

Life with Luther

We asked Diane L. Hunt, who regularly portrays Katie Luther, to answer 10 questions (plus one for good measure) about what life was like being married to Martin Luther. (It wasn't easy living with a former monk who once cut up a perfectly good pair of their son's pants to patch his own coat.)



1) What were some of your favorite hymns that Luther wrote? Why?

Katie: The Doctor knew many popular songs and borrowed their tunes to create wonderful hymns. Among them was *From Heaven Above*. This tune was a garland-song, or what today is known as a round. He wrote 16 verses of this lovely Christmas hymn, so that each of our children and foster-children would have their own verse to sing. That is why this is one of my favorites. The Doctor was very musical. He once said, "I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise." He played the lute and had a beautiful singing voice. Our home was always filled with music and song.

2) Why did you join the convent in the first place?

Katie: I did not choose to enter the convent, but was sent there at age seven by my father and stepmother. Sending the youngest child to a convent or monastery was a common practice of my time. As daunting as this sounds, I did have family at Nembtschen: my father's sister Magdalena was a nun there and my late mother's sister was the abbess. As a young child so far away from home, my Tanta Magdalena was a special comfort to me. She remained thus throughout my entire life.

3) Did you really hide in a pickarel barrel to escape the convent? How long did it take for you to wash off the smell?

Katie: Yes! Herring barrels were our mode of escape! The stink inside those barrels was unbearable! We had a most unpleasant journey with the lids of the barrels closed tightly over our heads. It took many days to be rid of the horrid odor and to get those nasty little clinging fish-scales out of my hair. For many years after, I still had a hard time stomaching those smelly little fish.

4) A British tabloid reported that before he married you, Luther was in love with one of your friends, the youngest of the former Nimbschen nuns. Did you know about this?

Katie: I had the feeling that at first Doctor Luther thought I was a bit proud and headstrong. It wouldn't surprise me if he did find others more interesting. However, Doctor Luther was not my first choice either, so ... But, O those British! King Henry VIII, upon hearing of our marriage, said "Aha! So that's what the old monk really wanted after all!"

5) Did you get along with your mother-in-law?

Katie: Margarethe Luther was a strong-willed woman who loved her son very much. He had done so many things that caused her concern that by the time we were married (he was 42, I was 26), I do believe she was pleased to have someone else taking care of her wayward and equally strong-willed son. She did bless us at our wedding, and this was a great comfort (and relief!) to me.

6) In your daily life, as a wife and mother, what were some of your struggles? What were some of your joys?

Katie: Certainly, the deaths of two of our daughters, Magdalena and baby Elizabeth, were very difficult moments for me. I went to the Psalms for reassurance and strength. My favorite was Psalm 31.

Bow down Your ear to me; Deliver me speedily;
Be Thou my strong Rock, a Stronghold to keep me safe ...
For You are my Strength.
Let Your face shine on your servant. Save me in Your unfailing love.

Doctor Luther was also a rock and safe place in my life. Together we found the love of Christ in each other. "Marriage," said the Doctor, "and the love of man and wife is a beautiful example of God's love for each and every one of us." He had moments of great depression. This was difficult for me. Once I dressed in widow's clothes and told him it seemed to me, by his sadness, that God must be dead. I then held him close to me and reassured him that "God is always near to us." Conversely, he also had a wonderful sense of humor. He wrote me very amusing letters and could always make me laugh. I would say my greatest joy was sharing my life with Martin and my dear children in God's grace and service.

In moments of great joy or great sorrow, in simple, everyday moments, I always prayed the Lord's Prayer, paying special heed to the words "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done." The Doctor said we were always in God's care. This portion of the prayer made that so very clear to me.

7) How did you discipline? Did you spank, time out, talk or something more creative?

Katie: I grew up in a convent where the rules were very strict. So, I ruled my own children and foster-children with less sternness. But, of course, keeping 11 plus kids in line required a good deal of quick thinking and stamina. My advice: don't sweat the small stuff – like leaving the lederhosen out in the rain.

8) Luther never invested any money for either you or your children in case of his death. Did this worry you?

Katie: Doctor Luther was a very wise and learned man. However, he had no sense where money was concerned. Throughout our life together, I managed the finances. One way I got us through the hard times was by hiding extra food, grain, beer and other necessities. I hid a prized wedding gift – a jeweled goblet – which I later used to get my youngest son Paul through medical school after the Doctor's death. Doctor Luther did, however, do a very unusual thing regarding money. He left all of his estate to me – not our eldest son Hans, as was the custom of the day. I had to battle the town courts to keep this inheritance. Hans, who was a lawyer, helped me win this court case. The estate, however, was not large, and I continued to work and save just as I had done all my life. No, I was not worried about money, but I also knew that I had to work hard to make ends meet. The Lord so richly blessed me that this was just one small way that I could be thankful.

9) Did you get to participate in the theological discussions that took place at your home or were you primarily maid and chief cook and bottle-washer?

Many nights found our dinner table full of young students eager to learn from Doctor Luther. He so enjoyed these "Table Talks." And, yes, I was the chief cook and bottle-washer at the Luther House, but I was also the only woman ever allowed at the table during these discussions. In fact, they dubbed me "The Doctressa." My training in Latin at the convent made this possible. It was a great joy for me to be a part of this learning and discussion. However, the language often made me blush!

10) We're told that you made your own beer, which helped ease Martin's stomach distress. Could you give us your recipe?

Katie: Doctor Luther was very fond of beer. Lest anyone should boast, the Doctor said that I "made the best beer and sauerkraut in all of Germany." The style of beer we drank in our area is called Einbecker. It is made with about one-third wheat and the rest the best air-dried barley malt you can find. I used plenty of hops from my garden, but not so many as to overpower the beer. I find this the finest beer in that people do not fatten too much from its use, and it is useful in fever cases. My beer also helped the Doctor with his troublesome insomnia and worked very well as a laxative. Once on a trip away from home, he had a bad experience with the poor quality of the local beer. After that, we always packed several bottles of my Einbecker along with him for "medicinal purposes" and should an emergency baptism occur. (The Doctor said that since the Word is the principal part of baptism, it didn't matter if beer were used in an emergency when no water is at hand.)

11) As a woman, you were pretty gutsy in a time when men ruled the roost. What made you so self assured?

Katie: Being married to an excommunicated man with a price on his head demanded great strength and courage. He was very strong-willed, and it took that same kind of resolve on my part to keep up with him. It also helped that I could be as stubborn as he was. I knew that all my strength and courage rested in the Lord, just as the Doctor did. This was the man, after all, who took the beautiful strength of Psalm 46 and wrote ***A Mighty Fortress Is Our God***. It was God, and God alone, who got us through each and every day.

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