

A Bold Life of Faith

Katharina von Bora Luther



Katie Luther was a wife, mother, farmer, brewmaster, innkeeper, and more. In all that she did, she acted boldly on her faith in Jesus Christ. There's a little bit of Katie in all of us. Use this resource to learn about Katie while learning more about yourself.

Opening prayer

God of justice and compassion, we celebrate the life of your faithful servant Katharina von Bora Luther. She loved you, served your people, and cared for your creation. Humble our hearts that we may follow her example. Grant us the same boldness of spirit. This we ask through our savior, Jesus. Amen.

Katharina's early years

Think of bold women in our faith tradition, and Katharina von Bora Luther might immediately come to mind. Katie, as we fondly call her, was born in the eastern German state of Saxony on January 29, 1499. Hers was a noble family, but a family without much wealth. When Katie was about five years old, her mother died, and her father sent Katie to a Benedictine convent school near Halle. When she was ten, Katie was sent to a Cistercian nunnery in Nimbschen, where she was consecrated as a nun six years later, in 1515, when she was 16 years old.

Life in the cloisters gave Katie something that most women outside the cloister did not have: the ability to read and write. Katie even learned some Latin. In addition to the community formed by the nuns, Katie had two relatives at the same Cistercian nunnery. A maternal aunt, Margaret von Haubitz, was the abbess at Nimbschen; a paternal aunt, Magdalene von Bora, was a nun.

How to use this resource

This resource is for group use. Allow 45-60 minutes, depending upon how much time is taken for discussion. Participants will need a copy of this resource and a pen. Open and close the session using the prayers. Take an offering for Katie's Fund; to learn more, visit www.womenoftheelca.org.

Katie was separated from her family when she was quite young, at the death of her mother.

**Did you experience some adversity as a young girl?
How did that shape you into the woman you are today?**



Statue of Katharina, Lutherhalle, Wittenberg

A leap of faith on the eve of Easter

While in the Nimbschen cloister, Katie and others somehow learned of the reforming work of Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and professor at the University of Wittenberg. It is known that in 1519 Luther preached in Grimma, a town near Nimbschen. The nascent Reformation teachings appealed to some of the sisters. On Holy Saturday in 1523, after the Easter Vigil, Katie and 11 other nuns secretly left the Nimbschen cloister under the dark of night. The 12 traveled to Torgau, and 9 continued on to Wittenberg, where Luther then assisted the women in establishing new lives.



Ruins of the cloister at Nimbschen, where Katharina spent time as a nun

At that time, leaving religious life or assisting someone with leaving were offences punishable by death. Katie and the other 11 women boldly risked their lives for freedom. Martin Luther also risked his life, as he is attributed as having facilitated the escape. Also risking his life was merchant and alderman Leonhard Koppe, who spirited the 12 women out of the nunnery and to freedom by hiding them in his wagon.

Can you imagine what Katie and the other 11 women were feeling that Holy Saturday? Think of a time when you were empowered by your faith to take a bold risk. What were your emotions? Did you act alone, or were you strengthened by acting with others?

A controversial marriage

Katie was the last among the 12 to settle into a new life, but a new life she found on June 13, 1525, when she and Martin Luther married. This marriage between a former monk and a former nun was quite controversial, but each of them had a strong personality and was able to stand up to the criticism they received. Luther was called a “most insane and libidinous of apostates,” for example, and Katie a “poor, misled woman.” Commentaries and plays were written attacking the two. “Protestant pigs” were depicted entering the church in one woodcut, “followed by the biggest pigs of all, Catharina von Bora and Martin Luther.”

Katie and Martin likely supported each other in the face of all this criticism.

Think of a time when you were subject to significant criticism. Who supported you? What saw you through that time?

Entrepreneur and beloved partner

There’s some evidence that Luther was a reluctant groom. In November 1524 Luther said in a letter to Georg Spalatin, “the way I feel now, and have felt thus far, I will not marry.” In April 1525, in another letter to Spalatin, Luther said he had “no thought of marriage at all.”

Two months later, Luther married Katie. If he did not love her when they married, his love grew over time and theirs was a happy marriage. By 1531 Luther had commented, “I wouldn’t give up my Katie for France or for Venice.” Luther had many nicknames for Katie over time, including “my rib,” “Lord Katie,” and “my *kette*” (or chain). He also called her “the morning star of Wittenberg” because the energetic



Inside Martin and Katharina's home, Wittenberg

Katie was known to rise at 4:00 a.m. each morning.

Katie and Martin received the former Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg known as the Black Cloister as a wedding gift, and soon Katie was managing all the household affairs. She was a frugal and shrewd entrepreneur: She raised and bred cattle. She ran a brewery. She took in students and professors as boarders. She had several gardens, which fed both her family (in time she and Luther had six children) and the boarders. She managed the stables. Using nursing skills learned while in the cloister, Katie cared for many of the local ill. She often participated in Luther’s famous table talks. She even assisted a call committee in securing a new pastor, at Luther’s request.

Katie was a Renaissance woman, excelling in many areas. We might say there’s a bit of Katie in all of us.

What do you have in common with Katie?



Katharina's grave in St. Mary's Church, Torgau

Life without Martin

Martin died February 18, 1546, in Eisleben. Katie greatly grieved his death. In a letter to her sister-in-law, Christina von Bora, she shared that she was so overcome with grief that she could not eat, drink, or sleep. She and their children were forced to leave Wittenberg that same year due to the Schmalkaldic War. They returned at the end of 1547 when the war ended

only to find that all the properties other than the Black Cloister had been confiscated and ruined. The Black Cloister had been plundered and damaged in the war, but Katie rebuilt it as a boarding house.

When you have suffered great loss (e.g., the death of a loved one, a physical calamity, loss of employment), have you had the strength to continue on? What has been the source or sources of that strength?

At his death Luther had been receiving a pension annuity from King Christian III of Denmark. King Christian III continued the pension after Luther's death, making the payments to Katie. When the pension stopped coming in 1548, two of Luther's colleagues sought to get the pension restored, to no effect. Katie took up the cause in letters to King Christian III in 1550 and 1552, to which the king finally assented. Katie was clearly a force to be reckoned with, a bit like the New Testament's persistent widow.

Six years after Martin's death, Katie died December 20, 1552, in Torgau. She had left Wittenberg due to an outbreak of the Black Plague. Her final words are reported to have been, "I will stick to Christ as a burr [sticks] to cloth." Katie was buried in St. Mary's Church in Torgau. Today, Torgau is home to the only known museum dedicated to the life of Katharina von Bora Luther.

Closing prayer

- L:** Remembering the life of our sister Katie, and following her strong example, we pray,
- C:** When we are separated from those we love, strengthen us to do your will. When we face risks because of our faith in you, take away our anxiousness and replace it with resolute will. When we are criticized, give us an ample good humor and make us gracious to those who find fault. When we face loss, remind us of your constant love and presence. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Timeline

- 1483** Martin Luther born, 10 November
- 1499** Katharina von Bora born, 29 January
- 1505** Katharina enters Benedictine convent school, St. Clemens, in Brehna, near Halle
- 1507** Martin ordained a priest, Erfurt
- 1509** Katharina enters Marienthron, Cistercian Cloister in Nimbschen, near Grimma
- 1512** Martin receives doctorate, begins teaching at Wittenberg University
- 1514** Katharina begins novitiate
- 1515** Katharina consecrated a nun, 8 October
- 1517** Martin posts 95 Theses to Castle Church door, Wittenberg
- 1521** Martin outlawed, exiled to Wartburg castle
- 1522** Martin returns to Wittenberg
- 1523** Katharina flees cloister, Holy Saturday
- 1525** Katharina and Martin marry; private ceremony 13 June; public celebration 27 June
- 1526 – 1534** Couple has six children: Johannes, Elisabeth, Magdalena, Martin, Paul and Margarethe
- 1534** Martin publishes complete Bible in German
- 1546** Martin dies in Eisleben, 18 February; interred in the Castle Church, Wittenberg, 22 February
- Katharina flees Wittenberg to Dessau (and then Magdeburg) due to Smalkaldian War
- 1552** Katharina flees Wittenberg to Torgau due to Black Plague
- Katharina dies in Torgau, 20 December; funeral in Torgau, 21 December; interred in St. Mary's Church

For further consideration

Katharina von Bora: A Reformation Life, by Rudolf K. Markwald and Marilyn Morris Markwald (Concordia, 2002), offers an approachable and thorough biography.

Katharina von Bora, Luther's Wife, by Martin Treu (Wittenberg, 2003). Dr. Treu is a Luther scholar, and this volume, originally written in German, has been translated into English by Stephen Glinsky.

Katharina von Bora Through Five Centuries: A Historiography, by Jeanette C. Smith, published in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 3. (Autumn, 1999), pp. 745-774.

Katie Luther: The Morning Star of Wittenberg, a video about Katie's life, produced by the ELCA. Go to www.youtube.com and search "Katie Luther."

"Katherine, Morning Star," by Joy A. Schroeder, *Lutheran Woman Today* magazine, December 2008 (Vol. 21, No. 10)