



A CHANCY THING:

The Marriage of Katharina and Martin Luther

By Michelle DeRusha

When I began researching Martin and Katharina Luther, I stood amid the university library stacks and nearly wept as I gazed at row upon row of books by and about Martin Luther. The American Edition of Luther's Works alone comprises more than 55 volumes, to say nothing of the dozens of biographies written about the Great Reformer in the 500 years since he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the doors of Wittenberg's Castle Church. Given the breadth and depth of the scholarship already available, I couldn't possibly see where there was room for yet another book in the extensive Luther collection.

As it turned out, there was something important left to say about Martin Luther. Very few books or articles offer much more than a cursory glance at his relationship with Katharina and his role as a husband and father. The Luthers' marriage was one of the most intriguing in history, yet five centuries later, we still know little about Martin and Katharina Luther's life as husband and wife.

Martin and Katharina Luther were married for nearly 21 years, and although their marriage, like any, wasn't perfect, it was a rich, fruitful, and loving partnership. Together this legendary couple faced tremendous adversity, experienced much joy and contentment, and grew not only to respect and admire each other, but also to love one another deeply.

No Intention of Marrying

Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, wrote extensively about the theology of marriage, elevating it to the sacred status formerly reserved by the Roman Catholic Church for clerics and monastics. According to Luther,

marriage should not be seen as less sacred than celibacy, nor should married couples be considered less holy or spiritually pure than monks, nuns, and priests. Luther believed strongly that marriage was divinely ordained, a gift from God to be honored and esteemed.

However, at the same time Luther wrote his major treatises on matrimony, he was reluctant to take the plunge into marriage himself. He admitted to his good friend, George Spalatin, "According to my present frame of mind I have no intention of marrying, not that I am insensible to the emotions of the flesh, being neither wood nor stone, but because I have no desire to, and daily expect to die a heretic's death."

All that changed on April 4, 1523, when a 24-year-old nun named Katharina von Bora escaped with 11 of her fellow sisters from a Cistercian convent in rural Germany. Enrolled at the age of six by her father, following the death of her mother, Katharina had known nothing but the cloistered convent life for 18 years. Spurred by Luther's writings against monasticism, bits and pieces of which had been smuggled into convents and monasteries across Germany and beyond, Katharina and her peers made a bold decision. Risking punishment and possibly even death, they fled the convent for freedom.

A day after their bold, middle-of-the-night escape, all 12 nuns found themselves on Martin Luther's doorstep in Wittenberg. Luther had helped to orchestrate the nuns' escape — it was his friend Leonhard Koppe who had retrieved the nuns in his fish wagon — but now he faced a formidable challenge. Noblewomen during the 16th century had two choices: marriage or the convent. With 12 former nuns on his hands, Luther took on the role of Wittenberg's matchmaker, writing letters to potential suitors and facilitating engagements for the nuns who hadn't returned to live with their parents.

Two years after their midnight escape, only one nun remained unmarried, and Luther was desperate to find her a husband. The problem was, she refused to marry the suitor he had selected for her. Instead, Katharina suggested to Martin that he marry her himself.

A Scandalous Union

Katharina and Martin Luther married on June 13, 1525. Just a few weeks after their wedding, Martin declared in a letter to a friend, "I do not love my wife, but I appreciate her." And while we don't have Katharina's thoughts about her marriage in her own words (only eight of her letters have survived, all of which were written after Martin's death), we do know that she wed Martin largely because her options were limited. Katharina married to survive; Martin married to put into practice the theology of matrimony he had so passionately preached, and because he felt responsible for Katharina's plight as a former nun with no prospects.

Marriage between a 26-year-old former nun and a 42-year-old former monk, each of whom was strong-willed and accustomed to living a quiet, cloistered life, would have been challenging even under the best of circumstances, and Katharina and Luther did not wed under the best of circumstances. Aside from Luther's parents and a handful of close friends, most everyone opposed their union. Church officials

were appalled. According to canon law, the Luthers' marriage was a capital offense — a scandal, a blasphemy, and the work of the devil. Most of Martin's peers and fellow reformers resisted the union as well, considering it a distraction with the potential to derail the whole Reformation movement.

Katharina suffered the brunt of the scandal. In the weeks and months following their wedding, she faced public accusations and humiliation. She was regarded as a former nun who had broken her lifelong vow of chastity to seduce not just any man, but a monk, and a famous one at that. People speculated that she was pregnant and would give birth to the Antichrist. In fact, rumors and gossip continued to circulate long after their wedding day and even long after Katharina's death.



Kate, you have a god-fearing man who loves you. You are an empress. If I should lose my Katie, I would not take another wife though I were offered a queen.

—Martin Luther to Katharina, circa 1533



The Empress Kate

Against all odds, their marriage not only survived, it thrived. A close look at Martin's many letters to Katharina during their years together reveals the slow but steady maturation of their relationship, from trust and respect to genuine affection and love. Martin quickly came to depend on Katharina, not only for her domestic, business, and financial prowess, but also for her companionship. "Kate, you have a god-fearing man who loves you," he wrote to Katharina in 1533. "You are an empress. If I should lose my Katie, I would not take another wife though I were offered a queen," he declared later.

The couple also enjoyed a good-natured repartee, and their teasing banter reveals how comfortable they were with each other and how much they enjoyed each other's company. Martin often addressed Katharina in his letters to her as "lord," "sir," and "doctor," a light-hearted reference to her status in the household. And while some of his published writings point to a more traditional view of women's roles in society — "Women are created for no other purpose than to serve men and be their helpers"



Exterior and interior views of the Luther home in Wittenberg

— it's clear from his personal letters to Katharina that their marriage was much more equitable. Martin appreciated his wife's intellect, respected her opinions, trusted her as his confidant, and cherished her as his companion.

Stubborn, opinionated, outspoken, and often crass, as well as sickly, prone to depression, and a classic workaholic, Martin could not possibly have been an easy man to live with. At one point he declared, "If I were to court a girl again, I would chisel myself an obedient wife from rock." Yet it's clear, as biographer Edith Stein noted, that he would not have fared nearly as well with a meek wife. Feisty, strong, courageous, and utterly devoted, Katharina was the perfect match for Martin Luther, and he knew it.

The Noblest and Most Precious Work

A married woman was expected to bear and rear children, and Katharina fulfilled her duty six times. Just a few days short of the Luthers' first wedding anniversary, Katharina gave birth to a son. They named him Johannes — Hans for short — after Martin's father. Although maternal mortality was common, none of Katharina's six pregnancies presented any extraordinary challenges. The Luthers did suffer the loss of two daughters, however, one in infancy and a second at the age of 13 — a loss that was particularly devastating to both Katharina and Martin. The Luthers also raised as many as 11 foster children — nieces and nephews who lived with them after the loss of their own parents from the Black Death and other illnesses.

Martin Luther doted on his children to the point of spoiling them, and he was also a surprisingly hands-on father. The children frequently dined with the Luthers and their guests and were often underfoot, even as toddlers, rather than sequestered in a nursery. Martin considered parenting the "noblest and most precious work," and he even declared in writing that a father should not be mocked for participating in the holy work of parenting. "God, with all His angels and creatures, is smiling — not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith," Martin wrote in "The Estate of Marriage."

Martin was also very involved in his children's spiritual development. Each morning he worked with them on memorizing the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed and some Psalms, because he believed the repetition of Scripture and prayers helped to cement one's faith. The religious instruction he taught in his own home eventually formed the basis of the Small Catechism, which was published in 1529 and is still used in Lutheran youth education and confirmation classes today.

A Chancy Thing

One of Katharina's greatest regrets was that she was not at her husband's bedside when he died. She had tried to convince Martin to cancel a trip to his hometown of Eisleben, but he had insisted on traveling there with his three sons to help arbitrate a political dispute. During dinner on February 17, 1546, Martin complained of a headache and chest pains. Several hours later, early on the morning of February 18, the Great Reformer took his last breath.

Although he had left her the bulk of his estate and named her guardian of their children (a highly unusual decision for the time, as widows and their children were typically appointed male guardians), Martin had failed to get his will notarized by an attorney, and thus it was not legally binding. As a result, Katharina not only struggled financially, but she also fought for months following Martin's death to retain custody of her own children. She died virtually penniless in 1552, six years after her husband.

"Marriage does not always run smoothly, it is a chancy thing. One has to commit oneself to it," Martin Luther admitted, many years after his own wedding day. Together Martin and Katharina Luther walked side-by-side through more than two decades of joy, grief, triumph, and travail. Together they experienced the highs and lows as well as the everyday, ordinary circumstances of life together as husband and wife.

Five hundred years ago, Katie and Martin Luther committed to a "chancy thing." Today we look to their genuine, faithful, loving marriage as an example to which we aspire in our own 21st century lives. Q

A native New Englander who now lives in Nebraska, Michelle DeRusha is the author of the recently published *Katharina and Martin Luther: The Radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and a Radical Monk*; Baker Books.