

THE LUTHERAN TE DEUM

Rinkart's Hymn of Praise

*Now thank we all our God,
With hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom His earth rejoices;
Who from our mother's arms
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.*

*O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace,
And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills,
In this world and the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God
The Father now be given,
The Son, and Him who reigns
With them in highest heaven;
The One eternal God,
Whom earth and heaven adore;
For thus it was, is now,
And shall be evermore!*

MARTIN RINKART (1586-1649).

The last of the great Lutheran hymn-writers belonging to the period of the Thirty Years' War was Martin Rinkart. Except for the time of the Reformation, this period was probably the greatest creative epoch in the history of Lutheran hymnody. But of all the glorious hymns that were written during those stirring years, there is none that equals Rinkart's famous hymn, "Now thank we all our God."

The date of this remarkable hymn is obscure. The claim has been made that it was written as a hymn of thanksgiving following the Peace of Westphalia, which in 1648 brought to an end the

long and cruel war. This claim has been based on the fact that the first two stanzas are a paraphrase of the words of the high priest Simeon, recorded in the Apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus 50:29-32: "And now let all praise God, who hath done great things, who hath glorified our days, and dealeth with us according to His loving-kindness. He giveth us the joy of our hearts, that we may find peace in Israel as in the days of yore, thus He lets His loving-kindness remain with us, and He will redeem us in our day." Inasmuch as this was the Scripture passage on which all regimental chaplains were ordered to preach in celebration of the conclusion of peace, it has been inferred that Rinkart was inspired to write his hymn at that time.

It is probable, however, that these circumstances were merely a coincidence, and that the hymn was written several years previous to 1648. In Rinkart's own volume, "Jesu Hertz-Buchlein," it appears under the title "Tisch- Gebetlein," or a short prayer before meals, and many believe that it was originally written for Rinkart's children. It will be noticed that, while the first two stanzas are based on the passage from Ecclesiasticus, the last stanza is the ancient doxology, *Gloria Patri*.

No hymn except Luther's famous "A mighty Fortress is our God" has been used more generally in the Lutheran Church than Rinkart's glorious paean of praise. In Germany, where it has become the national *Te Deum*, it is sung at all impressive occasions. After the battle of Leuthen, the army of Frederick the Great raised the strains of this noble hymn, and it is said that even the mortally wounded joined in the singing.

In his history of the Franco-Prussian War, Cassel tells of a stirring incident that took place on the day following the battle of Sedan, where the Germans had won a decisive victory over the French. A multitude of Prussian troops who were marching toward Paris were billeted in the parish church of Augécourt. They could not sleep because of the extreme excitement of the day. Suddenly a strain of music came from the organ, first very softly but gradually swelling in volume until the whole sanctuary shook. It was the grand old hymn -- "Nun danket alle Gott!" Instantly men and officers were upon their feet, singing the stirring words. Then followed Luther's "Ein feste Burg," after which the terrible strain seemed relieved, and they laid themselves down to peaceful slumber.

It is recorded that the hymn was also sung at the opening of the magnificent Cathedral of Cologne, August 14, 1880, as well as at the laying of the cornerstone of the Parliament building in Berlin, June 9, 1884. It has also achieved great popularity in England, where it was sung as a *Te Deum* in nearly all churches and chapels at the close of the Boer War in 1902.

Rinkart's life was a tragic one. The greater part of his public service was rendered during the horrors of the Thirty Years' War. He was born at Eilenburg, Saxony, April 23, 1586. After attending a Latin school in his home town, he became a student at the University of Leipzig.

In 1617, by invitation of the town council of Eilenburg, he became pastor of the church in the

city of his birth. It was at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, and, because Eilenburg was a walled city, it became a refuge for thousands who had lost everything in the conflict. Famine and pestilence added to the horror of the situation, and the other two pastors of the city having died, Rinkart was left alone to minister to the spiritual needs of the populace.

Twice Eilenburg was saved from the Swedish army through the intercession of Rinkart, first in 1637 and again in 1639. A levy of 30,000 thaler had been made on the city by the Swedish general to aid the Protestant cause. Knowing the impoverished condition of his townsmen, Rinkart went out to the Swedish camp to plead their cause, but to no avail. Turning to those who were with him, Rinkart exclaimed, "Come, my children, we can find no mercy with men, let us take refuge with God." He then fell on his knees and uttered a fervent prayer, after which they sang the hymn of Paul Eber so much used in those trying days, "When in the hour of utmost need." The scene made such an impression on the Swedish commander that he relented and reduced his demand to 2,000 florins or 1,350 thaler.

Rinkart lived only a year after the close of the bloody war. He died, a worn and broken man, in 1649.