

“Now Thank We All Our God”

By ROBERT D. KALIS

OUT OF THE HORRIBLE PERIOD in the Seventeenth Century known as the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) came many beautiful German hymns. Foremost among them is the universally esteemed hymn of Pastor Martin Rinkart, *Nun danket alle Gott*, which has been translated into many languages and sung the world over. In fact it has been asserted that the hymn tune, written by Johann Crueger probably for this hymn, is among the best known melodies in the world. Our English translation comes from Cathrine Winkworth (1829-1878) who loved German hymns and translated many of them into English.

The author, Martin Rinkart, is an exception to the saying, “A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country,” for it was in Eilenburg, the city of his birth, that he ministered for more than thirty years. Young Martin supported himself as a student of theology at the University of Leipzig through his musical talents. Shortly after his appointment as pastor of the church at Eilenburg, the wars broke out which were to ravage Europe for thirty years.

On three separate occasions Eilenburg was plundered, once by the Austrians and twice by the Swedish forces. Because it was a walled city Eilenburg became a haven for refugees

from the surrounding area. Unsanitary conditions, aggravated by overcrowding, brought a plague upon the city. During the year of 1637 alone, eight thousand people died within the city walls, including the pastor's wife. During that ghastly period Pastor Rinkart sometimes conducted funeral services for as many as forty victims in one day, and in all held 4,480 funerals. So devastating were the undisciplined armies that eight hundred of the one thousand homes in the city were demolished. The generous and compassionate pastor gave so much to the suffering flock that often he and his children had little to eat or wear. The grievous famine which followed the plague drove the inhabitants to desperation. Often, “starving wretches fought in the open streets for a dead cat or a crow.”

Passing armies would often stop and demand money in exchange for a promise not to attack the city. On one such occasion Pastor Rinkart led a committee to the camp of the Swedish army and pled with the general to have pity on the already impoverished citizens. When the general would not hear, Pastor Rinkart turned to those with him and said, “Come, my children, we can find no mercy with men, let us take ref-

uge with God.” Thereupon he fell to his knees and prayed so fervently that the general relented and reduced the demand from 30,000 thalers to less than 2,000.

History records that no war of modern times has been more inhumane and unreasonable. Germany did not recover from its terrible ravages for one hundred and fifty years.

When the *Peace of Westphalia* was finally signed on October 24, 1648, guaranteeing, at least in word, some freedom of religion, and bringing the hostilities of thirty years' duration to an end, it was a cause for great rejoicing. The army chaplains were ordered to preach in celebration of the conclusion of the peace treaty on a text from the Apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus:

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 (Ecclesiasticus 50: 22-24).

It is upon this Apocryphal quotation that the first two stanzas of Rinkart's hymn is based. The third stanza is an adaptation of the Latin doxology, *Gloria Patri*.

Nun danket alle Gott has become a second national hymn in Germany; second only to *Ein feste Burg*. German congregations customarily sing Rinkart's hymn at New Year's Day services as well as on many other festive occasions. Following a severe famine in southern Germany, it was employed as a thanksgiving hymn when the first wagonload of grain from the new harvest rolled into Stuttgart.

Each time a new baby was brought into the world in one typical German home, the father would gather his ever-increasing family together in the living room, announce to the eager children whether they had a brother or sister, and then seating himself at the old harmonium lead the family in singing *Nun danket alle Gott*.

The English translation by Catherine Winkworth is popular to this day as a Thanksgiving hymn. It was sung in almost all the churches of England in 1902 to give thanks for the end of the Boer War.

The composer of the hymn-tune, Johann Crueger (1598-1662) was a musician of top rank. More than twenty of his hymn-tunes remain in use today. Not many composers have done as much to encourage congregational singing as Johann Crueger. He worked out elaborate instrumentations to accompany the congregational singing and was a leader in his era in the study of harmony. In the most beautiful arrangement of Crueger's famous tune, Felix Mendelssohn used it in his work entitled *Lobgesang*.

Whether this great hymn is used, as suggested in its earliest existent publication, as a *tisch*

gebetlien (table prayer), or as a family song of praise to thank God for some personal blessing, or as a public thanksgiving hymn for national blessings, or as a song of praise for restora-

tion of peace, of this we can be sure: it is appropriate for all occasions, for we are commanded in the Holy Scriptures to "bless the Lord *at all times*," and again, "*In everything give thanks.*"