

MY PRIESTHOOD AND A STRANGER

WILLIAM EMMANUEL KETTELER (1811-1877)

We all have the prayers and sacrifices of others to thank for what we are and for our vocations. In the case of the famous Bishop Ketteler, one of the leading figures of the German episcopate in the 19th century and one of the prominent founders of Catholic sociology, he owed his gratitude to a simple nun, the lowest and poorest lay sister in the convent.

The year was 1869 and a German diocesan bishop was sitting together with his guest, Bishop Ketteler from Mainz. In the course of their conversation, the diocesan bishop came to the topic of his guest's extremely blessed apostolate. Yet, Bishop Ketteler explained to his host, "I owe thanks for everything that I have accomplished with God's help, to the prayer and sacrifice of someone I do not even know. I can only say that I know somebody has offered his or her whole life to our loving God for me, and I have this sacrifice to thank that I even became a priest."

He continued, "Originally, I wasn't planning on becoming a priest. I had already finished my law degree and thought only about finding an important place in the world to begin acquiring honour, prestige and wealth. An extraordinary experience held me back and directed my life down a different path.

"One evening I was alone in my room, considering my future plans of fame and fortune, when something happened which I cannot explain. Was I awake or asleep? Did I really see it or was it just a dream? One thing I do know, it brought about a change in my life. I saw Jesus very clearly and distinctly standing over me in a radiant cloud, showing me his Sacred Heart. A nun was kneeling before him, her hands raised up in prayer. From his mouth, I heard

the words, 'She prays unremittingly for you!'

"I distinctly saw the appearance of the sister, and her traits made such an impression on me that she has remained in my memory to this day. She seemed to be quite an ordinary lay sister. Her clothing was very poor and rough. Her hands were red and calloused from hard work. Whatever it was, a dream or not, it was extraordinary. It shook me to the depths of my being so that from that moment on, I decided to consecrate myself to God in the service of the priesthood.

"I withdrew to a monastery for a retreat, and I talked about everything with my confessor. Then, at the age of 30, I began studying theology. You know the rest of the story. So, if you think that I have done something admirable, now you know who really deserves the credit—a religious sister who prayed for me, maybe without even knowing who I was. I am convinced, I was prayed for and I will continue to be prayed for in secret and that without these prayers, I could never have reached the goal that God has destined for me."

"Do you have any idea of the whereabouts or the identity of who has prayed for you?" asked the diocesan bishop.

"No, I can only ask God each day that, while she is still on earth, he bless and repay her a thousand-fold for what she has done for me."

THE SISTER IN THE BARN

The next day, Bishop Ketteler visited a convent of sisters in a nearby city, and he celebrated Holy Mass in their chapel. He was distributing Holy Communion to the last row of sisters when one of them suddenly caught his eye. His face grew pale. He stood there, motionless... finally regaining his composure, he gave Holy Communion to the sister kneeling there in recollection, unaware of the bishop's hesitation. He then proceeded to finish the liturgy.

The bishop who had invited him the previous day came and joined him at the convent for breakfast. When they had finished, Bishop Ketteler asked the Mother Superior to present to him all the sisters in the house. Before long, she had gathered all the sisters together and both bishops went to meet them. Bishop Ketteler greeted them all but it was apparent that he did not find what he was looking for.

He quietly asked the Mother Superior, "Are all the sisters really here?"

She looked over the group of sisters and then said, "Your Excellency, I called them all, but, in fact, one of them is not here."

"Why didn't she come?"

"She works in the stall," answered the superior, "and in such a commendable way that, in her enthusiasm, she sometimes forgets other things."

"I would like to see that sister," requested the Bishop.

A little while later, the sister who had been summoned stepped into the room. Again Bishop Ketteler turned pale, and after a few words to all the sisters, he asked if he could be alone with the sister who had just come in.

"Do you know me?" he asked her.

"I have never seen Your Excellency before."

"Have you ever prayed for me or offered up a good deed for me?" he wanted to know.

"I do not recall that I have ever heard of Your Excellency."

The bishop was silent for a few moments and then he asked, "Do you have a particular devotion that you like?"

"The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus," was the response.

"You have, it seems, the most difficult task in the convent," he continued.

"Oh no, Your Excellency" the sister countered, "but I cannot lie, it is unpleasant for me."

"And what do you do when you have such temptations against your work?"

"For things that cost me greatly, I grew accustomed to facing them with joy and enthusiasm out of love for God, and then I offer them up for one soul on earth. To whom God chooses to be gracious as a result, I have left completely up to him and I do not want to know. I also offer up my time of Eucharistic adoration every evening from 8 to 9 for this intention."

"Where did you get the idea to offer up all your merits for someone totally unknown to you?"

"I learned it while I was still out in the world," she replied. "At school our teacher, the parish priest, taught us how we can pray and offer our merits for our relatives. Besides that, he said that we should pray much for those who are in danger of being lost. Since only God knows who really needs prayer, it is best to put your merits at the disposition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus trusting in his wisdom and omnipotence. That is what I have done," she concluded, "and I always believed that God would find the right soul."

DAY OF BIRTH AND DAY OF CONVERSION

"How old are you?" Ketteler asked.

"Thirty-three, Your Excellency," she answered.

The bishop paused a moment. Then he asked her, "*When were you born?*" The sister stated her day of birth. The bishop gasped; her birthday was the day of his conversion! Back then he saw her exactly as she was before him now. "*And have you any idea whether your prayers and sacrifices have been successful?*" he asked her further.

"No, Your Excellency."

"Don't you want to know?"

"*Our dear God knows when something good happens, and that is enough,*" was the simple answer.

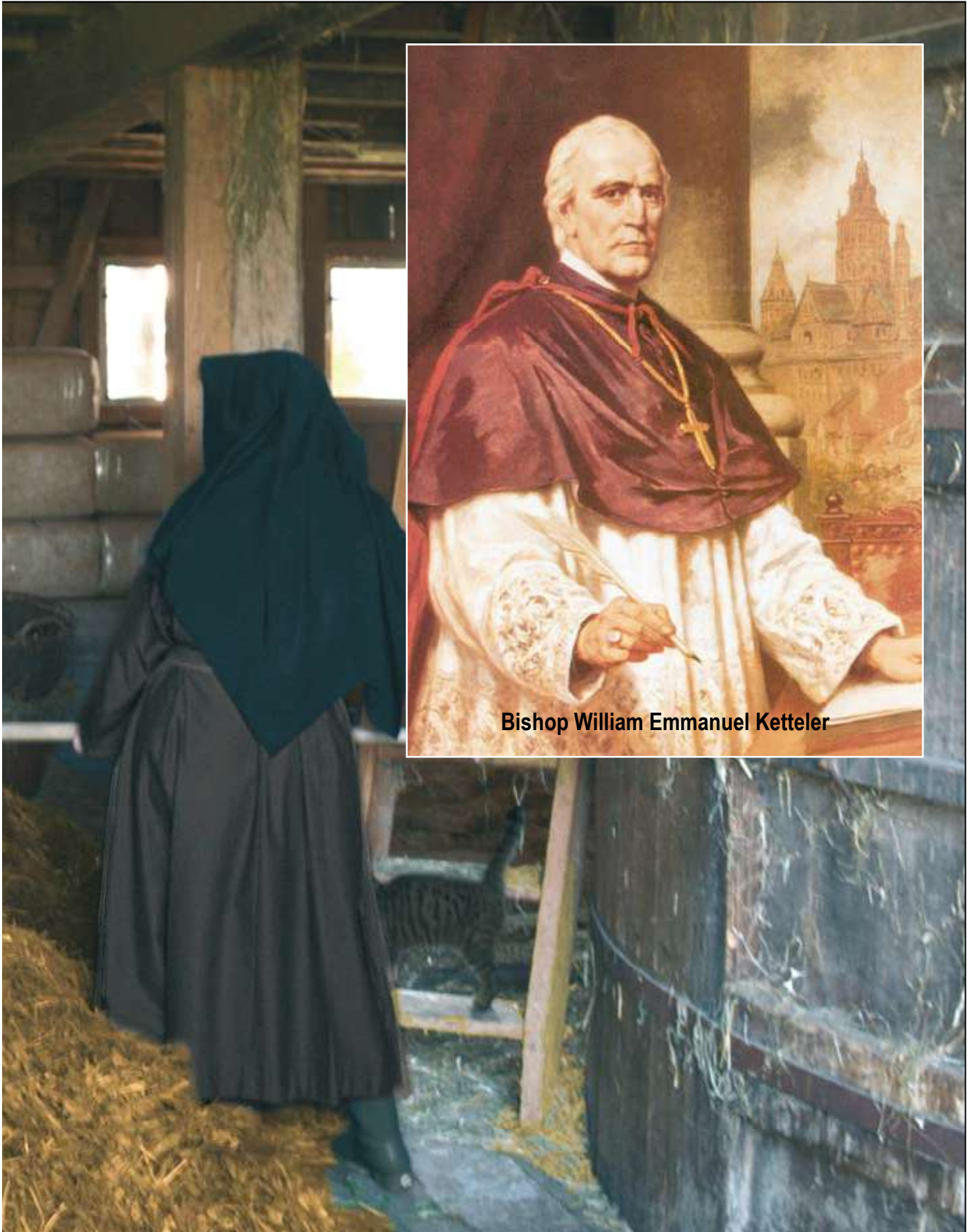
The bishop was shaken. "*So continue this work in the name of the Lord,*" he said. The sister knelt down immediately at his feet and asked for his blessing. The bishop solemnly raised his hands and said with great emotion, "*With the power entrusted to me as a bishop, I bless your soul, I bless your hands and their work, I bless your prayers and sacrifices, your self-renunciation and your obedience. I bless especially your final hour and ask God to assist you with all his consolation.*" "Amen," the sister answered calmly, then stood up and left.

A TEACHING FOR LIFE

The bishop, profoundly moved, stepped over to the window in order to recompose himself. Some time later, he said good-bye to the Mother Superior and returned to the apartment of his bishop friend. He confided to him, "*Now I found the one I have to thank for my vocation. It is the lowest and poorest lay sister of that convent. I cannot thank God enough for his mercy because this sister has prayed for me for almost 20 years. On the day she first saw the light of the world, God worked my conversion accepting in advance her future prayers and works.*"

"*What a lesson and a reminder for me! Should I become tempted to vanity by a certain amount of success or by my good works, then I can affirm in truth: You have the prayer and sacrifice of a poor maid in a convent stall to thank. And when a small and lowly task appears of little value to me, then I will also remember the fact: what this maid does in humble obedience to God, making a sacrifice by overcoming herself, is so valuable before the Lord Our God that her merits have given rise to a bishop for the Church.*"





Bishop William Emmanuel Ketteler