Dates of Katharina von Bora's Life

1499  January 29: Birth in Lippendorf.
1505  Admission into the Brehna Cloister.
1509  Admission into the Marienthron Cloister in Nimbschen near Grimma.
1514  Beginning of her novitiate.
1515  October 8: Consecration as a nun.
1523  April 6/7: Flight from the Nimbschen Cloister with eleven other nuns with the aid of the merchant, Leonard Köppe, from Torgau. Nine nuns come through Torgau to Wittenberg.
1525  June 13: Marriage to Martin Luther in the Black Cloister in Wittenberg.
       June 27: Public church-going and wedding feast in Wittenberg.
1526  June 7: Birth of her son, Johannes.
1527  December 10: Birth of her daughter, Elisabeth. †1528
1529  May 4: Birth of her daughter, Magdalena. †1542
1531  November 9: Birth of Martin Luther, Jr.
1533  July 29: Birth of her son, Paul.
1534  December 17: Birth of her daughter, Margarethe.
1535  Re-building at the Black Cloister and acquisition of landed property, the Zülsdorf estate, among others, in order to give house and family an economic base.
1546  Death of her husband, Martin Luther.
1546  Flight of Katharina von Bora before the Schmalkaldic War to Dessau and Magdeburg.
1547  Renewed flight to Magdeburg and Braunschweig.
1552  Flight from the plague in Wittenberg.
       December 20: Death of Katharina von Bora in Torgau.
       December 21: Funeral in the city church of St. Marien in Torgau.

From the tour brochure, Wittenberg-Information, Schloßplatz 2, 06886
Lutherstadt Wittenberg
A real biography of Katharina von Bora could hardly be written even in the future. The base of sources is too small. Her eight extant letters, none of them in her own hand, are all concerned with economic projects. Her letters to Luther are entirely lost, which could be a significant reflection on the lack of interest in her personal effects. Furthermore, her daughter took some of the family papers with her to East Prussia, where they were destroyed in early 1945. Only one letter, to her sister-in-law Christina von Bora, from April 25, 1546, seems to open for us a direct glimpse into her heart:

I see that you have a heartfelt sympathy for me and my poor children. For who should not properly be sad and worried on account of such a dear man as was my beloved husband. . . . I can neither eat nor drink. And in addition to that, I cannot sleep. And if I had a principality or an empire I wouldn’t feel so bad about losing it as I feel now that our dear Lord God has taken this beloved and dear man from me and not only from me, but from the whole world. When I think about it, I can’t refrain from grief and crying either to read or to write, as God well knows.2

The impression of this letter alone is deceiving. Even if the sincerity of Katharina’s feelings should not be called into question, nevertheless the second part of this letter shows that she used them strategically in refusing Christina’s wish for a scholarship for her son Florian, since Katharina herself has no money.

So we remain dependent above all on Luther’s letters to Katharina as a source for her life. Twenty-one of them are preserved, and it can be deduced that there were at least fifteen more, now lost. Apart from the problem of the one-sided “exchange,” a chronological survey makes it clear that surviving letters of significance have been preserved only from Luther’s stay at the Coburg in 1530 and his last trip to Eisleben in 1546. Melanchthon’s correspondence is added to this, but it also shows gaps, as does the recording of the
table talks, in which the note-takers show clear resentments against Katharina.

Childhood and Youth (1499–1523)

The darkness of history weighs over the early years of Katharina von Bora. Erasmus of Rotterdam recorded her birth year as 1499 in a commentary on Luther’s wedding ceremony, connected with the demonstrably false claim that she was already pregnant at the wedding. This at least raises doubts about the reliability of Erasmus’ information. Her date of birth, the 29th of January, goes back to a note from the year 1733, according to which a (now lost) medal in the possession of Katharina bore this date. The place of birth ultimately depends on the genealogy of the von Boras, still not adequately clear. If one follows the tradition, she was born at the Lippendorf estate, south of Leipzig, as the daughter of Hans von Bora and his wife, Katharina, née von Haugwitz. Besides her, there were three brothers and at least one sister in the family. Katharina’s mother died before 1505, since her father remarried at this time. By then, though, the little girl found herself already in the Augustinian cloister of Brehna, at least according to a short note in a letter from Lorenz Zoch to Luther in October 1531.

It can be deduced that her father, following the example of many of the nobility of his time, had decided on the path of the cloister for his daughter. This was considered religiously legitimate and economically advantageous because the daughter was thus eliminated from the succession of the family inheritance. Hans von Bora paid only thirty Groschen for her entrance into the cloister, which indicates either miserliness or else an extremely hard-pressed financial situation. If we take into account the fact that the von Boras had to sell their heavily mortgaged property in 1520, the latter conjecture seems to be correct.

In any case, in 1508/1509 Katharina entered the Cistercian cloister of Marienthron in Nimbschen near Grimma and was consecrated at the earliest possible time, 1514. The list of the nuns who were there reads like a catalogue of the surplus daughters of the minor nobility of Saxony. The abbess was very probably her aunt.
on her mother's side; her best friend, later the famous "Auntie Lena," was an aunt on her father's side.\textsuperscript{6}

Marienhron was rich in spiritual and worldly possessions.\textsuperscript{7} The cloister church contained twelve altars with 367 relics, which offered those who venerated them many indulgences. The agricultural land belonging to the cloister enclosed many landed properties, which, among other things, allowed for intensive sheep-raising at two outlying farms. The operation was maintained by more than forty employees, in addition to the labor of the farmers from the surrounding villages. This permitted a general self-sufficiency in agricultural matters.

Even though the young nun Katharina certainly did not work in the fields, nevertheless in these surroundings she experienced her first lesson in the management of a large-scale agricultural enterprise, which may have been helpful to her later on. The strictly regulated daily routine of the nuns accustomed her to punctuality and order. She received instruction in reading, writing, singing, and Latin, which constituted a privilege in comparison with her contemporaries outside the cloister, since life on an estate differed only slightly from the life of a prosperous farmer. Common to both was the fact that such families placed no value on education, especially not for their daughters.\textsuperscript{8}

So it is significant, then, that there are no negative comments from Katharina about her time in the cloister, even though later, amid Luther’s circle at table, the guests certainly would have liked to hear them. The contrasting case of Florentina of Oberweimar, whose report of fleeing the cloister Luther had published in 1524 with a polemical foreword, proves that women at the beginning of the Reformation could be deeply unhappy in the cloister.\textsuperscript{9} One cannot deduce from the sources whether Katharina played a driving role in her group’s flight from the cloister. Likewise, it is not clear in what way Luther's reforming message penetrated into their convent. It is conceivable that such contact could have been made by means of Wolfgang von Zeschau, the prior of the Augustinian cloister near Grimma, whom Luther visited in 1516 as vicar of the district and who had resigned from the order in 1522 but remained in the city as master of the hospital. Von Zeschau had two sisters
at Marienthron who later were also among the refugees. Another conceivable connection is Leonhard Koppe, city councillor in Torgau, who as a merchant regularly supplied the cloister with products that they could not produce there by themselves. It was Koppe who organized the flight of the nuns. It is also striking that an edition of Luther’s *The Estate of Marriage* is among the few printings that Wolfgang Stöckel produced in Grimma right at the end of 1522. This essay represents Luther’s most radical and popular criticism of the celibate life. It is highly unusual that Stöckel, deviating from the normal quarto format, executed the printing in a small octavo format, as if he intended it precisely for the purpose of being smuggled into a convent.

Even if its background remains in darkness, we are well informed about the flight itself, thanks to Luther’s detailed report, “Why Nuns May, in All Godliness, Leave the Convents: Ground and Reply.” Thus, on the night of Easter in 1523 (the 6th to the 7th of April), twelve nuns boarded Leonhard Koppe’s covered wagon and traveled by way of Torgau to Wittenberg, where they arrived on the 8th of April. About the flight itself Luther recounts hardly any details, so that chronicles gifted with imagination later concluded from Koppe’s work as a merchant that the nuns were driven out of the cloister hidden behind barrels of herring. Fish as a food for Lent was part of the usual goods of Koppe’s trade. Three of the escaped nuns were taken in by their families and thus played no further role in Luther’s account. The others, however, had to be accommodated in Wittenberg, which at that time could only mean marriage. For most of them this also was soon arranged. The almost fifty-year-old Margarethe von Staupitz, a sister of Luther’s fatherly friend, found a job as the mistress of a girls’ school in Grimma, even though she also got married after that in 1537. Only Katharina von Bora was left.

*Marriage with Luther*

The written records of the following few years are full of gaps. Katharina probably lived at Lukas Cranach the Elder’s house. The later mutual god-parenthood between the families and the fact that
Cranach’s wife was the only woman present at the wedding is evidence for this. It is at least conceivable that Katharina completed her knowledge about managing a large household at this time, since Cranach’s home was the largest residence in Wittenberg. For this reason King Christian II of Denmark, driven out of his land, also stayed with Cranach in 1523. He gave Katharina a golden ring, which perhaps was later worked into the wedding ring.¹³

Though it would have been unusual, Katharina must have come into contact with the students of the university (founded in 1502). They called her “Katharina of Alexandria,” after the patron saint of the arts faculty. According to the *Golden Legend*, Saint Katharina had proven herself in academic disputations. A romance developed with the son of a patrician from Nürnberg, Hieronymus Baumgartner, who visited his teacher, Philip Melanchthon, in the early summer of 1523. In October of 1524 Luther himself wrote to Baumgartner that Katharina was still waiting for him.¹⁴ He did not return to the city on the Elbe, however, but instead married the daughter of a Bavarian official in January of 1526. Certainly his family could have had no interest in a match with a runaway nun of no means. In 1540 Luther was still making fun of the unsuccessful lover in a letter.

A further plan of marriage with the older Kaspar Glatz, pastor in Orlamünde, fell through at Katharina’s opposition. It must have been in this connection that the famous discussion with Nicholas von Amsdorf took place, in which the former nun declared that she would marry either him or Luther, otherwise she would remain single. As is well known, Amsdorf died a bachelor.¹⁵

In the late fall of 1524, Luther himself appears to have seriously considered a marriage, but without mentioning the name of the chosen one in his letter. Later, Luther reported that he originally had Ave von Schönfeld in mind, but then she married the pharmacist Basilius Axt, an employee of Cranach’s.¹⁶ Apparently, at this time Luther was resolved to marry, mostly on theological grounds. The outbreak of the Peasants’ War seemed to him an omen that he himself did not have much longer to live; it seemed necessary to strengthen his criticism of monastic celibacy with his own life. Besides this came the reconciliation with his father, who had never
forgiven his eldest son for entering the cloister.\textsuperscript{17} The final trigger was the death of Elector Frederick the Wise, who died in May of 1525. In retrospect, Luther explained that he had hesitated with the choice of a bride because Katharina seemed too proud to him. The self-possession of the young woman seemed to him difficult to reconcile with the traditional role of the man as the head of the family. Even if it cannot ultimately be proven, the sources point to the fact that Luther certainly took on himself the initiative to get married, but the choice of a specific partner was finally determined by Katharina.

There are no eye-witness accounts of the wedding on the June 13, 1525, at the Black Cloister in Wittenberg, where Luther was living at the time with only his professional assistant and the former prior. Johann Bugenhagen conducted the wedding ceremony within a very narrow family circle. Fourteen days later the newlyweds sent invitations to a so-called \textit{Wirtschaft} [Household], a communal church-going with a festive meal following. As a sign of its high regard the city sent twenty Gulden and one keg of beer, the university sent a silver goblet, and the new elector, John the Constant, sent a gift of fifty Gulden. Thus did the three most important authorities express their recognition of Luther's marriage.\textsuperscript{18}

Others, however, reacted with a sense of devastation. Philip Melanchthon, who had not been invited, implied in a Greek letter from June 16, 1525, that Luther had been beguiled by the nuns.\textsuperscript{19} Luther's legal advisor at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Hieronymus Schurff, was heard to say that now "the whole world and the devil are laughing." The city punished the wife of Eberhard Lorenz Jessner for publicly reviling Luther and his wife at a wedding.\textsuperscript{20} If even some of Luther's friends reacted negatively to the wedding, such a reaction is hardly surprising among his enemies. King Henry VIII of England broadcast in a pamphlet that the runaway monk had instigated the whole Reformation just because of his lechery, and Duke George of Saxony claimed that Luther had pressured his fellow brothers out of the cloister. What earlier had served for thirty monks was now consumed by one family. Scornful writings appeared also from those old opponents of Luther, Johann Eck and Hieronymus Emser.\textsuperscript{21}
No reaction by Katharina is recorded. It is not clear whether she read Joachim von Heyden’s German piece of invective against her at all. Luther claimed in his reply that he had used it immediately as toilet paper.22

Children

Out of the joining of a monk and a nun, went the common saying, would come the Antichrist. The humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam had already joked that in that case the world must be full of Antichrists. Nevertheless, certainly the family expected the birth of their first child with anxiety. On the 2nd of June, 1526, their son Johannes came into the world, receiving his name from Luther’s father. This date also ended all the slander that Luther had been forced to marry his wife because she was already pregnant by him. Eighteen months later came the first daughter, Elisabeth. A second daughter, Magdalena, was born on May 4th, 1529, and a second son, who received the name Martin, on the 9th of November, 1531. Paul followed him on January 29th, 1533. Finally the baby of the family, Margarethe, was born on the 17th of December, 1534. Magdalena received her name after Katharina’s aunt, who later also left the convent and lived in the Luther home; Margarethe was named after Luther’s mother.

The relatively short interval between the births is striking. It is clear that in 1532, even though her son Martin was still breast-feeding, Katharina became pregnant again.23 Early in the year of 1540 Katharina suffered a miscarriage and almost died. It took her many months to recover fully.24

The Luther family was not spared by the high mortality rate of children in the sixteenth century, although their two cases appear to be very different. In Luther’s letters there is hardly anything to be learned about the death of Elisabeth, who was only ten months old. The communication with his friends is rather formal and incidental. Very different is his behavior on the death of Magdalena in 1542. Even here there are no recorded reactions of her mother, leaving aside the fact that Magdalena passed away in the arms of her father, evidently since her mother was not able to master her
desperation. Luther's grief can also be observed in a moving way. The theologian who had comforted so many grieving people found comfort only laboriously in prayer. Precisely because he was of the conviction that the death of his daughter meant a passage over into a better world, his own difficult grief, which he continually tried to work out in letters and table talk, was troubling to him. In contrast, Katharina seems inarticulate. It is noticeable, however, that from this time on, she tried everything to keep her children in her own house. At her initiative, Johannes, who was attending a school in Torgau in 1542, was called back, even though he found his sister no longer living. After that, his education took place in Wittenberg, which indicates at least a latent conflict with Luther, who pleaded for following the custom of the time, which was to have the sons study away from home as early as possible.

As a pedagogue, Luther complied to a great extent with the conventions of his time, even though he increased the standards, since he derived from the fourth commandment the responsibility of parents for their children not only in this world but also in the next. Corporal punishment seemed to him to be biblically commanded, if necessary, in order to enforce the commandment regarding parents, which was also biblically grounded. At the same time, however, it was for him important to punish moderately and appropriately, to lay "the apple next to the switch." Sons should accordingly experience a tougher education than daughters, who stayed in the mother's domain.

To judge from the letters, Luther followed the growth of their older children with much greater attention than that of the younger ones. When we remember that he was forty-three years old at the birth of the first one and already fifty-one at the birth of the last one, this seems understandable. It is furthermore assumed that with Luther's work load, his activity of upbringing was rather sporadic and was limited to the sons. On the other hand, only traces of Katharina's pedagogy are recorded, since it happened in the everyday routine, which usually seemed not worth reporting. There must have been an indirect conflict with Luther especially in connection with the eldest. Johannes was obviously not too gifted intellectually, which did not stop his mother from contin-
ously requesting scholarships for him at the University of Königsberg after the death of her husband. Without wishing to make a causal connection, it should still be noted that it was the two youngest children who were successful in life. At 23 years old, Paul earned a degree as a doctor of medicine and served as physician successively to Duke Johann Friedrich of Saxony, Elector Joachim II of Brandenburg and Elector August of Saxony. He died in 1593 in Leipzig. Margarethe married a nobleman from eastern Prussia and moved with him close to Königsberg, where in 1570 she died in her ninth childbirth. On the other hand, Johannes Luther, in spite of his long-term studies, never held a position, and his short marriage remained childless. Until his death in 1575, he was maintained by Duke Albrecht of Prussia in Königsberg. The second son, Martin, stayed in Wittenberg, although without a firm vocation. He died of alcoholism in 1565 at barely thirty-four years old. The conditions of life in the sixteenth century, different from ours, forbid a psychologizing of history, but the fate of Luther's children nevertheless seems to be a variation on the old problem of the descendants of a great man.

*House and Grounds*

Today, whoever stands in front of the imposing buildings of the former Black Cloister in Wittenberg recognizes very quickly how misleading it is to call Katharina "Luther's housewife" by today's standards. The function that Katharina fulfilled can be described in modern terms more as "manager of a mid-sized business with low intensity production." Evidently unaffected by six pregnancies in only eight years, she succeeded in organizing both the family and the household economy in a relatively short time.

Its beginnings were not at all promising. At the time of the wedding the Cloister was in bad structural condition, and the family lacked a regular income. Only from the end of 1525 did Luther receive a fixed annual salary of two hundred Gulden, which later was raised to three hundred Gulden, although offset by rampant inflation. From 1527 on, there were increases in natural produce
as well: wheat, barley for brewing beer, and firewood. The processing of these materials presupposes some settled servants, but we have no information about how many there were. There is mention of a coachman, a swineherd, and a cook, but there were surely more. At least from 1529 on, students and their teachers found for a fee accommodation in Luther's house. To live with the great man under one roof was regarded as an honor that Katharina let people pay for appropriately. The writers of the informative table talks stem from the ranks of these students. Relatives of Luther came as well, nieces and nephews, who populated the Black Cloister for a long time. On Katharina's side, there was her nephew, Florian von Bora, and her aunt, who evidently worked with her in managing the household. Despite a few fluctuations, we can place the number of regular inhabitants of the house at thirty or forty, not counting the numerous guests who came for short periods of time.

To accommodate so many, a physical extension of the house became necessary, which Katharina directed. The renovations and expansions were undertaken mainly between 1536 and 1540. The only surviving result, if one leaves aside the entrance gate erected in 1540, is the so-called Luther parlor on the first floor of the former cloister. Four heated rooms were provided above it at the same time. On July 12, 1532, a newly dug cellar collapsed, almost killing Luther and his wife. A succession of buildings for economic purposes were built on the grounds: stalls for the livestock, a brewery, and in 1541 a bath house, which Luther had lined with slabs of sandstone from Pirna. The letters show that Katharina was the driving force behind these building projects. In this respect it can reasonably be assumed that she also made the choice concerning the location of the living space of the family within the cloister. Why else would one move into rooms on the sunless north side, except that from there one had an excellent view of all the business going on throughout the grounds? The kitchen on the ground floor was also easily reached from there by a staircase, now lost.

Although no contemporary comments by Katharina remain, the retrospective view of Nikolas von Amsdorf is perfectly believable,
namely, that Luther originally wanted to abandon the cloister entirely and move into a suitable new building instead, analogous to the sizeable but practical house that Philip Melanchthon received in 1536 as a gift from the Elector. Amsdorf's claim that Katharina thwarted the idea because she wanted to derive great material benefit out of the students' lodging fees is unpersuasive if one considers the investment expended. Nevertheless, the sentence Amsdorf put in her mouth retains a certain believable quality: "I have to get the doctor used to my different way so that he does it the way I want it." Luther himself had already complained in 1533, "I may live in a big house, but I would rather be free from it." The formal transfer of the property of the former cloister to Luther by Elector Johann the Constant, endorsed by his son and successor Johann Friedrich on March 6th, 1536, prevented any further consideration of such a move. Interestingly, however, the transfer contained a first-refusal clause for the university in case of a resale. Apparently, the electoral lawyers did not consider such a sale impossible.

A comment in 1536 by the lawyer Hieronymus Schurff, who was not one of Katharina's friends, supplies proof for Katharina's interest in becoming the owner or co-owner of the cloister. He advised her to take the big house "and as long as one offers you a piglet, hold the bag open. If Christ is forgotten, so will Luther be forgotten as well." Katharina was yet to have a taste, after 1546, of how right Schurff was with the second sentence.

Schurff's deft metaphor also points to Katharina's second area of activity, agriculture. The extension of the house was accompanied by the development of the garden, which at first even pleased Luther. It was cultivated not only with economically useful plants but also with fruits and spices. Since the climate in Wittenberg was demonstrably milder than today, attempts with melons and squash were successful, although the effort at planting figs fell through. Katharina was especially proud of a successful crop of saffron, since this spice usually had to be purchased at a high price. The motive of a subsistence economy also played a decisive role in the raising of livestock. It is clear from tax statements that in March of 1542 eight pigs (gilts) and two sows with three piglets populated the Luther grounds, as well as five cows and nine big calves, and a goat.
with two kids. For the latter, Katharina, along with Melanchthon’s wife, must have obtained a special permit, since the elector had in 1537 forbidden the Wittenbergers to raise goats, taking the newly erected fortification walls into consideration. Certainly poultry were also part of the stock of animals, but they played no role in the reckoning of taxes. The repeatedly mentioned dog was more of a pet; a cat in Luther’s household cannot be proven.\(^{37}\) The expanse of the existing garden was not enough to support the family, let alone the added cultivation of fodder for the livestock. Consequently, Katharina sought to acquire a further tract of land as early as 1526, but it did not happen until the beginning of the 1530s, when Luther bought a garden in front of the Elster gate for ninety Gulden. From a letter it is indisputable that Katharina was the driving force behind this transaction. On legal grounds Luther’s name had to be on the title; however, his wife moved him to it by “begging and crying.” In 1536 a second plot of land was added to it from the property of Klaus Heffner, a sculptor. A stream flowed through it, which provided fish. This garden cost nine hundred Gulden, or three years earnings for Luther, who had to borrow money for it. Luther gained a third garden in 1544. In the same year he bought yet another adjoining acre. All the plots of ground were near the cloister, thus just outside the northeast front part of the city.\(^{38}\)

The property did not satisfy Katharina. In a letter of 1539, the only one recorded in the critical edition of Luther’s works, she turned to the Landesrentmeister (a Saxon official), Hans von Taubenheim, a distant relative of hers, to lease a large outlying farm on the other side of the Elbe. An attempt at this had already failed in 1536. She explicitly explained that she did not intend to take over the farm under her ownership. That is, it belonged to the elector, but she wanted only to lease it for one or two years. This letter mentions a slander that von Taubenheim should not believe. Evidently the suspicion had emerged in public that Katharina had few scruples when it came to enlarging her property.\(^{39}\) The lease was negotiated, even if, in the opinion of Hieronymus Schurff, it was with an inappropriately low payment. How long it lasted, we do not know. In this process it is remarkable that by writing herself
Katharina abandoned the fiction that Luther was in charge of the action.\textsuperscript{40}

Finally, in 1540 Katharina took the opportunity to appropriate the former family property of Zöllsdorf, which her brother, Hans von Bora, had not been able to hold. This outlying farm lay south of Leipzig, a two days' journey away from Wittenberg, which entailed the long-term absence of Katharina from Wittenberg.\textsuperscript{41} In 1545 Luther considered it as the place to end his days.\textsuperscript{42} The price of purchase came to six hundred Gulden, even though considerable investments were necessary. The fact that Katharina could leave her own household alone often and for a long time speaks for her organizational talent. To be sure, Luther was not overly enthused about this. Even after his death, Katharina succeeded with the help of the elector, in acquiring yet another piece of property on the other side of the Elbe.

The extended transactions over land plots, which repeatedly pushed the limits of what is economically sensible, permit a few conclusions. First, Katharina's personality was evidently shaped lifelong by her origin and family. Considering the fate of her father and brother, she saw the possession of land not only as something worth striving for but also as something that grants security. Second, her business transactions clear away the legend of the "poor" Luther. The anecdotal description of a cash shortage, as well as a few exaggerated statements by Luther about himself, have given the impression that the family lived at a subsistence level. If one excludes the early years until 1528/1529, which really were difficult, then the opposite is the case. At his death Luther was counted among the richest residents of the city. The steadily growing inflation, joined with a rise in agricultural prices, made the purchase of real estate seem economically sensible, even if it was financed on credit. That wars and crop failures could bring this construction quickly to a collapse became evident after 1546. The credit for their economic expansion is finally due to Katharina alone. Sometimes she had to carry out her plans over and against Luther's explicit resistance. That this did not lead to serious conflicts rested above all on the fact that Luther took seriously his own concepts of the position of a man and a woman in marriage.
Husband and Wife

Luther's Reformation did not exclude the celibate life in principle, but saw in it a special gift of God. In contrast, the normal rule of human existence was marriage, to which he alloted three important functions: help against unchastity; bringing up children, as the biblical tradition describes it; and, as a third and new accent, the mutual comfort and assistance of the married couple.

Precisely because Luther's objectives were conservative in themselves, he created a new understanding of marriage. He distinguished the areas of responsibility of the spouses in the traditional way. The husband represented the family outside, in the sphere of the politeia; the wife was in charge of the house, responsible for the oikonomia. It is Luther's contribution to have emphasized and stressed anew the equal value of these two realms. Theologically he did this especially with his doctrine of vocation. In his re-evaluation of worldly activity Luther explicitly included household obligations and child-rearing among the callings intended by God and entitled to the same dignity as the masculine callings. Women are in no way excluded from the general priesthood of all believers, although this doctrine does not imply that the preaching office is for all, whether men or women. Luther knows women as holders of the spiritual office only in extreme cases of need precisely because of their commitment to the household realm.

More important in our context is the fact that Luther took very seriously for himself personally the implementation of his theology of vocation. The legal conditions of his time limited the economic independence of women by their dependence on men in court and in the concluding of business deals, indicating the governing function of the man with respect to his wife. The best proof that Luther tried to change this is his will from 1542.

He appointed his wife his sole heir, explicitly rejecting guardianship for her and, in fact, assigning the guardianship of the children to her. According to Saxon law this was impossible in several ways. The wife was only entitled to the so-called Leihgedinge, that is, usufruct, not ownership in a specific part of the real estate. The possession of land passed over to the children; if there were none
existing, the relatives on the man's side inherited it. Minors were appointed guardians in order to secure their rights. In extreme cases, a son who was of age could be the guardian of his own mother, which Luther considered a clear violation of the fourth commandment. In a table talk from 1541 Luther summarizes his thoughts:

My books are here, which I leave behind to my children; may they see that they are not smarter than their father. You, Käthe, I appoint the sole heir. You have borne the children and extended your breast to them. You will not manage their affairs to their detriment. I am an enemy of the guardians; they seldom do it well.45

The formulating of the will presupposes that his intentions also retained validity if Katharina should marry again. Although the elector confirmed Luther's will on the 11th of April, 1546, the Saxon lawyers did not permit its execution. Katharina received a guardian in exactly the same way as her children.

Luther's motives for this unusual will were various. For one thing, the particular personality of his wife certainly played a role. He thought he could trust her more than his friends in economic matters. Furthermore, Luther's aversion to lawyers must be considered. In the will he explicitly emphasizes that he is avoiding the normal formulas of the law. Finally, this last will fits into a series of Luther's efforts to provide the new position of pastor's wife and pastor's widow with an acceptable maintenance for living. In 1539 he had to intervene for the widow of a pastor in Neiden near Torgau. In 1540 the brother of Ave von Schönfeld withheld the share of the inheritance to which she was entitled.46 In the cases of both these women, their relatives referred to the vow of celibacy, which did not allow a legally valid marriage. For the former monk who had married a nun, this was cause to intervene. In the end the authorities had to settle the problem. Duke Ernst of Saxony-Gotha created the first cash-box for the widows of pastors, but only in 1645.

The attitude of Luther expressed in his will was itself disputed among his friends. It was suspected that he was henpecked. For this reason a statement by Luther from February of 1542 was en-
thusiastically circulated, namely, that he could be completely controlled by his wife when it came to house and grounds. “But in matters of conscience and of the scriptures I know no teacher, professor or master except the Holy Spirit.” The problem was that things which could be separated cleanly in theory had a tendency to get mixed up in daily life.47

Certainly the couple held to the conventions. Even in the presence of his friends, Katharina called her husband only “Herr Doktor” and used the formal form of “you.” But the fact that she took part in the table conversations regularly and even expressed her opinion was borne only with difficulty by some admirers of Luther. Luther furthered her interest in his work as far as Katharina's own responsibilities allowed. His offer in the fall of 1535 to give her fifty Gulden if she read through the whole German Bible by Easter of the next year is characteristic. Luther used the mercantile tendency in Katharina's nature in connection with the first edition of the 1534 translation of the Bible in Wittenberg.48

The extent of her knowledge of Latin is difficult to determine. Evidently she could follow the German–Latin mixing of languages at the table. Some indications point to the fact that she herself sometimes spoke in Latin. The note-takers called her “Doctorissa,” a newly coined word with a note of reluctant admiration in it. In his report from the Marburg Disputation with Ulrich Zwingli in 1529, Luther assumed that Katharina could understand the arguments carried on in Latin and could then recount them to Luther's friend, Johann Bugenhagen.49

A close friendship connected Katharina to Bugenhagen. On July 2, 1540, Luther requested that the two of them choose a new pastor for the Count of Schwarzburg. Here the Reformer himself overstepped his own boundary between domestic and official activities. Characteristically, none of the other wives of the reformers is mentioned in such a connection. Conversely, it furthered one's friendship with Luther to send gifts to his wife, which prompted her thanks and greetings in numerous letters.50

Luther included the wives of his friends in his attention. But the position of his wife was as unique in this circle of friends as his
own. As a rule, however, this consideration ended at theological differences. Thus, in the summer of 1537 Katharina did not succeed in reconciling Luther with Johann Agricola again, even though his wife Else, whom Luther also liked, was her best friend.

The close living and working together of the Luther couple prompted more than positive reactions. When Dr. Martin unexpectedly died on February 18, 1546, in Eisleben, it seemed that the time had come to settle old scores. Indeed, Elector Johann Friedrich stood protectively in front of the widow, but the beginning of the Schmalkald War tied up his attention. Furthermore, Katharina insisted on the conditions of Luther’s will and refused to leave the Black Cloister. She tried instead to continue the hostel and, with the help of Philip Melanchthon, who was appointed as her guardian, she applied to the elector in March of 1546 for the acquisition of the Wachsdorf property. In November of that year, Wittenberg University was temporarily dissolved. Melanchthon fled to Anhalt under the crush of advancing imperial troops and Katharina followed him with the children. She returned to Wittenberg after a few weeks, but in April of 1547 she fled again by way of Magdeburg to Braunschweig. Her goal was originally Copenhagen, since she hoped for asylum with the king of Denmark, who had supported her with regular annual payments of fifty Gulden. But the wagon with her and the children had to turn back north of Lüneburg.

In the late fall of 1547 the family was in Wittenberg again. The motive for the flight remains unclear. Katharina had been closely connected to Melanchthon, who tried to the best of his ability to care for the family, even though there was hardly a close friendship between him and Katharina. It is certain that the double flight exhausted the cash reserves of the family. Crop failures and plundering by soldiers in the Schmalkald War restricted the income to the family property, such that Katharina stood temporarily at the edge of bankruptcy. After the battle at Mühlberg she lost her electorial protector as well. The new Elector Moritz of Albertine lineage stood aloof from her and did not answer a petition of September 1548, in which she requested continuation of the an-
nual contribution of one hundred bushels and two Maltern [approximately 300 liters] of grain as well as one hundred cords of wood.\textsuperscript{53}

The reports of the following years remain sparse. Economically, Katharina got back on her feet only laboriously. Melanchthon supported her in a court case before a Leipzig official regarding the Zöllsdorf property. She secured scholarships for her sons from Duke Albrecht of Prussia and from Duke Christoph of Württemberg. In October of 1551, Katharina's debts had increased so much that she had to take out a mortgage on Zöllsdorf.

In August of 1552, the university moved to Torgau because of the plague raging in Wittenberg. Katharina followed in October. However, outside the gates of the city she fell from the coach and sustained internal injuries. She died from them on the 20th of December, 1552. Where she last stayed in Torgau is not known. A Latin obituary by Philip Melanchthon represents the only source for her death and her burial.\textsuperscript{54} The singularity of this source throws a significant light on Katharina's existence as a widow. Although Torgau was full of friends and colleagues of her husband's in the autumn of 1552, there are no signs of encounters and assistance. In spite of all attempts, Luther's wife did not succeed in establishing herself as an independent personality. The limits of the time, which she could only transcend jointly with Luther, did not allow this.

\textit{Images of Katharina}

At the beginning of the sixteenth century women played practically no public role in matters that did not directly concern female saints or rulers. We have only a handful of images of non-noble-women recorded from that period in Germany. The ones we have involve mainly rich patricians from southern Germany.\textsuperscript{55}

In contrast, Martin Luther aroused such great attention through his effect on the public, especially as the author of pamphlets from 1518 on, that a demand for his image very quickly emerged. The first, a copper plate engraving by Lukas Cranach, came on the market in 1520;\textsuperscript{56} more followed at short intervals. Evidently, ev-
erything that had to do with Luther was of interest to a wide public, especially since the Reformer yielded to this interest with spectacular actions, like the burning of the Bull threatening his excommunication in December of 1520. The same thing goes for Luther's wedding on the 13th of June, 1525. The wedding ceremony worked like a seal on Luther's teaching that the life of the religious orders was not pleasing to God.

In connection with the wedding Lukas Cranach the Elder, court artist of the Wettin rulers and a friend of Luther's in Wittenberg, painted the first double image of the "freshly baked" couple. This fact in itself is remarkable, and yet more interesting is the fact that it did not stop there. Even though several specimens have been lost, four examples of the round, small wedding portraits have come to us. A little later, Cranach issued a second series in a small rectangular format, of which likewise four specimens have survived, and after 1526 a third series emerged, with five pictures still surviving today.57 A common feature of all is that they were conceived as double images, even if today the pairs have been separated from each other or even lost. It follows from this that the artist had only a limited interest in Katharina von Bora as a person and wanted rather to portray her as Luther's lawfully wedded wife. The pictorial propaganda of the Reformation was involved to a certain extent, since the claim that a monk could get married according to divine and human right led straight into the middle of Luther's Reformation.58 This interpretation is supported by the fact that the double images of the Luther couple were replaced after 1530 by those portraying Luther and Melanchthon. The married Luther was no longer at issue, but rather it was essential to prove the unity between the two leaders of the Reformation, which had been questioned in view of the dispute about the Augsburg Confession.

This does not mean that Katharina was understood merely as a shadow of Luther, as an interesting, but finally unnecessary ingredient. Rather, the opposite is the case. For no images at all are recorded of the wives of the other reformers.59 This is true not only for the Wittenberg circle of Melanchthon and Johann Bugenhagen, but also for Martin Bucer and John Calvin. The singularity of the portrayal of Katharina von Bora, therefore, has to do
first with her public role as Luther's consort, but also, inseparably linked to this, with her individuality, which she asserted at the side of her husband.

Thus the image of Katharina remains defined by its reflection in Luther's statements. There is only partial access to her in herself. This may be appropriate, however, insofar as she understood herself first as Luther's wife. By today's standards that may be very little; nevertheless, we owe to this self-understanding the fact that the form of Katharina von Bora is recorded for us at all.

NOTES


2. Published in *Martin Luthers Briefe, Sendschreiben und Bedenken*, Martin Leberecht de Wette and Johann Karl Seidemann, eds., vol. 6 (Berlin: Reimer, 1856), 650, together with a letter of Florian von Bora's and one of his mother's, Christina, to Heinrich Hildebrand von Einsiedel at Gnandstein, both from April 7, 1546. Katharina's letter came to Wittenberg in 1911, but now is considered a casualty of war.

3. Wilhelm Beste, *Die Geschichte der Katharina von Bora, nach den Quellen bearbeitet* (Halle: Mühlmann, 1843), 12, provides a detailed description as well as the citation from the letter to Thomas Lupspe: "Luther, that happy and favored one, having put off the mantle of philosophy, took a wife, from the noted Bora family, a girl of elegant appearance, 26 years old but poor."

4. Thoma's summary of the state of affairs is still current. See his *Katharina von Bora*, 268–71. A newer work by Wolfgang Liebehenschel from Berlin has been announced.


9. Martin Luther, *Eine Geschichte, wie Gott einer ehrbaren Klosterjungfrau ausgeholfen hat*, with a circular letter of Luther's to the Counts of Mansfeld and Wittenberg (originally published by Cranach und Döring in Wittenberg, 1524.) See Josef Benzing, *Lutherbiblio-


14 WA, Br 2:358.7–10, from October 12, 1524

15. Beste, Die Geschichte der Katharina von Bora, 23

16 WA, Br 6:169.13f. to Johann Briesmann in Königsberg on August 24, 1531.

17 Luther's letter to his father in Mansfeld on February 15, 1530, supports the fact that Katharina, too, later had a warm relationship with her parents-in-law. WA, Br 5: 239–15 LW 49:268


20. Beste, Die Geschichte der Katharina von Bora, 20; see also note 56.


23. Luther's letter to his father in Mansfeld on February 15, 1530, supports the fact that Katharina, too, later had a warm relationship with her parents-in-law. WA, Br 5: 239–15 LW 49:268

24. Only in April was she restored to health. See WA, Br 9:70.35 to Melanchthon on April 8, 1540.

25 However, see WA, Br 10:149.21. LW 50:238

26. MBW 6, #6061 from April 23, 1551. Another earlier letter comes from May 29, 1549. The writer of both letters is Philip Melanchthon.

27 Treu, Katharina von Bora, 79f


29. F. L. C. Freiherr von Medem, Die Universitätsjahre der Herzöge Ernst Ludwig und Barnum von Pommern (Anklam, 1867.)


32 WA, Br 8 609.17 and WA, Br 9:138.20 from June 15, 1540 to Anton Lauterbach.

33 WA, TR 3:239.3–9, #3264b

34 WA, TR 2:144.32–145.2, #1591 A draft of the plan of the cloister and grounds is found in Herrmann Steun, Geschichte des Lutherhauses (Wittenberg, 1883), 15

35. Treu, Katharina von Bora, 46f.
37. Treu, Katharina von Bora, 49.
39. WA, Br 8:426f.
40. WA, TR 2:290.12–16, #1995, where Luther says about the purchase of a garden: "by herself and not by me, and against me, not for me. . . . I am not able to bear her begging or her tears."
41. Thoma, Katharina von Bora, 84–86.
42. WA, Br 11:149.9–15. LW 50:278.
43. WA 8:498.12–14. LW 36:152: "But if no man were to preach, then it would be necessary for the women to preach." (The Misuse of the Mass.)
45. WA, TR 4:631.11–14, #5041.
46. WA, Br 8:394ff. See also Treu, Martin Luther und Torgau, 44f.
48. WA, Br 7:317.15 and 322.27. LW 50:108 and 112.
52. MBW 5, #5278.
57. For the listing I am indebted to the research of my colleague, Jutta Strehle, at the Luther house. The classification of a picture in Leipzig supposedly portraying Katharina as a widow remains unclear.
58. Werner Hoffmann, ed., Luther und die Folgen für die bildende Kunst, Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Hamburg Art Gallery (München: Prestel-Verlag, 1983). For these and other images of Katharina, see the following article by Frederick Schumacher.