

## The Morning Star of Wittenberg: Katharina von Bora Luther

The reformer Martin Luther said he married for several reasons: to make his father happy, to rile the pope, make the angels laugh and the devil weep, and to seal his testimony. He made no mention of romantic love; in fact, one of Luther's biographers suggested he could have just as well have married a plank. But Katharina von Bora was anything but a plank. Luther had no idea what he was getting himself into.

Katharina grew up in a German convent. She was placed in the care of the nuns when she was five years old, just after the death of her mother and her father's remarriage. We can only imagine how frightening it must have been for little Katharina to be suddenly removed from her home into such an austere environment. After four years, her father transferred her to a different convent, where two of her aunts were already cloistered. There, Katharina learned reading, writing and some Latin. At 16, she took the vows of a nun. She had little choice—her father did not want her to come home, and there were few other options available to a woman in 1515.



Over the next few years, Katharina would hear rumors of great things happening in Germany. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg to protest the Catholic Church practice of selling indulgences—letters endorsed by the Pope that purportedly granted forgiveness of sins. Luther taught that forgiveness of sins came from grace alone as a free gift from God through faith alone—not mediated through the church but directly from God. He also proclaimed that Scripture alone should be the rule to which we give our allegiance. Luther's teaching spread like wildfire throughout Europe, causing many monks and nuns to renounce their vows and common people to leave the Catholic Church. Finally, Katharina and the other nuns heard that Luther had been excommunicated from the Catholic Church, and that his life was in danger.

In the next few years, Luther's writings found their way into Katharina's convent. God opened the eyes of nine of the nuns (including Katharina) to understand that justification before God came through faith in Christ and by grace. They could no longer in good conscience live in the convent and go through the motions of confession to a priest or perform penance for the remission of sins. They secretly contacted Luther, who arranged for the women to be smuggled out in a tradesman's wagon on the night before Easter, 1523. If captured, both the women and the tradesman would have

been executed. Luther and his associates placed the women with reformed families in Wittenberg, and gradually arranged marriages for all but Katharina. She lived for two years with a family in Reichenbach, where she learned housekeeping. She fell in love with one man who rejected her for a wealthy woman. Then she rejected a Dr. Glatz, whom Luther suggested she marry. Instead, she sent a message to Luther that she would marry either him or his associate, Dr. Amsdorf. Katharina was determined to marry not just the first available man, but a man whom she respected.

To everyone's surprise, the 42-year-old Luther agreed to marry 26-year-old Katie. Luther's life changed dramatically after his marriage. Katie was a force to be reckoned with. She rose at 4 am in the summer and 5 am in the winter to oversee the workings of their large home and farm. Luther jokingly dubbed her the Morning Star of Wittenberg. She learned to do everything—paying the bills, gardening, raising livestock, running the household and even brewing beer for family use. And what a family it was! Luther and Katharina had six children and adopted eleven more. At any given time, university students, refugees and homeless relatives lived with them. The former abbey they lived in had 40 rooms, but usually few were empty. Katharina was called to provide care for the sick and to support her husband through ailments both physical and spiritual. Even under all this pressure, Luther described his wife as “compliant, accommodating, and affable beyond anything I dared hope.” He jokingly said, “In domestic affairs, I defer to Katie. Otherwise I am led by the Holy Ghost.”

Katharina curbed Luther's reckless side, begging him to stay home instead of undertaking dangerous journeys. She also curbed his generosity a bit and appealed to him to think of his family before letting money slip through his fingers. She took a lively interest in her husband's affairs and was not reticent about advising him. This occasionally rankled Luther, who would then refer to his Katie as “My Lord” or “My Chain.” But on the whole, domestic life was sweet in the Luther household. This freed the reformer to write, teach, travel and to preach an average of 150 times a year. Katharina's contribution to the reformation was behind the scenes—supporting and challenging her husband and caring for her family. Katharina provided a new example of what it means to be a woman dedicated to God—not cloistered in a convent but unselfishly serving her family and the church.

Luther died in 1546, and Katharina two years later. Her last words were, “I will stick to Christ as a burr on a top coat.” Thus she ended her extraordinary life, determined and depending on Christ alone.

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