

Self-Attributed Importance of Spiritual Practices in Catholic Pastoral Workers and their Association with Life Satisfaction

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Abstract Although much is known about the frequency of the spiritual activities of pastoral workers, less is known related to how important specific spiritual and existential practices are to pastoral workers personally or existentially. This part of the German Pastoral Ministry Study analyzed (1) which forms of spiritual activities were regarded as important, (2) how the perceived importance of religious practices related to frequency of engagement in spiritual practices, and (3) how these practices contributed to the life satisfaction of ordained priests and of non-ordained pastoral workers. Participants included 1826 Catholic pastoral workers, composed of 65% priests and 35% (non-ordained) pastoral assistants and parish expert workers. Prosocial-Humanistic practices scored highest in importance, followed by Gratitude/Awe, Existentialistic practices, and Religious practices; specific forms of Spiritual Mind-Body practices were not relevant. Differences in the frequency and ascribed importance of spiritual practices between ordained and non-ordained pastoral workers were identified, as well as a surprising lack of connection between religious practices and their proclaimed importance, particularly of Prosocial-Humanistic and Gratitude/Awe practices. These findings may stimulate further research into the underlying causes of these differences between priests and other pastoral workers and between the frequency and importance of spiritual practices in all groups, which in the researchers' opinion indicate challenging inconsistencies with regard to the ideals of religious vocations.

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Working in pastoral ministry in the Catholic Church is generally considered a religious vocation rather than a job, notwithstanding the different roles and commitments of ordained and non-ordained pastoral workers in their ministries. Their faith and religion, their concrete spiritual life, and related spiritual activities like prayer and sacraments are assumed to play an important if not central role in the lives of priests, deacons, and non-ordained pastoral workers on both an official and a personal, existential level. Much of their life satisfaction, therefore, might depend on their spiritual activities and the importance they give or attribute to them in their daily lives.

Research on the spiritual lives of pastoral workers, both priests and non-ordained, usually focusses on the frequency of different kinds of religious or spiritual activities. The frequency of private prayer, in particular, should be taken into account in our understanding of the importance of spiritual activities in general (Maltby et al. 1999; Nicholson et al. 2010). However, differences in types of spiritual activities and in corresponding beliefs should not be neglected (Lazar 2015).

In our recent study of pastoral workers, we have analyzed which forms of spiritual activities the pastoral workers practiced and whether these activities were related to their experience of the transcendent in daily life. These practices can be differentiated first by the level of their profession (i.e., priests are expected to celebrate the Eucharist every day as far as possible, whereas the non-ordained will participate mainly on the weekend) and second by their public commitment and personal initiative in practicing spiritual activities (Büssing et al. 2015). Interestingly, their perception of the transcendent in daily life was more related to private prayer than to presiding over/celebrating the Holy Eucharist, sacramental Confession, or Liturgy of the Hours (i.e., psalms and other religious texts prayed according to a daily pattern defined by the Church). Moreover, this perception of the transcendent was predicted best by private prayer and the pastoral workers' life satisfaction (Büssing et al. 2015). Of course, there were significant differences in the engagement frequency of these spiritual activities, which can be ascribed to the underlying profession, yet it seems that even within the two professions the significance ('importance') of spiritual activities may differ considerably.

Official Church documents, formation programs for pastoral workers (especially for candidates for the diaconate and for the priesthood), as well as theological monographs underline the central role of the vibrant spiritual life of pastoral workers in general and of deacons and priests as sacramentally ordained ministers in particular (Rossetti 2009). In particular, the liturgy of the Church, which celebrates the mysteries of faith, is considered "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows" (Second Vatican Council 1963, #10). According to Vatican II, it is the Eucharist that "draws the faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire" (Second Vatican Council, #10). Vatican II continues: "All the faithful" (not only the priests) "should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations" (Second Vatican Council 1963, #14). Beyond liturgical participation, "the Christian is indeed called to pray with his brethren, but he must also enter into his chamber to pray to the Father, in secret (Mathew 6:6); yet more, according to the teaching of the Apostle, he should pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17)" (Second Vatican Council 1963, #12).

What is supposed to be true for all the faithful is presumed to apply even more to pastoral workers in general and to the ordained ministry in particular. Their personal spiritual life of prayer and their participation in the liturgy, most of all in the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours, are expected to be sources of spiritual experiences of divine grace and of a burning love of God and neighbor. They all are “expected and called to care for their own personal spirituality, which is regarded as a resource by both themselves and the institution” (Büssing et al. 2015).

On the other hand, we have data about specific phases of spiritual crises in Catholic priests (‘spiritual dryness’) that were predicted by low perception of the transcendent in their daily life, depressive symptoms, perceived stress, and the low importance these priests ascribed to their religious activity (Büssing et al. 2016). If we want to assess how deeply their personal spirituality saturates their daily life activities and thus contributes to their life satisfaction, we should not only examine *what* they are doing and *how often* but also how *important* it is to them (‘centrality,’ according to Huber and Huber 2012; Zwingmann and Gottschling 2015; ‘functional significance,’ according to Rulla 1971, pp. 73–89). In studying Orthodox Jewish prayer, Lazar (2015) compared men who were ritually obliged to pray three times a day with fixed texts and women who ‘privately’ chose their prayers. For female Jewish prayers, life satisfaction required the moderating effects of prayer duration and belief in the power of prayer.

Aim of the analysis

Much is known much about the *frequency* of spiritual activities of pastoral workers (either because it is part of their job or routine or even an intrinsic motivation), but less is known about how *important* specific spiritual and existential practices are to them personally or existentially. Scholars have assumed that the spirituality is an important resource for religious persons such as pastoral workers. Therefore, we focused on pastoral workers’ *perception* of the transcendent in their life on the one hand (experience) and on their spiritual practices on the other (activities). However, what a person is doing must not necessarily be regarded as important to their life in general. For this study, we thus focused on the *experience* of the transcendent, the *frequency of engagement* in specific spiritual/religious practices of relevance for this population, and also the *importance* they ascribed to different fields of spiritual/religious practices. Pastoral workers’ general life satisfaction, as well as their ‘spiritual congruence’ (i.e., perception of the transcendent in their daily life and the absence of spiritual dryness) might be shaped by these engagement dimensions.

Therefore, we designed this study to analyze (1) which forms of spiritual activities the pastoral workers regarded as important, (2) how the perceived importance of spiritual practices relates to the frequency of their engagement in these practices, and (3) how these practices contributed to the life satisfaction of ordained priests and of non-ordained pastoral workers.

Materials and methods

Participants

All individuals who participated in this anonymously conducted cross-sectional study were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw

at any time, and asked to provide informed consent by signing provided questionnaires. They were recruited from all groups of Catholic pastoral workers in 22 of the 27 German dioceses (Frick et al. 2015). The response rate was 42% (ranging from 16% to 52%). For this specific analysis we used data of pastoral workers from 4 dioceses.

All participants were informed about the study by the personnel managers of their diocese and were invited in a separate letter written by the study authors to participate in the study. Participation was possible using a pencil-and-paper version or an online questionnaire.

Measures

Daily spiritual experiences To measure pastoral workers' perceptions of the transcendent in daily life, we used the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) (Underwood 2011; Underwood and Teresi 2002). Its 6-item version (DSES-6; $\alpha = .91$) uses the following items: feeling God's presence, feeling close to God, finding strength in my faith (religion), feeling deep inner peace, feeling God's love, and being touched by the beauty of creation (Underwood and Teresi 2002). Responses were scored on a 6-point scale ranging from *many times a day, every day, most days, some days, once in a while*, to *never/almost never*. Item scores were summarized.

Frequency of religious activities We measured the frequency of different forms of either private (individual) or public (organized) forms of religious activities, such as celebration of the Holy Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, private prayers (apart from church services or the Liturgy of the Hours), and participation in the sacramental Confession (Büssing et al. 2015).

The frequency of the Holy Eucharist (whether presiding or participating) ranged from *daily/nearly daily, several times per week to mostly on the weekend*. The frequency of the Liturgy of the Hours ranged from *never, seldom, several times per week, to daily for some, most, or all parts*. The frequency of private prayer ranged from *never/almost never, sometimes, on some days, several days a week, daily, to several times per day*. The frequency of the participant's own Confession ranged from *less than once per year, once per year, once every 6 months, once every 3 months, once per month, to nearly weekly*. Items were recorded in such a way that higher scores represented higher engagement frequency.

Importance of spiritual practices To differentiate various forms of specific spiritual practices and to investigate the self-ascribed importance of these activities, we used the SpREUK-P questionnaire (Büssing et al. 2005, 2012). This generic instrument was designed to measure the engagement in organized and private spiritual, existential, philosophical, and prosocial-humanistic practices. In its shortened 17-item version, it differentiates five main factors: Religious practices ($\alpha = .82$), Humanistic practices ($\alpha = .79$), Existentialistic practices ($\alpha = .77$), Gratitude/Awe ($\alpha = .77$), and Spiritual Mind-Body practices ($\alpha = .72$) (Büssing et al. 2012).

For this study, the importance of the following practices and perceptions was addressed:

- *Religious practices*, i.e., celebrating the Holy Eucharist, participating in religious events (apart from the participant's official duties), praying privately, meditating (in the Christian style), and having religious symbols in one's surroundings,
- *Prosocial-Humanistic practices*, i.e., thinking of those in need, being considerate of others, actively helping others, advocating for equity and doing good,

- *Existentialistic practices*, i.e., considering the meaning in life, getting insight/awareness (including about oneself), and achieving self-realization,
- *Gratitude/Awe*, i.e., feeling great gratitude, having feelings of wonder and awe, and experiencing and valuing beauty,
- *Spiritual Mind-Body practices* (mind-body practices inspired by non-Christian traditions such as Zen-Buddhism), i.e., meditation (non-Christian styles), mind-body disciplines (i.e., mindfulness, yoga, qigong), and specific rituals (from other religious traditions).

Internal reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) in this specific sample were .67, .81, .72, .79, and .65, respectively. The importance of each of the practices/engagements was scored on a 4-point scale (0 = *not at all*; 1 = *somewhat important*; 2 = *important*; 3 = *essential*). The scores can be referred to a 100% level (transformed scale score).

Life satisfaction To measure life satisfaction, we relied on the German version of Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al. 1985). This 5-item scale ($\alpha = .92$) uses general phrasings such as, "In most ways my life is close to my ideal", "The conditions of my life are excellent", "I am satisfied with my life", "So far I have gotten the important things I want in my life", and, "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing". Although this instrument does not differentiate the fields of satisfaction, it is nevertheless a good measure of a person's global satisfaction in life as it addresses also the self-assessed balance between the ideal and the given life situation. A benefit of the SWLS is the fact that it is not contaminated with positive affect variables, vitality, health function, etc. It can thus be used to analyze which other dimensions of spiritual engagement and experience would contribute to pastoral workers' overall life satisfaction. The extent of respondents' agreement or disagreement is indicated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.

Statistical analyses

Descriptive statistics as well as first-order correlations and regression analyses were computed with SPSS 22.0. Given the exploratory character of this study, the significance level was set at $p < .01$. With respect to classifying the strength of the observed correlations, we regarded $r > .5$ as a strong correlation, r between .3 and .5 as a moderate correlation, r between .2 and .3 as a weak correlation, and $r < .2$ as negligible or no correlation.

Results

Description of the sample

We analyzed data from 1826 pastoral workers, of whom 65% were priests and 35% non-ordained pastoral assistants and parish expert workers. Deacons were not enrolled in this analysis. Priests were of male gender, but most of the non-ordained pastoral workers were women (see Table 1). The sample of priests was significantly older than the parish assistants/expert workers, who usually retire at age 65 (Table 1).

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of pastoral workers

		Priests (%)	Non-ordained (%)	All pastoral workers (%)	<i>p</i> value (Chi ² or ANOVA)
Profession (%)		65.1	34.9	100.0	
Gender (%)	Male	100.0	30.5	76.0	< .0001
	Female	0.0	69.6	24.0	
Age (%)	< 45 y	12.2	24.4	16.5	< .0001
	45–55 y	24.7	45.4	45.4	
	> 55 y	63.1	30.2	30.2	
Transcendence Perception (DSES)	Mean	24.5	24.4	24.5	n.s.
	SD	5.3	4.9	5.2	

n.s. = not significant

Frequency of religious activities

Among the priests, 61% presided over or participated in the Eucharist every day, 28% several times per week, and 11% only on the weekends. Because a large proportion of these priests (30%) were retired, their options to preside over the Eucharist on a daily basis were reduced. Among these retired priests, 16% presided over the Eucharist every day, 23% nearly daily, 40% several times per week, and 22% only on the weekends. Among the other priests actively working, 21% presided over the Eucharist daily, 50% nearly daily, 24% several times per week, and 6% only on the weekends. In contrast, 75% of non-ordained pastoral workers participated in the Eucharist regularly on the weekends, 20% several times per week, and 5% daily. These results differ significantly ($p < .0001$).

The Liturgy of the Hours was prayed by 67% of priests daily, by 10% several times per week, by 17% seldom, and by 6% never. In contrast, 42% of non-ordained persons never prayed it, 41% seldom, 6% several times per week, and 11% daily. These results differ significantly ($p < .0001$), too.

The frequency of private prayer does not differ significantly ($p = .105$) between priests and non-ordained pastoral workers. We found that 58% of priests and 61% of non-ordained participants prayed daily and 28% of priests and 29% of non-ordained persons prayed some days, but 13% of priests and 9% of non-ordained pastoral workers indicated that they did not pray privately.

Personal sacramental Confession is of low relevance for non-ordained pastoral workers; 76% practiced the sacrament of penance less than once per year and 12% once per year, whereas 34% of priests practiced it less than once per year and 21% at least once per year ($p < .0001$).

Importance of spiritual practices (SpREUK-P)

Next we analyzed the self-attributed importance of different forms of spiritual practices. As shown in Table 2, there were some strong differences between the importance ascribed by priests and non-ordained pastoral workers, particularly with respect to the spiritual practices specifically related to their profession (i.e., the Liturgy of the Hours, celebration of the Eucharist), which scored high among priests. On the other hand, activities not related to their

Table 2 Mean scores of self-attributed importance of specific spiritual and existential practices

Items	Priests	Non-ordained	F value
(Christian) Religious practices			
Praying the Liturgy of the Hours	1.6 ± 1.0	0.5 ± 0.7	686.9**
Private praying (for oneself, for others etc.)	2.2 ± 0.7	2.2 ± 0.8	0.4
Celebrating the Eucharist/Holy Mass	2.4 ± 0.6	2.2 ± 0.8	110.8**
Meditation/Contemplation (Christian styles)	1.3 ± 0.9	1.2 ± 0.9	9.7*
Reading religious/spiritual books	1.8 ± 0.8	1.6 ± 0.8	26.3**
Religious symbols in one's surroundings	2.2 ± 0.8	2.0 ± 0.9	11.8*
Participating in religious events (apart from 'official duties')	1.8 ± 0.8	2.0 ± 0.8	48.9**
Spiritual Mind-Body practices practices			
Meditating (non-Christian traditions' style)	0.3 ± 0.7	0.3 ± 0.7	0.5
Practicing specific mind-body disciplines (mindfulness, yoga, qigong)	0.4 ± 0.7	0.8 ± 0.9	113.0**
Practicing specific rituals from other religious traditions	0.2 ± 0.5	0.4 ± 0.7	30.1**
Existentialistic practices			
Considering the meaning of life	2.2 ± 0.7	2.3 ± 0.7	15.3**
Trying to get insight/awareness (also about myself)	2.1 ± 0.7	2.4 ± 0.7	53.0**
Working to achieve self-realization	1.6 ± 0.9	1.9 ± 0.8	38.1**
Conveying positive values and thinking/attitudes	2.3 ± 0.6	2.4 ± 0.6	13.0**
Being conscious of how to treat the environment	2.0 ± 0.7	2.3 ± 0.6	70.7**
Prosocial-Humanistic practices			
Trying to actively help others	2.2 ± 0.6	2.3 ± 0.6	4.0
Being considerate of others	2.2 ± 0.6	2.3 ± 0.5	18.8**
Thinking about those in need	2.1 ± 0.7	2.0 ± 0.7	3.9
Advocating for equity and doing good	2.1 ± 0.6	2.2 ± 0.6	1.1
Gratitude/Awe			
Having feelings of great gratitude	2.0 ± 0.7	2.1 ± 0.7	3.1
Having feelings of wonder and awe	2.0 ± 0.8	2.0 ± 0.8	0.1
Experiencing and valuing beauty	2.3 ± 0.6	2.5 ± 0.6	16.5**

** $p < .0001$; * $p < .01$ (ANOVA)

professional role, i.e., the practice of specific mind-body disciplines (e.g., mindfulness, yoga, qigong), conscious interaction with nature, gaining insight/awareness, and participation in religious events (also apart from the 'official duties') scored higher among non-ordained pastoral workers. Some practices do not differ significantly among the professions: private prayer, advocacy for justice, doing good, thinking about those in need, actively helping others, and feeling gratitude and awe.

In analysing the underlying factors, it became evident that the importance of Prosocial-Humanistic practices scored highest, followed by Gratitude/Awe, Existentialistic practices, and Religious practices (see Table 3). Specific forms of Spiritual Mind-Body practices were not relevant. Compared to priests, non-ordained women in particular had significantly higher scores for Existentialistic and Spiritual Mind-Body practices.

The Liturgy of the Hours is not part of the Religious practices scale because of a low item-scale correlation. Nevertheless, in priests it correlated moderately with Religious practices

Table 3 Importance of spiritual practices differentiated for profession and gender

		Importance (SpREUK-P)				
		Prosocial- Humanistic practices	Gratitude/Awe	Religious practices	Existentialistic practices	Spiritual Mind-Body practices
All pastoral workers	Mean	71.90	71.04	64.49	67.85	12.77
	SD	16.15	19.90	17.34	20.29	18.49
Profession						
Priests	z-Mean *	-0.03	-0.04	0.05	-0.12	-0.14
	z-SD	1.00	1.01	0.95	1.02	0.87
Non-ordained	z-Mean *	0.05	0.07	-0.10	0.23	0.25
	z-SD	1.00	0.98	1.08	0.91	1.16
F value		2.2	4.2	9.6	50.8	64.2
p value		n.s.	.040	.002	< .0001	< .0001
Gender						
Male	z-Mean *	-0.01	-0.04	-0.01	-0.08	-0.10
	z-SD	0.99	1.01	0.97	1.01	0.92
Female	z-Mean *	0.03	0.14	0.04	0.26	0.31
	z-SD	1.03	0.95	1.07	0.94	1.17
F value		0.5	11.0	0.8	39.6	57.2
p value		n.s.	.001	n.s.	< .0001	< .0001

n.s. = not significant

*standardized z-values (weak to moderate effects were highlighted)

($r = .43$), but only marginally and less with Gratitude/Awe ($r = .12$), Prosocial-Humanistic practices ($r = .08$), and Existentialistic practices ($r = -.04$).

Associations between self-attributed importance of spiritual practices and actual frequency of religious activities

For both priests and non-ordained pastoral workers, the importance of spiritual practices (according to the SpREUK-P scale) correlated weakly to moderately with the frequency of celebrating the Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, and sacramental Confession, and it correlated best with private prayers (see Tables 4 and 5). Detailed analyses of single items for priests showed that the frequency and importance of presiding over/celebrating the Eucharist correlated weakly ($r = .30$), whereas the same correlation was moderate for Liturgy of the Hours ($r = .35$) and for private prayer ($r = .37$). In non-ordained pastoral workers, the correlations between the importance of Religious practices and the frequency of specific spiritual practices of the Roman Catholic tradition were slightly different: for the Eucharist ($r = .36$) and private prayer ($r = .45$) they were moderate, whereas for the Liturgy of the Hours they were only weak ($r = .28$), in all cases at a significant level ($p < .01$). The frequency of these religious practices was either not related or only marginally related to the self-attributed importance of Existentialistic practices or of Prosocial-Humanistic practices. For priests, Gratitude/Awe was weakly related to the frequency of private prayers (see Table 4), but for non-ordained persons there were only marginal associations (see Table 5).

Table 4 Correlations between the importance of spiritual practices, the frequency of religious practices, and life satisfaction-associated variables in the subsample of priests

	Importance (SpREUK-P)				
	Prosocial-Humanistic practices	Gratitude/Awe	Religious practices	Existentialistic practices	Spiritual Mind-Body practices
Spirituality-associated variables					
Prosocial-Humanistic practices	1.000	.408**	.332**	.312**	.071
Gratitude/Awe		1.000	.355**	.341**	.101**
Religious practices			1.000	.217**	.099**
Existentialistic practices				1.000	.153**
Non-Christian spiritual practices					1.000
Frequency of religious practices					
Holy Mass	.007	.005	.269**	-.044	-.033
Liturgy of the Hours	.084**	.123**	.354**	-.051	-.032
Sacramental Confession	.002	.033	.363**	-.077	.005
Private prayers	.163**	.239**	.365**	.130**	.127**
Life satisfaction-associated variables					
Perception of the Transcendent	.259**	.428**	.413**	.108**	.076
Life satisfaction	.206**	.355**	.246**	.062	-.026
Spiritual dryness	-.200**	-.342**	-.311**	-.111**	-.047

** $p < .01$ (Spearman rho); moderate correlations are bolded

Associations of perception of the transcendent and of spiritual dryness with the importance of spiritual practices

Perception of the transcendent and spiritual dryness are strongly interrelated ($r = -.56$), but how are these aspects of spirituality related to the self-ascribed importance of spiritual practices?

Perception of the transcendent was moderately related to the importance of Religious practices as well as to Gratitude/Awe, both in priests (Table 4) and non-ordained pastoral workers (see Table 5), whereas Prosocial-Humanistic practices were weakly associated with the perception of the transcendent. In priests, Existentialistic practices were negligibly correlated with the perception of the transcendent, and in non-ordained participants these were weakly correlated.

With respect to spiritual dryness in priests, both the importance of Gratitude/Awe and Religious practices were inversely correlated in a moderate way with spiritual dryness (Table 4), whereas in non-ordained pastoral workers spiritual dryness scores showed no relevant correlations with variables of the importance of spiritual practices (Table 5).

Associations between life satisfaction and the importance of spiritual practices

Perception of the transcendent and spiritual dryness were moderately related to pastoral workers' overall life satisfaction ($r = .38$ and $r = -.37$, respectively). Yet, how does the importance of their spiritual practices relate to their life satisfaction?

Table 5 Correlations between the importance of spiritual practices, the frequency of religious practices, and life satisfaction-associated variables in the subsample of non-ordained pastoral workers

	Importance (SpREUK-P)				
	Prosocial-Humanistic practices	Gratitude/Awe	Religious practices	Existentialistic practices	Spiritual Mind-Body practices
Spirituality-associated variables					
Prosocial-Humanistic practices	1.000	.387**	.279**	.308**	.002
Gratitude/awe		1.000	.250**	.338**	.107**
Religious practices			1.000	.187**	.107**
Existentialistic practices				1.000	.247**
Non-Christian spiritual practices					1.000
Frequency of religious practices					
Holy Mass	.038	.055	.358**	-.026	-.027
Liturgy of the Hours	-.003	.065	.278**	-.044	-.021
Sacramental Confession	-.025	.006	.366**	-.056	-.029
Private prayers	.131**	.145**	.451**	.102*	.123**
Life satisfaction-associated variables					
Perception of the Transcendent	.273**	.357**	.382**	.200**	.135**
Life satisfaction	.128**	.239**	.087	.052	-.094
Spiritual dryness	-.108**	-.141**	-.198**	-.085	.004

** $p < .01$ (Spearman rho); moderate correlations are bolded

The life satisfaction of priests was moderately related to Gratitude/Awe and weakly related to the self-attributed importance of Religious practices and Prosocial-Humanistic practices (see Table 4), whereas the life satisfaction of non-ordained persons was weakly related to Gratitude/Awe but not to Religious practices (see Table 5). In both groups, life satisfaction was not significantly associated with the importance of Existentialistic practices or Spiritual Mind-Body practices.

Predictors of pastoral workers' life satisfaction

We assumed that different aspects of spirituality would contribute to pastoral workers' life satisfaction. This might be either their *experience* of the transcendent, their active engagement (*frequency*) in specific spiritual/religious practices, or what they regarded as *important* in their life. Moreover, we assumed a differential pattern of predictors for priests and for non-ordained. With respect to the exploratory correlations described above, as well as differences related to gender, we performed separate stepwise regression analyses for ordained and non-ordained pastoral workers (see Table 6).

Including all measures of importance of spiritual practices (except Spiritual Mind-Body practices), for priests, the perception of the transcendent, spiritual dryness (inversely), and the importance of Gratitude/Awe were the best spiritual predictors of their life satisfaction (these three variables explain 31% of the variance), followed by four additional variables (i.e., the frequency of the Liturgy of the Hours, the participant's age, and, as negative predictors, private prayer and the importance of Existentialistic practices), which add another 5% of variance

Table 6 Predictors of priests' and non-ordained pastoral workers' life satisfaction (dependent variable)

	Beta	T	p
Priests			
Model 7: $F = 80.4$; $p < .000$; $R^2 = .36$			
(Constant)		10.952	< .0001
Perception of the Transcendent	.191	5.331	< .0001
Spiritual Dryness	-.265	-7.884	< .0001
Importance of Gratitude/Awe	.215	7.014	< .0001
Frequency of the Liturgy of the Hours	.156	5.746	< .0001
Age	.107	4.111	< .0001
Frequency of Private Prayers	-.080	-2.933	.003
Importance of Existentialistic practices	-.058	-2.158	.031
Non-ordained pastoral workers			
Model 5: $F = 19.3$; $p < .000$; $R^2 = .17$			
(Constant)		21.635	< .0001
Spiritual Dryness	-.296	-6.851	< .0001
Importance of Gratitude/Awe	.204	4.496	< .0001
Importance of Existentialistic practices	-.127	-2.862	.004
Frequency of Sacramental Confession	-.135	-2.937	.003
Frequency of Holy Mass	.098	2.103	.036

Stepwise regression analysis: Only the best prediction models were presented. The strongest predictors are bolded

explanation (see Table 6). Other aspects of spirituality (both as to importance and frequency) were not among the significant predictors in this model.

For non-ordained pastoral workers, five variables explain only 17% of the variance in their life satisfaction scores, particularly spiritual dryness and the importance of Gratitude/Awe, followed by the importance of Existentialistic practices, the frequency of sacramental Confession, and the frequency of the Eucharist (see Table 6).

Discussion

This analysis was designed to analyze (1) which forms of spiritual activities the pastoral workers regarded as important, (2) how these spiritual activities relate to the frequency of their religious practices, and (3) how these spiritual practices (their importance and frequency) contributed to the life satisfaction of ordained priests and non-ordained pastoral workers.

To answer the first research question, the highest self-ascribed importance was found for Prosocial-Humanistic activities and Gratitude/Awe, followed by Existentialistic practices and Religious practices of their Roman Catholic tradition, whereas the Spiritual Mind-Body practices of non-Christian spiritual traditions were not of relevance in the whole group of pastoral workers, although they were of some relevance for a small fraction. Although the importance of specific religious practices was understandably higher for priests than for non-ordained pastoral workers, the importance scores of Existentialistic practices were higher for non-ordained men and women. Detailed analyses revealed that this difference can be attributed

particularly to the higher importance of a conscious way of dealing with nature, the intention to get insight/awareness (including about oneself), and the desire to work on one's 'self-realization'. We expected that priests would attribute more importance to presiding over/celebrating the Eucharist and to praying the Liturgy of the Hours compared to non-ordained pastoral workers. Interestingly, the importance of voluntarily participating in religious events (apart from 'official duties') was higher for the non-ordained than for priests. This may indicate that the non-ordained are looking either for more or different religious events to nourish their spirituality than are provided within their pastoral reality at their local workplace. Previous studies differentiated between organizational religious involvement, such as attendance at worship services and private prayer. The social support dimension linked to official religious practices seems to have a strong influence on (better) health outcomes (Nicholson et al. 2010). Further studies on the spiritual needs of pastoral workers should focus on the fruits of different spiritual practices in each of the professional groups.

For the second research question, we analyzed how the self-ascribed importance of spiritual practices was related to the frequency of religious practices. As expected, the importance of Religious practices correlated moderately with the frequency of private prayers and sacramental Confession in both the ordained and the non-ordained. To our surprise, the importance of Religious practices correlated only weakly with the frequency of celebrating Eucharist in priests. However, more relevant is the fact that private prayer was weakly associated with Gratitude/Awe in priests and was less associated (only marginally) in the non-ordained persons. This difference needs to be explained, because Gratitude/Awe was assessed as similarly important by both groups. We wonder whether priests respond to these feelings more frequently with prayers to bring their feelings to God or if their prayers prompt more feelings of gratitude and awe. The importance of Existentialistic practices (which refer to one's own 'inner' development) is not significantly related to the frequency of religious practices in the Roman Catholic faith tradition, probably because these practices refer primarily to God rather than to reflecting on oneself. We find it astonishing, however, that the frequencies of religious practices are either not or only marginally (in the case of private prayers) related to the importance of Prosocial-Humanistic practices (which were nevertheless seen as highly important). "Love of neighbor" (Mark 12:31) is at the core of the Christian ethos, that is, the obligation to care for the poor, the old, the sick, the suffering, etc., and to find Christ in all of them (Mathew 25:40). This may indicate a crack in spiritual coherence. Does this finding mean a break between religious practices and "love of neighbor", between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of Christian love?

Interestingly, as early as the 1970s a study among German priests confirmed that they viewed sermons and church services as most important but ranked pastoral home visits, care for the old and sick, and other social and charitable activities as less important (Schmidtchen 1973). Our study asked for the perceived importance, and all these activities were considered as important, yet the frequency of the activities and the importance of the practices were not related.

A recent study (Cappellen et al. 2014) shows that a positive relation between religious practices such as participation in the Eucharist and prosociality has to be mediated by the social aspect of the ritual. All in all, our study underlines that the frequency and importance of spiritual practices should be differentiated. Previous studies (Huber and Huber 2012; Rulla 1971; Zwingmann and Gottschling 2015) considered *importance* as an aspect of centrality or salience—of religiosity in personality, i.e., the degree of (intrinsic) religiosity that guides one's daily life consistently. These researchers inquired five basic religious domains (according to Glock and Stark 1971): intellect, ideology, experience, private practice, and public practice.

With respect to the third research question, we assumed that much of the life satisfaction of persons in pastoral ministry might depend on their spiritual activities and the importance they give or attribute to them in their daily lives. This assumption was confirmed for the group of priests, for whom perception of the transcendent, (low) spiritual dryness, and the importance of Gratitude/Awe as best spiritual predictors would explain 31% of the variance in their global life satisfaction. There is a marked difference, however, in comparison to non-ordained men and women in pastoral ministry. Considering the life satisfaction of the latter group, the best five spiritual predictors would explain only 17% of the variance, most prominently spiritual dryness (inversely) and the importance of Gratitude/Awe. Perception of the transcendent, however, would not play an important role in this regard. Thus, most of the non-ordained pastoral workers' global life satisfaction depends on sources other than their spirituality. In contrast, for priests, the respective measures of spirituality explain a considerable amount of variance, which indicates that their spirituality is quite important for their satisfaction with and in life. These findings suggest that priests' life satisfaction is much more dependent on their vocational experience and religious commitment than is the life satisfaction of non-ordained pastoral workers. This may be due to a stronger separation between the latter group's professional and private life. This would also explain why their self-attributed importance of spiritual activities shows hardly any impact on their life satisfaction except spiritual dryness (inversely, with its 'depressive' aspects) and its 'anti-depressive' opposite of Gratitude/Awe. In relation to these strongly mood-connected variables, both groups resemble each other, although with a stronger impact on the priests' life satisfaction. In fact, spiritual dryness would account for 21% of the variance in priests' life satisfaction and Gratitude/Awe for 14%. In contrast, spiritual dryness explains 11% of non-ordained pastoral workers' life satisfaction and Gratitude/Awe only 5%.

There is basically a similar effect in the results of both the *frequency* as well as the self-attributed *importance* of spiritual activities with regard to ritually bound religious practices (especially the sacraments), which are strongly connected to the priestly role and commitment (Büssing et al. 2015). The results show pronounced differences between priests and non-ordained pastoral workers in this regard. Functional role and vocational role commitment may sufficiently explain such differences. There is conformity, however, between the groups with respect to their engagement in private prayer and their perception of the transcendent (Büssing et al. 2015).

Although Catholic pastoral workers may consider gratitude, altruism and the search for meaning as important, these spiritual goals are nevertheless not related to the frequency of their religious practices or activities, as described above. They score high on perception of the transcendent without correlation to the variables of Gratitude/Awe and Prosocial-Humanistic practices (nor to Existentialistic practices). In other words, there is a reported perception of the transcendent that does not seem to bear the fruits of prosocial activities, as is implied by biblical faith; in our findings, at least, these variables are instead independent.

What about the surprising irrelevance of the liturgy for both Prosocial-Humanistic practices and Gratitude/Awe among pastoral workers and even among priests, who celebrate the Eucharist frequently, usually on a daily basis? The reason for this missing correlation is probably not a matter of 'quantity' (i.e., the more one prays the Liturgy of the Hours, the more Gratitude/Awe is regarded as important) but of the 'quality' or disposition on the side of the participant, i.e., the vivid spiritual importance addressed in the present study. In fact, if the Catholic Church tradition and conviction as expressed by Vatican II and many theologians holds true, it provides some clue to the answer to this phenomenon of spiritual/existential

ineffectiveness: “In order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain” (Second Vatican Council 1963, #11).

In consequence, due to the subjective disposition or experiential quality of the pastoral workers of both groups who perform or participate in religious activities, these activities may lack a dynamic thrust towards deeper gratitude towards God and empathetic “love of neighbors” in need. Dynamically, in other words, it seems that pastoral workers, both priests and non-ordained persons, are indifferent or even jaded in respect to what is officially supposed to be a privileged source of divine gratitude and social love.

Can this result account, at least to some extent, for the relative scarcity of parishes engaged in work on behalf of the poor and marginalized (Eurich et al. 2010), for the considerable split between well-to-do parishes and Catholic social welfare services in Germany (and other countries) (Baumann 2011; Pompey 2007), and for the marginalization of social issues in mainstream theology (Baumann 2014)? Monks in the Benedictine tradition integrate their spiritual life with their daily work; they are not separate domains but instead intermingle with each other. Thus, when each action is an expression of one’s true faith and vital spirituality, it should have an effect on one’s interactions with others, the world around, and the transcendent. In line with this, Underwood found that ‘compassionate love’ assumed well self-transcendence as the core of spirituality (Underwood 2005), which is the essence of the main commandment of the Christian tradition (Mark 12:28–34). Notably, the theme of compassion can also be found in basic spiritual orientations in other religious traditions.

The results of this analysis raise several further questions. What is happening with those priests who report they are not praying privately at all? Analogously, what does it mean that the sacramental Confession seems to be hardly practiced at all, even by a large number of priests who are the primary ministers of this sacrament? What does it mean that the perception of the transcendent does not contribute much to non-ordained pastoral workers’ life satisfaction?

Limitations

Self-reported information can be biased; respondents’ answers may be either too positive (due to social desirability) or too negative (to let off steam). To overcome this problem, we also performed qualitative interviews with a large number of pastoral workers in order to further substantiate the current findings. These data, which will be published in a future paper, indicate that the pastoral workers in this study responded quite sincerely and reliably.

Due to the high number of participants from most German dioceses and the response rate of 42%, which is quite high for a study without any incentives and without any obligation to participate (voluntary participation), we consider this sample as representative of Catholic pastoral workers in Germany. These findings should be reproduced in other countries, regions, and cultural contexts where Catholic priests and non-ordained ministers work under different social, political, or economic situations.

Moreover, one has to keep in mind that statistically significant differences might not necessarily be of practical relevance. Therefore, we have added standardized z-values to describe the differences between the analyzed subgroups; in the correlation, we have highlighted moderate to strong associations. Data of the regression analyses should not be overinterpreted, particularly

with respect to the minor predictors that may be weakly significant (and thus included in the regression model) or significant only in the trend of relevance (and thus not included). Thus, we focused on the main relevant predictors.

Conclusion

We identified differences in the frequency and ascribed importance of spiritual practices between ordained and non-ordained pastoral workers, as well as a surprising lack of connection between religious practices and their proclaimed importance particularly of Prosocial-Humanistic practices and Gratitude/Awe. These findings may stimulate further research into the underlying causes of these differences between priests and other pastoral workers and into the gaps between the frequency and the importance of spiritual practices in all the groups, which in our opinion indicate challenging inconsistencies with regard to the ideals of religious vocations.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Competing Interests This study was an investigator-initiated trial without any influence of Church authorities. All authors are members of their respective universities; three of the authors are Catholic priests (EF, KB, CJ) who work at universities as researchers. The authors have no financial or other competing interests to disclose.

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