field of pastoral formation for their actual work." (P1). Correspondingly, the second participant emphasizes the need for preparation regarding "…contemporary developments," aiming at "their more complete preparation for their entry into the priesthood." (P2).

B. Horizontal and differentiated educational needs (content): All Metropolitan Bishops underscore the need to reinforce the clergy in practical matters and the challenges of contemporary society. The primary horizontal needs mentioned cover a wide range of fields, such as social, pastoral, liturgical, and administrative, which constitute the central pillars of modern priestly ministry. This convergence demonstrates that the Continuing Education of the holy clergy constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the Orthodox Church's response to complex contemporary social challenges and the cultivation of a healthy ecclesiastical and priestly mindset. However, through the participants' discourse, these needs are differentiated and specialized into the following categories:

• Liturgical/Linguistic issues: The first participant highlights the significant interest in cultivating "Liturgical Language," noting that the clergy of the Metropolis of Thessaloniki attending the program stated that "it was a very beautiful opportunity you gave us, and we want to continue it." (P1)

• Pastoral and social skills: The second participant emphasizes the need for the "development of pastoral skills [...] in special pastoral sectors, such as hospitals and prisons," as well as in other fields, such as "bioethics, new technologies, and new mores in the family and society" (P2), underscoring the dynamic nature of pastoral LLE.

• Administrative and organizational competencies: The third participant emphasizes the necessity of equipping both clergy and associates with specialized knowledge through CE ensuring they are prepared to address contemporary social challenges. "With specialized knowledge, we must prepare both our clergy and our associates so that they are ready to support these people and address the particular problems that arise in our time." (P3)

C. Technology: Digital literacy and pastoral boundaries: The Hierarchs approach technology as an inevitable evolution and a useful tool for the dissemination of the Gospel, catechesis, administration, and pastoral care. The integration of digital media is articulated through the following perspectives:

• Acceptance and integration: The first participant states that "…digital education is an established norm" and adds, "yes, we use digital media," emphasizing that the use of digital tools is already an adopted reality. (P1).

• Operational support and computerization: The second participant points out the "direct impact of new technologies on the field of communication" and characterizes the use of the internet as a tool that "assists the work of the pulpit and the Sunday sermon." Furthermore, he highlights the need for computerization in the parish church, as managing a large volume of information "provides solutions to problems created by a populous flock." (P2)

• Historical necessity and crisis management: The third participant emphasizes that technology is "present in life, in history, and in the Church" and "no one can stop it." He underscores its utility during periods of crisis (e.g., COVID-19), when "technology gave us the ability to communicate and maintain ecclesiastical communion through a machine." (P3)

Despite recognizing its utility, all Hierarchs set clear pastoral boundaries regarding the use of digital technology, as it cannot substitute for the essence of ecclesiastical life:

• Personal communication and ontological integrity:

The first participant warns that:

…pastoral care cannot end up being a digital pastoral care [...] it is addressed to people, and you get to know a person through personal communication [...] but we do not let the ontology of digital media affect our own ontology, our own way of perceiving things, and our own way of life. (P1)

• Preservation of intimacy and holy spiritual ethos: The second participant points out that digital contact "lacks the intimacy" of a face-to-face relationship, urging caution to preserve the "holy spiritual ethos" (the grace-filled character of the Spirit). (P2)

• Priority of the eucharistic assembly: The third participant establishes the ontological priority of the "relationship of

persons [...] as manifested [...] in the Eucharistic assembly." (P3)

According to the Metropolitan Bishops' views, clerical LLE must promote technology as a supportive tool while ensuring the ontological priority of the person and the essence of the ecclesiastical community.

4.2 The Role and Methodology of Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) in Program Design (RQ2)

A. Mechanisms of identification and ENA Methodology: In this section, which addresses the second research question (RQ2), the Hierarchs confirm that the design of clerical educational programs offered in the Metropolis is based on a systematic Educational Needs Assessment (ENA). Identification mechanisms include priestly assemblies, personal discussions, questionnaires, as well as the continuous observation of the gaps identified in young clergy. These practices ensure that the design targets the "required competence" of the cleric within contemporary reality.

• Strategic planning and goal setting: The first participant links ENA with strategic planning, emphasizing "We must identify the gaps [...] and based on those, set our goals." (P1)

• Systematic investigation and effectiveness: The second participant underlines that CE interventions "implemented without taking into account the characteristics of the participants […] are likely to have limited effectiveness," advocating for a comprehensive model of systematic Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) (P2).

• Practical direction and field response: The third participant confirms that the value of the I.P.E. initiatives lies in providing "specific directions on practical issues," covering the identified needs of the field. (P3)

B. Differentiation, autonomy, and collaborations (RQ2): The Hierarchs converge on the finding that the effectiveness of clerical CE depends on the ability of educational design to adapt to the specific requirements of ecclesiastical ministry. While the need for specialization is common ground, the participants' discourse differs regarding the prioritization of the means to achieve this goal, advocating respectively for institutional flexibility, the specialization of roles, and partnership with the scientific community.

• Institutional flexibility and immediate response: "The exceptional flexibility" of the I.P.E. to adapt to the immediate demands of the clergy is highlighted, an element that allows the Church to address contemporary challenges with agility. (P1)

• Targeting based on specialized duties: The need for differentiating programs according to each cleric's ministry is underscored, notably stating that "the educational needs of presiding parish priests [...] and those of spiritual fathers (confessors) are different." (P2)

• Interdisciplinary collaboration and staff training: Cooperation with "appropriate scientists" is advocated for the LLE of clergy and lay associates, ensuring the readiness of parish administration toward new social problems. (P3)

• Organizational autonomy emerges emphatically in the case of the Metropolis of Serres and Nigrita, which implements an integrated model and provision of clerical CE. Simultaneously, the Metropolitan Bishops function as institutional guarantors of the quality of continuing education provision, ensuring the high standards of professional development through strategic partnerships with the I.P.E. and academic institutions, such as the Faculty of Theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. These partnerships lend scientific prestige, academic legitimacy, and a high level of expertise to the entire endeavor.

4.3 Comparative Analysis: Local Parameters, Contemporary Educational Needs, and LLL Design (RQ3 and RQ4)

A. Social and geographical profile of the Metropolitan Districts: This section, addressing the third and fourth research questions (RQ3, RQ4), examines the three Metropolises (P1, P2, P3), which present differentiated geographical and social characteristics within the Greek context (see Table 1). The comparative approach allows for the highlighting of local educational needs in relation to their social and demographic profiles (RQ4).

• Urban and multinational center (P1): The research data reveal challenges associated with the urban environment and the strong presence of immigrants and Orthodox Christians from the Balkans. As characteristically stated, "You must [...] find ways to serve these people even in their own language." (P1). This reference suggests the need to adapt pastoral practice to a multicultural context. P1's discourse highlights the need for an *extroverted* pastoral practice.

• Provincial multinational with a Strong Balkan Element: The second participant points out issues such as "low birth rates and the shrinking of the countryside," while also referring to "the presence of Balkan Orthodox Christians in coastal parishes". (P2). These elements outline a distinct socio-demographic environment linked to specific educational needs.

• Metropolis of Neapolis and Stavroupolis (Semi-urban/Refugee identity: The third participant underscores the strong historical identity of Western Thessaloniki, which was formed by the "refugee element" of the Asia Minor catastrophe. The profile of the faithful is described as "humble and simple people [...] with an enormous charitable work," defining the area's pastoral priorities. (P3). Here, historical memory functions as a foundational pillar for social solidarity,

necessitating a pastoral strategy that prioritizes diaconal service and the preservation of cultural identity.

B. Shared and differentiated educational needs: The analysis of the three Hierarchs' views highlights local contextualization as a dominant comparative finding. Educational needs differ based on the geographical and social environment, requiring strategic flexibility in program design. This differentiation underscores that local identity constitutes the decisive factor transforming the design of clerical educational programs. From this perspective, adapting educational content to the specific social and geographical conditions of each Metropolis is not a mere organizational choice but a structural necessity to ensure the relevance of pastoral CE programs to daily parish practice. Consequently, the success of Lifelong Learning programs is directly linked to their ability to transmute local particularities into targeted pastoral skills.

4.4 Summary Synthesis of Findings and Typology of Needs

Based on the presented findings, it emerges that the three Metropolitan Bishops' perceptions converge on the need for a multidimensional and flexible LLL approach. The Institute for Pastoral Education (I.P.E.) is recognized by all three as the primary institutional body for supporting the clerical CE. The comparative mapping of the data demonstrates that CE is linked, according to their reports, to the reinforcement of the cleric's pastoral, social, and administrative skills. The mapping of specific needs per Metropolitan District, as derived from the qualitative processing of the interviews, is structured as follows:

Metropolis of Thessaloniki (P1)

• Particularity: Multinational and complex social composition, presence of immigrants, refugees, and non-Greek-speaking Orthodox communities.

• Emphasis: Intercultural pastoral care, pastoral work responding to modern social reality, development of individualized LLL programs and academic collaborations (e.g., Aristotle University of Thessaloniki - AUTH), as well as with the I.P.E.

• Priority: Systematic recording of local needs; targeted educational programs and aligning professional development with institutional incentives.

Metropolis of Serres and Nigrita (P2)

• Particularity: Provincial Metropolis with demographic shrinkage of the countryside and the presence of Balkan Orthodox Christians.

• Emphasis: Promotion of history, Greek-Orthodox folk tradition, culture, and arts, spiritual guidance, grief counseling, bioethical issues and themes linked to contemporary social challenges.

• Priority: Pastoral action in diverse sectors (anti-heretical action, charity, youth, support of the priestly family) and linking continuing education with cultural awareness and institutional incentives.

Metropolis of Neapolis and Stavroupolis (P3)

• Particularity: Strong refugee identity (Asia Minor), emphasis on the faith and simplicity of the people, and a high percentage of university-educated clergy (98%).

• Emphasis: Pastoral activity in sectors such as family and youth, anti-heretical action; organized charity and highlighting the role of volunteers, with reference to the need for educating both clergy and volunteers in management and delegation issues.

• Priority: "Pastoral craft" and pastoral work as a means of maintaining the living relationship between Church and society.

The summary report of the findings, which codes the local profile and the typology of needs per, is presented per Metropolitan in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary Report of Findings and Typology of Needs per Metropolis

Thematic Domains	P1: Metropolis of Thessaloniki	P2: Metropolis of Serres and Nigrita	P3: Metropolis of Neapolis and Stavroupolis
Geographical / Social profile	Urban-multinational center	Provincial-multinational context with demographic shrinkage of the countryside	Semi-urban area with a strong refugee identity
Key local parameters	Presence of immigrants and non-Greek-speaking Orthodox communities (Balkans)	Low birth rates and presence of Balkan Orthodox Christians	Historical memory of Asia Minor origin and high educational level of clergy
Common (Horizontal) needs	Social, Pastoral Liturgical, Administrative		
Emphasis of educational content (differentiated needs)	Intercultural pastoral care	Promotion and support of Orthodox tradition and Greco-Christian cultural and spiritual wealth	Organized charity, training and organization of volunteers
Pastoral goal setting	Extroversion and multinational integration	Social cohesion and reinforcement of the countryside	Historical continuity and social solidarity

The summary synthesis demonstrates that LLL is linked, according to the participants' reports, to the need for adaptation to the local social and geographical context. CE is described as a supportive factor for pastoral ministry, especially when it considers the specific needs of each Metropolitan District. At the same time, the reference to linking continuing education with institutional incentives, such as salary advancement, appears as an element that may influence clergy participation.

Overall, the data highlight the importance of systematic clerical LLE as a means of strengthening pastoral work and adapting to contemporary social challenges, as these are reflected in local realities.

5. Discussion

5.1 Pastoral Practice as a Field of Application for Adult Education (RQ1)

The findings regarding RQ1 underscore that the CE of the clergy serves as a strategic response to contemporary social challenges, effectively bridging the "practical gap" identified in Initial Theological Education. The Hierarchs' focus on reinforcing the cleric's role as a social mediator and administrative manager aligns with the principles of Adult Education, problem-centered orientation of Knowles et al. (2015) and Kokkos (2005), where learning is validated through its immediate applicability to pastoral ministry.

Simultaneously, this shift reflects a broader "deprivatization" (Casanova, 2009), as it was expressed by His Beatitude Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Jerome II, which promotes LLE to cultivate and form "a strong voice within society" (I.P.E., 2025). Furthermore, the balanced integration of digital tools, provided they do not compromise the "holy spiritual ethos," suggests an adaptive institutional identity that seeks to maintain ontological integrity while embracing technological flexibility.

5.2 Methodological Approach and Local Autonomy in ENA (RQ2)

Regarding RQ2 the Hierarchy's recognition of systematic data collection, signifies a shift toward a holistic Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) model that transcends a simple focus on the individual level (the cleric) and considers needs at the organizational level (the Metropolis) and the societal level (the flock) (Kaufman & Guerra-López, 2013). The utilization of targeted assemblies and questionnaires signifies a transition toward participatory design, where the identification of educational needs is not unilaterally imposed but co-constructed with the learners (Sava, 2012). Furthermore, the institutionalization of incentives—ranging from salary advancement to moral recognition—is identified as a decisive factor for enhancing participation and embedding LLE within the Church's administrative and legal framework (Regulation of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, 2018).

Of particular interest is the emergence of local autonomy practices within the Metropolitan Districts exemplified by specific organizational charts and autonomous initiatives, which demonstrates a dynamic interaction between central strategic planning (I.P.E.) and local agency. The coupling of central oversight with local agency can ensure transparency and scientific validity, establishing Lifelong Adult Education (LAE) as an organic and distinct phase in the design of educational programs.

5.3 Program Design and Local Adaptation (RQ3 and RQ4)

Addressing RQ3 and RQ4 the dominant finding of the study highlights the significance of contextualization as a critical determinant of the effectiveness of clerical CE initiatives. According to the literature, program design must account for the sociocultural context of the learners (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013), necessitating a systematic investigation of both the organization's internal environment and the external environment in which it operates (Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2024)). The distinct differentiation of needs ranging from —intercultural pastoral care in urban centers to the

reinforcement of socio-historical identity and volunteer management in the semi-urban refugee-background areas—confirms that adult learning is meaningful only when situated within locally defined challenges (Jarvis, 2004; Knowles et al., 2015; Rogers, 2002).

Consequently, Metropolises can function as *local hubs* for the design and implementation of educational initiatives within a dynamic relationship between central coordination (I.P.E) and local agency. Such an approach may enhance participatory education and institutional proximity, contributing to a more substantial integration of CE into pastoral practice.

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

6.1 Conclusions

The present qualitative comparative analysis, through the study of the views of three (3) Metropolitan Bishops of the Orthodox Church of Greece, highlights that Lifelong Learning (LLL) for the holy clergy constitutes a critical institutional and pastoral parameter. The research demonstrates that the design and fulfillment of educational needs depend on a flexible and contextualized framework, bridging the gap between theoretical formation and daily practice. The main conclusions are summarized as follows:

1) Alignment with Adult Education principles: The emphasis on addressing practical gaps ("liturgical" issues, "pastoral craft") and the transition toward applied knowledge confirms that clerical CE aligns with the core principles of Adult Education. The cleric, as an adult learner, prioritizes problem-centered learning (Knowles et al., 2015) that addresses the multifaceted demands of ministry.

2) ENA as a structured practice at the local level: Metropolises implement systematic Educational Needs Assessment (ENA) processes, highlighting the importance of autonomous and structured data collection. This practice can serve as a basis for further systematization of design by the I.P.E. or other bodies.

3) Contextualization as a critical determinant of effective CE design: The differentiation of needs, in relation to the social and geographical profile of each Metropolitan District, proves that flexibility and adaptability are critical factors for the effective response of educational programs to local challenges.

4) Institutional incentives, utility, and limits of technology: CE is inextricably linked to the need for institutionalizing incentives (Regulation of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, 2018). Simultaneously, while digital technology is recognized as a vital supportive tool, the Hierarchs establish clear boundaries to ensure that face-to-face pastoral relationships are not substituted.

Overall, CE/LLE emerges as a dynamic mechanism for reinforcing the cleric's pastoral role and adapting ecclesiastical action to contemporary social conditions.

6.2 Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

6.2.1 Research Limitations

The interpretation of the findings of the present study should be examined considering specific methodological limitations, which define the scope and transferability of the conclusions. First, the limited number of participating Hierarchs does not allow for the generalization of findings to the entire Orthodox Church of Greece, as the research focuses on the in-depth analysis of specific cases. Furthermore, the study exclusively captures the leadership perspective (the Hierarchy); this restricts the interpretive scope, as the perceptions of the trainee clergy or the I.P.E. administrative staff were not included. Finally, the recorded views reflect the institutional position and personal experience of the participants, an element that may influence the formulation of priorities and evaluations.

6.2.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings, the following research directions are proposed:

• Clergy perspective: Conducting research that incorporates the perceptions of the clergy themselves, through quantitative or mixed methods, to examine the alignment between perceived educational needs and institutional objectives.

• Comparative studies: Performing comparative studies between Metropolitan Districts or between Greece and other Orthodox Churches (e.g., Romania, Cyprus) to analyze convergences and variations in educational design, and to identify and adopt best practices.

• Effectiveness evaluation: Investigating the transfer of learning to pastoral practice and the long-term effectiveness of specific general or pastoral educational programs.

• Role of leadership: Analyzing the ways in which Church leadership influences clergy participation and commitment to Lifelong Learning.

In conclusion, this study highlights that Continuing Education (CE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) transcend the limits of a formal educational process, functioning as a dynamic mechanism for aligning ecclesiastical ministry with contemporary social conditions. Through contextualized design and local agency, the I.P.E. and the Metropolises develop practices that bridge theory with pastoral practice. From this perspective, the continuing education of the holy clergy, framed within the principles of Lifelong Learning (LLL), emerges as a critical parameter for reinforcing priestly identity and ensuring the Church's robust response to the complex social challenges of our time.

Notes

Note 1. The Institute of Pastoral Education (I.P.E.) initiated a strategic framework for the implementation of the operation "Lifelong Learning Programmes for Members of Staff of the Church – Developing Open Online Courses 2021-2023" within the context of the EU's Operational Programme 'Human Resources Development, Education, and Lifelong Learning" https://ipe.gr/the-act-entitled-lifelong-learning-programs-of-the-human-resources-of-the-church-development-of-open-online-courses/. While this initiative serves as a foundational pillar for the systematic provision of Continuing Education (CE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for the clergy and staff of the Church of Greece, the present study focuses exclusively on the holy clergy. Following Jarvis (2005), a crucial distinction is made. "Lifelong Learning" (LLL) refers to the broad, ontological process of "learning that occurs variously in formal institutions. […] at home, at work or in the wider community" (p. 380). In contrast, the programs examined here fall under "Lifelong Education" (LLE) and "Continuing Education" (CE), which represent the "lifelong process [...] started from initial education and continued throughout life" (p. 379), specifically providing "learning opportunities taken up after the end of full-time initial education" (p. 118). Consequently, the term LLL is used here to denote the overarching framework, while CE/LLE refers more specifically to structured adult education programs addressed to clergy following their Initial Ecclesiastical Education and ministerial formation aimed at reinforcing priestly identity. For reasons of readability, these terms are occasionally used in close association.

Note 2. "General and pastoral training courses" is the official designation employed by the Institute for Pastoral Education of the Holy Archdiocese of Athens (I.P.E.) https://ipe.gr/pastoral-education-foundation/. I.P.E serves as a provider of Lifelong Learning (LLL), non-formal education, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD), operating as a certified Lifelong Learning Centre in accordance with the provisions of Government Gazette vol. II 5119/5-11-2021.

Note 3. While these initiatives are often framed within the broader context of Lifelong Learning (LLL), the term Continuing Education (CE) is preferred here to maintain terminological precision in relation to *Initial Ecclesiastical Education* (for the conceptual distinction and the definition by Jarvis (2005), see Note 1).

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Author contributions

This paper is based on research undertaken by Olga Plagisou within the framework of an ongoing doctoral dissertation at the School of Early Childhood Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), under the supervision of Professor Maria Pavlis Korres. Olga Plagisou designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Maria Pavlis Korres supervised the research process and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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