

RE-INTERPRETING THE CATHOLICS' IMAGES OF THE CHURCH IN JAVA – PART I

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Abstract:

This article is an endeavour to be 'imagerially present' among the believers in Java, and in this way, could add to the sensitivity to what is happening in the praxis of faith of the Christians in Java. Christian faith may have caused some changes in the believers' imagination. Catechesis on the church in Java can take many advantages from this research, considering that its outcome comprises of the church images which can be used to enhance the catechetical material. The distinction of images appears in four dimensions (the believers' imagerial preferences, the church's relevance, the believers' intentions to participate and their contextual and meaningful images). This research is an opening towards further reflections about 'imagerial catechesis' in Java. In this eye, it prepares a necessary path for deepening the conviction that the believers' 'cultural' ways of being church are an essential element in the process of doing theology with images. No less than seventeen images have surfaced during the efforts of re-imagining the church images. These 'cultural' and communal images are correlated with the 'biblical' images of the church in order to unearth the believers' interpretations of the latter within the sociocultural contexts.

Keywords:

images • cultural images • biblical images • Javanese • Sundanese • imagerial preference • church's relevance • intentions to participate • contextual and meaningful images • catechesis • ecclesiology

Introduction

My earlier article¹ was focused on the Sundanese and Javanese believers' vigour of being cultural persons and church members. The spirit of participation and the culturally meaningful images have emerged in the exploration, and this brings the research further in associating them with the main source of Christian faith, that is, the Scriptures. I will re-interpret the believers' images of the church surfacing in the surveys² in the light of the 'biblical' images so as to maintain the theological character of this discussion. By conceding this, the following interpretations will bring forth not only constructive elements of the images but also those elements that need to be critically evaluated in the light of the 'biblical' images. Two questions are necessary to facilitate this re-assessment of the believers' images of the church: (1) Which are the '*biblical images*' that may have been interpreted in the believers' cultural images and which are their relevant associations? (2) Which '*content similarities*' can we notice from these associations that illustrate the culturally embedded images of the church? These questions are by no means intended to abridge the creative and transformative process of imagining the church that is still going on among the Christians in Java. On the contrary, these may lead us to delve into the believers' images and ways of being church in their daily life. At this point of this research, Christian faith and cultural expressions are re-interpreted in the light of the gospel and thus may reveal some traces of 'local spiritualities' which play an important role in motivating the believers' participations in the church.³ For the believers in Java, being church in the real sociocultural context would mean that there is room for their imagination in the discussions about the church. For us, associating the 'cultural' and the 'biblical' images is an essential step to identify the elements of 'imagerial' catechesis, which will be an important step in doing theology with images in the local context.

In reconsidering the believers' cultural images in the light of 'biblical' images of the church, I depend the following analyses largely on the images of the church in the New Testament as explored elaborately by Paul S. Minear.⁴ The great advantage of using this resource lies, as Minear himself

argues in his book, in the functions of these images from the Scriptures. These images (a) give colour and accent to the thought without changing the thought in its context, (b) serve as a mode for perceiving a given reality which is not easy to measure, and (c) advance the community's self-understanding and inner cohesion from the images' 'magnetic power'.⁵ First, I will discuss the 'biblical' images related to the believers' cultural images and how they are enhancing each other. We shall see that some images hint us about the aspects of the church that may sustain its existence in Java in the future as anticipated by the believers. Second, I will try to find 'content similarities' of the church images. These similarities refer to the related church images insofar as they support the content of catechesis about the church. These are the implication of our effort in associating the believers' cultural images with the images from the Scriptures. This method of re-interpreting the believers' images with the help of church images in the New Testament will be fruitful to unearth the meaningful images that so far have supported the existence of the local churches in Java.

Cultural Images of the Church Reconsidered

Three dimensions of these images have been discussed earlier, showing the believers' *preferences* on characters and images of community life, the socio-cultural situation and the *relevance* of the church, and the believers' *intentions* to participate in the church. However, these images and characters are now presented in numbered sequence through the three dimensions, in order to ease the references towards the preceding as well as the following points throughout the discussion. This exploration bears in mind the motivation to discover whether these images and attitudes are in line with the 'biblical' images about the church or not. We probably will realise that some cultural images or attitudes are referred to 'biblical' images and some others are not. Those which only slightly insinuate the relationship will have to be discussed critically in the light of the missing biblical references. In that way, we are not simply justifying the cultural images and preferences, but by and large criticising them with the purpose of intensifying their fruitfulness for further discussions about the church.

Basically, these images, preferences and attitudes are valuable and constructive to improve the content of catechesis concerning the church in Java. Going through the following discussions not only can motivate us to reconsider these matters theologically, but also to improve and if necessary to revise the catechetical materials biblically and to reinterpret them

culturally. The cultural images are now to be reviewed from the perspective of the bible. We will see that the 'biblical' images in the following discussions could be major or minor in relation to the believers' preferences of church images.⁶ Nevertheless, we want to observe how these cultural and biblical images can be associated fruitfully. The following table sketches an overview of the whole discussions in this article.

	Believers' Responses → Cultural Images	Biblical Images	Content Similarities
Believers' imagerial preferences	1 Participation in church raises familiarity → "a family united"	<i>The elect</i> <i>Sons of God</i> <i>Abraham's sons</i>	(a) being <i>God's new family</i> : - the believers' union - committed and inclusive familiarity
	2 Communality & encounter in familial togetherness → "place of fraternal encounter"	<i>Ark</i> <i>Bond of love</i>	(a) Being <i>God's new family</i> : - communal trust - higher degree of togetherness
	3 Caring community (self-supporting) → "caring community"	<i>God's planting/ building</i> <i>Growing body</i> <i>Building under construction</i>	(b) <i>Communal transformation</i> : - internal involvement - external movement
	4 Hospitality & accomodativeness → "room for differences"	<i>Diversity of ministries</i> <i>New wine</i>	(b) <i>Communal transformation</i> : - coping with differences - critical hospitality
	5 Cultural values in life, not simply 'products' → "space for cultural/applicable interpretations"	<i>(Wild) olive tree</i> <i>The body of life</i>	(b) <i>Communal transformation</i> : - critical contextualisation - participation in the life of Christ.
Church's	6 A church blending in the society ('social') → "social person"	<i>Exiles</i> <i>Remnant</i>	(c) <i>church's inclusivity</i> - a more 'social' and sympathetic church
	7 A church concerned with 'secular' matters (common life)	<i>Citizens 'in the world'</i> <i>First fruits</i>	(d) <i>Daily spiritualities</i> : - hope in secular world - sanctification of creation through Christ

	→ “common life in household”		
	8 A church with unique and transformative roles → “low-profile person	<i>Salt of the earth</i> <i>Wedding feast</i>	(c) <i>church's inclusivity</i> : - complementarity of roles in church and in society
Believers' intentions to participate	9 Participation from brotherhood and connectedness → “intimate friendship”	<i>Brotherhood</i> <i>A letter from Christ</i>	(a) being <i>God's new family</i> : - solidarity and love among friends
	10 Prefer the priest rather than the laity in church leadership → “priesthood”	<i>Branches of the vine</i> <i>The cup of the Lord</i>	(e) <i>Communal partnership</i> : - faithful dependence among believers and leaders
	11 Life applicability in church services, and faith lesson for life → “sources of answer about life”	<i>Life</i> <i>The tree of life</i>	(d) <i>Daily spiritualities</i> : - sharing God's life - relevances to realities
	12 Informal and cordial community meetings → “informal gathering”	<i>Friends</i> <i>Hosts and guests</i>	(d) <i>Daily spiritualities</i> : - committed togetherness - hospitality in welcoming and serving
Contextual and meaningful images	13 Preferred church images as a big family → “family meal”	<i>The wedding feast</i> <i>Flock</i> <i>Household of God</i>	(a) being <i>God's new family</i> : - sharing God's blessing - being protected and nourished
	14 Main aims: listening to God's Word, loving others and praying together → “sanctuary of God's Word”	<i>The Holy Temple</i> <i>Members of Christ</i>	(b) <i>Communal transformation</i> : - the members' spiritual presence - the members' self-giving
	15 Church will survive if it is open to all races and nations → “open house”	<i>The vineyard</i> <i>Building on the rock</i>	(c) <i>church's inclusivity</i> : - readiness to dialogues - courage to face challenges
	16 Church leader should be like father and ‘ <i>pamong</i> ’ → “assisted community”	<i>Followers</i> <i>Disciples</i>	(e) <i>Communal partnership</i> : - the leaders' charisms - the believers' loyalty toward each other

17 Church adjustment to local cultures & integration of Christian values → “a flexible body”	<i>Unleavened bread</i> <i>The new humanity</i>	(b) <i>Communal transformation:</i> - hope for a new solidarity - church’s eschatological condition
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The Believers' Imagerial Preferences

The feeling as [1] a '**family united**' has been one of the motivations of the believers to participate in church meetings. This feeling has become stronger when accompanied by the need to involve their family members in church activities. The believers see the familial relationship as a unifying element to build a community. This image could have been one of the believers' most important images to experience and assess the church communities. 'Family' may also serve as an orienting image for them in living their participation in the dynamic of local communities. The emphasis put on the church image as a 'family united' is the believers' union, that is, their being connected in a new circle of familial relationships and in the whole company of God's family. Here the differences in cultural and familial backgrounds are covered in a new identity, that is, in being invited to become a family of God. The believers could imagine that many have been invited but only some are willing to come together into this family. Needless to say, being cultural people in Java might have brought the awareness of a familiarity, but in being God's family, the believers are challenged to reconsider the meaning of being united in a new family albeit from various familial differences among them. There is a sense of being 'lucky' due to being chosen by God, so now they can start afresh this family life in the church.⁷ Thus, being God's family here also means reshaping community life in the church in the light of one of the cultural values. There is also a sense of wholeness in the image, given that the believers are called to see the church as a unifying family in spite of all the differences. They can expect that their participation in the church as a family may bring harmony among them.⁸ Their membership in the church is characterised mostly by this familial union made possible by the sonship in God's family. They are all children of the sociocultural families called together to live a harmonious familial communion with God.

The first biblical image to complement this image would be the church as '*the elect*' (Eph. 1:4; I Thess. 1:4; II Peter 1:10).⁹ It is in Jesus Christ as God's Elect that the whole community of disciples can become the elect. Emphasised in this image is the church as a Messianic community living towards the fulfillment of its identity as the elect. The members of this

community are called to bear out their intimate relationships with Christ and in this endeavour they embrace their new identity despite the different backgrounds they might have come from. This biblical image can support the believers' image of the church as a 'family united' in one of its aspects, that is, as a familial communion of families. Seen in this reflection, to be elected as God's people in Christ brings the consequence that the believers would have to accept each other to build this community and further to be an example to all the believers (cf. I Thess. 1:7). We might want to consider that being elected as God's children through Christ is not so much a separation from the world as one of the ways God wants to save the world (Eph. 1:5-10). The second biblical image related to this church image is '*sons of God*' (Matt. 23:9; John 1:12; 11:52).¹⁰ However, this biblical image is best seen not in its generative aspect but in the context of God's new covenant. Becoming God's children means entering the covenantal bond in which Christians are invited to live according to the will of God as their only Father. It is a new birth in the Spirit. The believers belong to many families, but by believing in Jesus' name and receiving him, they are given the power to be children of God (John 1:12). This biblical image of the church as God's children implies the need to improve the believers' commitment in being the members of God's family. They are not only united in this new family, but also encouraged to deepen their relationships in praxis. The feeling of being united as a family should be seen, so to speak, in their active participation.

We may also refer this image to the third biblical image of the church as '*Abraham's sons*'¹¹ (Gal. 3:29; Rom. 4:16). Here, sonship means sharing Abraham's faith. But this image does not limit the scope on those of the earthly family of Abraham. This image goes further with an inclusion of the gentiles as also sons of Abraham according to God's promise to bless all families on the earth in Abraham's posterity. Being united as a family for the believers in Java means being blessed as community and family of Jesus Christ. They realise that when this image of the family is used to depict the church, it receives a new understanding of how being a family of Jesus Christ would be. They participate in the church activities because there they are called sons and daughters of the divine family. God's family in Jesus Christ must have been a '*big family*', and being united in such family means being blessed with countless brothers and sisters in faith. For the believers in Java, there are no greater delights than belonging to a family, having opportunities to meet one's brothers and sisters, and feeling the atmosphere of caring about each other. A critical remark to this image from the biblical point of view would be that this feeling of united as a family should bring the believers

further towards the inclusion of other people, especially those probably regarded as “not of this family”. This image, in this sense, cannot remain as a romantic image to 'celebrate' or enjoy familial togetherness as a church community. It should have a moral and transformative call also to unite other people who might have not been considered as 'Abraham's sons'.

[2] A 'place of fraternal encounter', which is still in close connection with the image 'family', is the next image surfacing in our survey. This image explains further the quality of familial relationship in the community. The emphasis was on the togetherness instead of the number of those present in the meetings, on the intensity of the meeting rather than its activity. The believers' motivation to encounter others as a family in the church refers to the need to strengthen their fraternity. They come together to enrich their fellowship. The church as a community can be trusted insofar as it becomes a place to meet one another in a fraternal relationship. We have noticed how the believers put the emphasis on the *trustworthiness* of the community seen in this image.¹² We might have sensed that the tone behind this emphasis implies how this image at the same time supposes the existing problems in the community that can be discussed only in a fraternal circumstance. A biblical image of the church supporting this community image is an 'ark'¹³ (I Peter 3:18-22). Here, by referring to the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, God is portrayed to have waited patiently for a few to be saved through water. The baptism is the water through which one will be saved, and the church is the ark carrying the elect, that is, the believers, to survive through the flood of difficulties. The church as an ark provides a place for the believers to encounter each other and to live in trust. This trust comes from God who, through the baptism that makes the believers God's family, is present in the church to assure that it will be safe. In other words, the church can be trusted because God is present in the fraternal encounters of its members. The church image as ark can also remind the believers on the necessity of trust in community life so as to experience their encounters in a fraternal environment. Their involvement in the ecclesial community cannot cover the fact that they are 'family' not in the ordinary meaning of the term. They have been elected and called together to build this fellowship around the God they can always trust. In the same way, they are also demanded to trust one another.

The '*bond of love*'¹⁴ as another image of the church may illustrate the community image of fraternal encounter. Since fraternal fellowship is not construed in an exactly the same way as family, this less pictorial term actually can explain the communal trait of the Spirit's work in the community. This

bond of love, extensively depicted in I John chapters 3 and 4, gives the fraternal image a stronger motive for the relationships. It explains the believers' experience of togetherness with some qualitative characters, so that the encounters will not be held for the sake of simply being together in the same place. This bond of love accentuates the relationships deeply imbued with passion. The people in Java would compare this bond to that of the '*Pandawa*', a band of five brothers in the *wayang* story, which shows the (spiritual) quality rather than the quantity of relationship. This brotherhood is often contrasted to that of the '*Kurawa*' which consists of a hundred brothers but relies itself on physical togetherness in reacting towards difficulties. The passages from the letter of John above try to highlight the reality that the believers are now called 'God's children' and 'God's beloved'. Togetherness understood in the image of fraternal encounter should remind the believers that they are a 'new' spiritual family of God, and since they do not come together by themselves but are united by God's love, they would still have to learn to strengthen their relationships in the Spirit. Community as a place of fraternal encounters is not a house with all things effortlessly set up. It is a community challenging the believers to leave their traditional familial nest and move into a togetherness that “test[s] the spirits whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (I John 4:1).

We have seen earlier that the church image as a 'family united' in [1] stresses the believers' union in their being connected from different backgrounds. Now we might see that the church image as a 'place of fraternal encounter' in [2] can benefit from its related biblical images in that it cannot be regarded as a place to rest. There will be various encounters among the believers in this place that need to be tested and enhanced in the Spirit. While this image is within the same content similarity with [1], that is, the dynamic of (a) *being God's new family* (cf. the related images [9] and [13]), the accent is here put on the communal trust and the higher degree of togetherness. The encounters in the church illustrated in this familial place would be fraternally tested in the Spirit. The church is not a place to stay nice. It is a place to meet spiritedly.

The next communal image is [3] a '**caring community**'—an image showing the community's concern to take care of the weak, the humble, and those enduring difficulties in their lives. This community of believers appears in the social activities. Most social activities among the believers are almost at all times oriented towards the society. There has been practically no differentiation between those who need help within the church communities

and those within the society. The disadvantaged and the poor are everywhere. Thus, the believers are accustomed to help each other not because those people are members of their community, but because those, too, are their brothers and sisters to take care of. This vivid albeit not entirely figurative image is perceptible in the actual social activities carried on together by the believers. Here togetherness, in contrast with similar image above, shows its 'active' dimension in an 'external' love pointed towards those outside the community. The biblical image interpreted by and which in turn enhances this caring community is '*God's planting/ building*'¹⁵ (I Cor. 3:9). Paul describes the Corinthian church as planting or field and at the same time as building owned by God. The other related images, however, may be equally interesting. Paul says that Apollos and he himself are 'God's servants', and "you are God's field, God's building." When these images are related to other church images as a '*growing body*' and a '*building under construction*'¹⁶ (cf. Eph. 2:21, 4:12,16), we will probably unearth the dynamic aspect of the community as mirrored in the image of a 'caring community'. Some persons, like Paul and Apollos, are the fellow workers of God, since it is only God who alone can establish their work. The same applies to the image 'planting', because only God who gives the growth (I Cor. 3:7).

Thus imagined, the image of a 'caring community' might be an interpretation of the church as a growing field and as a building under construction. This image catches the dynamic of these biblical images in its tendency to motivate the believers to be actively engaged in social activities. The believers as a community could be the planting or the building, and in this case they become the place of activities involving and caring for the needy. They are also, to some extent, the ones to be helped and watered, in order to be able to grow. On the other hand, the believers are also God's fellow workers sharing their gifts to others who are weak and disadvantaged. The dynamic of such caring community lies in the movements within the community, or to put it in a different way, in the *moving* members. The believers cannot stay idle. The community is *changing*, and moving, and *growing*. This growth is made possible because of the believers' working together, and this time, God has made this togetherness meaningful and fruitful. The meaning of togetherness, in this line, has been enhanced by the image of a 'caring community'. It should even go further to support the growth and construction process that only God can establish. One can imagine that a community depicted in this way might appear as a network of relationships, a web of believers that expands its attitude of relatedness and caring actions towards larger areas and across the boundaries of cultures and

faces.

We could distinguish that this image implies a different content similarity with the previous two. Here, one may see that the similarity of the contents points to the aspect of (b) *communal transformation* in the church (cf. the related images [4], [5], [14] and [17]). The church as a 'caring community' heightens the internal involvement as well as the external movement. This image is different from the other images in that it illustrates that the church is growing and changing. The believers' commitment to live together in the Spirit is now realised in their willingness to change and their yearn to care for the others. When the church is portrayed in this image, the believers are so speak 'called out' again from their communal life to learn about this transformative aspect of the church and its implications on their togetherness inside and outside the church. Being church members will have to change their community life and the lives of the people in their neighbourhood. The following image will suggest a different emphasis of this similarity.

From our previous survey, we see that 'accommodativeness' and 'hospitality' characterising the local communities in Java can give rise to an image of **[4] 'room for differences'**.¹⁷ The believers' hospitality in our earlier discussion has been related to some degree to the accommodative character of the church leaders. The local leaders have been observed and therefore would be expected to be supple (accommodating) in their pastoral policies towards the believers. The believers' expectation to their leaders mirrors their hope that the community they belong to should also be accommodative towards different opinions. If accommodativeness is expected from the leaders, hospitality is thus needed from the believers. It goes without saying that among the Javanese and the Sundanese there is a hint that people should be able to express their reluctance or even disagreement in friendly gestures and words. Expressing anger and emotion directly and publicly would be considered awfully impolite. Hospitality, understood in this framework, indeed becomes ambiguous. It might illustrate a situation that just the opposite of what it looks like. However, considered in this sense, hospitality can indicate the believers' actual attitude of creating a room for differences, a room to reflect on the differences and to look for the accommodative options. A community profiled in this image may appear as a community looking for some new ways and new interpretations of how to live together in a changing world. To a certain degree, this community is in the process of looking for alternatives to live the faith notwithstanding the various challenges it endures. The following

biblical images related to this image may help reflect the (b) *communal transformation* especially in coping with differences and critically employing hospitality.

A biblical image that would be helpful to improve this image is '*the diversities of ministries in one body*' elaborated in I Corinthians chapters 12 to 14.¹⁸ In responding to the situation of the church in Corinth, Paul put emphasis on the dynamic interdependence of the gifts, services and activities within the church. The diversities shown in the believers' participation in the church ought to be seen as the gifts of the same Spirit, the services of the same Lord, and the activities moved by the same God. Nowhere in the New Testament is the church portrayed in its diversities without losing its accommodative character as richly as in this Pauline image. The church as 'diversities' suggests that there should be greater respect and care among the members (12:22-25), and the primary means for achieving this unity of differences is love (13:4-7). In this setting, the accommodativeness in the image of the church as 'room for differences' need to be complemented with the spirit of caring and loving so as to give the believers the Christian way of coping with differences. Experiencing diversities in this nuance can help the believers to find out the fruitful interdependence among themselves. Thus, building up the church would bring the consequence of supporting one another according to each gifts and services. Here we can find that accommodativeness is not only required from the leaders but also from the members because they, though many, "are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:5).

The second biblical image that might be useful to verify as well as complement the image of 'room for differences' is the '*new wine*'¹⁹ (Mark 2:22). While it is far from clear that this image would be associated with the new community Jesus would like to establish, it might be constructive first to juxtapose this with the communal image. The new wine means the newness of the gospel and the life that it mediates, and thus reference to the old skin would appertain to the sociocultural realities of the local context. Let us consider that this image also betokens the discussions among the disciples of Jesus and John and the Pharisees about feasting and fasting. Feasting is the condition when the Messiah is present among them, and fasting is when he is taken from them. One might capture a farther consequence through the wedding feast illustrated in John 2:1-11. Here the wine exists by the turning of six jars of water, implying not only that the new interpretations would complement the old ones, but even that the later should be transformed into the former, so as to save those who are present from the worse problems.

These passages, which once again are not solely addressed to the design of a community, can contribute fresh air to the communal image above, especially in their way of reminding the believers and the leaders of their readiness to accommodate new interpretations of the gospel and faith in community life. The biblical image heightens the idea of accommodativeness to the extent that the later cannot be just a way to react upon the emerging differences, but should lead one to change and to be transformed by faith. It also can help the believers to be critical in their 'hospitality' so as not to fall into a fake friendliness. If the community is to be drawn as a room for differences, needless to say, it is members and leaders must be willing to be transformed into 'fresh wineskins'. Constructing a community that is open (hospitable) to differences amid the various cultural values would hint at the genuine hospitality of Jesus Christ himself—a hospitality chiefly oriented to those who usually are not welcome in the community and the society.

A similar communal image, though in a different sense, appears as [5] a **'space for cultural/applicable interpretations'**. This image arises from the believers' preference to cultural values and not simply to cultural 'products'. The variety of responses among the believers²⁰ shows a tendency that they seem to have discerned the characteristic of cultural interpretations through the church activities. They would prefer contextually and critically employing cultural images and works in the church activities rather than plainly importing them in the latter. This tendency gives rise to the image of a community as a space for cultural or applicable interpretations. We may recall our previous observation that here the believers do not want to contrast the Christian faith and the Scriptures against the efforts of inculturation in the church services and ceremonies. Faith is not supposed to supersede culture. Faith and its communal expressions should take the role of unifying the cultural elements as well as imagining applicable and appropriate interpretations of culture within the church economy. One may reminisce over the believers' aptitude of using national language instead of local language in liturgy, or their less agreement of abruptly involving *gamelan* and other cultural dances and rituals in the ecclesial ceremonies. All this, in short, reveals the believers' wish to create sufficient space for the interpretations of the Christian values in life.

The first biblical image which behoves us to twig this communal image would be the '*olive tree*'²¹ as found in Rom. 11:13-24. It is critical to consider this biblical image as a whole, as Paul himself suggests. The importance of this image lies exactly in the wholeness of the olive tree. The branches should not become proud of themselves, but instead, must stand in awe, because the

reason that they are not broken off is that they share the rich root of the olive tree. It is the root that supports the branches, and not the other way around. It is even more interesting that Paul is also talking about the differences between a wild olive tree and a cultivated one, between the branches cut off from the wild tree and grafted to the cultivated one, and the natural branches broken off of their own olive tree. While this series of images is used to describe God's saving plan for both Gentiles and Jews through the church, it can help us assess our communal image above, in particular concerning the branches that share the riches of the root. A community as a space for cultural and applicable interpretations of faith would have to crack down on the efforts to share in the death and life of Jesus Christ as the root of the tree. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is at work in the community when the faithful are interpreting and imagining critically whether the elements of culture as the branches of cultivated olive tree would fit into the church as a nature-grown, wild olive tree. The church in this image is the believers themselves. Perhaps it sometimes appears as a cultivated olive tree grafted with so many cultural branches, but that is not what it is supposed to be. It should, then, attempt to focus on its fundamental call to be a wild olive tree grown by nature. Even if this community is still grafted with local and perceptible cultural elements, it will find the ways and space to adjust them so as to share in the riches of the root, that is, the life and love of Jesus Christ. The communal image of a 'space for cultural/applicable interpretations' may contribute to the venture of the local churches towards inculturation.

A biblical image of the church as '*the body of life*' (Rom. chapters 5 to 8)²² as contrasted to the body of death can lead the image 'space for applicable interpretations' towards the believers' participation in the life of Christ. Participating in his life means participating in the Spirit of life through his body. When the church is seen as 'the body of life', the believers are invited to review the efforts to contextualise the Christian values. The governing law is now the law of the Spirit which supports life in the various activities of the believers, so that the way towards the gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus will be made possible (6:23). This biblical image supports the communal image in the way that it directs the applicable interpretations of Christian faith towards this eternal life in Christ. The believers are not supposed to accept whatever interpretations in the church, except those which uphold the reality of the church as a body or a place of life. They can experience communal transformation insofar as there is thoughtful discussions oriented towards the participation in the life of Christ Jesus. In this sense, the church image as a 'space for applicable interpretations' need not remain as simply cultural

image but receives its Christian, ecclesial and transformative aspects in the spiritual participation. By realising this, we also confirm the potential towards (b) *communal transformation* in these images, particularly through the critical contextualisation considered in the ecclesial meetings of the believers.

The Church's Relevance in the Society

The preceding images more or less illustrate the believers' imagerial preferences about the community. The following images, on the other hand, mirror the roles and the functioning of the church in the society in Java, though at the same time may reflect related similarities with regard to their contents. Observing the roles and characteristics of the church in the society illustrated by the results of our survey yields the following images. From the first characteristic under this dimension, the church is described as **[6]** a **'social person'**.²³ We may want to call to mind that in Java the term 'social' when attributed to a person would refer to someone who can easily converse with everyone and is also generous. When imagining the church in this image, the believers in fact speak of the church leaders who represent their existence as a religious community.²⁴ It is the leaders or at least the church activists who might have been thought of when the community's presence in the society is evaluated by the believers. The consequence is that greater attention would also be put on the leaders' social behaviours and capability to get along with the society. Even though they are originated from the same culture and society, when seen in this social image and because they are now representatives of the church, they seem, however, to be distanced socially from their origin. They are, to some extent, like guests in their own home whose aptitude would be assessed by the neighbours who, in our case, are virtually the society itself or communities of other religions. Though such image seems to have spread around among the people in Java, the fact that it keeps the gap between the church and the society cannot be denied. This might be one of the images that could bring about the so-called social alienation, despite the truth that it also yields some challenges towards serious dialogues with the society and summons the local church (leaders) to become more inclusive and communicative in the praxis of faith.

When imagining the church as a 'social person' in relation with the society and culture, we may need to allude to the biblical image of the church as *'exiles'*²⁵ (I Peter 1:1; 2:11; Heb. 11:13). The letter to the Hebrews even illustrates the Christian community as like Abraham, "in the land he had been

promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents” (Heb. 11:9). Paul S. Minear pictures the church skilfully as a community composed of 'tent dwellers'.²⁶ The Christians here are seen as sojourners and strangers, since, to a certain degree, they have been distanced from their own origins which, in relation to the social image above, are their own society and culture. The first letter of Peter gives a specific nuance to this biblical image by describing that even though Christians are like strangers, they are in fact *made* strangers to their earthly life and human desires (4:2). They are strangers in the spiritual sense that they are alienated from the worldly desires and called to live the rest of their lives by the will of God. Therefore, this image of the church as consisting of the believers as 'exiles' should on the other hand encourage them to live this Christian life as a blessing in their own society. Being alienated from the sins of the world is so much a liberating experience for Christians, no matter what the social consequences and difficulties this would cause. Hence, conversing this image with the image of ecclesial community as a 'social person' in Java can spawn a great enrichment to the believers' relationship with the society. The church as a community of 'social' persons need not be downhearted in the face of the reality that its presence in the society might have caused social estrangement of its own members. Being 'tent dwellers' should not make Christians desperate. It might be a much better way to call them out to take bold journey towards a 'homeland' of even a wider 'social' and yet more authentic church community. In a manner of speaking, the voyage towards such community might be a thrilling adventure for the faithful in Java if they truly want to be inclusive and 'blending' towards other people.²⁷ The image 'exiles' challenges them to be 'social' and open to a larger community rather than their own original society.

Another constructive image from Paul relevant to this image is the church as a 'remnant', “chosen by grace” (Rom. 11:5-7).²⁸ This image may contribute positive sense to the church image as a 'social person' considering that albeit considered as a remnant, the church members are seen as those who have endured difficulties. They have been chosen based on God's grace, which is contrasted to human works (v. 6), and therefore this suggests that they ought to live together with other people in the society to bring them also towards God's redemptive actions. A social person considered as a survivor amid the difficulties would have greater care and solidarity towards his or her neighbours. The church imagined as a social person characterised with this kind of solidarity may also make difference in the ways and the matters it should blend in the society. It is a sort of encouraging inclusivity, not from the standpoint of a winner, but from the second or the third place in the

common life. This attitude of church members and leaders can be regarded as more sympathetic to the society and thus may advance respect in the practices of dialogue. We want to indicate the third similarity derived from the contents of the above communal and biblical images as (c) *the church's inclusivity*, since these images not only are important for the church's relationships with the society but also for the accomplishment of its mission to bring God's redemption to the world and the nations. Two other images within this similarity are [8] and [15] with their different emphases.

A church community strictly related to various sociocultural realities as in Java will be concerned about 'secular' matters of the believers. This situation, explored in my previous article, gives rise to the image of the church as [7] a **'common life in household'**. The believers' responses concerning the church's responsibility on the 'secular' matters of its members, namely, their education, health, and wealth, were quite considerable.²⁹ Though these matters are commonly the task of the society, there is an emphasis here on the complementarity of the church in relation with the society. Both communities care for their members, hence, there must be different aspect of the church's responsibility to that of the society's. The responses give us a clue that there are some secular matters experienced by the believers that would best be grappled with the help of the church. Greater preference to solve personal problems with the help of church leaders rather than cultural elders may partly explain this situation. A clearer response towards the role of the church to help resolve social problems was yet indicated in the results. Thus, this image tries to capture the spirit of caring about ordinary things in the most everyday experiences of the church in the society. The image of the church as a 'common life' of Christians in a larger household of society underlines the importance of living together as a community within a larger community and therefore emphasises the church's coresponsibility in matters related with the believers' social condition. The advantage of such image is that the church as a spiritual community can realise its rootedness in the reality of the world. It is the 'secular' responsibility in the dynamic of a common life that indicates the different aspect of the church from merely a spiritual 'household'.

The first biblical image that would be constructive to this image is the church captured as '*citizens*'.³⁰ Reading Eph. 2:19 that mentions this image would also draw our attention to the other image parallel to this, that is, 'members of the household of God'. However, if the church image is closely related to the social reality as discussed above, our preference falls upon the image of 'citizens'. This image is also related to other image of the church as

a 'the holy city'³¹, except that here, 'citizens' gives specific context to us that Christians once were without Christ, "having no hope and without God *in the world*" (2:12). Reference to this condition contributes to the idea that the worldly realities of the believers are not to be forgotten. These realities, rather, are reconsidered with the help of Christ and given hope in the believers' hearts. Thus, by bringing up the image 'citizens' to assess the believers' image 'common life in a household', we want to highlight the presence of *hope* and *care* in the secular world. Jesus Christ is what makes this common life different from before. He brings the believers "who once were far off" now near by his blood (2:13). In this sense, the biblical image can bring about two meanings, namely, that the believers as 'citizens' of the worldly city are not cut off from their sociocultural realities and that they become now the 'citizens' of a new community given hope and care thanks to Christ's presence in their midst. The church imagined in this picture is not supposed to care only about the spiritual wealth of its members, but also their 'secular' concerns. The faithful in Java trust their lives to the church not only regarding their spiritual problems, but likewise regarding their everyday 'life' problems. One may imagine that when coming together to pray in the church, the faithful for the most part want to present their 'real lives' to God as their gifts and prayers with sighs too deep for words (Rom. 8:26). The believers' common life in the household of God appears in their sighs. The church in this image takes seriously these sighs as a 'social character' of its nature. It answers them, and not simply prays for them. The church as a 'common life' in the society is not much different from the society, as it were. Its presence in the world shows that God is truly close, even to the believers' most secular realities.

In line with this image we may confer to another biblical image of the church as '*first fruits*'³² (Jam. 1:18; II Thess. 2:13; Rom. 8:23; cf. Matt. 21:43; Rev. 14:4). However, before employing this image to the church we have to see first that it is Christ who is "the first fruits of those who have died" (I Cor. 15:20-23). The Christian community becomes the first fruits of all God's creatures (Jam. 1:18) because it is Christ who is the beginning of God's creation (Rev. 3:14) and it is the Spirit who sanctifies the believers as the first fruits for salvation (II Thess. 2:13). The church is linked to Christ as the beginning of God's creation and to the whole creation that belongs to him. In this sense, the church as first fruits presented through Christ becomes a sign of indebtedness to God and at the same time a gesture to sanctify the whole creation thanks to the goodness of Christ as the first-born of all creation.³³ This image can be greatly advantageous to the image of the church

as 'common life in household' because it suggests that the whole creation is fundamentally good and it is the task of the church to return what is good in this world to God. This biblical image is also insightful to the believers as it can motivate them to be responsible to the matters that normally considered as 'secular' in their common life. These matters are seen differently owing to the presence of God who is active in the social life of the believers. There is a sharp tone of the church's mission to the world in its image as 'first fruits'. When the church is imagined as the believers' common life in God's household which is the world or the society itself, one can realise that this image, together with the related biblical images, may have mirrored the reality of everydayness in the church. For this reason we would like to indicate the fourth content similarity covering this set of images, namely, (d) *the daily spiritualities*. We have mentioned above that the emphases regarding the contents of this similarity would be on the hope in the real ('secular') world and the sanctification of creation through Jesus Christ. Other images under this grouping are [11] and [12].

Related to previous image, regarding the roles and the functioning of the church in the society, is the image of [8] a '**low-profile person**'. This image stems from the observation that the church's roles in in the society in Java are unique and thus complementing the roles of the society.³⁴ The difference with the previous is that this image places emphasis on the *uniqueness* of the church, despite its being 'social' and 'common' for the society. For the believers, its distinctiveness most probably lies in its eligibility to blend into the society while at the same time capable to transform the society through its members. That is why the church portrayed as a 'low-profile person' means that it is not passive at all. It also need not lose its identity by blending into the society, since its identity is not shaped by its faith expressions only, but in this context, primarily by the *unique roles* it employs in relation with the society. The believers through our survey showed their views that while the church is not the same as other organisations and not supposed to be active in politics, it should not simply replace some Sundanese/Javanese rituals with church ceremonies.³⁵ Complementing the society's roles means contributing things that probably have not been provided well by the society. It is an act of responding and not merely reacting or let alone imposing its own ideas to the need of the people. This explains the image of the church as a 'low-profile person'. The believers can find in this image their contextual interpretations of transforming the society they live within and the cultural values they live by. They become low-profile for the sake of the mission to save the 'world' by employing the Christian values they already believed. They

are doing all this not as a spectacular 'savior', but through the most ordinary ways possible. The society in Java will not respect persons who are arrogant and haughty. On the contrary, those who are modest and plain in their lives would be honoured and yet in most cases be obeyed by many. If the church wants to bring significant changes in Java, it would first have to be respectful and 'plain' in order to be able to work together with the society. It is precisely in this sense, too, that the Christians and church leaders should express and flesh out their faith in a more inclusive way.

The biblical image '*salt of the earth*'³⁶ is very much positive to this image of a 'low-profile person'. "You are the salt of the earth," says Jesus in Matt. 5:13. It is important to note that there is an insinuation that Jesus is speaking to his disciples not as separate individuals but as a band of followers. The disciples are addressed and associated with the salt *of the earth*, and not simply salt. It means that they will be everywhere and most probably be present unnoticed like the ordinariness of salt in the earth. Despite this fact, they will have to make difference to the world insofar as they are cautious not to lose their 'taste'. The 'saltiness' or the meaningfulness of the world or the society will only be maintained if they remain faithful in their unnoticed presence. This image virtually elucidates the image of the church as a 'low-profile person'. Christians may appear humble and unobtrusive especially when the society and the culture accommodate this attitude positively, but this is not a permanent disposition. The church as a community of low-profile persons would be prophetic only if its members are ready to sacrifice everything for being Jesus' true disciples (cf. Luk. 14:33-34). This sacrifice may concern the church's status in the society or the believers' social acknowledgment. In short, the sacrifice pertains to all the worldly tributes. Carrying on Jesus' mission to build God's Kingdom would cause the losses in worldly kingdom. This reality need not discourage the believers to do their best as members of the church and at the same time as members of the society.

With the help of church image '*wedding feast*'³⁷ (cf. Matt. 22:1-10; Luk 12:36; 14:8), the believers living their faith in the church portrayed as a low-profile person should have enough reasons to be aware of their *roles* in the banquet. The presence of Jesus as the bridegroom indicates the felicity of those invited to the wedding feast (Mark 2:19), but also brings the consequence that those who are invited should have prepared themselves for the feast. In this sense, this biblical image emphasises the unique obligation to *prepare* and to *recognise* the coming of Christ and to receive him according to everyone's role in order to enjoy the unique opportunity together. For Christians, this image encourages them to participate in the church's unique

roles in the society, bearing in mind that this after all is an invitation to share the gifts God has offered through Jesus Christ. The believers are invited to the church as a wedding feast and this is because God considers them worthy for this invitation. This biblical image may contribute the sense of respect and the awareness of one's roles to the church image as a 'low-profile person'. Since the contents of these biblical as well as local images in many ways illustrate the church's ability to work together with and blend into the society, they could have referred to the similarity mentioned above as (c) *church's inclusivity*. This set of images accentuates the complementarity of the believers' roles whether in the church community itself or in relation with the society.

Endnotes:

¹ Hadrianus Tedjoworo, "Being Sundanese and Javanese Cultural Persons and Church Members," *Melintas* (Vol. 27, No. 3, Desember 2011): 235-261.

² The surveys were conducted among the Catholics in Cigugur and Ganjuran parishes. The first is a parish indicating the Sundanese culture, and the latter indicating the Javanese culture. The survey, conducted in April 2008, was carried on by inviting the believers to the meetings, which were specially organised by the parishes not merely for the purpose of this survey but firstly for the purpose of some actual topics among the believers (i.e., about Catholic marriage, biblical images of Mary, and serving others in Christ). The respondents from both parishes were in total 699 Catholics, ranging from the age of thirteen to above sixty three.

³ Cf. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, op. cit., 124-125; Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 67.

⁴ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004 [orig. 1960]); hereafter quoted as *Images*.

⁵ *Ibid*, 22-27.

⁶ It is worth to quote Minear's words that we may simply need "to indicate what light [these images] cast on the nature of Christian community;" in *Images*, 28. Needless to say, not every image in the bible refers to the church. Most of the images only implicitly refer to the church, or more often, they simply shed light on some aspects of the Christian 'community'. However, this character can be of great help for us in discussing the cultural images associated with the church, since images, whether biblical or cultural, tend to deepen and enhance our apprehensions of the matter.

⁷ Cf. image [9].

⁸ Cf. statement Q48 in Tedjoworo, art. cit., 254.

⁹ *Images*, 81-82.

¹⁰ *Images*, 167-171.

¹¹ *Images*, 76.

¹² See responses on Q9 ("The church can be trusted to help resolve problems in the

- family”) in Tedjoworo, *art. cit.*, 239.
- ¹³ *Images*, 34.
- ¹⁴ *Images*, 134; this image is part of the church image as a 'new creation'.
- ¹⁵ *Images*, 49.
- ¹⁶ *Images*, 164.
- ¹⁷ See point (4) in Tedjoworo, *art. cit.*, 239-240.
- ¹⁸ *Images*, 190-195.
- ¹⁹ *Images*, 40.
- ²⁰ See especially responses to the less preferable cultural 'products' in questions Q4, Q5, Q6, and Q12; Tedjoworo, *art. cit.*, 241.
- ²¹ *Images*, 45-47.
- ²² *Images*, 174-178.
- ²³ See point (1) in Tedjoworo, *art. cit.*, 242-243.
- ²⁴ Cf. the related questions (Q18, Q21, and Q22) pointing to the church represented by its leaders.
- ²⁵ *Images*, 61.
- ²⁶ *Images*, 62.
- ²⁷ Cf. the 'synthetic' and particularly the 'inclusive' functions of the believers' imagination. This inclusive imagination is probably best expressed in what Peter C. Phan points out as “dialogical imagination.” See Peter C. Phan, *op. cit.*, 197. This imagination is at work whenever Christians, guided by the spirit of God, seek to create community, insofar as this is unforced community of the divine love; George Newlands, *Transformative Imagination: Rethinking Intercultural Theology* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), 179.
- ²⁸ *Images*, 80-81.
- ²⁹ See point (2) in Tedjoworo, *art. cit.*, 243.
- ³⁰ *Images*, 60-61.
- ³¹ *Images*, 91 and further.
- ³² *Images*, 112-113.
- ³³ See *ibid.*
- ³⁴ See point (3) in Tedjoworo, *art. cit.*, 244.
- ³⁵ See again Q20, Q23, and Q25.
- ³⁶ *Images*, 29-31.
- ³⁷ *Images*, 56-57.