



December 20

Commemoration: Katharina von Bora Luther, renewer of the church, 1552

Katharina von Bora, referred to as "die Lutherin", (January 29, 1499 – December 20, 1552) was the wife of Martin Luther, German leader of the Protestant Reformation. Beyond what is found in the writings of Luther and some of his contemporaries, little is known about her. Despite this, Katharina is often considered one of the most important participants of the Reformation because of her role in helping to define Protestant family life and setting the tone for clergy marriages.

It is certain, that her father sent the five year old Katherina to the Benedictine cloister in Brehna in 1504, for education. This is documented in a letter from Laurentius Zoch to Martin Luther, written on October 30, 1531. This letter is the only evidence for Katherina von Bora's time spent within the nunnery. At the age of nine she moved to the Cistercian convent Marienthron (Mary's Throne) in Nimbschen, near Grimma, where her maternal aunt also lived. Katharina is well documented at this convent in a provision list of 1509/10.

After several years of religious life, Katharina became interested in the growing reform movement and grew dissatisfied with her life at the convent. Conspiring with several other nuns to flee in secrecy, she contacted Luther and begged for his assistance.

On Easter eve 1523, Luther sent Leonhard Köppe, a city councilman of Torgau and merchant who regularly delivered herring to the convent. The nuns successfully escaped by hiding in Köppe's covered wagon among the fish barrels, and fled to Wittenberg. A local student wrote to a friend: 'A wagon load of vestal virgins has just come to town, all more eager for marriage than for life. God grant them husbands lest worse befall.'

Luther at first asked the parents and relations of the ex-nuns to admit them again into their houses, but they declined to receive them. Within two years, Luther was able to arrange homes, marriages, or employment for all of the escaped nuns—except for Katharina. She first was housed with the family of Philipp Reichenbach, the city clerk of Wittenberg, and later went to the home of Lucas Cranach the Elder and his wife, Barbara. Katharina had a number of suitors, including Wittenberg University alumnus Jerome (Hieronymus) Baumgärtner (1498–1565) of Nuremberg and a pastor, Dr. Kaspar Glatz of Orlamünde, but none of the proposed matches resulted in marriage. Finally, she told Luther's friend and fellow reformer, Nikolaus von Amsdorf, that she would be willing to marry only Dr. Luther or him.

Luther eventually married Katharina on June 13, 1525 before witnesses including Justus Jonas, Johannes Bugenhagen, and Barbara and Lucas Cranach. There was a wedding breakfast the next morning with a small company, but two weeks later on June 27, they held a more formal public ceremony which was presided over by Bugenhagen. Katharina was 26 years old, Luther 41. The couple took up residence in "The Black Cloister" (Augusteum), the former dormitory and educational institution for Augustinian monks studying in Wittenberg, given as a wedding gift by the reform-minded John Frederick, Elector of Saxony, who was the son and nephew of Luther's protectors, John, Elector of Saxony and Frederick III, Elector of Saxony.

Katharina immediately took on the task of administering and managing the vast holdings of the monastery, breeding and selling cattle, and running a brewery in order to provide for their family and the steady stream of students who boarded with them and visitors seeking audiences with Luther. In times of widespread illness, Katharina operated a hospital on site, ministering to the sick alongside other nurses. Luther called her the "boss of Zulusdorf," after the name of the farm they owned, and the "morning star of Wittenberg" for her habit of rising at 4 a.m. to take care of her various responsibilities.

In addition to her busy life tending to the lands and grounds of the monastery, Katharina bore six children: Johannes (Hans) (1526–1575), Elizabeth (1527–28) who died at eight months, Magdalena (1529–42) who died at thirteen years, Martin Jr. (1531–1565), Paul (1533–1593), and Margarete (1534–70); in addition she suffered a miscarriage in 1539. The Luthers also raised four orphan children, including Katharina's nephew, Fabian.

Throughout Luther's writings, one can obtain a sense of Katharina's wit and personality, as seen in this exchange: Martin Luther said, "The time will come when a man will take more than one wife." [Katharina] responded, "Let the devil believe that!" The doctor said, "The reason, Katie, is that a woman can bear a child only once a year while her husband can beget many." Katie responded, "Paul said that each man should have his own wife." To this the doctor replied, "Yes, 'his own wife' and not 'only one wife,' for the latter isn't what Paul wrote." The doctor kidded for a long time and finally the doctor's wife said, "Before I put up with this, I'd rather go back to the convent and leave you and all our children."

When Martin Luther died in 1546, Katharina was left in difficult financial straits without Luther's salary as professor and pastor. She was asked to move out of the old abbey and into much more modest quarters with the children who remained at home, but she initially refused. Almost immediately thereafter, Katharina had to leave the Black Cloister on her own at the outbreak of the Schmalkaldic War, from which she fled to Magdeburg. After her return the approach of the war forced another flight in 1547, this time to Braunschweig. In July of that year, at the close of the war, she was at last able to return to Wittenberg. The buildings and lands of the monastery had been torn apart and laid waste. Economically, they could not remain there. Katharina was able to support herself thanks to the generosity of John Frederick I, Elector of Saxony and the princes of Anhalt.

She remained in Wittenberg in poverty until 1552, when an outbreak of the Black Plague and a harvest failure forced her to leave the city once again. She fled to Torgau where her cart was involved in a bad accident near the city gates, seriously injuring Katharina. She died in Torgau about three months later on December 20, 1552 at the age of fifty-three and was buried at Torgau's Saint Mary's Church, far from her husband's grave in Wittenberg. She is reported to have said on her deathbed, "I will stick to Christ as a burr to cloth."

By the time of Katharina's death, the surviving Luther children were adults. Hans studied law and became a court advisor. Martin studied theology, but never had a regular pastoral call. Paul became a physician. He fathered six children and the male line of the Luther family continued through him to John Ernest Luther, ending in 1759. Margareta Luther, born in Wittenberg on December 17, 1534, married into a noble, wealthy Prussian family, to Georg von Kunheim (Wehlau, July 1, 1523 – Mühlhausen, October 18, 1611, the son of Georg von Kunheim (1480 – 1543) and wife Margarethe, Truchsessin von Wetzhausen (1490 – 1527)) but died in Mühlhausen in 1570 at the age of thirty-six. However, her descendants have continued to modern times, including German President Paul von Hindenburg (1837-1934) and the Counts zu Eulenburg and Princes zu Eulenburg und Hertefeld.

Portrait of Katharina von Bora by Lucas. Date: ca. 1530.