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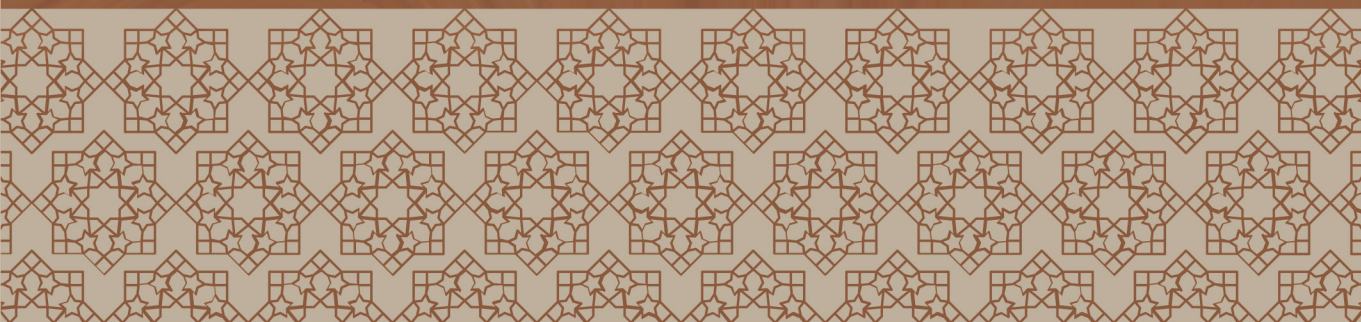
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Abstract

This article discusses the role of photography as a medium for proclaiming the values of love in the Catholic faith through an exhibition entitled Stella Matutina: Love One Another, organized by the Diocese of Bandung. This exhibition showcases the works of 33 photographers who convey the message of Christian love, inspired by the Gospel of John 15:12, through simple and touching visual narratives. This research employs a qualitative narrative approach, drawing on studies of theological aesthetics and visual communication theories, as well as an analysis of the creative process, photography techniques, and the spiritual impact of the exhibited works. The results of the study show that the photography in this exhibition effectively conveys Catholic values contextually and communicatively. Through a human-interest approach and reflective visual compositions, such as the use of eye-level perspectives, monochromatic colors, and natural lighting, the message of love is presented in everyday life. It can be accepted across religions and cultures. Art becomes a means of preaching that not only conveys dogma but also brings the experience of faith to life and opens up a space for inclusive spiritual encounters. This exhibition highlights that art, when combined with religious values, can foster a civilization of love and serve as a reflective vehicle in a multicultural society.

Keywords: *Photography, Love, Proclamation of Faith, Catholic Values, Religious Visualization, Interfaith Dialogue*

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas peran seni fotografi sebagai media pewartaan nilai-nilai kasih dalam iman Katolik melalui pameran bertajuk *Stella Matutina: Kasihilah Seorang Akan yang Lain* yang diselenggarakan oleh Keuskupan Bandung. Pameran ini menampilkan karya 33 fotografer yang merefleksikan pesan kasih Kristiani berdasarkan inspirasi Injil Yohanes 15:12 dalam bentuk narasi visual yang sederhana dan menyentuh. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif naratif dengan telaah teori estetika teologis dan komunikasi visual, serta analisis terhadap proses kreatif, teknik fotografi, dan dampak spiritual dari karya-karya yang dipamerkan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa seni fotografi dalam pameran ini berhasil mewartakan nilai-nilai Katolik secara kontekstual dan komunikatif. Melalui pendekatan human interest dan komposisi visual yang reflektif seperti penggunaan sudut pandang *eye-level*, warna monokromatik, dan pencahayaan natural pesan kasih dihadirkan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari dan dapat diterima secara lintas agama dan budaya. Seni menjadi sarana pewartaan yang tidak hanya menyampaikan dogma, tetapi menghidupkan pengalaman iman dan membuka ruang perjumpaan spiritual yang inklusif. Pameran ini menegaskan bahwa seni, ketika dipadukan dengan nilai-nilai agama, dapat membangun peradaban kasih dan menjadi wahana reflektif dalam masyarakat multikultural.

Kata Kunci: *Seni Fotografi, Kasih, Pewartaan Iman, Nilai Katolik, Visualisasi Agama, Dialog Lintas Iman*

INTRODUCTION

In the Catholic Church tradition, art holds a privileged position as a means of proclaiming the faith, spiritual reflection, and expressing Gospel values through symbols, colors, shapes, and visual narratives. The Second Vatican Council, through its document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, emphasized the importance of sacred art as part of the liturgy and spiritual life of Catholics, as art can touch the human soul and direct hearts toward God¹. In this context, modern photography has become a new form of evangelization capable of reaching a broad audience with inclusive, aesthetic, and meaningful language.

One form of contemporary religious art expression that has captured public attention is the photography exhibition entitled “Stella Matutina: Illuminating with Love,” organized by the Diocese of Bandung. This exhibition is not merely a visual display, but a space for contemplation and proclamation that elevates the spirit of Christian love as its central message. Taking its name from one of the titles of the Virgin Mary, “Stella Matutina” or “Morning Star,” this exhibition presents photographic works that radiate the light of hope, the silence of prayer, and the depth of love in the daily lives of believers.

In Catholic theology, love (agape) is at the heart of all of Christ’s teachings. As stated in the Gospel of John 13:34, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another,” love is the foundation of human relationships and the relationship of people with God. Therefore, conveying the message of love through photography is not only a form of artistic expression, but also a living proclamation of faith. The photographs

¹ Alkitab LAI, 2002, Yohanes 15:12. <https://www.bible.com/id/bible/306/JHN.15.12.TB>

in this exhibition explore various aspects of people's lives, from the faces of simplicity, service, and suffering to hope, all woven within the framework of a spirituality of love.

In his discourse on visual semiotic theory, Roland Barthes² explains that visual images contain meaningful texts that can be read and interpreted deeply. Therefore, this exhibition can be understood as conveying a text of love through visual language, where each portrait is not only a technical result of the camera, but also a spiritual representation of the Gospel values he wishes to proclaim to the world. Visuality becomes a window into the experience of faith that cannot always be explained with words.

In addition to being a contextual form of faith communication, the Stella Matutina exhibition also emphasizes the Church's role in responding to current developments. In today's digital and visual culture era, a preaching approach using visual arts is becoming increasingly relevant and reaching a wide range of audiences, especially the younger generation, who are more connected to visual media. As Marshall McLuhan³ Put it this way: "the medium is the message." Therefore, photography, in this case, is not merely a tool but also the content of the preaching itself, conveying the light of love that is central to the Christian faith.

The Diocese of Bandung's organization of this exhibition also reflects the spirit of inculturation and the congregation's participation in the apostolate of arts and culture. This demonstrates that the proclamation of love need not be limited to conventional forms, such as homilies or liturgical texts, but can be presented in creative and touching ways, like photography. Therefore, this article aims to examine how the Stella Matutina exhibition serves as a transformative medium for conveying Catholic values of love through a visual approach, and how this exhibition enriches the form of faith proclamation in today's urban society.

Literature review

First. Art and Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition. In the Catholic Church tradition, art is seen not only as a cultural product but as a form of revelation and encounter between humanity and God. The Second Vatican Council, in its document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, emphasized that sacred art plays a vital role in strengthening the faith of the faithful and beautifying the liturgy, as it guides the faithful through symbolism and beauty to the divine mystery⁴. In this spirit, art becomes an effective and transformative means of evangelization. In his Letter to Artists⁵, Pope John Paul II emphasized that art has a

² R. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (Fontana Press, 1977).

³ M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁴ Alkitab LAI. (2002). Yohanes 15:12. <https://www.bible.com/id/bible/306/JHN.15.12.TB>

⁵ John Paul II. (1999). *Letter to Artists*. Vatican.

divine mission: to reflect God's beauty and serve as a means of expressing the human experience of faith. Therefore, works of art rooted in Christian spirituality, including religious photography, can become a field of profound contemplation for the faithful.

Second. Photography as a Visual Text Medium. Photography in contemporary semiotic studies is understood not only as a visual representation but also as a text that conveys messages, values, and meaning. Roland Barthes in *Image, Music, Text*⁶ stated that photographs contain two dimensions of meaning: denotative (what is directly visible) and connotative (symbolic or cultural meanings hidden behind the image). Thus, every photograph can be read as a visual narrative, which, in a religious context, can communicate spiritual values such as love, hope, and forgiveness. In Stella Matutina's exhibition, photography becomes a contemplative space that re-presents the values of Christian love in communicative visual forms. The representations of community life, service, and simplicity in the photographs can be seen as symbolic and meditative forms of faith proclamation.

Third. Theology of Love in the Catholic Church. Love (*caritas*) is at the heart of Christian teaching. The Gospel of John 13:34 affirms Jesus' command to love one another: "Love one another as I have loved you." This concept of love is further elaborated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1822–1829) as an act of goodwill toward others, stemming from love for God. In Catholic theology, love is not only personal but also social touching on the realms of communal life, service, and witness to faith. Proclaiming love through art, such as photography, can be a form of spiritual and cultural service that touches the hearts of people. By presenting human faces and real-life situations, the photography exhibition Stella Matutina invites audiences to experience love in both visual and emotional forms.

Fourth. Visual Media and Contemporary Faith Proclamation. In the era of visual and digital culture, the proclamation of faith demands a relevant and creative approach. Marshall McLuhan⁷ In "Understanding Media stated that the medium itself is the message, meaning that the choice of medium influences how the message is received and interpreted. The modern church is also challenged to use visual media wisely to convey evangelical values to its congregation, especially the younger generation, who are more familiar with visual language. Photography exhibitions serve as a means of communication, bridging the gap between spirituality and aesthetics. This medium delves into the realm of affect, offers space for reflection, and fosters a dialogue between faith and everyday life.

⁶ R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Hill and Wang, 1981).

⁷ M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (McGraw-Hill, 1964).

Methodology

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the meaning behind the visual representations in Stella Matutina's photography exhibition, which serves as a medium for proclaiming love within the Catholic tradition. This approach was chosen because it is appropriate for exploring the symbolic meanings, religious messages, and aesthetic experiences contained in the artworks, particularly the photographs, displayed in the exhibition.

According to Creswell⁸, a qualitative approach is suitable for examining complex social or cultural phenomena, relying on a deep understanding of the context and subjective meanings constructed by a particular subject or artifact. In this context, the photography exhibition is positioned as a visual text that is read and analyzed interpretively to reveal the values of love (*caritas*) that the organizer, the Diocese of Bandung, wishes to convey.

The primary data in this study consist of: first, visual documentation of the Stella Matutina exhibition, including exhibited photographs, curatorial narratives, and supporting materials such as catalogs, leaflets, and thematic explanations provided by the organizers. Second, Semi-structured interviews with curators, photographers, and representatives from the Bandung Diocese involved in organizing the exhibition, to explore the intentions, messages, and theological reflections behind the selection of themes and photographic objects. Third, Participatory observation during the exhibition involves taking notes on the flow of the visual narrative, visitor interactions, and the atmosphere of the exhibition space, which can influence the audience's spiritual experience. Fourth, Theological texts and church documents such as *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Letter to Artists, as well as the Holy Scriptures and the Catechism of the Catholic Church serve as normative references in interpreting the message of love from the perspective of the Catholic faith.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data was analyzed using a visual hermeneutics approach, an interpretive method for interpreting the symbolic and theological meaning of images or photographs. According to Mitchell⁹, in the study of visual culture, analysis must consider not only the visual form itself, but also the context of the artwork's production, perception, and reception. The study is carried out in several stages: first, a Visual description, namely

⁸ J. W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, (SAGE Publications, 2014).

⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, USA: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

identifying the elements of the image (subject, composition, color, lighting). Second, Symbolic interpretation, namely, interpreting the religious and spiritual meanings of the visual objects that appear. Third, Theological contextualization, by connecting visual representations with the teachings of love in the Catholic faith. Fourth, Pastoral reflection, namely evaluating the extent to which this exhibition functions as a means of proclamation and spiritual transformation for the congregation.

To ensure data validity, source triangulation techniques were used, comparing data obtained from visual documentation, interviews, and observations. Furthermore, member checking with several sources was conducted to ensure the accuracy of interpretations and the validity of theological reflections. This technique aims to maintain objectivity and academic integrity in the data analysis process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The art exhibition “Stella Matutina: Love One Another,” initiated by the Diocese of Bandung and embodied in a photography exhibition, resulted in a collaborative practice of photography as a spiritual and social medium. This activity aimed not only to showcase aesthetic works but also to present concrete Christian values of love in the context of the lives of the people. Through a creative photographic process that combines a technical approach and the spirituality of faith, the photographers involved successfully construct the meaning of love through a human interest approach. The photographs on display demonstrate a visual expression of love that stems from the value of agape, namely, unconditional and sacrificial divine love¹⁰.



¹⁰ Yohanes 15:12, *Alkitab Terjemahan Baru* (LAI, 2002).

One of the exhibition's key findings is how photography can be an effective means of evangelization. Drawing on the classical view of *fides ex visu* faith that comes through sight the photographs displayed are not only documentary but also transformative. Visitors experience affective moments, such as emotion, gratitude, and the urge to engage in acts of love in their daily lives¹¹.

The creative process followed the stages described by Wallas¹²: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. The process began with field research and thematic discussions on the meaning of love with the artists. The next stage was personal reflection on the theme, followed by intensive photography in five areas of the Bandung Diocese, including Cirebon, Karawang, and Lembang. The result is an authentic documentation of the lives of the congregation, filled with expressions of real love, both in the form of friendship, service, and sacrifice in socio-religious life.

One of the important dimensions of the *Stella Matutina: Love One Another* exhibition is its success in combining the artistic quality of photography with the depth of spiritual and humanitarian messages. The photographs displayed are not merely visual documentation, but are the result of a mature artistic process, both in technical and conceptual aspects. The photographic techniques used, such as the rule of thirds, eye-level perspective, depth of field, and black and white composition, demonstrate that these works were created with serious aesthetic and expressive considerations¹³. These techniques not only strengthen the visual appeal but also deepen the intensity of the message conveyed to the viewer.



¹¹ S. Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

¹² G. Wallas, *The Art of Thought*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1926).

¹³ P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. I*, (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

The use of eye-level perspective, for example, reinforces the sense of closeness and honesty between the subject and the viewer. Photos with carefully measured depth of field also direct the viewer's eye to facial expressions or human interactions that serve as the core message of love¹⁴. Meanwhile, the choice of monochromatic compositions in several photographs enhances the emotional atmosphere and creates a deeply reflective impression. With this approach, each work is not only visually stunning but also spiritually evocative.

More than just an art exhibition, Stella Matutina conveys that love is not dependent on background, social status, or religious beliefs. The love depicted in her photographs is love in its simplest form: entertaining others with song, pulling a rickshaw for her family, and embracing her grandchildren in warmth. These are forms of love born from everyday human experience, yet possessing a powerful spiritual resonance. In other words, the love proclaimed in this exhibition is love that can be realized by anyone, anywhere, in any situation.



In this context, photography acts as a transformative medium it bridges visual beauty with profound human values. This echoes Susan Sontag's¹⁵ view that photography possesses a moral power capable of fostering empathy and provoking social awareness. By presenting love as a real, universal experience accessible to anyone, this exhibition not only enriches artistic discourse but also contributes to interfaith spiritual practice. Therefore, Stella Matutina's success lies in her ability to convey a narrative of love through photography that is technically powerful, emotionally touching, and spiritually liberating. This exhibition is proof that art can transcend the boundaries of personal expression,

¹⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, (USA: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁵ S. Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

become a vehicle for proclaiming values, and invite everyone, regardless of their beliefs, to live in active and transformative love.

One of the important achievements of Stella Matutina's exhibition, "Love One Another," is its success in reaching various levels of society across faiths, not just Catholics. This is achieved thanks to its humanistic visual approach and universal thematics. Photography, as a visual medium, has narrative power that transcends languages and cultures; it is able to convey meaning instantly without the need for complex verbal interpretation (Barthes, 1981). In this context, the theme of love becomes a universal bridge accepted by all humans, regardless of religious background, ethnicity, or social class.



The message of love conveyed through the photographs in this exhibition is neither dogmatic nor exclusively theological. Instead, it is embodied in everyday gestures: a grandmother warmly holding her grandchild, the friendship of two street musicians, the togetherness of pedicab drivers who strengthen each other. Portraits like these convey the most fundamental and authentic form of love, love born from human relationships, unconstrained by the institutional boundaries of religion.

Visitors from various religious and social backgrounds responded affectively to these works. The emotional responses, which included feelings of emotion, warmth, and even spiritual reflection, are evidence that photography can activate universal human empathy and solidarity. This reinforces the argument that aesthetic experience can ignite ethics

and spirituality, as Kearney¹⁶ argues, stating that “the aesthetic experience can open the way to ethical encounter with the Other.”

Furthermore, the exhibition’s success lies in its depiction of love as action, not mere discourse. In the context of Indonesia’s multicultural and multireligious society, this approach is highly relevant. Love as a concrete action, manifested in everyday life, serves as a meeting point between religions. Whether in Catholicism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or local beliefs, the values of compassion, sacrifice, and kindness are at the heart of spiritual teachings. Therefore, the works in this exhibition have a dialogical capacity, inviting viewers of various faiths to reflect on and live out love in their daily lives.

Discussion

Stella Matutina’s photography exhibition, *Love One Another*, is concrete evidence that art can function as a mediating space between faith and life, between sacred texts and social reality. In this context, photography is not merely an aesthetic visual medium, but also a form of visual theological narrative that conveys spiritual values in a language that is accessible across cultures and religions. The power of this visual narrative lies in its ability to bridge doctrinal understandings of faith into tangible, touching, and inclusive forms of expression.

In Catholic teaching, the command to love, as found in the Gospel of John 15:12¹⁷, is the core of the entire Christian moral law. However, in the practice of preaching, love cannot be conveyed only verbally or theoretically. Through the photographic works presented in this exhibition, love is shown as a concrete action: comforting, lifting, carrying, embracing, sharing laughter and sweat with fellow human beings. This visualization of love reflects what Paul Tillich called the revelation of faith in the form of existential symbols, namely that theological values come alive when presented in the form of everyday human relationships.

Technically, the photography in this exhibition is curated and arranged with high artistic consideration. The shooting technique utilizes human interest principles, such as eye-level perspective, which equates the observer with the subject, as well as depth of field and natural lighting, making the objects depicted feel honest and close. This kind of aesthetic is important because it creates an emotional connection between the work and the audience. In this case, art is not merely a mirror of reality, but a contemplative window that leads the viewer to new spiritual and ethical experiences.

¹⁶ R. Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, (USA: Columbia University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Yohanes 15:12, *Alkitab Terjemahan Baru* (LAI, 2002).

The colors used in post-production, including monochrome effects, enhance the dramatic power and focus on the expression of love through gestures and relationships. The use of color in this photography draws on the principles of color psychology, which can stimulate the viewer's emotions, such as black and white, which evokes nostalgia, solemnity, and spiritual reflection. Therefore, the visualization does not stand alone but is consciously directed to convey the experience of faith in a universal language that can be felt by anyone.



Sociologically, these works reveal the reality that love need not be spectacular or heroic. In fact, the most powerful love is that which is manifested in small, simple acts, and carried out by anyone. Photos of a grandmother holding her grandson, two buskers keeping each other's spirits up, or rickshaw drivers sharing stories and laughter in between work are all icons of agape love, a love that demands nothing in return, a love that sustains, not dominates. This aligns with Pope Francis's idea in *Fratelli Tutti*¹⁸, that "True love is social, transformative, and can be realized by anyone, even by those considered small in the eyes of the world."

Beyond the theological and aesthetic aspects, this exhibition also succeeds in the Catholic Church's pastoral mission to reach out to the wider community. The theme of love raised is universal and inclusive, touching not only Catholics but also visitors from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. In the document *Evangelii Gaudium*¹⁹, the Church is called to proclaim the Gospel through approaches familiar with the modern world, including art and popular culture, which can bridge the message of faith to the wider community. This exhibition answers this call in a highly contextual way presenting

¹⁸ Paus Fransiskus, *Fratelli Tutti: Tentang Persaudaraan dan Persahabatan Sosial*, (Vatikan: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020).

¹⁹ Paus Fransiskus, *Evangelii Gaudium (Sukacita Injil)*, (Vatikan: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

love as a human experience that can be experienced and realized by anyone, not just those who are formally religious.

Furthermore, the value of love embodied in this exhibition does not stand alone, but is presented as a unifying and liberating act. In line with the message of the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Fratelli Tutti, Francis, 2020), true love transcends the boundaries of identity and becomes the foundation of universal brotherhood. In this context, Stella Matutina has opened a space for dialogue between faith and humanity, between doctrine and action, and between the Church and society.

These works also touch visitors from various religious and cultural backgrounds. Love, as a universal value, becomes a space for encounter between different religious texts. In the Islamic tradition, love for others (*rahmah*) is also a core teaching. In Buddhism, compassion (*karunā*) is the ethical foundation. In Hinduism, the value of love (*prema*) is the highest expression of devotion to God and others. Therefore, the photography in this exhibition becomes a space for theological encounter that does not judge, but invites.

Thus, this exhibition is not only a venue for artistic expression but also a medium for dialogue between faith and humanity. It demonstrates that art, particularly photography, can transcend its aesthetic function and become a means of proclaiming the Gospel that is alive, grounded, and relevant to today's world. Art becomes a spiritual mediator, a place where transcendent values are expressed in forms accessible to human experience.

Amidst a modern society that tends to be fragmented by religious, political, and cultural identities, Stella Matutina's exhibition serves as a call to return to a fundamental human value: love. This exhibition reminds us that in a world often filled with noise and conflict, sometimes a simple photograph of a smile or a hug can communicate more effectively than lengthy verbal discourses. It touches the heart, fosters empathy, and invites everyone to participate in being an agent of love in its most tangible and human form.

CONCLUSION

The exhibition Stella Matutina: Love One Another has demonstrated that the art of photography can be a highly effective, lively, and contextual medium for the proclamation of faith. Inspired by the Gospel text of John 15:12, the value of love as the center of Christian spirituality is translated into a simple, touching visual language that can reach everyday human experience. The strength of this exhibition lies not only in the quality of the photographic techniques used, but especially in the visual narrative it constructs: a love that does not have to be spectacular, but real, human, and can be realized by anyone.

Through reflective visual compositions, such as eye-level perspectives, monochromatic colors, and a focus on human interest themes, the photographers in this exhibition

successfully convey a message of love rooted in the teachings of faith, yet not confined to religious exclusivism. Instead, love is presented as a universal value that opens up space for dialogue across faiths, cultures, and social backgrounds. This demonstrates that the proclamation of Catholic values does not always have to take place in worship spaces or doctrinal documents, but can also be present powerfully and transformatively through art that can be felt emotionally and spiritually by a wide audience.

Thus, *Stella Matutina* is not only an artistic event, but also a form of creative evangelization that presents the face of Christ's love in social life. She successfully brings the message of faith to life in a form that can be seen, felt, and lived, testifying that art, when combined with spirituality, has the power to touch hearts and build a civilization of love in a pluralistic world.

Given the success and reach of this exhibition, it is recommended that visual arts, particularly photography, be increasingly involved in the contextual dissemination of faith values. Churches and communities of faith are expected to open up spaces for artistic expression as a means of dialogue between faith and humanity, particularly in the context of a multicultural society like Indonesia. Similar exhibitions can be developed more broadly, involving artists from across faiths, and packaged in formats that are easily accessible to the public, including through digital media.

Furthermore, this visual approach also has great potential for application in character and spirituality education in schools, communities, and public spaces. Values education doesn't always have to take place in the form of lectures or texts, but can also be achieved through aesthetic experiences that touch the heart and open up space for reflection. Therefore, collaboration between artists, educators, and religious leaders is crucial for developing visual narratives that inspire, educate, and liberate. Ultimately, *Stella Matutina's* exhibition serves as an example that evangelization does not always have to begin with words, but can begin with images of light that capture moments of love in everyday life, which then lead people to a deeper truth, namely the love of God living among others.

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