

Gottschalk: Lone Voice in the Night (2)

The young monk bent over the manuscript he was copying and sighed. He heard the birds singing their springtime songs and looked out the window. He looked down at his writing again. He had practiced on a cookbook and had done a fine enough job to be assigned texts from Augustine and other church fathers. It was tedious work. His shoulders ached. The last line was almost complete and he did not want to spill any ink now.

The bell from the abbey rang. Gottschalk wiped his brow. It was the hour for prayers. He could finish the page another time.

If there would be another time.

Gottschalk did not want to be a monk. He remembered the day his parents brought him to the monastery at Fulda, well over ten years ago. He remembered the goodbyes. Then his parents left him there. He was so young, he had had no choice in the matter.

His parents meant well. They believed monks and priests were more holy than other people. The church said so. To live away from the world in a monastery, to own almost nothing, and to have no wife or children to distract him—all those things would make him more holy. The church said so. And Gottschalk did want to live a holy life. But he wondered about these things as he made his way to the abbey. He saw the crypt where the bones of St. Boniface were kept, the martyr killed by the Friesians. Maybe God made martyrs more holy, he thought as he gathered with the other monks.

Rabanus Maurus, the abbot of the monastery, was by the altar. Gottschalk had learned much under Rabanus and the other teachers at Fulda. This was one of the best places in the whole empire to receive an education. But still, Gottschalk did not want to be a monk. He could inherit land, for his own father was rich. He could have a family. He closed his eyes in longing for these things. Then he opened them and watched Rabanus raise his hands in blessing.

Rabanus would not be pleased with these thoughts, Gottschalk knew. Rabanus had told his students over and over: a vow can never be broken. Never. But how could a monk be held to vows he had been forced to make? Rabanus was a wise and reasonable man. The Synod of Mainz was to be held this June in 829. The men there should be sensible, too. Surely anyone would be able to see that such vows do not have to be kept. He would appeal to the Synod of Mainz.

At supper, eaten in silence, he had time to think. The vegetables were few, but Gottschalk did not notice. Nor did he mind the lack of meat. These rules of the Benedictine monks about food were not his main concern at the moment. Gottschalk was deep in thought about the Synod of Mainz. He was sure those men would understand his case.

And they did, partly. His inheritance would still belong to the church, but the men said he could be released from his vows as a monk. He was free! Gottschalk's heart was filled with joy at that. He could not wait to gather his few belongings and leave the walls of the monastery behind—although his freedom would be more difficult without an inheritance.

But this was an unusual turn of events. Some of his fellow monks looked at him cautiously. Here was a monk who was trying to forsake his vows—vows that they were keeping. And what would their abbot Rabanus Maurus say? The heart of Rabanus was filled with emotion, too. But it was not with joy.