

# A Day in the Life of Katie Luther

**M**artin Luther nicknamed his wife “the morning star of Wittenberg” for good reason. Katharina typically rose before dawn and worked for 17 or more hours before retiring well after dusk.

It didn't take long upon moving into The Black Cloister (the former monastery in Wittenberg where Martin lived) for Katharina to discover that the place was not up to her standards. Not only was the home barely furnished and missing all but the most basic necessities, Martin's bedstraw hadn't been changed in a year, which was basically the 16th-century equivalent of not changing the sheets. Katharina clearly had her work cut out for her.

Katharina also tackled the Black Cloister's dingy rooms, whitewashing the walls with a solution of lime and water to brighten the interior and deter vermin and insects. She then turned to weeding and planting the garden. Within a year the plot was flourishing with a large crop of vegetables, including peas, beans, carrots, cabbage, lettuce and other greens, as well as herbs, which she used for both cooking and medicinal purposes.

Katharina's daily and weekly chores included: breeding and slaughtering livestock and poultry for meat; fishing the local streams and ponds; planting and tending the fruit and nut orchards and the vineyard; raising bees for honey; and preserving meats, fruits, and vegetables. When she wasn't gardening, milking, churning butter, making cheese, butchering a cow, or brewing her own beer (Martin preferred Katharina's homemade brew over any other), she shopped at the market in Wittenberg to purchase anything she didn't make or raise herself.

Water, of course, did not pour from a faucet but had to be hauled from the well. The woman of the house also typically chopped and carried in wood year-round for the fire, which was used for both cooking and heating. Likewise, laundry was done in the nearby Elbe River, and meals were cooked entirely from scratch — including grinding spices and herbs with a mortar and pestle and preparing the food over an open fire.

Katharina was also a skilled nurse and mixed many of her own medicinal remedies. Martin suffered with many ailments, but he wasn't Katharina's only patient. She also cared for their six children and several foster children, as well as for the guests who fell ill while visiting the Black Cloister.

The Luthers often had up to 50 houseguests at a time — mainly students, theologians, and other reformers — who stayed in the former “cells” of the monastery. At one point, illness swept through the Black Cloister, leaving Katharina with 40 ill guests under her care. When the plague hit Wittenberg and most of the residents fled, Martin and Katharina stayed and turned the Black Cloister into a hospital. Katharina even gave birth to their daughter Elizabeth during the plague outbreak of 1527, while Martin was out of town on business.

Because managing the budget was not Martin's forte, he entrusted the oversight of household finances to Katharina soon after they married. She purchased additional land in a nearby town to expand her farming operations and produce more income. Katie insisted that Martin accept payment for his many publications and lectures, and she began to charge many of the Black Cloister's long-term visitors room and board, much to the chagrin of those who were accustomed to staying there for free. She also often oversaw the printing and distribution schedule of his many publications.

“In domestic affairs I defer to Katie, otherwise I am led by the Holy Ghost,” Martin once declared, an understatement when one considers Katharina's monumental daily workload. Not only was she the mother of his children, his nurse, and his financial planner and business manager, Katharina was also Martin's trusted confidante and devoted companion. The Reformation surely would have taken place without the marriage of Martin and Katharina, but Martin would not have been the same Reformer without Katharina by his side. Q

