

Katharina von Bora Luther The Reformation's Model for Marriage

Katharina von Bora was born in 1499 to an impoverished noble family. At the age of five she was placed in care of Benedictine sisters in Brehna. Such practice was not uncommon among noble families, and girls could greatly benefit from convent education and shelter. A few years later, Katharina moved in with two of her aunts to a more ascetic oriented Cistercian convent in Nimbschen, where she took her vows as a nun at the age of sixteen. In the convent she learned to write some Latin, study the scripture, and practice religious discipline, just as she achieved many life skills that later she would come to use as the reformer's spouse.

She never spoke ill of her years with her sisters, but it was a frightening time to be living because the common person was under the thumb of a few noble landholders and, of course, the church—and there was an eternal fear of what would happen to them when they died.

She was a very self-determined person because she dared to leave the convent. If anyone helped nuns to do it and was caught, they could be beheaded for “abduction.” Nuns who were caught were put in solitary confinement for an indefinite period. After reading Luther's writings, especially his criticism of monastic life, she conspired with eleven other sisters to escape the convent. Luther, hearing of their desire, coordinated a plan, which was executed by Wittenberg city counselor and merchant Leonard Koppe, who smuggled them in a covered wagon as “freight” from the convent to Wittenberg.

Three returned to their families and marriages were soon arranged for eight others, leaving only Katharina without a suitable prospect. She was 26, considered near the end of her eligibility for marriage, and had no dowry. Two prospective husbands had been arranged for her. The first seemed willing to marry her, but his family objected. The second was a Dr. Glatz, whom she said she could “not abide” and that marriage to him was out of the question. However, she said that she was not unreasonable; she would even marry Dr. Amsdorf or Dr. Luther, both bachelors considered beyond the eligible marrying age. Luther was then 41.

It had already been suggested to Luther that he marry as an example to other monks and nuns. But he objected because he was condemned an “outlaw” by Emperor Charles V and expected to die a martyr's death, so his wife would just become a widow. Then, after visiting his father, who wanted Luther to marry and have children to carry on the family name, he reconsidered. Marrying Katharina—for whom he had run out of marriage prospects—he reasoned that his pending death would at least provide her some status as his widow. So, his marriage with Katharina was arranged. They were wedded in June 1525.

The first year of their marriage was a time of adjustment for them both. Luther found in Katharina a match for himself. And, perhaps for that very reason, Katharina and Luther found themselves deeply in love with each other. Luther called “Katie” his “sweetheart” and

“lord.” Katharina left no autobiography, but Luther’s letters portray her as a remarkable person: gifted, strong-willed, and capable in so many ways. Together—perhaps, more so by Katie—they forged a new model of what marriage could be.

Luther’s picture of marriage was carried over from the Middle Ages. The man is the head of the wife because Adam was created before Eve. He is to rule her with gentleness, but he is to rule. Her place is with the children and the home. Children are subject to their parents, but especially the father as head of the household. Children must be obedient and show respect to their parents. However, after his marriage, his image of marriage was modified in several ways.

First, Luther begins to see marriage as a partnership, with Katie exercising unusual autonomy for a woman in her time, especially in the sphere of the family’s financial means and management. When they married, Luther had only a small stipend as a professor; not enough for them to live on. However, the Duke of Saxony gave Luther, as a wedding present, the abandoned Augustinian monastery at Wittenberg for their home and increased his salary. Nonetheless, Luther had very little fiscal sense, nor a concern for cleanliness. Katie immediately took both responsibilities in hand. She took in student boarders, but objected to them using mealtimes for further instruction from Luther without him charging them fees as other professors would have done; yet he never did—after all the gospel is freely given, why should he charge someone to hear it! And, as the Luther household grew, Katie supervised the tasks of hired servants. To increase the household’s income, Katie raised and sold cattle which allowed Luther to purchase an orchard for her, which she prized. In addition, she also looked after a fish pond and barnyard, all of which produced an abundance of food for the household; she even did her own butchering and brewed her own beer. To help Katie, Luther tended their house garden, traditionally considered within the wife’s sphere of responsibility.

Second, Luther found the home the initial place for exercising neighborly love. Of course, said Luther, the Christian must love his wife. He is obliged to love his neighbor as himself. His wife is his nearest neighbor. Therefore, she should be his closest friend. The greatest grace of God is when love persists in marriage. “The first love is drunken, then comes the real marriage love.” The couple should learn to be pleasing to each other.

Within this relationship, Luther could speak of sexual intercourse with Katie as a joy. This was a departure from the view of the Medieval church, which saw marriage as an inferior state to celibacy; it existed to quench the sexual desires of those who were not celibate and to produce children for the church, although the veneration of the Virgin Mary did elevate the status of child bearing and motherhood for women. Now Luther understood that, when the intent of each spouse is to please the other, intercourse strengthens their love and bonds their relationship. As Genesis 2:24 says, “...a man...is united with his wife, and they become one.”

The vocation of Christian love within their home grew with the birth of their children. Katharina gave birth to six children: Johannes (“Hans”), Elizabeth, Magdalena, Martin Jr.,

Paul, and Margareta. Two of her daughters—Elizabeth and Magdalena—died young; she also lost two children in miscarriages. In their parenting, in joys and grief, the couple together found an even deeper reliance on God's saving grace. They *both* also grasped an understanding of parenting which requires worry, frustration, patience, and responsibility in guiding the spiritual life of each of their children.

Third, the demands of the university and the church weighed heavily on Luther. Katie saw her primary vocation as his wife to support her husband. Not only did she provided for his practical needs, she comforted him when he was downhearted and corrected him when unreasonable, which he admitted was for his own good. And, it is known that Luther sometimes consulted her on church matters.

Additionally, Katie was engaged in her own ministries. With a stream of visitors seeking Luther's aid and consul, she ministered with gracious hospitality. Even on the night of their wedding, after their guest had gone, a man with whom Luther had serious theological difference, arrived to asked for protection from the raging Peasant's War. The newly married couple took him in and provided for him until he could safely leave. They also took in four orphaned children from their relatives, whom they raised. There were as many as 25 guests, including boarders. in their home at any given time.

What is more, since the monastery was large and suited for a hospital, the sick were also taken in. Katie, along with other nurses, cared for them. Katie was a master of herbs, poultices, and massage. She successively dealt with ailments such as gout, insomnia, catarrh, hemorrhoids, constipation, stone, dizziness, and ringing in the ears, all of which Luther also suffered from at one time or another. Her son Paul, who became a doctor, said his mother was half one.

When Luther died in 1546, she professed, "He was my best friend. There's nobody else I can talk to."

Without her husband's income as a pastor and professor, Katharina endured financial hardship that forced her to beg help from her children. She had been named as Luther's heir in his will—a sign of equality in marriage—but Saxon laws required her to have a male guardian. This legality blocked her from owning her property. Finally, Luther's colleague and friend Philipp Melanchthon agreed to "legally" serve in that role. Several Lutheran nobles provided her an allowance as well.

She continued to live independently, although modestly, at her monastery-home. Yet twice she had to flee because of wars. Returning after her second flight, she found her home almost in ruins, yet she remained there until the black plague forced her once again to flee toward Torgau. The widow died in 1552 from injuries falling from a wagon on her way. On her deathbed in Torgau, she declared her faith: "I will stick to Christ as a burr to a fur coat."

Her life is commemorated on December 20 in the Lutheran Calendar of Saints.

Sources: Roland H. Bainton, *Her I Stand: A Life of Luther*, Abington, 1978; Kristi Stjerna, "Katarina von Bora Luther: Mother of the Lutheran Reformation," *Together by Grace: Introducing the Lutherans*, Kathryn

A. Klienhaus (ed.), Augsburg Fortress, 2016; Cara Strickler, "Daughter of the Reformation," *Living Lutheran*, October 2017.