

Article

Spiritual Dryness in Non-Ordained Catholic Pastoral Workers

Arndt Büssing ^{1,*}, Eckhard Frick ², Christoph Jacobs ³ and Klaus Baumann ⁴

¹ Quality of Life, Spirituality and Coping, Institute for Integrative Medicine, Faculty of Health, Witten/Herdecke University, 58313 Herdecke, Germany

² Munich School of Philosophy & Research Centre Spiritual Care, Technische Universität München, 81675 Munich, Germany; Eckhard.Frick@hfph.mwn.de

³ Pastoral Psychology and Sociology, Faculty of Theology Paderborn, 33098 Paderborn, Germany; christoph_jacobs@compuserve.com

⁴ Caritas Science and Christian Social Work, Faculty of Theology, Albert-Ludwig University, Freiburg, 79085 Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany; klaus.baumann@theol.uni-freiburg.de

* Correspondence: arndt.buessing@uni-wh.de; Tel.: +49-2330-623246

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Abstract: Background: We wondered whether “spiritual dryness” as a specific phase of “spiritual crisis” or insecurity is mostly a matter only of Catholic priests or can also be found in other pastoral professionals. Methods: In a cross-sectional survey, we measured the prevalence of spiritual dryness in non-ordained Catholic pastoral workers, and identified relevant predictors. Results: In a sample of 3.277 pastoral workers, 50% would occasionally experience phases of spiritual dryness, while 13% experience it often or even regularly. There were no significant differences between women and men, professions, or age groups. The best predictors of spiritual dryness were low transcendence perception and a low sense of coherence (both are resources), as well as depressive symptoms and stress perception (both are demands or stressors), which would explain 41% of the variance. Self-efficacy expectation and social support were not among the significant predictors. Conclusion: Both the proportions and the main predictors are similar compared to Catholic priests. It is thus not the underlying profession or vocation and the related life situation or differences in social support, but predominantly specific perceptions, feelings, and attitudes that are related to the phenomenon of spiritual dryness—and these can be found in all pastoral professionals who seriously live their spirituality.

Keywords: pastoral workers; spiritual dryness; stress perception; sense of coherence; transcendence perception; Catholics

1. Introduction

What is going on, and what does it mean to pastoral workers, either priests or non-ordained, who professionally care for the spiritual health and support of their parishioners, when they lose their own faith or may experience phases of spiritual insecurity or “spiritual dryness”?

Among other consequences, this may decrease their capacity to care for others. When such phases are transient and they are able to overcome them, these experiences may be important for their own spiritual development, and helpful for their ministry because they can better understand parishioners’ spiritual struggles or existential problems (not only theoretically, but experientially). However, when these phases are long-lasting, they may be unable to support others in finding new hope and trust in dark times or spiritual and existential insecurity.

Such feelings of “spiritual dryness” were operationalized as various perceptions and emotional states, i.e., as a perception to be distant from God, regardless of one’s efforts to draw close to Him,

that one's prayers go unanswered, the perception of being spiritually empty or of not being able to give any more (both in terms of spiritual exhaustion), and even feelings of being abandoned by God [1,2]. Thus, these feelings are not primarily a matter of depression (although it might be related), but an inability to get in contact with God and to communicate with Him (i.e., in prayer) and thus to perceive God in one's life concerns. Spiritual struggles or "spiritual dryness" are classical themes in religious literature [3]. "The dark night of the soul" (Saint John of the Cross) is a form of a human crisis experienced especially by persons who are deeply devoted to a spiritual life [4,5]. Despite its negative connotation, it is nevertheless a process of spiritual development that longs for "union with God" [6].

In a cross-sectional survey among 3,824 Catholic priests, it was found that such feelings of "spiritual dryness" were experienced occasionally by 46%, and often or regularly by 12% [2]. The predictors of these feelings were a low perception of the transcendent and a low sense of coherence, on the one hand, and depressive symptoms and burnout symptoms on the other. The best predictor of priests' spiritual dryness, a reduced perception of the transcendent in daily life concerns, would underline that these feelings are primarily a lack of spiritual "oneness," a one-sided longing to be "seen" by God who seems to be "silent." Interestingly, depression and burnout were among the significant predictors, too.

However, there have not been any studies on whether these phases of spiritual dryness are experienced predominantly by (male) priests with their specific religious and celibacy life styles or by other professionals in pastoral ministry, either male or female, living with a partner or not. Taking into account that they are highly religious and practicing some personal kind of a spiritual lifestyle, too [6], we recognize that all pastoral professionals in Germany are living and working in a society which at large is increasingly secular, indifferent, and sometimes suspicious or even hostile towards religious issues. In consequence, pastoral ministry is even more challenging with such decreases in social recognition and esteem. In such a situation, spiritual dryness as the experience of a "non-responding" God may be an additional threat to their concept of a vibrantly spiritual life.

Therefore, we intended to measure these perceptions of spiritual dryness in non-ordained pastoral workers, both women and men who, like the priests, require "good enough" spiritual stability for their professional work. Specifically, we aimed (1) to analyze the prevalence of spiritual dryness as a measure of spiritual crisis in the non-ordained pastoral workers and (2) to identify predictors associated with spiritual dryness. We assume an influence of aggravating stressful extrinsic and intrinsic demands (i.e., stress perception, depressive symptoms, and anxiety), as well as external and internal resources (i.e., perception of the transcendent, sense of coherence, and social support) that might buffer these phases, similarly observed in Catholic priests who are male and mostly living alone.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

This study is part of the German Pastoral Ministry Study [7]. All individuals of this anonymously conducted cross-sectional study were informed about the study either by the personnel managers of the dioceses or by our independent study office, and invited by a separate letter from our study office to participate in the study. This separate letter described the purpose of the study, assured confidentiality, underlined their right not to participate, and asked them to provide informed consent by providing the filed anonym questionnaires. They were recruited from pastoral workers of 22 of the 27 German dioceses. The response rate in the German Pastoral Ministry Study was 36.0% (ranging from 16% to 52%). Participation was possible by an online questionnaire or a pencil-and-paper version. All returned their paper questionnaire directly to the study office via surface mail.

2.2. Materials and Procedures

2.2.1. Spiritual Dryness Scale

To operationalize feelings of “spiritual dryness,” we used the 6-item Spiritual Dryness Scale (SDS) which had a good internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.87$) [1]. The instrument addresses whether or not individuals have experienced such phases of “spiritual dryness,” feelings that God is distant, that one’s prayers go unanswered, of being “spiritually empty” or of not being able to give any more (both in terms of a spiritual exhaustion), and finally of being abandoned by God. The items of this instrument were formulated in such a way that they fit the daily life experiences of religious individuals. Response options were *not at all* (1); *rarely* (2); *occasionally* (3); *fairly often* (4); and *regularly* (5). The cited SDS scores were mean scores and represent the perceived lack/shortage. In this sample, the scale’s Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.84$.

2.2.2. Daily Spiritual Experiences

The instrument was developed as a measure of a person’s perception of the transcendent in daily life, and thus the items measure experience rather than particular beliefs or behaviors [8,9]. Here, we used the 6-item version of the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES-6; Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$), which uses specific items such as feeling God’s presence, God’s love, or a desire to be closer to God (union), finding strength/comfort in God, and being touched by the beauty of creation [8]. The response categories are *many times a day*, *every day*, *most days*, *some days*, *once in a while*, and *never/almost never*. Item scores were finally summed up. In this sample, the scale’s Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.87$.

2.2.3. Frequency of Religious Activities

We measured the frequency of private prayer with a single item [10]. The frequency of private prayer could be represented as *never/almost never*, *sometimes*, *on some days*, *several days a week*, *daily*, or *several times per day*.

2.2.4. Sense of Coherence

The Sense of Coherence (SOC) scale is widely used to assess internal strengths of an individual referring to Antonovsky’s “salutogenetic orientation” [11]. According to theory, this sense of coherence may determine a person’s coping with stressors in life. Antonovsky primarily developed a 29-item instrument with a putatively one dimensional structure [11]. For this study, we used the 13-item version of the SOC scale with 7-point semantic differential; these scales intend to measure comprehensibility (5 items), manageability (4 items), and meaningfulness (4 items). However, there is currently a debate about the factorial structure of the instrument, which is highly inconsistent depending on the tested samples. Jakobsson [12] recently tested the construct validity of the 13-item version and reported that the “instrument failed to show acceptable construct validity in any of the tests or in any age group” and that “factor analyses did not support the factor structure proposed by Antonovsky.” Thus, for this analysis, we will refer only to the SOC-13 sum score (due to the general validity of the scale) rather than on specific sub-constructs. Representative items are “Do you have the feeling that you really don’t care about what is going on around you?”, “Has it happened that people whom you counted on disappointed you?”, “Until now your life has had: no clear goals—very clear goals and purpose”, “Do you have the feeling that you are in an unfamiliar situation and don’t know what to do?”, “Does it happen that you experience feelings that you would rather not have to endure?”, “How often do you have the feeling that there is little meaning in the things you do in your daily life?”, etc. All items of the SOC-13 were scored on a 7-graded Likert scale that was summed up (theoretical range: 13 to 91). In this sample, the scale’s Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.79$.

2.2.5. General Self Efficacy

To assess individuals' self-efficacy, we used the German language General Self Efficacy Scale (GSE) [13]. The GSE scale has a good to very good internal consistence, i.e., Cronbach's alpha in German samples range from 0.80 to 0.90 [14]. Specific items include "If someone opposes me, I can find means and ways to get what I want," "When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions," "I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events," and "No matter what comes my way, I am usually able to handle it." The 10 items were answered on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from disagreement to agreement, and were then summed up. High scores indicate higher (optimistic) self-efficacy. In this sample, the scale's Cronbach's alpha = 0.88.

2.2.6. Social Support

To measure a person's social support, we used the 14-item short version of the Social Support Questionnaire "F-SozU" [15]. Its internal consistency is very good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$). The items refer to social support (i.e., are accepted by others and have persons who share emotions), concrete support (i.e., have someone care for the flat when absent, have a confident person one can always count on for his help, and get lent something by friends or neighbors) and social integration (i.e., belong to a circle of friends to meet with and take action with others). Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from *does not apply* to *definitely applies*). In this sample, the scale's Cronbach's alpha = 0.92.

2.2.7. Psychological Distress

Derogatis' 18-item Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI-18), a short form of the Symptom Check List (SCL-90-R), was used to measure psychological distress [16]. This instrument has three scales, i.e., Somatization, Depression, and Anxiety, with 6 items each. Specific items include feelings of worthlessness, loneliness, and being down, no interest in things, hopelessness about future, pains in heart and chest, nausea or upset stomach, nervousness, restlessness, being scared for no reason, and spells of terror or panic. The German version has good reliability coefficients for the respective subscales (i.e., Somatization: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$; Depression: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$; Anxiety: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$) [17]. All perceptions are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all* to *very strong*. For this study, we used the depression and anxiety sum scores, and the General Severity Index, which combines all three scales. In this sample, the scale's Cronbach's alpha = 0.90.

2.2.8. Perceived Stress Scale

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is a 10-item questionnaire to measure the self-perceived stress level in specific situations during the last month [18]. Internal reliability of the original PSS was moderate (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$) [18]. Specific items include, e.g., was upset because about something that happened unexpectedly, felt unable to control the important things in life, felt confident about ability to handle personal problems, was angered because of things that happened that were outside of control, and could not cope with all the things that one had to do. All items refer to emotions and thoughts and how often one may have felt or thought a certain way. The sum scores range from *never* to *very often*; higher scores would thus indicate greater stress. In this sample, the scale's Cronbach's alpha = 0.85.

2.3. Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics as well as first-order correlations and regression analyses were computed with SPSS 22.0 (IBM Deutschland GmbH, 71137 Ehningen, Germany). Given the exploratory character of this study, significance level was set at $p < 0.01$. With respect to classifying the strength of the observed correlations, we regarded $r > 0.5$ as a strong correlation, an r between 0.3 and 0.5 as a moderate correlation, an r between 0.2 and 0.3 as a weak correlation, and $r < 0.2$ as negligible or no correlation.

3. Results

3.1. Participants

We analyzed the data of 3,277 non-ordained Catholic pastoral workers (45% pastoral assistants; 55% parish expert workers), all with a high school education. Among them, 63.5% were women and 36.5% men; the majority's age was between 45 and 55 years (i.e., 12% between 25 and 35 years of age; 19% 35–45 years; 42% 45–55 years, and 27% 55–65 years of age). Pastoral assistants have a balanced gender proportion (46% women and 54% men), while 78% of parish expert workers are women. Some of them live a consecrated life (vow), i.e., 4.5% of Pastoral assistants and 6.9% of Parish expert workers; specifically, 2% of men and 8% of women.

3.2. Phases of Spiritual Dryness in Pastoral Workers

Feelings of spiritual dryness were experienced occasionally by 50% of the non-ordained pastoral workers, often by 10% and regularly by 3%, while 32% experience it seldom and 6% not at all. The perception of being spiritually “empty” was reported by 31% occasionally, by 7% often, and by 1% regularly. In contrast, the explicit feeling that God is distant (despite one's own quest) was experienced occasionally by 15%, and often or even regularly by 3%, while the feeling to be abandoned by God was experienced occasionally by 11%, and often or even regularly by 2%.

The SDS scores did not differ significantly between parish expert workers and pastoral assistants, women and men, or between the different age groups (Table 1). Nor did we find significant differences as to whether or not the non-ordained live a consecrated life (data not shown). Instead, transcendence perception was significantly lower in men and in pastoral assistants (which had a higher proportion of men when compared to parish expert workers), and in younger pastoral professionals (Table 1).

Table 1. Mean scores of Spiritual Dryness Scale (SDS) within the sample.

	<i>n</i>	Spiritual Dryness Scores	Transcendence Perception
Profession			
Pastoral assistants	1465	2.21 ± 0.62	23.74 ± 4.95
Parish expert workers	1804	2.19 ± 0.61	24.44 ± 4.81
All professions	3269	2.19 ± 0.62	24.13 ± 4.89
<i>F</i> value		0.76	16.66
<i>p</i> value		n.s.	<0.0001
Gender			
Women	2061	2.18 ± 0.61	24.54 ± 4.89
Men	1183	2.22 ± 0.63	23.43 ± 4.79
all gender	3244	2.20 ± 0.62	24.13 ± 4.88
<i>F</i> value		1.93	39.20
<i>p</i> value		n.s.	<0.0001
Age			
25–35 years	386	2.19 ± 0.58	23.21 ± 4.29
35–45 years	627	2.23 ± 0.62	23.56 ± 4.66
45–55 years	1386	2.20 ± 0.62	24.26 ± 5.01
55–65 years	870	2.16 ± 0.61	24.74 ± 4.99
all ages	3269	2.19 ± 0.62	23.13 ± 4.89
<i>F</i> value		1.50	12.28
<i>p</i> value		n.s.	<0.0001

To analyze inter-subject effects, we performed univariate analyses with the variables gender, profession, and age. For spiritual dryness, we see only small trends that profession and age may have an effect ($F = 2.5$; $p = 0.057$), but none of these variables alone. For transcendence perception, there is a significant effect of gender ($F = 10.9$; $p < 0.0001$), age ($F = 4.6$; $p = 0.003$), and for gender and age

($F = 5.4$; $p = 0.001$), while profession has no independent effect ($F = 1.9$; $p = 0.169$). Thus, the observed differences between both professions with respect to transcendence perception are mainly due to gender differences.

3.3. Correlations between Spiritual Dryness, Social Support, and Health-Associated Variables

Spiritual dryness correlated moderately negatively with transcendence perception (DSES) and Sense of Coherence (SOC), and moderately positive with depressive symptoms and stress perception. Self-efficacy expectation and social support were only weakly and inversely related, and anxiety weakly positive (Table 2).

Table 2. Mean values and correlation of spiritual dryness scores with other variables.

	Mean \pm SD	Range	Correlation with Spiritual Dryness
Psychosomatic Health/Stress			
Spiritual Dryness	2.2 \pm 0.6	1–5	
Depression	2.4 \pm 3.2	0–22	0.402 **
Anxiety	2.8 \pm 2.8	0–21	0.275 **
Stress Perception	15.4 \pm 6.2	0–37	0.378 **
Resources			
Social Support	4.5 \pm 0.5	1–5	–0.249 **
Sense of Coherence	65.4 \pm 9.7	31–91	– 0.437 **
Self-Efficacy Expectation	28.9 \pm 4.0	12–40	–0.270 **
Transcendence perception	24.0 \pm 5.0	3–36	– 0.499 **

** $p < 0.01$ (Spearman rho); moderate correlations are bolded.

3.4. Predictors of Spiritual Dryness and Depressive Symptoms

In order to analyze which variables can be regarded as significant predictors of pastoral workers' spiritual dryness, we performed stepwise regression analyses using the following variables: Self-Efficacy Expectation, Sense of Coherence, perception of the transcendent (DSES), stress perception, psychosomatic health (i.e., depressive symptoms and anxiety), social support, and frequency of private prayer.

As shown in Table 3, the best predictors of spiritual dryness were the (lack of) perception of the transcendent in daily life, a (low) sense of coherence, followed by depressive symptoms and stress perception. These variables explain 41% of the variance. The DSES score alone explains 26% of the explained variance, and the SOC adds a further 11% of the explained variance, while depression and stress perception adds a further 3% and are thus of minor relevance. Self-efficacy expectation and social support were not among the significant predictors in this model.

Table 3. Predictors of spiritual dryness.

Dependent Variable: Spiritual Dryness	Beta	T	p	Collinearity Statistics	
				Tolerance	VIF ¹
Model 4: $F = 550.3$; $R^2 = 0.41$					
(constant)		41.137	<0.0001		
Transcendence perception	–0.385	–27.002	<0.0001	0.908	1.102
Sense of Coherence	–0.211	–11.477	<0.0001	0.548	1.824
Depressive symptoms	0.179	10.319	<0.0001	0.618	1.619
Stress perception	0.086	4.773	<0.0001	0.572	1.747

¹ Because regression coefficients may be compromised by collinearity, we checked the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) as an indicator for collinearity. VIF > 10 is indicative of high collinearity. In all cases, the VIF was <2.0.

4. Discussion

In our sample of non-ordained Catholic pastoral professionals, we found that 50% would occasionally experience phases of spiritual dryness, while 13% experience it often or even regularly. There were no significant differences between women and men, professions, or age groups. These proportions are similar compared to Catholic priests of whom 46% reported feelings of spiritual dryness occasionally and 12% often or regularly [2]. Moreover, the predictors of spiritual dryness were similar. In non-ordained Catholic pastoral workers, the best predictors were low transcendence perception and a low sense of coherence, and depressive symptoms and stress perception, which explains 41% of the variance. In priests, transcendence perception, a sense of coherence, depressive symptoms, and burnout (which was not investigated in this sample) were the best predictors, which all together explained 43% of the variance [2]. Thus, the experiences and predictors were similar. According to these results, it is neither the profession nor the priestly vocation, nor the related life situation or differences in social support and self-efficacy, that are related to these phases of spiritual dryness, but it is rather and predominantly specific perceptions, feelings, and attitudes that seem conducive to experiences of spiritual dryness. These can be found in all pastoral professionals, not only in male priests.

Interestingly, although the transcendence perception was significantly lower in men and in pastoral assistants (which had a higher proportion of men when compared to parish expert workers and in younger pastoral professionals), the SDS scores—which are closely related—did not differ significantly between parish expert workers and pastoral assistants, between women and men, or between different age groups. Transcendence perception is a variable that refers to the “frequency” of these perceptions and feelings in the present moment, while spiritual dryness does also refer to the “frequency” of such feelings and perceptions but seems to refer to a longer time frame. Generally, women have been shown to be more religiously or spiritually oriented [19] as reflected in their higher transcendence perception in this sample. Nevertheless, there is no significant difference between men and women in this group as to their scores/experiences of spiritual dryness.

Particularly, however, the perception of God’s presence in daily life is negatively related to spiritual dryness, which means that God is perceived as being present, loving, and supportive. Thus, its strong predictive potential is comprehensible. Nevertheless, transcendence perception is not simply the negative side of spiritual dryness (or vice versa). It explains only 26% of the variance in spiritual dryness, and much more of the variance remains unexplained. Another relevant and significant predictor has been shown to be the Sense of Coherence. It implies comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness regarding the current life situation as a pastoral professional—either alone or with a supportive God. Thus, it is no surprise that this variable also has an important influence. The SOC alone may explain 22% of the variance in spiritual dryness, and the SOC and DSES together, 37% of the variance. Much more remains to be explained, for spiritual dryness is neither simply a depressive state nor stress perception, which both together would add only 3% of the further explained variance.

Limitations

Data from cross-sectional studies do not allow causal interpretations, and thus the directions of interacting effects are so far unclear. To overcome this, longitudinal and qualitative studies are needed, particularly when it is the aim to provide early support for pastoral workers (or other persons) facing emotional and spiritual struggles. Although we assume that the data represent at least the situation of non-ordained pastoral workers from Germany, this does not mean that the data are also true for other countries where Catholic non-ordained pastoral workers priests may work under socially, politically, or economically different situations. Moreover, so far we have no data whether these phases of spiritual dryness are experienced similarly in persons from other denominations as well. This remains to be investigated.

5. Conclusions

The proportion of non-ordained Catholic pastoral professionals experiencing phases of spiritual dryness is similar compared to Catholic priests from the same dioceses in Germany; the main predictors of spiritual dryness are also similar. Thus, it is not the underlying profession or vocation and the related life situation or differences in social support, but predominantly specific perceptions, feelings, and attitudes that are related to the phenomenon of spiritual dryness—and these can be found in all pastoral professionals who seriously live their spirituality. As to the reality of spiritual dryness experiences, further thoughts are provoked by the fact that neither self-efficacy expectation nor social support (both as resource variables), nor the frequency of private prayer, were among the significant predictors in the regression analyses (as negative correlates). Spiritual dryness points to a dimension of spiritual life which is not closely related to social support, working conditions and professional roles of both ordained and non-ordained pastoral professionals. It rather hints to the experiential wisdom that the quality of spiritual experiences is exempt from the persons' command, notwithstanding its correlations with depression and anxiety on the one side (of positive correlations) and with transcendence perception and sense of coherence on the other (negative) side.

Spiritual dryness is a phenomenon with various underlying dynamics (progressive and/or regressive) and needs prayerful discernment and perseverance. Although these phases may occur during a process of spiritual growth [4,6], they can nevertheless also be a hint for an existential crisis [2]. At any rate, adequate support by a “spiritual guide” during this process of spiritual development is essential [20]. Those who have managed to overcome these phases were stimulated “all the more to help others” and experienced a “deeper spiritual clarity and depth” [21].

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Conflicts of Interest: This study was an investigator initiated trial without any influence of Church authorities. All authors are members of the respective universities; three of the authors are Catholic priests (E.F., K.B., C.J.) working at universities as researchers. The authors disclose any financial or other competing interests.

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