

# A Family Album

A closer look at Luther's wife and children.

**KATHERINE VON BORA**  
(1499–1552)  
*Runaway nun who became Luther's "lord"*

When Martin Luther heard that the monks joining in his reformation had begun getting married, he rejected the idea for himself: "Good heavens! They won't give me a wife!"

But time would prove otherwise. In 1523, Katherine von Bora and eleven (some say eight) other nuns wanted to escape their cloister, and they wrote to Luther, whose radical new ideas had filtered into their convent. Though liberating nuns was a capital offense, Luther devised an ingenious plan with Leonhard Koppe, who regularly delivered herring to the cloister. On Koppe's next delivery, twelve nuns were smuggled out—inside empty herring barrels. As a man in Wittenberg put it, "A wagon load of vestal virgins has just come to town, all more eager for marriage than for life."

Luther found husbands for most, but he struggled to find a suitable match for Katherine, a feisty redhead in her mid-20s, far beyond the usual age for marriage. He proposed one older man, but she refused him, adding that if Luther himself were willing, she would say yes.

Luther was not interested. "I am not now inclined to take a wife," he wrote to a friend. "Not that I lack the feelings of a man (for I am neither wood nor stone), but my mind is averse to marriage because I daily expect the death decreed to the heretic."

Bolstered by his parents' encouragement to wed, however, Luther



married in the summer of 1525, "quickly and secretly." He knew his best friends would not have approved of his choice: "All my best friends exclaimed, 'For heaven's sake, not this one,'" he admitted.

The marriage brought even more scorn from his Catholic opponents, such as Henry VIII, who considered the union "a crime." One pamphlet called Katherine a "poor, fallen woman" who had passed "from the cloistered holy religion into a

damnable, shameful life."

But Luther's friend Philipp Melancthon had "hopes that this state of life may sober him down, so that he will discard the low buffoonery that we have often censured." Kate indeed set about bringing order to Martin's chaotic personal affairs. He had been a bachelor for many years, and he noted, "Before I was married, the bed was not made for a whole year and became foul with sweat."

From Luther and His Times by E. G. Schwiebert (Concordia, 1950)

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Helmut Nils Loose

Martin suffered at various times from gout, insomnia, catarrh, hemorrhoids, constipation, stones, dizziness, and ringing in the ears. So Kate became a master of herbal medicines, poultices, and massage. She brewed her own beer, which also served as a medicine for his insomnia and stones.

Finances were a perpetual worry, in part because Martin was always giving away what few funds and belongings they had. Katherine, whom Martin wryly dubbed "my Lord Kate," often had to take matters into her own hands. Martin once wrote a friend, "I am sending you a vase as a wedding present. P.S. Katie's hid it."

The Luther home usually overflowed with, in one observer's words, "a motley crowd of boys, students, girls, widows, old women, and youngsters. For this reason there is much disturbance in the place." Kate supervised the whole with skill and patience. She also planted the fields, cared for an orchard, harvested a fish pond, looked after the barnyard, and slaughtered the livestock.

Though Martin denied having any "burning" passion for his wife, his writings reflect his twenty-year devotion to her. He once chided himself for giving "more credit to Katherine than to Christ, who has done so much for me." And he declared, "I would not give my Katie for France and Venice together."

Upon Martin's death in 1546,



HANS



MAGDALENA

Katie grieved: "For who would not be sad and afflicted at the loss of such a precious man as my dear lord was? He did great things not just for a city or a single land, but for the whole world. Therefore I am truly so deeply grieved that I cannot ... eat or drink, nor can I sleep. And if I had a principality or an empire and lost it, it would not have been as painful as it is now that the dear Lord God has taken from me this precious and beloved man, and not from me alone, but from the whole world."

## LUTHER'S CHILDREN Six "little heathen" from God

Only four months after Martin and Kate were married, he told a friend: "My Katherine is fulfilling Genesis 1:28." On June 7, 1526, the Luthers were "fruitful," and Johannes, known as Hans, was born. Martin quipped: "Kick, little fellow. That's what the pope did to me, but I got loose."

His parents knew the superstition that if a monk and nun had a child together, it would be a two-headed monster. Instead they received a healthy boy, a source of great happiness. "Hans is cutting his teeth and beginning to make a joyous nuisance of himself," Martin later wrote. "These are the joys of marriage, of which the pope is not worthy."

The next year, 1527, came a daughter, Elizabeth. Her father

wrote to a prospective godmother: "Dear Lady, God has produced from me and my wife, Katie, a little heathen. We hope you will be willing to become her spiritual mother and help make her a Christian."

Next came Magdalena (1529), Martin (1531), Paul (1533), and Margaretha (1534). Such a large brood kept both mother and father busy. Luther sometimes had to wash diapers, but he declared defiantly that even if neighbors should snicker at such "unmanly" labor, "Let them laugh. God and the angels are smiling in heaven."

Hans became a lawyer and later a government official. Paul grew up to be a famous doctor. Martin studied theology but never became a pastor, dying young, at age 33. Margaretha married a nobleman.

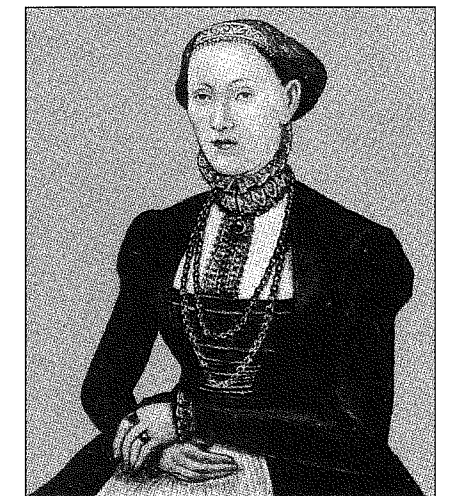
The Luthers' hearts were broken twice, when they lost Elizabeth at only 8 months and Magdalena at 13 years.

Martin asked Magdalena as she lay upon her deathbed: "Magdalena, my little girl, you would like to stay with your father here, and you would be glad to go to your Father in heaven?"

"Yes, dear Father," she said, "as God wills." Then she died in his arms.

"Beloved little Magdalena," Luther said as she was buried, "you will rise and shine like the stars and sun."

—Paul Thigpen



MARGARETHA AS AN ADULT