Metaphors of suffering, illness, and death in the digital edition of the *Apostolate of the Sick* journal

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Key words

Abstract

The sick can conceptualize their suffering individually and in a community by subordinating themselves to the rules of the discourse that regulates thinking and behaviour. Conceptualization can, therefore, be the result of choice, adopting a particular perspective, and filtering experience through categories that make up a specific ideological or axiological system. It is not only the result of somatic, cultural, or subcultural determination. Research conducted worldwide has already shown that conceptual metaphors help individual patients cope with suffering, mobilize them to fight, and even give them hope. Research on religious communities online has already mapped the community-forming potential of groups of the sick. However, so far, the two trends have not met. The authors of this article try to fill these gaps in the literature by using intuitive analysis of metaphors as part of the discourse analysis of the digital edition of the Polish monthly *Apostolstwo Chorych* [*Apostolate of the Sick*] in 2019-2022. The results of the analysis allow us to understand the community that creates the monthly magazine in its ideological and axiological dimensions. Moreover, the results help capture the connections between the conceptual processes of metaphorizing suffering and the community experience. The conducted research constitutes a contribution to further research on religious communities online, as well as on the metaphors, axiology, and pragmatics of discourses about illness, suffering, and death.

1. Introduction

The issue of how metaphors function in religious language is gaining significance, especially in the latest scholarship in religious studies (Krech, Karis and Elwert, 2023). At the same time, religious cyber communities, already in existence for almost two decades, comprise a revised subject of research analysis at the nexus of communication, media and theology. Moreover, conceptual metaphors have remained on the peripheries of the academic discourse undertaken

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by these communities (Campbell, 2005). In order to understand the studied religious communities, including those made up of sick people, Campbell (2005) reaches for the category of narration and story, metaphors dealing with one of many instruments serving their construction. Meanwhile, studies on metaphors show that conceptual metaphors have an essential meaning in the lives of sick people, not only allowing them to express what cannot be expressed but also motivating them to fight, even giving them hope (Reisfield and Wilson, 2004).

Conceptual metaphors also have community-creative and identity-forming potential. This article is focused on the topic of how metaphors determine the process of conceptualizing diseases, the suffering that accompanies them, and even death, not only at the individual level, but also at the collective level. By identifying conceptual metaphors in the pages of *Apostolstwo Chorych/ Apostolate of the Sick* (2025 is the centenary of this Polish monthly magazine on suffering people, also published digitally), the authors of the article strive to understand the discourse of the community using it. This will enrich the area of research on religious discourse in the digital space (Campbell, 2005; Kołodziejska, 2018; Evolvi, 2019). The authors' goal is to enrich the area of studies on metaphor and religion (Slingerland, 2004) by exploring the community issue, the community-creative experience and the conceptualization of suffering as a carrier of specific axiology, things researchers have overlooked so far.

To achieve this goal, the authors formulated two exploratory research questions:

Q1 What linguistic metaphors of suffering, illness and death can be identified in the issues of *Apostolate of the Sick* published in 2019–2022?

Q2 What ideas and values were promoted in *Apostolate of the Sick* in the years 2019–2022, using linguistic metaphors of suffering, illness and death?

2. Materials

Both the *Apostolate of the Sick* and the problem of experiencing suffering by members of religious communities operating online have so far been ignored by researchers of communication and religion in Poland. Meanwhile, interest in the magazine focused on its history (Rechowicz, 1979; Podleski, 1994), implementing the Catholic Church's specific ideological functions (Bartoszek, 2024; Durda, 1998), its publishing condition (Michałowski, 2000), and its position in the system of religious communication in Poland (Guzek, 2016).

This state of research does not correspond to current trends in research literature but rather focuses on how representatives of Catholic communities operating online and offline function in the specific spaces of freedom they co-create, at least partially removed from the tutelage of the institutional Church. This is especially true of Dorota Hall's (2016) study on the dynamics of finding a place in the Church by groups of LGBTQIA+ believers, or Marta Kołodziejska's (2018) research on the discursive practices of Catholics active on online

forums, and how similar practices pave the way for new forms of religious authority and religious individualism.

The *Apostolate of the Sick* does not break away from the aegis of the Roman Catholic Church. It is edited in the environment of a community co-created not only by sick people, but also by their pastors. This monthly magazine is a medium of the Church – priests largely determine its shape. Moreover, the magazine was initially published in the form of a letter to the sick and, over time, underwent an evolution in terms of genre, content, and structure until it became a digital edition available at www.apchor.pl.

Understanding discourse as a structural unit that is an expression of the articulation of specific ideologies (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007; Carpentier, 2017) and a product of axiology in textual form (Fairclough, 1992; Sulkunen and Törrönen, 1997; Jeffries, 2015; Bączkowska, 2021), we will see that the discourse of the *Apostolate of the Sick* it is not the result of the views of emancipated internet users, as in Kołodziejska (2018), or of problematic groups studied by Hall (2016) who desire unity with the institutional Catholic Church but are excluded by it. Instead, *Apostolate of the Sick* presents an amalgam of biblical content, especially texts exposing the New Testament's logic. This also includes John Paul II's achievements on the theology of suffering (Colosi, 2009) and the brotherhood of Francis (Woźnica and Słomka, 2021; Guzek, 2024) and, finally, elements of the servant model church (Campbell, 2005). As a result, members of the apostolate are articulated in the magazine in a metaphorical way as the core and heart of the Roman Catholic Church.

For the authors of this article, the key is not so much to identify the readers of the apostolate but the fact that the magazine is a phenomenon that can be described not only in sociological or ecclesiological categories but also in categories specific to the study of digital religion. *Apostolate of the Sick* is an example of a periodical whose small discourse community accompanies it, operating in a religious multisite reality between the real and virtual worlds. The magazine is published in a hybrid form, which perfectly reflects its mobility when it comes to the challenges of the current conditions of how media outlets function (Chadwick, 2013). At the same time, the magazine is based on a coherent audience whose religious identity is given by metaphors and whose discourse illustrates the process of conceptualizing disease, suffering, and death through metaphors at the individual experience and the collective level.

For this article, the authors analysed all 489 texts published in *Apostolate of the Sick* in 2019–2022 (123 texts in 2019, 105 texts in 2020, 128 texts in 2021, and 133 in 2022). They performed an in-depth analysis of 321 articles in which conceptual metaphors of suffering, illness, and death were identified (79 texts in 2019, 74 in 2020, 86 in 2021, 82 in 2022). The time frame adopted in this way made it possible to capture the changes that the examined medium underwent in terms of content in connection with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, its course, and "normalization" in 2022. Putting "normalization" in quotation

marks should also be associated with the fact of a radical change in Poland's media agenda caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

3. Methods

The authors adopted *conceptual metaphor theory* (CMT) as the theoretical basis for their considerations. According to this approach, metaphor is not a means of poetic imagination or a rhetorical decoration but a category that can be applied to language and, above all, to thinking and action. As the theory's creators point out, our typical framework for thinking and behaving is fundamentally metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson, 1981).

What is essential here means that this metaphorical system of concepts is subject to intercultural and intracultural variation. Although many conceptual metaphors are of a universal, primary nature, conditioned by universal, primary somatic experiences, there are metaphors used only by representatives of particular cultures, or – in Zoltán Kövecses's terminology – subcultures. Thus, those who suffer or have suffered from depression describe their experiences using metaphors that seem to be inaccessible to those who have never suffered from this disease (Kövecses, 2005, p.7). Individual conceptual metaphors can be a source of knowledge about the individuals who use them, the communities they have created, and even entire cultures (Kövecses, 2006).

The pursuit of an in-depth discourse analysis focused on the presence of conceptual metaphors urges the authors to use a qualitative methodology. The method used in this article is the intuitive analysis of metaphors, used, among others, by one of the creators of the theory of conceptual metaphors, George Lakoff (2012). It positions the research conducted by the authors in the microtextual and microcontextual space concerning the possibilities of examining discourse (Filimonov and Svensson, 2016). Its indispensable advantage in the case of researching religious discourse is that this method provides a non-invasive approach to studying social reality.

This holds significance because *critical metaphor analysis* (CMA) (Charteris-Black, 2004), meaning the theory of conceptual metaphors most common in communication and media, was constructed for researchers with a neo-Marxist worldview. It strives not only to learn and understand social reality, but also to change it. Meanwhile, taking into account the increasing secularization (Pew Research Centre, 2017; 2018; Gorski, 2018) and the demands to eliminate religion from the public sphere due to its alleged violent and discriminatory potential (Wright and Khoo, 2020), it is clear that CMA will be more likely to abuse the research material than to subject it to a substantive analysis in terms of ideology and axiology.

The problem with the intuitive analysis of metaphors used by the authors results from the fact that this method encourages abuses – due to its "intuitionism" and accompanying subjectivism – that are generally considered to be abuses of a methodological nature. However, in practice they are rather abuses of an ethical nature. The shortcomings of the

method lie in the fact that it does not provide transparent and precise procedures, but the responsibility for errors made using it falls on the shoulders of the researchers themselves. Researchers who use intuitive metaphor analysis are often accused of concluding the presence of individual conceptual metaphors in a given language based only on dictionary analyses, detaching dictionary units from the living tissue of the language (Kövecses, 2008). Therefore, it can be said that each adept of the method should have a specific "contextual imagination" and be aware of the risks resulting from using intuition alone.

4. Results

4.1. Ecclesiological metaphorical models of suffering, sickness and death

The belief that the sick and suffering can offer their suffering to God is the main feature of the spirituality of the *Apostolate of the Sick*. The conceptual metaphor SUFFERING IS A SACRIFICE (or SUFFERING IS A GIFT TO OFFER), constituting the centre of the examined discourse, reflects the ideological and axiological configuration underlying the theological model of suffering. It arises from the Christian paradigm of the theology of sacrifice, outlined in the individual Gospels (Jervis, 2007) and further specified in the letters and tradition of Paul of Tarsus (Pobee, 1985; Gorman, 2009), including the later works of Anselm of Canterbury (McGrath, 1981). According to this model, a suffering person can offer his suffering like Jesus Christ "for the sake of his body, the Church" (Colossians 1:24). This metaphor is the basic carrier of the mystical axiology of the discourse, it is, as it were, a synthesis of this discourse, or at least of the mystically oriented part of it.

Suffering can and should be experienced "symphonically" and "in rhythm". In this, the authors of the *Apostolate of the Sick* refer to much later concepts. The first is a metaphor by Hans Urs von Balthasar (1987) regarding faith as symphonic truth. The second is a reference to the 20th-century theology of the "Paschal mystery", including such events in the life of Jesus Christ as his death, resurrection, ascension, and the descent of the Holy Spirit (Nowak, 2013, p.173). From this perspective, suffering is no longer solely a biological or psychological fact. SUFFERING IS THE BUILDING BLOCK OF THE CHURCH. As such, contrary to common sense, it is a value, not an anti-value.

4.2. Pedagogical metaphorical models of suffering, sickness and death

The metaphor SUFFERING IS A GIFT WE CAN ACCEPT is an example of a conceptualization typical of the Book of Job (cf. Job 2:10), in which one of the Jewish theological traditions with a robust Hellenistic orientation (Feldt, 2023) comes to the fore. The metaphors SUFFERING IS A TEST, SUFFERING IS A TEACHER, SUFFERING IS AN EDUCATOR, and SUFFERING IS A LESSON also have an Old Testament foundation. The latter has become a component of European culture thanks to Jewish and Christian writings but also thanks to the works of Greek poets (Heath, 2020).

These metaphors assume an unambiguously positive valuation of suffering. However, their importance for the analysed discourse remains marginal.

Although the topic of the educational nature of suffering does not disappear entirely in this discourse, it is present in the monthly magazine. However, it is included, like the metaphor SUFFERING IS A SACRIFICE (A GIFT TO OFFER), in the context of the theology of the Paschal mystery. In this case, an interpretation referring to the 20th-century concepts of Carmelite theology by Edith Stein, also known as St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (1950). The *Apostolate of the Sick* discourse is full of invitations addressed to the sick to deepen one's "knowledge of the cross" central to Stein's thoughts. Quoting the current text by Antoni Bartoszek:

> What else does it mean to learn to carry the cross? It is also about accepting the sufferings and adversities of life in connection with the cross of Christ: "Scientia crucis," says E. Stein, "is gained only when you experience the cross yourself. I was convinced of this from the very beginning, and I said with all my heart: *Ave Crux, Spes unica*." (Antoni Bartoszek, *Tasks flowing from the cross*, September 4, 2019)

The Carmelite spirituality of the *Apostolate of the Sick* is visible not only through references to the theology of Edith Stein, but also through the metaphors SUFFERING IS NIGHT and SICKNESS IS NIGHT in the monthly magazine. These are theologically entangled in the context of the doctrine bequeathed to the Carmelite Order by St John of the Cross. The mystic distinguished four types of "night": the passive and active nights of the senses and the passive and active nights of the spirit. They mean temporary states of suffering of varying degrees of intensity, which, each in its own way, are intended to prepare a person for union, already in this world, with God (St John of the Cross, 2003). It should be noted, however, that the creators of the discourse, using this metaphor, do not maintain fidelity to the teaching of the Spanish mystic. The way in which the monthly authors handle the doctrine of the dark night fits into the framework of religious therapeutic discourse rather than Carmelite orthodoxy. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to emphasize its axiological, though not statistical, relevance. It represents a kind of essence of the mystical sensibility of the monthly's creators, weighing on its axiology.

4.3. Apostolical metaphorical models of suffering, sickness and death

The metaphor SUFFERING IS THE GOSPEL is also of fundamental importance to the discourse in *Apostolate of the Sick*. Initially, the metaphor of the *Gospel of suffering* was introduced into the current church discourse by John Paul II in the letter *Salvifici doloris* (1984). According to this metaphor, the person who suffers can use suffering as a tool, an instrument that somehow supports the apostolate. However, suffering is also the very content of this apostolate. Therefore, suffering is an apostolate and means of evangelization. Additionally, what is essential from the perspective of the recipients of the *Apostolate of the Sick* is the fact that the metaphors SUFFERING IS THE GOSPEL and SUFFERING IS A SACRIFICE (A GIFT TO GIVE) constitute the mission and charism of the community they create.

> Through his experience of illness and weakness, being silent, patient, and brave, he gave the most explicit testimony to the Gospel of suffering. (Andrzej Muszala, *Teacher and companion of the sick*, May 5, 2020)
>
> Thanks to the generosity of the members of the Legion of Mary, this valuable magazine reaches out to people experiencing suffering in our parish and makes them apostles through the experience of illness, pain, and loneliness combined with the suffering of Christ for the salvation of the world. (Zbigniew Kocoń, *Caring for the sick in parish ministry during the epidemic*, October 26, 2021)
>
> You are to be an apostle through prayer, through life, through preaching, and especially in your case, through suffering (…) Pay attention to honor due to your illness and suffering in this kingdom. (Wojciech Bartoszek, *The Royal Mission of a Christian*, November 18, 2020)

These metaphors are community-creative, and while, according to the logic of the analysed discourse, suffering builds the Church mystically, the metaphor underlying this belief builds it symbolically.

4.4. Ontological metaphorical model of suffering, sickness and death

However, the pages of the *Apostolate of the Sick* show a peculiar duality. Conceptual metaphors in which the New Testament and Old Testament theological traditions intersect do not harmonize with the conceptualizations expressed by metaphors such as SUFFERING IS AN ENEMY, SUFFERING IS AN OPPONENT, DISEASE IS AN INVASION. This inconsistency is of great importance because, in the analysed discourse in 2019–2022, the presented conceptual metaphors appear very often. The vital essence and mystical perspectives (related to Carmelite theology) diverge, paving the way for two incompatible axiological configurations.

As for the linguistic creativity of the creators of the *Apostolate of the Sick*, it is more significant when there is a less objectified or conventionalized way of talking about particular conditions, diseases, or sufferings, either by the rules of religious discourse or by the rules of scientific discourse. The content of individual texts is also essential. Stories about the suffering of the spirit are less bound by convention than medicalized stories about the suffering of the body. Thus, the discourse on depression, a lexicalized metaphor, is full of creative metaphors.

DEPRESSION IS AN ENEMY that "can wreak enormous havoc on the body", something that "brings you down to earth", something that "can be encountered" and is "born" when hope fails. DEPRESSION IS A PLACE that is hard to get out of. Depression has its "abyss", and it can "deepen", and finally – DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS. It is similar to fear, which we can "fall into" and we can "carry within ourselves", but it is also something from which we can "escape". Fear "is born", "makes noise", and "increases". Fear has its "depth" it is an "abyss" or "darkness". Finally, anxiety "accompanies", "wakes up", and "affects". One can only try to "defeat", "overcome", or "fight" it.

The editors of *Apostolate of the Sick* also show great creativity when writing about the COVID-19 pandemic. A relatively large variety of metaphors, including the "COVID-19

attack", which "hits" and "causes suffering", "steals" and "takes away" something, now turns out to be an "efficient opponent", a "good-for-nothing" or a "parasite" striving to "take over attacked cells" and "take control". It "accompanies us in everyday life" and finally – to mention the "shadow of a global pandemic" which "gives food for thought" as something we cannot "read", seems to indicate not only the "demand for metaphors" resulting from the fact that this pandemic has touched every sphere of human life. When it touches each of these spheres, it is necessary to somehow explain to the reader what is happening, and metaphors are indispensable in this case. This also means that the authors of the monthly magazine cannot find a universal, coherent story about the COVID-19 pandemic. No philosophical or theological key would somehow organize its discourse.

However, it seems that the authors of *Apostolate of the Sick* do not have a similar problem with death. The monthly magazine presents one conventionalized way of talking about it, even in texts leaning towards naturalism. Death is a departure (to eternity) or a passage (to the other side).

4.5. Quantity of metaphors of suffering, sickness and death

In this part, the authors of the article focus on linguistic metaphors which turn out to be the most statistically significant. They are interested in pointing out certain general tendencies, including those of an ontological and axiological nature. The significant advantage that linguistic metaphors of suffering achieved quantitatively in the material studied over linguistic metaphors of illness and death seems to be due to the semantic capacity of the concept of suffering itself. For suffering can be corporeal and spiritual; it can refer to ailments that can be described in physical terms, as well as what is painful in the realm of conscience. The predominance of linguistic metaphors of suffering over the other metaphors also gains a confessional explanation in the Christian way of suffering. A genre-structural explanation is also important. The guides of the community and creators of the discourse are priests. The *Apostolate of the Sick* is entangled with the structures of the Catholic Church as a kind of transmission belt for the Christian ideological and axiological agenda, interspersed with popular science content, and interviews with doctors and specialists. Yet, the discourse agenda is dominated by theology and religious content in the broadest sense.

Table 1. Metaphors of suffering, sickness and death in numbers

Target domain	Number of metaphorical expressions	Percentage share
SUFFERING	910	61.8
SICKNESS	448	30.4
DEATH	114	7.7

The relatively small number of linguistic metaphors for death in the material studied may be puzzling. Perhaps this is because it is suffering, not death, which demands explanation and meaning in this context.

Figure 1. Target domains of SUFFERING metaphors

Figure 1 shows which source domains were statistically most significant in the metaphorical discourse on suffering. The linguistic metaphor FEAR IS A SACRIFICE appears 123 times in the surveyed material, achieving a decisive advantage over the others. The creators of the discourse regularly and determinedly remind members of the community of what its charism is – hence the frequent occurrences of the metaphor FEAR IS A SACRIFICE. It can be said that the strenuous repetition is a materialization of the strategy of seeking to position a particular ideological and axiological orientation in the consciousness of discourse users. If the research were limited to the exploration of this strategy alone, one could assume that the ideological and axiological profile of the magazine's discourse is fundamentally Christian, mystical, and also – given the sources of the mystical trend that the authors of the monthly magazine honour – very Carmelite.

However, in the magazine's discourse, there are two inconsistent axiological configurations adjacent to each other. The first, mystical, configuration includes linguistic metaphors such as FEAR IS A SACRIFICE (123 occurrences), FEAR IS A GIFT (TO BE ACCEPTED) (20 occurrences), and FEAR IS A CROSS (46 occurrences). The second configuration is vitalist, in which suffering in

itself is not valued and, as such, should be fought as an unpleasant consequence of being in the world rather than a transcendent privilege or a calling. This vitalist perspective is represented in the study material by linguistic metaphors such as FEAR IS A BURDEN (22 occurrences), FEAR IS A WALK (29 occurrences), or FEAR IS A DREAM (19 occurrences), all of which carry a specifically humanistic tinge. Moreover, the discourse makers readily use the linguistic metaphor FEAR IS A LIVING STREAM (19 occurrences), which, outside its contexts of occurrence, has no clear axiological charge. However, it points to a deeply embodied way of experiencing and conceptualizing suffering.

   All of the metaphors mentioned, with the exception of the metaphor FEAR IS A CURSE TO OFFER or CURSE TO GIVE (TO ACCEPT), are dead, conventionalized metaphors characteristic of the cultural context in which the discourse of the *Apostolate of the Sick* is embedded. And the two metaphors of a curse are clearly conventionalized, but only in the context of the particular axiological orientation popularized in the monthly magazine.

Figure 2. Target domains of SICKNESS metaphors

   Figure 2 takes into account quantitatively the most significant source domains mapped onto the disease target domain in the studied monthly. In the case of the cross metaphor – one source domain, the cross, is mapped onto two target domains – the domain of disease and the domain of suffering. Their distinction is not possible even if the context is separated. Interestingly, the concepts of illness and suffering, despite their semantic proximity, often, but not always, activate two different ontological and axiological orientations in the material studied. Suffering becomes a concept that acquires existential and theological depth, so as

such it assumes a reference to the supernatural. Illness, on the other hand, seems to be a term reserved almost for popular scientific, medical discourse, with its own ontology and axiology, as well as colloquial discourse, which sometimes complements the above, making its prey more accessible to the uneducated reader.

In the discourse of the magazine two types of texts are adjacent to each other: those with a religious, theological profile and those with a popular science profile. These discourses are independent of each other: they do not offer one common view of reality. And although sometimes the concepts of suffering and illness gain a common context and connote the same values (the metaphor of the cross is a good example of the semantic binder of the entire discourse), it seems that the monthly does not cope with the peculiarity of its own split. Suffering, as a concept, implies transcendence, mysticism, the sublime. Sickness, on the other hand, turns out to be more describable using colloquial language, which does not lack creativity, but lacks sublimity.

The linguistic metaphor SICKNESS IS A LIVING SYSTEM (as a category in the area of which linguistic metaphors such as SICKNESS IS AN ENEMY also fit; the different categories are therefore not always disconnected) in variants and configurations, occurred in the pages of the study material as many as 140 times, achieving greater statistical significance than the linguistic metaphor SICKNESS IS A VICTIM. This seemingly insignificant fact demonstrates well the ontological and axiological fracture of the studied discourse.

4. Concluding discussion

The authors of the article asked two research questions concerning the conceptual metaphors present in the periodical *Apostolate of the Sick*. The response to the first question, Q1: what linguistic metaphors of suffering, illness, and death can be identified on the pages of the periodical published from 2019–2022 – showed the break in the Christian discourse dealing with suffering, illness, and death. The theological strategies described (SUFFERING AS A GIFT, BUILDING SUPPORT, EDUCATING) were met with unique strategies for this naturalistic and battle-oriented discourse (SUFFERING AS AN ENEMY, INVASION, DARKNESS).

This shows that the Catholic discourse related to suffering is unsettling. From a theological aspect, it becomes a value that builds the religious community (John Paul II, 1984). This argumentation goes along the lines of Campell's (2005) previous statements. After deeper insight, we conclude that the discourse on suffering understood in this way particularly comes from the specifically understood Catholic metaphor of the Carmelite order's mystics (Stein, 1950; St John of the Cross, 2003). Suffering takes the form of an axiom that cannot be understood outside the system of Catholic understanding, which is the knowledge of the cross. Interestingly, the same suffering, considered from a psychological perspective, is an anti-value that proves the alienation of the individual (Younger, 1995; Svenaeus, 2015). It is not a building block or mediator but rather a tool isolating the suffering person from others. This

clear division indirectly refers to the distinctions emphasizing the presence of the "other"/"stranger" (Simmel, 1950; Fairclough, 2000; Bauman, 2016). The sufferer, in his or her alienation, is the elusive other. The research has shown that the discourse of the monthly magazine is unable to counteract this alienation.

The magazine creates a discourse addressed to the sick without being a discourse of the sick. The perspective of its creators is that of people observing, not experiencing, the borderline situations referred to in *Apostolate of the Sick*. While the creators of the discourse do not lack the awareness that illness creates "others", they lack the imagination to understand of the other, through which they could more effectively communicate with the sick and thus counteract othering.

The problem seems to be the lack of a common context – the lack of common experiential, not just religious or cultural, ground for the users of the communication event. The discourse makers seem to assume that certain metaphors are universal and available to common experience. However, studies of metaphor show that even so-called primary metaphors are not merely linguistic expressions of the original mind's predisposition but rather the result of the intertwining of various factors (cultural, social, cognitive or existential) in individual and collective experience (Gibbs 1999). Unaware of this problem, the creators of the discourse use metaphors understandable within the context of a particular confluence of factors, as if these metaphors were universal and accessible to everyone.

Thus, the discourse of the *Apostolate of the Sick* presupposes that "others" think, experience and experience as "we" do. Thus, it inadvertently sanctions the domination of one's own sensibilities over that of the other, perhaps without even recognizing its existence. This situation can be compared, by way of a loose analogy, to that of the deaf and mute in Poland, whose participation in the social world is facilitated by a foreign language rather than their natural language – sign language. Simply put, the discourse of the *Apostolate of the Sick* does not provide a proper space for articulation for people in marginalized situations. Within it, they remain the "other", alien and subjugated, as it were, by conventional, culturally sanctioned modes of articulation, which perhaps foster their alienation. From this perspective, the monthly magazine rather fails as an inclusive medium. Thus, the sick may have a privileged place in the Kingdom of God (as one of the monthly's columnists, Alexander Bańka, asserts), but they do not have it in the discourse of the *Apostolate of the Sick*.

The articulated social alienation of the sick may also be accompanied by their alienation from the reality of their own experience and, therefore, from themselves. How do you convince someone who is not a mystic, and probably never will be, that they can experience their suffering in a mystical way, without condemning them to escape to the world of fantasy?

Nevertheless, it seems that the creators of the monthly are not mystics themselves. Their perspective seems to be consistently vitalistic, accompanied by a celebration of activity and causality. In this sense, the programmatic mysticism of the monthly is a

strategy – a programmatic offer, addressed, primarily to people in borderline situations. To the rest – that is, to those who can still hope to improve their situation – activity and struggle, rather than capitulation, cheerful resignation and submission to the will of the creator, are proposed. This is partly understandable, given the notoriety of florism and suffering in the post-Christian world.

However, these strategies presuppose different, difficult-to-consolidate life models and value systems, and attempts to combine them result in semantic and pragmatic incoherence. Not even the metaphor of PAIN IS A SACRIFICE (ubiquitous in the monthly) according to which suffering can be an action similar to the one Christ undertook – or was interpreted to have undertaken – on the cross, changes this. Nonetheless, the cracks created in the discourse as a consequence of this inconsistency may testify not so much to the hypocrisy of its creators, but rather to the weakness of Catholic discourse on suffering as an intellectual and existential proposition full of contradictions. They may also indicate that the beliefs of the discourse's creators and their personal experiences are not consistent, or that there is an intellectual and existential tension created by their attempt to adopt their own programmatic offer. Indeed, it seems that the creators of the *Apostolate of the Sick* discourse are resistant to assimilating the community's charism. John Paul II, as someone who both taught the gospel of suffering and lived suffering in the spirit of his teaching, remains for them a point of reference and an unsurpassed model.

The authors also tried to answer the second research question, Q2: what ideas and values were promoted in the *Apostolate of the Sick* in the years 2019–2022 using linguistic metaphors of suffering, illness, and death? They drew attention to two separate analytical topics regarding the level of social structure: suffering and the value of the suffering person's life.

The first topic discussed concerns the interface between the individual and the collective way of articulating the discourse related to suffering. The presented research material indicates that the *Apostolate of the Sick* conceptualizes the suffering of the sick not only individually but also collectively, under an agreement subordinated to the rules regulating the discourse's thinking and behaviour. Conceptualization may, therefore, be the result of choice, adopting a particular perspective, or filtering experience through categories constituting a specific ideological or axiological system, and not only the result of somatic, cultural, or subcultural determination (Kövecses, 2005). Moreover, metaphors experienced collectively can give rise to a special kind of communal experience.

Thus, the metaphor SUFFERING IS A SACRIFICE (A GIFT TO GIVE) comprises not only an experience in which Paul of Tarsus took part. This metaphor also paves the way for a similar experience. This participation, thanks to suffering and the exchange of gifts can, therefore, be the result of assimilating metaphors on the individual and collective levels, which resonates with recent findings on the topic of using language in situations of social stress (Schoeneborn, Vásquez and Cornelissen, 2022).

The second issue related to the values presented on the pages of the magazine in the context of language metaphors of suffering, illness, and death are related to the so-called debate on the value of life. It concerns a quite strongly exploited in Poland since the 1990s public debate on euthanasia and abortion (Chańska, 2009). People opposing these acts are for the sanctity of life, irrespective of its quality. Those who are for abortion and euthanasia are of the opinion that an intolerable and low-quality life can be ended. Paradoxically, this incoherence is also revealed in the discourse in the *Apostolate of the Sick*. Some of the metaphors used indicate the meaningfulness and even sanctity of suffering, which reveals the sanctity of a suffering person's life.

The traces of this practice and making sense of suffering also seem to work in the non-religious environment (Schwartz and Lutfiyya, 2012). Other metaphors tend to indicate the physical discomfort of suffering, eventually ending in alienation and complete loneliness. Such strong arguments comprise a clear presentation of suffering in the context of the proposed euthanasia death, a form of suicide (Lewis, 2001; Lamers and Williams, 2016). It is, therefore, clear that conceptual metaphors may be the primary carriers of ideological and axiological meanings, and their identification may be helpful in research to understand the many voices of the communities that use them.

The discourse of the *Apostolate of the Sick* abounds in primordially value-laden metaphors referring the user to the order of supernatural, transcendent values (to mention metaphors that fit into the ecclesiological and apostolic metaphorical model of suffering). However, focusing solely on the number of occurrences of a particular linguistic metaphor could yield misleading results. A statistical study would not show, for example, that although the discourse of the *Apostolate of the Sick* is confessionally, programmatically and strategically oriented toward Christian asceticism, whose axiology it claims as its own, the perspective of its creators seems to be vitalist. The accumulation of linguistic metaphors with an axiological charge gravitating toward transcendence forms is merely on the periphery of this discourse, and does not eliminate its vitalist centre, gripped by a kind of obsession with causality, typical of postmodern culture (Stawiszynski 2021). Causality, vitality, and the broadly understood ability to live and act, are unequivocally valued in the discourse of the *Apostolate of the Sick*, while the loss of vitality or vitalistically understood causality fits at the opposite end of the axiological continuum. Suffice it to say that, presumably, the worst thing that can happen to a person, according to the logic of the monthly – apart from condemnation – is suffering that results in bedriddenness, helplessness, and loss of independence. This despite the fact that, according to the mystical traditions to which the creators of the *Apostolate of the Sick* refer, the lives of such people cannot be regarded as less fruitful, even in terms of causality and the ability to do good. Thus, the peculiar mysticism of the monthly collapses under the weight of its semantic incoherence and pragmatic inconsistency. It can be said that the *Apostolate of the Sick* carefully separates the orders of salvation and happy mortality. Each enjoys its own

logic, inconsistent with the other. And both find their place in this discourse, bursting it from the inside.

Therefore, there is an assimilation of two incoherent axiological systems in this discourse – vitalistic and mystical, or mystical and therapeutic. They correspond to two competing models in the Western world today: the model of quality of life, opposed by the Catholic Church, and the model of sanctity of life. The former proves to be more intuitive and, in some ways, easier to accept even for the creators of the monthly.

The discourse of the monthly implies not only inconsistent axiologies, but also inconsistent ontologies. Popular science and religious texts co-occur in the pages of the magazine, and their differing styles presuppose different ontologies, which no one cares to merge. Scientific or popular science discourse is separate from religious discourse on the pages of the monthly magazine. Furthermore, the religious meaning attributed to suffering by the creators of the *Apostolate of the Sick* seems to be something that has yet to be assigned to suffering, and which comes later, and in opposition to bodily experience.

Initially, meaning seems to be hostile to suffering, just as suffering seems to be hostile to meaning and prosperity. The plethora of dead metaphors (FEAR IS ENEMY, FEAR IS FOREVER, etc.), which the authors of the article put into the ontological metaphorical model, seems to indicate the resistance of bodily experience to religious experience. Religious experience of suffering is a postulate rather than an experience par excellence. In the terminology of cognitive semantics, it seems that the religious experience of suffering involves conscious rather than extra-conscious, decision-free conceptualization. It takes reflection, not just religious instinct, to offer suffering to God.

The research conducted for this article had its limitations. The discourse of the *Apostolate of the Sick* periodical did not change significantly in 2019–2022, which could have influenced the final shape of the analysis. First, the discursive study included texts published in *Apostolate of the Sick* in the short, three-year pandemic period. Although the discourse itself was analysed in a broader religious and cultural context, in the future, it is worth taking into account more extensive material following the postulate often formulated by cognitive linguists who criticize the theory of conceptual metaphors. According to it, metaphors should always be analysed diachronically, tracing their linguistic and cultural development paths.

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