

With Hearts and Hands and Voices:

Sermon at the Holy Eucharist

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Those of you who are Lutheran--and even some of you who wear another denominational label--will probably have perceived that the theme of this conference is the second line of Martin Rinkhart's famous hymn, "Now thank we all our God." This hymn was written at a time which deserves more than passing notice. The date is 1636, that is, right in the middle of the Thirty Years War. Rinkhart was pastor in his home town of Eilenberg, Saxony, which for some reason--possibly because it was a walled city--became a place of refuge for people fleeing from the horrors of war. But it became a place of death for many of them, since, having found protection behind the walls, they were attacked by an even worse disaster: the plague. In the year following the composition of this hymn eight thousand people are said to have died in Eilenberg, and Rinkhart buried four thousand of them.

So what was there to thank God for? In the midst of death and destruction it would seem that Pastor Rinkhart would have good reason to do what Job's wife urged him to do: "Curse God and die." But you see that, like Job, the basis for our thanksgiving, the unmovable reason for it, is not the situation in which we find ourselves at the moment. This is constantly changing, and it may at times be downright dreadful; but the love of God is constant, no matter what happens. Of course, our feelings go up and down, in and out, and a hint of this may be seen in the remark of that redoubtable translator of this hymn (and many others), Catherine Winkworth, who says that the tune of the hymn was composed in 1644, "when the hope of a general peace was dawning on the country." This, however, does not really answer the question of what Rinkhart was talking about when he wrote the text in 1636. How could he thank God when he was burying at least ten people every day?

There are certain facts which are simply unbudgable facts whether we are sick or well, rich or poor, slave or free. One of these is that, however much evidence may be

summoned to the contrary, there is someone in charge of human affairs, and that this Someone is wise and good and loving. It helps, and helps mightily, to know this when life seems utterly chaotic. We keep on asking why bad things happen to good people, and even when we remember that our Lord asked the same question on the cross, we feel frustrated at not getting a satisfactory answer. Part of our frustration derives from our inveterate tendency to concentrate on the bad things and to lose sight of the good things, in short, to forget about the works of God and to concentrate on the products of the devil. It takes a bit of faith, doesn't it, to say with Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."

But, as we keep on saying in church, "it is right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places offer thanks and praise to God." Even in Germany in the middle of the Thirty Years War. Even in fat and prosperous America toward the end of the twentieth century. Always and everywhere, it makes no difference. The Greek word for this action, as you know, is "Eucharist," and Eucharist has become a sort of trade label for the liturgical movement. Always and everywhere we have been called to celebrate, although sometimes and in some places some people have not been quite sure what they were supposed to celebrate. For a Christian, of course, the basis for it is obvious: the Host and Lord of the eucharistic feast. He is with us always, even to the close of the age. Even in the midst of tragedy, poverty, war, and starvation. "Now"--it matters not what the circumstances of the moment may be--"Now thank we all our God."

I hope you do it with all your heart. It is possible, you know, to do it heartlessly, mechanically, robot-wise. We have all attended Masses which were done with the utmost precision and correctness, but which were cold as the coldest ice. Decades ago friends pointed out to me that there was a distinction to be made between worship and liturgy. At first I did not pay much attention, because I was concerned with matters like the cut of a surplice, whether it should have a round or square neck and how low it should hang: to the knees or above or below them, and if so, how much. Only gradually did I begin to perceive that it really was not important

whether one wore a cotta or an incipient alb, that the main thing was whether one worshipped God. One could say the liturgy lifelessly or with a deep awareness of what it was all about, and the difference is supremely important.

But I hope you do it handily too. Our job as clergy people is to know what we are doing, and to do it well. It's our way of thanking and praising God. We are called to be masters of the art, and most parishioners are aware of either our expertness or our ineptitude. The liturgy is our expression of thanksgiving, and it is our task to express this both with our hearts and our hands.

Finally, we use our voices. Here it is necessary not only to say the words--anybody can do that--but it is necessary to say them in such a way that will convey the impression that we really mean what we are saying. This, you know, is not easy; it is difficult to hit the golden mean between boredom and sentimentality. Some clergy persons are so sugary that one gets the feeling of having swallowed too much chocolate at one gulp. Others give the impression of apologizing for taking up so much of the congregation's time with words that they have heard many times before. Still others are so misguided that they omit vital sections of the liturgy altogether, like the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. But Rinkart's hymn summons us to use our voices and to use them well, in such a way that all present will be caught up in the Godward action of the liturgy.

"With hearts and hands and voices." It's time now to sing the hymn, don't you think?