

## Contextual Ecclesiology through Cultural Images: Spiritual and Devotional Models of the Church in Java

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This study explores the construction of contextual models of the Catholic Church in Java by correlating cultural, biblical, and theological images. It addresses a gap in ecclesiological studies where local cultural symbols—such as *pamong*, *ziarah*, and *padepokan*—have not been systematically incorporated into Church models, despite their strong presence in the lived faith experiences of Javanese Catholics. **Methodology:** The research employs a qualitative approach using a reflective-hermeneutic method. It is based on secondary sources, including theological literature, cultural studies, and pastoral reflections. Thematic and narrative analysis is used to develop ecclesiological models grounded in symbolic and imaginative representations of the Church within the Javanese cultural context. **Findings:** The study formulates three contextual models of the Church: (1) the cultural model, emphasizing community participation and cultural rootedness; (2) the spiritual model, reflecting a contemplative and wisdom-oriented ecclesiology; and (3) the devotional model, centered on sacramental and prayerful expressions of faith. These models reveal that Javanese Catholics experience and shape their ecclesial identity through local symbols and religious imagination rather than abstract doctrines. **Implications:** The findings offer a practical theological framework for enhancing catechesis, pastoral leadership, and ecclesial policy through inculturated practices. The models also serve as references for other culturally diverse Church communities, particularly in Asia and Africa, seeking to integrate faith with local spiritual traditions. **Originality and Value:** This study introduces the *imagerial method*, an original theological approach that prioritizes imagination and symbolic experience in ecclesial construction. It contributes a systematic, bottom-up ecclesiology rooted in lived cultural expressions, offering an innovative response to the limitations of dogmatic and top-down Church models.

Keywords: Catholic devotion; cultural image; ecclesiology of the local Church; Javanese culture; model of the Church; tradition and ritual.

### Introduction

In the context of Javanese Catholic life, the faithful's approach to faith tends to be more imaginative rather than propositional or conceptual (Laksana, 2014, pp. 222–225; Tedjoworo, 2013, pp. 20–23). The faithful prefer to express and depict their experience of faith through images and symbols rather than by formulating abstract concepts. Unfortunately, this imaginative orientation receives little attention in theologically dominant rationalist discourses. In pastoral practice, for instance, guidelines are often formulated in a top-down manner, leaving little room for active participation from grassroots communities. Sukatmi Susantina's doctoral research (2018) shows that although the Catholic Church in the Yogyakarta Vicariate has adopted elements of local Javanese culture—such as using the Javanese language in liturgy, incorporating *Kidung Adi* music, and staging traditional offering dances—these efforts remain largely ceremonial and are still shaped by hierarchical structures rather than emerging organically

from community initiatives. A similar pattern is evident in the Satu Suro liturgy celebrated at St. Peter's Parish in Sambiroto and St. Joseph's Church in Gedangan, where inculturated rituals—such as the integration of the Javanese New Year, traditional dress, the procession of the Virgin Mary, and Wayang Wahyu performances—are featured as exceptional events rather than being embedded in regular ecclesial practice (Elwin, 2016). As a result, the creativity and imagination of the faithful in shaping their faith communities are largely overlooked. Yet, spirituality that emerges from local cultural contexts—such as in Java—holds significant potential to enrich ecclesial life in contextual and communal ways (Tedjoworo, 2010).

Previous studies on Javanese Catholic religiosity offer valuable insights but remain fragmented and lack systematic categorization. These studies can be grouped into at least three thematic categories. First, theological-symbolic studies, such as those by Tedjoworo (2010, 2013), explore the symbolic power embedded in the faith experiences of Javanese Catholics but do not translate these into ecclesial models. Second, devotional and spiritual practices, as highlighted by Laksana (2014), reveal strong expressions of local spirituality, yet they remain descriptive and are rarely integrated into broader theological frameworks. Third, contextual and cultural theology, represented by Beck (2018), emphasizes the significance of cultural contexts like Sendangsono in theological reflection, but stops short of constructing formal ecclesial correlations. Martin (2011) proposes a lectio or cultural reading approach, offering a constructive alternative to corrective frameworks, but his method has yet to be applied concretely to ecclesial modeling. Despite the relevance of these works, there remains a clear research gap: none have yet formulated a systematic correlation between local cultural symbols and ecclesial images of the Church. This gap opens the opportunity for developing Church models rooted not only in theoretical theology but in the lived symbolic experience of the faithful.

This study aims to develop contextual models of the Church in Java by formulating a symbolic correlation between local cultural images, biblical images, and theological images of the Church. To achieve this, it introduces the imagerial method—a theological approach that places imagination, cultural symbols, and local imagery at the foundation of ecclesiological construction. Through this method, the study proposes three contextual models of the Church: the cultural model, the spiritual model, and the devotional model. These models are not only descriptive but also normative, offering frameworks that resonate with the lived faith experience of Javanese Catholics. Thus, the results of this study are expected to provide a normative framework for pastoral ministry that is more culturally and spiritually relevant in Javanese Catholic communities, while also addressing the conceptual gap left unarticulated by previous studies.

Based on this objective, this study is based on the argument that the cultural imagination of Javanese Catholics—as expressed through symbols such as *pamong* (village guide), *ziarah* (pilgrimage), and *padepokan* (spiritual hermitage)—can serve as a valid theological source for constructing contextual and dynamic models of the Church. Because these cultural images are embedded in the religious experiences of the faithful, when correlated with biblical images such as the *Good Shepherd* or the *Mystical Body of Christ*, they generate ecclesiological models that are both rooted in local spirituality and open to broader theological reflection. This argument affirms the narrative assumption that lived religious experience is not only a subject of theological reflection but also a constructive theological resource (Phan, 2003a; Schreiter, 1985). It aligns with the concept of bottom-up ecclesiology (Manalu, 2022; Tedjoworo, 2010), in which theology emerges from the concrete realities of believers rather than abstract formulations. Through the imagerial method, this study thus explores how the symbolic life of the

people—interpreted through imagination and faith—can expand the horizon of ecclesiology in the local Church of Java.

## Methods

The unit of analysis in this study is the living models of the Church within the context of Javanese Catholic communities, represented through cultural imagery, local spirituality, and devotional activities. This research focuses on how Javanese Catholics shape their understanding of the Church through symbols, images, and religious practices rooted in local culture. Specifically, the study examines the relationship between cultural images and biblical or theological images in forming contextual ecclesiological models—such as the cultural, spiritual, and devotional models—that emerge from the lived experiences of local Catholic communities (Schreiter, 1990, pp. 345–356; Dulles, 1987, pp. 23–25).

This study employs a qualitative approach using a reflective-hermeneutic method (Creswell, 2016). This methodological choice arises from the need to deeply understand the symbolic meanings and representations experienced by the faithful. As theorized by John Henry Newman, an image is “a vivid realization of a particular object, a realization so intense that the object becomes a fact in the imagination” (Merrigan, 1991, pp. 48–49; Newman, 1870, pp. 39–41). Since the research object includes symbolic and theological meanings within a community of faith, this approach enables the researcher to construct an interpretive understanding of religious experiences that are not always expressed conceptually.

The data sources in this study are secondary and rely on theological literature and pastoral reflections. The main texts include works by theologians such as John Henry Newman, Avery Dulles, and Robert Schreiter—particularly Newman’s *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Newman, 1870), Dulles’ *Models of the Church* (Dulles, 1987), and Schreiter’s “Models of the Church Revisited” (R. Schreiter, 1990). In addition, the study refers to Church documents such as statements by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (Eilers, 1997, p. 201), as well as conceptual analyses of tradition, ritual, devotion, and spirituality within the Javanese cultural context. Working definitions of key terms like *tradition*, *ritual*, *devotion*, and *spirituality* are used to clarify the boundaries of observation within a framework of categorizing cultural and religious phenomena.

The data collection technique involves in-depth literature study of relevant theological and anthropological sources. The researcher gathers data through critical and annotated reading of both primary and supplementary texts, along with documentation of faith experiences in Javanese Catholic communities as reflected through visual and narrative practices. This study does not use direct interviews or field observation, but rather constructs a theological reflection based on textual and symbolic data codified in existing literature and pastoral documents.

The data analysis applies thematic analysis and narrative hermeneutics. The researcher identifies key themes such as the meaning of symbols, the correlation between cultural and theological imagery, and the construction of contextual Church models through religious imagination. The interpretive foundation rests on the idea that “It is possible to apprehend without understanding” (Newman, 1870), which guides the reading of how the faithful apprehend the meaning of the Church through visual and symbolic experience. The data are analyzed by conceptually constructing a correlation structure between images to understand how Church models are perceived, designed, and lived by the faithful within their local cultural context.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. The Local Church is Cultural

“A faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived,” said Pope John Paul II (Phan, 2003a). These words have rich meanings. The cultural model of the Church must be understood in light of the effort to root the Church in the sociocultural reality of Java. Discussions on the relevance of the church in Javanese society have shown that the growth of the church within a particular culture has not been smooth. The faithful want to participate in the Church, as they are used to participating in local community activities, art performances, volunteering activities in society, and cultural conversations among them (Darmawijaya, 1991). In their participation, they want to encounter a God who is in solidarity with humanity and is committed to freeing his people from all kinds of suffering and oppression. The faithful believe in their calling to be ‘leaven’ in the world, an image that Jesus used to describe the Kingdom of God. “The kingdom of heaven is like the leaven that a woman took and mixed into three measures of flour until it was all leavened” (Mt 13:33). Therefore, the faithful are immersed in society and feel what it means to be Christian when they are also involved in society. In this case, they are able to build an ecclesial community from within the sociocultural reality. Images such as ‘village’ or ‘village’, ‘free lunch’, ‘social community’, ‘living together’, and ‘prayer together’ will emerge in daily encounters as well as in church meetings (Tedjoworo, 2011, pp. 251–253). These cultural images from below support the cultural models of the Church (Helle, 2022, pp. 247–248). People can always discuss social and cultural issues in the context of church meetings as well as religious issues in community meetings.

Contextual models show the social dimensions of the Church. The corrective image is the ‘leaven in the world’. This corrective image will also be useful in countering the temptation of exclusivism, a distortion of the cultural church model. Cultural believers may be tempted to stay in the Church, instead of going out. This situation can be problematic when there is a lack of charismatic figures in the church. In Java, the presence of such figures is important. A biblical image of ‘going into the deep’ (Lk 5:4-10) can help the cultural Church face various difficulties in society. Social difficulties are encountered in real terms by the Church, but they must not prevent the faithful from going deep. The cultural Church is convinced that social change can occur through repentance and the courage to go into depth (Helle, 2022).

Traditional Javanese practices such as *slametan* (a communal thanksgiving meal for blessings), *tirakatan* (a spiritual ascetic practice), *kenduri* (a communal feast as a ritual), and the leadership concept of *pamong* (a community leader and role model) are not merely cultural backdrops, but serve as active frameworks that shape the life and spirituality of church life. A study of the Javanese Christian Church community shows that these traditional practices are intentionally incorporated into worship rituals, facilitating the transmission of religious values in ways that resonate deeply with the cultural identity of the congregation (Imaniyyah, Prameswari, Zahra, Adibah, & Maulana, 2024). This integration allows for a seamless blend of Javanese culture and Christian faith, making the teachings of the faith more easily understood and meaningful, and strengthening the faith of the faithful by rooting it in familiar communal-cultural images.

The Javanese philosophy of hospitality in welcoming guests, which underlies practices such as *slametan* and *kenduri*, provides a theological and philosophical foundation for a collaborative and participatory model of church ministry. This approach is evident, for example, in disability ecclesiology (Harisantoso, Balambeu, & Simanullang, 2024), where the church community is portrayed as an inclusive body that welcomes all members as equals, reflecting the communal spirit of Javanese hospitality. Such practices foster a sense of belonging and mutual care, in line with the ecclesiological vision of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, where every member is valued and included. By embedding Javanese rituals and values into the life of the Church, ecclesiology in the Javanese cultural context becomes a living and adaptive process. The correlation of cultural practices with Christian faith values ensures that the teachings of faith are not perceived as abstract or foreign, but rather experienced through culturally meaningful acts. This approach not only preserves the Javanese cultural heritage, but also strengthens the spiritual engagement of the faithful and their sense of identity, making the Church a space where faith and culture are mutually reinforcing.

In imagining the local church as cultural, we can see how rituals and traditions are transformed to be in harmony with the pastoral life of the Church. They encourage inclusivity, communal participation, religious moderation, and the effective transmission of the faith, demonstrating that ecclesiology in the Javanese context is deeply rooted in and shaped by local cultural wisdom and communal life (Haryanto, 2022). The transformation of ritual and tradition can be found in the works of Clifford Geertz (1960) who analyzed the religious and social systems in Javanese culture. Geertz conceptualized culture as a text to be interpreted, emphasizing that religion in Java is deeply embedded in cultural values and ritual meanings, and that individuals experience and interpret these meanings in their own ways. Geertz's broader interpretive framework further underscores his view that rituals are not simply concrete actions, but are imbued with layered meanings that reflect broader social and cultural transformations. His studies have been pivotal in shaping academic discourse on how rituals in Java adapt and transform in response to social, economic, and political contexts (Nasruddin, 2011).

A cultural church tends to have an accommodating nature (Helle, 2022). A contextual church belongs to and originates from the local faithful. A church like this will also be colored by a willingness to discuss many things between the congregation and its leaders. Leaders are known to be more sociable and flexible in many ways because they will be a way for the congregation to create space for dialogue with the community. Without this character, church leaders will have difficulty communicating with the congregation, and if that happens, it will be difficult to imagine a church as a community, let alone as a fellowship. An accommodating attitude is the character of Javanese society, and this is also an inclusive character of the faithful in the context of the catholicity of the Church. To become a yeast in society, the Church must first merge itself with the socio-cultural reality. By paying attention to secular problems, the Church takes an attitude of emptying itself so that it can produce the fruits of faith in the land of Java.

Overall, these findings show that the local church in Java has developed through its close engagement with the surrounding cultural environment. Cultural elements such as *slametan*, *kenduri*, *tirakatan*, and *pamong* leadership are not merely ethnographic backdrops but serve as active structures that shape the lived experience of the Catholic Church. Values like hospitality, communal participation, and the desire to integrate with the social reality mark the distinct characteristics of a culturally rooted Church model in Java. The integration of cultural symbols and images with the teachings of the faith demonstrates that Christian doctrine becomes more accessible when it is lived within a

cultural framework familiar to the people.

From the above discussion, we can identify at least four main tendencies. First, the community actively strives to contextualize faith within the values of local culture. Second, ritual and tradition undergo transformation into integral components of the Church's pastoral life. Third, the local church exhibits an accommodating character, open to dialogue and lay participation in shaping a shared spiritual identity. Fourth, local cultural symbols are not merely preserved but are also reinterpreted to deepen the religious meaning lived by the faithful. These tendencies suggest that the Church in Java does not appear as a foreign institution but as a faith community that grows together with the socio-cultural reality of its people.

These findings offer an important contribution to the study of contextual ecclesiology, particularly by showing that faith rooted in culture does not weaken Church teaching; rather, it deepens its reception in daily life. The faithful's experience in uniting faith and culture proves that local images can serve as effective bridges for living theology in tangible ways. In this sense, the culturally rooted Church model in Java demonstrates how Christian faith can flourish in adaptive, participatory forms while remaining faithful to the Gospel values through living, contextual cultural interpretations.

## 2. Spiritual Model of the Church

A theological model can be formed by correlating the cultural and scriptural images. The process of forming this model takes into account the perspective of local believers who are accustomed to reading and listening to the Scriptures. The imagination of the people works to connect the scriptural images they hear with the cultural images that are familiar to them (Newman, 1870). The function of the imagination of the people is inclusive and constructive and can be called by Peter Phan's term, "dialogical imagination" (Phan, 2003b, p. 197). Here, the faithful makes continuous analogies to find messages in the Scriptures that can be applied to everyday life.

One of the characteristics of Javanese society is its closeness to the mystical world (De Grave, 2016), although its meaning differs from that used in theological discussions. What is meant by 'mystical' for Javanese people is related to the spirits of the dead, the invisible world that is parallel to reality, and mystical practices. In forming a theological model, this cultural image can be corrected through an understanding of spirituality. Spirituality is often contrasted with secularity. Spirituality has a more positive connotation than the mystical world does. Some cultural images in Java that can play an important role in the spiritual model are *laku tapa* (meditation), *ngelmu batin* (studying in the heart), wise stories, wise words, silence, and peace (Tedjoworo, 2017, pp. 215–216). The spiritual model of the Church can be associated with the understanding of *padepokan*, a special place for studying spiritual and physical abilities. Its members are special students who want to learn special skills in terms of spirituality. The atmosphere of the Church with this model is reflective-spiritual towards the life of faith (Dulles, 1987). Its members greet each other with respect to their spiritual depth. Every word in the conversation has a deep meaning.

There are also charismatic leaders in the spiritually colored Church model, and although considered less popular, their words will be more authoritative and full of wisdom (Jenssen, 2018). The faithful in the spiritual model are encouraged to be evaluative, metaphorical, and imaginative in the way they consider and act spiritually. They tend to reflect deeply on the words of the Scripture and take special time to interpret their meaning for their lives. In this model, church leaders can guide people to enter the

vertical dimension of their relationship with God. God is in the hearts of the people, and the Holy Spirit moves and enlightens their minds through wisdom. The word of God meets local wisdom. The dominant character of encounters in this community is reflective. The community will always seek meaning in everything, what God's will is in certain events, and the meaning of certain events for each believer.

The distortion associated with this model is that the Church is seen as "merely human (fallible) receiving revelation" (Doyle, 2000, p. 15). In this case, the temptation that the church is merely a group of weak and fragile human beings is responded to by the awareness that the faithful learn about spiritual life. The leader figure will be like a 'teacher' in the spiritual context, namely someone who is charismatic and able to help the congregation arrive at the spiritual meaning of life (Tedjoworo, 2011). The biblical image of this model is the "hidden God" (Mt 6:3-18). This image is complemented by the way Jesus taught through parables revealing what was hidden (Mt 13:35). The hiddenness of truth challenges the congregation to interpret everyday experiences in light of the truth of faith. This spirituality can promote spiritual conversations among the faithful. They come to reflect on the text of the Scripture and discover its meaning and wisdom.

The communal way of living the Christian faith as a spiritual Church reflects the mystical dimension of the ecclesiology of *communio* of the Second Vatican Council. Its corrective images are Paul's "Mystical Body of Christ" and the "Communion of Saints" (Doyle, 2000). The faithful are invited to experience the dynamics of their community life as a way to transformation in their 'inner experience', and not just in their cognitive understanding. The image of the 'Mystical Body of Christ' can help them overcome the assumption that the Church is only filled with fragile and weak human beings. This model can also strengthen internal sensitivity (Jav. *rasa*) of the faithful and supports the resilience of the faithful, especially in difficult times (Sugiharto, 2008). Becoming a member of this model of Church means being strengthened 'from within' and 'from above'. From 'within', because the Spirit of God moves the faithful to be more sensitive to the signs of the times. From 'above', because the hidden Father gives answers to the silent cries in the depths of the hearts of the faithful who are Christ's disciples.

In general, the spiritual model of the Church within the Javanese cultural context reflects how Catholics live out their faith reflectively and deeply by linking local values with the teachings of Scripture. The imagination of the faithful plays a vital role in bridging the sacred texts with their everyday cultural experiences. Spiritual images such as *laku tapa* (ascetic practices), *ngelmu batin* (inner wisdom), silence, and the *padepokan* (spiritual hermitage) as a place for spiritual learning, represent distinctive Javanese ways of understanding and experiencing the presence of God in a personal and inward manner. The Church is not merely seen as an institution but as a contemplative space that allows an encounter with the hidden yet intimately present God.

From these findings, several key patterns emerge. First, the faithful tend to relate their experience of faith to local values rich in symbolic depth, such as wise tales and meditative practices. Second, spiritual leadership within this model is strongly supported by charismatic figures who serve not only in administrative roles but also as spiritual guides. Third, the Church community forms through reflective habits that encourage inner dialogue and reinterpretation of life events. Fourth, there is a strong inclination to perceive the teachings of faith not merely as cognitive doctrines, but as lived wisdom that must be embodied spiritually. A preliminary conclusion suggests that this spiritual model responds to the faithful's need for an intimate, authentic, and contextual experience of faith.

The significance of these findings lies in their contribution to showing that local

spirituality, when theologically cultivated, can enrich our understanding of ecclesiology. This model illustrates how faith communities in Java do not simply receive doctrine—they embody it through personal relationships with God and reflective engagement with everyday life. Faith becomes dynamic because it is grounded in the habit of seeking meaning in silence, interpreting the signs of the times, and relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to face life's challenges. In this way, the findings broaden the horizon of ecclesiology by placing local spirituality as a source of reflection and strength for faith communities amid an ever-changing world.

### 3. Devotional Model of the Church in Java

Catholics in Java have a strong preference for celebrating the sacraments of the Church in most of their meetings (Laksana, 2014; Laksana, Hariandja, & Taruna, 2023). Some efforts in the field of catechesis are needed to prevent the local church from becoming ritualistic. From my observations in the courtyard of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Temple in Ganjuran, Bantul, Yogyakarta, it was found that the preferences of the faithful who come to the place are devotional prayers, spiritual silence in this particular place, and pilgrimages (Tedjoworo, 2017). The model of a praying or devotional Church can summarize these preferences by offering images such as movements of praying and prostrating, culturally colored joint prayer events, thanksgiving events, places of pilgrimage, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, holy water, and Mary's grotto (Laksana, 2014). A model that accommodates these images invites people to pray a lot every day. They can find spaces for silence and prayer in many places.

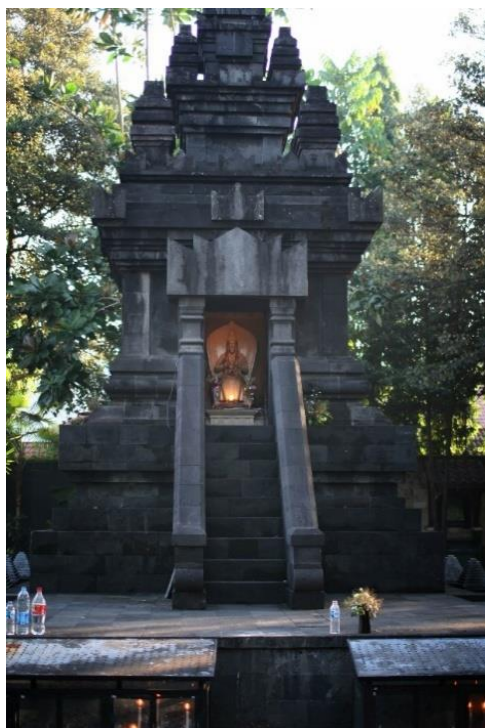
The faithful in this model can always be ready to pray together for fellow human beings who are sick and in need. They are willing to be spiritually present to others and engage in communal prayer rather than simply discussing prayer (Helle, 2022). The word of God is their assurance; for them God will not leave them to struggle alone. If it seems that their prayers are not answered once, God will answer them again. In this model, healing from illness, success at work, and happy relationships are the hopes of the people, and God will provide them as long as they remain closely connected to God in prayer. This model is distinguished from the spiritual model, because here the people are present as 'the people of God' who pray together. The devotional community imagines God as always leading them to a 'green valley'. This model makes room for moral, devotional, and communal obedience for the faithful (Tedjoworo, 2013). As long as they are close to God, they are protected from evil.

The model of a devoted Church can be useful in countering the tendency towards juridicalism as a form of distortion in relation to the image of the Church as *communio*. This distortion is known as institutionalism or legalism (Doyle, 2000). However, this distortion may not completely disappear from the reality of people in Java. This distortion can still appear in the form of bureaucratic attitudes among the people and in their relations with the hierarchy, in procedural tendencies in sacramental events, in indifference and a waiting mentality due to the dominance of the hierarchy, and in the reluctance of the people in the midst of the atmosphere of the Church which is still centralistic (Helle, 2022). In this model, the appropriate image of a leader is as a *pamong* which means counselor, guide, and mentor (Tedjoworo, 2011). This image of a leader helps overcome the distortion of institutionalism. The relevant scriptural image is the figure of Jesus as the "Good Shepherd" (Jn 10:11-15). The figure of a good shepherd is willing to give life to his sheep and will not abandon his flock when there is an attack from outside the group. This figure also knows his sheep, and is always close to his flock.



Another scriptural image that can describe the faithful is the “flock” that wants to remain faithful to the Good Shepherd. An image that represents the togetherness of the flock was also found in Psalm 23. The church that is devoted in this case can be described by the images in Psalm 23, namely, depicting the ‘green valley’ where the people are accompanied and guided by God, the Good Shepherd.

The devotional model of the Church can be clearly observed in the practices of Catholics who gather at pilgrimage sites such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus Temple in Ganjuran, Bantul, Yogyakarta. In this context, the faithful express their religious commitment through devotional prayers, spiritual silence, and communal pilgrimages (Tedjoworo, 2017). As illustrated in Figure 1, this temple—located within the church courtyard—features the Blessed Sacrament enthroned at its center, serving as the focal point of prayer and devotion. Pilgrims often collect water from the sacred spring beside the temple, believing in its sanctifying power and bringing it home in hopes of receiving divine grace for daily needs.



**Figure 1. The Sacred Heart of Jesus Temple, Ganjuran, Bantul, Central Java, Indonesia**

The Sacred Heart of Jesus Ganjuran Temple is located in the courtyard of the Church. Inside it is enthroned the Blessed Sacrament which is the center of prayer and devotion for Catholics who come to the place. Pilgrims place bottles of water from the water source next to the temple, asking for blessings from God so that they can take the water home in the hope that they will receive the grace they need every day.

The sacramental dimension of the Church is a relevant theological framework for forming a model of a devoted Church. The community is imagined as a flock of people

who are in an attitude of prayer, who entrust their lives and fate to the presence of God, who will care for and take care of the entire community. The figure of God in this model may not simply eliminate the dark valley and evil but promises his presence and provides peace in the hearts of the people. The image of the ‘communion of communions’ in ecclesiology (Tillard, 1992, p. 29) can help the people in this model to be sure that they will not be abandoned, also in togetherness with the ‘other sheep’ who may not be part of their group, but are also guided by the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:16).

This theological vision comes alive in devotional spaces such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus Shrine in Ganjuran, where the faithful engage in acts of devotion that reflect their trust in God's nearness. As shown in Figure 2, individuals are seen praying personally before the Blessed Sacrament, the spiritual center of the shrine. In the background, pilgrims collect water from a sacred source adjacent to the temple, believing it to be a medium of divine blessing for their daily lives. This practice exemplifies the tactile and sacramental nature of their faith—an embodied spirituality deeply rooted in place and ritual.



**Figure 2. The Faithful's Devotion at the Temple. The faithful come and devote themselves personally before the Blessed Sacrament. In the background are a number of water taps for water that will be asked to be blessed by God.**

This liturgical and sacramental environment reinforces the communal dimension of prayer, not only for personal petitions but also in solidarity with others. The prayer of petition functions as a theological and liturgical image that upholds unity among the faithful across the world—those who persist in prayer, hope, and devotion. A Church that embraces this devotional model becomes both a sacrament of salvation and a symbolic home for people seeking divine grace through tangible expressions of faith.

In summary, the devotional model of the Church in the Javanese context shows that Catholics have a strong inclination to express their faith through prayer, pilgrimage, and symbolically rich sacramental practices. Sites such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus Shrine in Ganjuran serve as living spiritual spaces where the faithful seek closeness with God

through personal prayer, blessed water, and inner peace. Religious activities such as kneeling, offering intercessory prayers, and attending Mass at pilgrimage sites are integral to how the faithful live out their faith communally and with hope.

Based on observations and theological analysis, several key patterns emerge within this model. First, there is a high level of intensity in both personal and communal devotional practices, especially those rooted in sacramental presence and symbols such as the Blessed Sacrament, holy water, and pilgrimage sites. Second, communal prayer and active participation in the liturgy and devotions serve as primary means of strengthening faith, particularly during difficult life circumstances. Third, the faithful express a strong belief that their closeness to God through prayer brings protection, healing, and spiritual tranquility. Fourth, despite the often bureaucratic and legalistic tendencies within Church institutions, the faithful continue to rely on the image of the spiritual leader as a *pamong*—a pastoral guide who is close, nurturing, and protective.

These findings show that the devotional model of the Church is not merely a personal or ceremonial religious expression but also a spiritual and theological strategy for creating intimacy with God within a local cultural framework. The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and the faithful as His flock reinforces the relational dimension of faith life. Moreover, devotional practices in local contexts such as Ganjuran not only deepen personal faith but also strengthen community solidarity and shape a liturgical awareness that remains open to the world. In this way, the model enriches our understanding of how devotional spirituality can serve as a meaningful, touching, and relevant form of Catholic faith inculturation within the Javanese cultural setting.

## Discussion

This study has identified and formulated three contextual models of the Church within the Javanese Catholic community: the cultural model, the spiritual model, and the devotional model. Each model was constructed through a correlative approach between local cultural imagery (such as *pamong*, *padepokan*, *slametan*), biblical imagery (such as the Good Shepherd and the Mystical Body of Christ), and theological images. These models show that Javanese Catholics live out their faith through symbolic forms that are familiar and deeply embedded in their socio-cultural lives, rather than through purely abstract dogmatic conceptions.

These models emerged as a theological and social response to the way Javanese Catholics experience and express their faith—through cultural symbols that are embedded in their lived realities. Theologically, the Church in Java reflects a “bottom-up” ecclesiology, where local images such as *padepokan*, *pamong*, and *ziarah* are not just cultural artifacts but mediators of spiritual meaning, aligning with the study’s foundational argument that lived religious experience constitutes a valid source of theological reflection. Socially, these images function as shared symbols that organize communal life and support religious identity in a non-abstract and participatory form. In contrast to top-down theological formulations, the models arise because the faithful encounter God not primarily through formal doctrine, but through familiar symbols that reflect their values, community structures, and spiritual rhythms. This explains the correlation: cultural images give shape to theological imagination and foster models of the Church that resonate with the people’s everyday sacred life, thereby affirming the main argument introduced in the study—that ecclesiology can be constructed through the symbolic and imaginative world of local believers.

The findings of this study connect to and complement previous research. For

example, Tedjoworo (2010, 2013, 2017) has emphasized the importance of the faithful's imagination in shaping Church imagery. However, this study advances that work by systematically conceptualizing the correlative model. Laksana (Laksana, 2014) and Helle (Helle, 2022) have also noted the strength of devotional practices among Javanese Catholics, particularly in the context of pilgrimage and sacramental symbolism, but have not explicitly constructed an ecclesiological model from those practices. In a global context, research by Wilkens (2024) and Ellens (2019) shows that embodied and affective devotional practices also play a vital role in African churches and in the domestic history of Christianity. Meanwhile, La Grange & Dreyer (2022) found that Reformed churches in the Netherlands are in decline partly due to the lack of meaningful spiritual experience. This highlights that the kind of contextual and emotional faith experience found in the Javanese model may in fact be a strength of the local church.

This study underscores the importance of a fundamental theological approach in constructing ecclesiology—one that is not only rooted in dogma but is responsive to the social and symbolic worlds of the faithful. The findings demonstrate that spirituality and devotion, often considered peripheral or emotional, are in fact central in shaping how Catholics perceive the Church: not merely as a juridical institution but as a space for encounter, reflection, and healing. Socially, this reflects a movement toward reclaiming the role of lay Catholics to shape their spiritual identities through cultural continuity and participatory rituals. Ideologically, the emergence of these models enriches the hierarchical approach of ecclesial meaning-making, advocating instead for a bottom-up and inclusive vision of the Church. This reframes ecclesiology as a lived and culturally-rooted process in which religious identity is dynamically constructed through local aesthetics, affective memory, and collective imagination (Newman, 1870; Phan, 2003b). Thus, these models carry not only theological weight but also critical implications for Church transformation, pastoral openness, and socio-cultural empowerment.

Functionally, these models enrich the diversity of faith expressions and strengthen the identity of Catholics within their local cultural environment. However, dysfunctionally, they present several potential risks that must be addressed. First, cultural exclusivism in the cultural model may lead to a tendency to isolate from other expressions of faith rooted in different cultures—a concern also raised by Nagoya and Santosa (2024), who argue that exclusivism in religious communities can hinder intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Second, the spiritual model risks devolving into closed spiritualism, where religious experience becomes overly individualized and disconnected from social engagement. This concern is similarly noted by Guerriero and Hida (2025), who describe how contemporary spirituality has shifted from collective moral engagement toward private, New Age-style individualism. Third, the devotional model is prone to ritualistic formalism, where religious practices become symbolic acts devoid of deeper spiritual meaning. Rejowska (2022), in her study of humanist weddings in Poland, shows how rituals can lose their substance when reduced to mere outward forms without internal conviction. Therefore, each model must be accompanied by adequate internal correction, grounded in biblical imagery and the *communio* dimension of the universal Church, to ensure that they remain open, reflective, and relevant to the evolving spiritual needs of the faithful.

Based on these findings, actionable recommendations include: (1) improving catechetical curricula to better integrate local cultural symbols, (2) training priests and catechists to develop pastoral methods rooted in the people's culture and imagination, and (3) formulating contextual pastoral policies that are not uniform but respectful of local dynamics. This model can also serve as a reference for other Church communities in Asia

and Africa that experience similar dynamics, as illustrated in the works of Rojas (2022) and McClure (2013), which emphasize the importance of contextual pastoral leadership and devotional practices as forms of social support within the community.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the Catholic Church in Java has developed three contextual models—cultural, spiritual, and devotional—which reflect how the faithful live out their faith through symbolic, imaginative, and embodied expressions rooted in their local socio-cultural context. These models emerge from a correlative theological approach that connects Javanese cultural images (such as *pamong*, *ziarah*, *slametan*, *padepokan*) with biblical symbols (such as the Good Shepherd and the Mystical Body of Christ), enabling a bottom-up ecclesiology that is reflective, participatory, and community-centered. The key insight of this research is that the faithful's imagination plays a central role in constructing meaningful experiences of the Church, revealing that faith is not abstractly taught but concretely lived within everyday cultural realities.

The main scientific contribution of this study lies in its formulation of the *imagerial method*, a contextual theological approach that correlates cultural and biblical images and draws from fundamental theology rather than dogmatic frameworks. This methodology provides a fresh conceptual lens through which ecclesiological models can be constructed from within a living culture, not imposed from above. In doing so, the study advances previous scholarship—such as that of Tedjoworo, Laksana, and Helle—by systematically organizing cultural-symbolic expressions into coherent Church models. It also aligns with broader global studies on devotional and affective faith practices, contributing to the growing field of contextual ecclesiology. Furthermore, this research offers practical recommendations for catechesis, pastoral training, and policy design that respond to the real spiritual needs and cultural contexts of the faithful.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The research relies solely on secondary sources, theological texts, and reflective analysis without empirical fieldwork such as interviews or participant observation. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the dynamic diversity of ecclesial life across different regions of Java. Future research can deepen this study by incorporating ethnographic methods, comparative analysis with other cultural contexts in Asia and Africa, or longitudinal studies of how these models evolve in response to socio-religious changes. Expanding the empirical base would strengthen the theological reflections and enhance their relevance for broader ecclesiological discourse.

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