



We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost

Text: St. 1, unknown; st. 2-4, Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Tune: Unknown, c. 1100

Shortly after the start of the Reformation, Martin Luther mourned the lack of good hymns that could be sung by the people. Very few were in existence, and in the people’s language, that could be used in services. However, the hymn “We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost” was one of those hymns which was well-known and was praised by Luther as one that could be profitably sung by the congregation.

The hymn did not begin as the four-stanza hymn we know today. When Luther first praised it, it was only one stanza. Though the author is unknown, it is first mentioned by the well-known medieval preacher, Berthold of Regensburg, who encouraged his



Martin Luther

people to sing it. According to some other sources from that time, this stanza was sung by the people on Pentecost during a ceremony in which a wooden dove was lowered by a rope or even a live dove was freed, symbolizing the descent of the Holy Spirit.

What we now know as a Lutheran chorale began as a *Liese*, a sacred folk-song which ended with *Kyrie eleison*, Lord, have mercy. By the 1524 printing of Johann Walther’s *Geystlich gesangk Buchleyn*, the first Lutheran hymnal, Martin Luther had added three additional stanzas which invoke the Holy Spirit as the most precious Light (*Du wertest Licht*), the sacred Love (*Du süße Lieb*), and the highest Comfort (*Du höchste Tröster*). Luther’s additional stanzas are likely a reference to Paul’s admonishment to remain in faith, hope, and love in 1 Corinthians 13:13. It is likely that Luther penned these additional

stanzas for Pentecost 1524, at a time when he was greatly distressed by the activities of Andreas Karlstadt and other opponents who relied on human reason in his discussion of the Lord’s Supper, and therefore determined that Christ’s Body and Blood are not in the Sacrament.

Though little is known about the hymn’s tune, *NUN BITTEN WIR*, it dates to well before the Reformation, and could have even been written along with the hymn. It does, however, bear similarities to the tune of the Pentecost Sequence, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. When Luther’s expansion of the hymn was published in the 1524 Wittenberg hymnal, it had a four-part arrangement written by Johann Walther, with whom Luther worked frequently on hymnody projects. Numerous Lutheran composers have written outstanding music on this hymn tune. It has been featured in Bach Cantatas (most notably Cantata 169, *Gott soll allein mein Herze haben*, which he wrote for the eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, 1726) and several monumental choral works of the 20th Century.

The hymn is in use in several denominations and in several languages. Its first translation was in 1528 when it was translated into Dutch.

The first stanza prays that we have a “right faith, which we need the most” (*rechten Glauben allermeist*), and that we return to our true home after the exile (*ellende*) of life, led there by the Holy Spirit. The second stanza connects well to the Gospels for Jubilate, Cantate, and Rogate Sundays, as we pray that the Holy Spirit would help us to know Christ aright, which is the emphasis of the Gospel readings for those Sundays. The Holy Spirit causes us to “cling to our Savior, whose Blood hath bought us.” The grace of the Holy Spirit to leave in peace with our Christian brother is the focus of stanza three, which is an emphasis of the readings for Pentecost Sunday. Finally, we pray that the Holy Spirit would lead us to a bold confession in this life, even in the face of shame and death and the accusations of Satan. In all, we beg God for His mercy to keep and defend us through this life.

