

Martin O'Malley
Wilhelm Ketteler and the Birth of Modern Catholic Social Thought



Wilhelm Ketteler and the Birth
of Modern Catholic
Social Thought

A Catholic Manifesto
in Revolutionary 1848

Martin O'Malley



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*Prof. Dr. mult Nikolaus Knoepffler, Universität Jena
und*

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Preface

Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler responded to the vacuum of social consensus in 1848 with a series of six sermons, the *Advent Sermons*, and thereby laid the theoretical groundwork for “Modern Catholic Social Thought”. It was a ‘manifesto’ delivered within a year of Karl Marx’s and Friedrich Engel’s famous *Communist Manifesto*. Yet, Ketteler’s achievement was one that remained essentially rooted in Catholic traditions as he articulating his forward-looking social theory, used a modern language of subjective rights, and ‘performatively’ acknowledged the value of representational politics. He did this while rejecting the individualism and atomism often associated with liberalism, rights, and democracy.

Ketteler’s *Advent Sermons* declared the social principles, concerns and goals for Roman Catholicism as the church confronted both the opportunities and dangers of modern secular politics. The *Sermons* outlined principles that articulated timeless Christian beliefs for a world dealing with revolutionary changes. Ketteler read the signs of the times with remarkable clarity and saw the danger posed by radical social solutions such as communism. And his response was distinctively modern in that he refused to hide behind a defensive or nostalgic rejection of representational politics or the emerging democratic institutions. He addressed the public sphere in a way that recognized that governments rule legitimately only if they represent the will and interests of the people. And further, he used a language of rights that recognized the claims of the church and of individuals in a way that was clearly modern. He set forth the principles, concerns and goals that created a template for the church regarding the ‘Social Question.’ And thus it is fitting to call the sermons a Catholic manifesto and to understand this moment as the birth of modern Catholic Social Thought.

My own study of Ketteler and 19th century German Romanticism began while I was finishing doctoral coursework at Boston College under the direction of David Hollenbach, SJ. I was interested in contemporary rights discourse and the debate regarding whether that discourse was entirely dependent upon a single philosophical history. My own reading of such authors as Brian Tierney had convinced me that rights language has a medieval tradition and does not necessarily carry with it the baggage of modern liberal philosophy. A friend of mine, Tom Lynch, was doing doctoral work at Catholic University in church history and he pointed me in the direction of Ketteler as a figure whose relevance for Catholic thought was little understood in the United States. I owe a great deal of gratitude to Tom because his advice led to my doctoral dissertation topic and to the appreciation of the debt that Catholic Social Thought owes to Ketteler and the 19th century German Catholic Church. The following work is a revised section from the dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Boston College PhD (May, 2007). The PhD dissertation is titled: “Catholic rights discourse in nineteenth-century Germany: Bishop Ketteler protected religious and social freedoms from the equal threats of secularizing liberalism and anti-catholic absolutism.”

This work is the fruit of many years of research and writing and my debts of gratitude have accumulated over those years. I thank David Hollenbach, SJ for his wisdom, expertise, and extraordinary generosity in reading and correcting my drafts. Donald Dietrich kept me on track while I delved into the mysterious depths of nineteenth-century German history and jurisprudence. Norbert Brieskorn, SJ read a draft of the dissertation and gave me quite helpful corrections and suggestions. Nikolas Knoepffler provided me with a place of work, funding, and supported the present publication in the “ta ethika” series of publications in ethics, for which he is the editor. I thank my parents, sisters and brother for their patience and support. And a special thanks goes to my wife Simone, who read and corrected many drafts, translations and wild ideas. She kept me sane and happy during the

difficult times and she made it possible to celebrate the wonderful times. We have dedicated this book to our little Eva Aine. I extend my gratitude to all. Naturally, any errors remaining in the text are my own responsibility.

Author



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