

Spiritual Dryness in Catholic Priests: Internal Resources as possible Buffers

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Background

During their professional life with increasing job demands, pastoral workers may experience phases of **psychological and spiritual crises**. Such phases are in most cases transient, and they may recur.

The underlying causes are probably multifaceted, stemming from **external factors** (i.e., work overload, structural changes in the work processes, conflict with colleagues, low credit by superiors), but also from **internal factors** (i.e., psychological traits and capacities, own resources to rely on).

Aim

We aimed to analyze

1. the **prevalence** of spiritual dryness as a measure of spiritual crisis in a large sample of Catholic priests, and
2. to identify **predictors** associated with spiritual dryness. We assume an influence of aggravating stressful extrinsic and intrinsic demands, and external and internal resources which might buffer these phases (Figure 1).



Method

Cross-sectional study (as part of the German Pastoral Worker Study; Frick *et al.*, 2015) among 3,824 Catholic priests from 22 of 27 dioceses using standardized questionnaires (i.e., Spiritual Dryness Scale, DSES-6, MBI, PSS, BSI-18, SOC-13, etc.).

The majority's age was between 45 and 55 years.

Results

- Feelings of spiritual dryness (Büssing *et al.*, 2013) were experienced occasionally by 46%, often or regularly by 12%, while 36% experience it seldom and 6% not at all.
- Spiritual Dryness is related to psychosomatic distress, loneliness, and low internal resources (Tab. 1).
- Best predictors were (low) perception of the transcendent, (low) sense of coherence, depressive and burnout symptoms (Fig. 1).
 - These 4 variables explain 43% of variance (Tab. 2).
 - Loneliness, anxiety and stress perception would add further 0.6% explained variance - and are thus of low relevance in the regression model

- Because Spiritual Dryness and depressive symptoms were moderately, almost strongly associated ($r = .496$), one may suggest a similar pattern of predictors.
- However, stress perception was the best predictor of priests' depressive symptoms accounting for 33% of variance, followed by low sense of coherence, loneliness and burnout symptoms, adding further 14% of explained variance. In contrast, spiritual dryness, (low) transcendence perception and social support had a further weak influence (adding 1% of explained variance) - and are thus not of relevance.

Tabelle 1: Correlation between Spiritual Dryness and psychosomatic health / distress, social support, and internal resources

** p < .01 (Spearman rho)	Spiritual Dryness	Daily spiritual experience scale
Psychosomatic Health / distress		
Depression	.496**	-.293**
Anxiety	.363**	-.196**
Stress Perception	.447**	-.270**
Burnout	.494**	-.336**
Social Support		
Social Support	-.258**	.200**
Loneliness (inability to be alone)	.332**	-.229**
Loneliness (lack of social net)	.332**	-.230**
Internal resources		
Sense of Coherence	-.339**	.317**
Self-Efficacy Expectation	-.491**	.323**
Daily Spiritual Experiences	-.527**	

Table 2: Predictors of Spiritual Dryness

(stepwise regression analysis)

Dependent variable: SDS	Beta	T	p	Tolerance	VIF
Model 8: F= 506.9; R ² = .43					
(constant)		41.40	<.0001		
Daily Spiritual Experiences	-.351	-31.520	<.0001	.861	1.162
Sense of Coherence	-.158	-10.87	<.0001	.508	1.967
Depressive symptoms	.157	9.91	<.0001	.426	2.350
Burnout symptoms	.142	9.57	<.0001	.485	2.061
Loneliness: Inability to be alone	.054	4.78	<.0001	.831	1.204
Stress perception	.062	4.06	<.0001	.467	2.144
Loneliness: lack of social network	.035	2.97	.003	.766	1.306
Anxiety	-.042	-2.90	.004	.510	1.960

Note: Because the 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.

Putative reactions (apart from indifference)



38% were inspired by the experienced phases of spiritual struggles "all the more to help others" (30% rather not, 32% sometimes), and 38% perceived "greater spiritual serenity and depth" later on (22% rather not, 40% sometimes).

Conclusions

- Catholic priests may experience phases of spiritual dryness which are associated with depressive symptoms.
- Because this spiritual struggle can either lead to spiritual desolation or spiritual growth (Figure 2), it is important to support pastoral workers adequately.
- Particularly low perception of the transcendent and low sense of coherence are of relevance because they are resources for which suitable support might be offered.

References:

1. Büssing, A., Günther, A., Baumann, K., Frick, E., Jacobs, C. (2013). Spiritual dryness as a measure of a specific spiritual crisis in catholic priests: associations with symptoms of burnout and distress. *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2013, 246797. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1155/2013/246797>.
2. Frick, E., Büssing, A., Baumann, K., Weig, W., Jacobs, C. (2015). Do self-efficacy expectation and spirituality provide a buffer against stress-associated impairment of health? - A comprehensive analysis of the German Pastoral Ministry Study. *Journal of Religion and Health*. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10943-015-0040-7>