



Pope John Paul II – God’s “Man of the Century”

Like everyone else in Poland in 1939, nineteen-year-old Karol Wojtyla (voy-TEE-wah) had grown up in a family that took its Catholic faith seriously. Every day upon leaving and re-entering their home, family members blessed themselves with holy water kept in a small bowl by the door. Every morning and evening, they prayed together before a devotional altar set up in a parlor.

Scholar, Athlete, Actor, Author

At school, Karol was a good student. In his free time, he enjoyed participating in sports—soccer, swimming, kayaking, skiing, hiking, and mountain climbing. A natural athlete, he loved pushing his body to its limits. In college, he developed a thoughtful, artistic side as well, acting with an experimental theater ensemble, joining literary discussion groups, writing poetry, and taking part in public poetry readings.

At nineteen, Karol was vigorous, outgoing, popular, and fully engaged in the world around him—yet also haunted by the long, dark shadow that death had already cast over his youth. Before his birth on May 18, 1920, an older sister died in infancy. Just short of his ninth birthday, his mother died of heart and kidney problems. At age twelve, he lost his elder brother to scarlet fever.

During those years of repeated loss, a kind of spiritual transformation took place in the only living family member he had left, his father. Karol later recalled, “The violence of the blows that struck him opened up immense spiritual depths in him; his grief found its outlet in prayer.” Often when the boy awoke during the night, his eyes fell on the dark form of his restless father on bent knee, hands folded, head bowed in prayer.

Then the Nazis came. In 1939, during Karol’s second year in college, Nazi Germany invaded free Poland. A secret handbook written by



1920-2005

Hans Frank, the German Governor General of Poland, stated a policy of “making certain that not one Polish man, woman, or child was left alive to soil the territories now and forever a part of the Third Reich.”

In the ensuing days, execution, starvation, and deportation to death camps became the fate of millions. The only ones spared were military draftees and manual laborers deemed essential to the war effort. By taking a job as a stone cutter in a quarry, Karol secured his own personal safety—but then endured the continuing torture of watching friends and neighbors disappear almost daily, never to be heard from again.

I will not live long and would like to be certain before I die that you will commit yourself to God’s service.

Karol Wojtyla, Sr., to his son, Karol, Jr.

From there, things got worse. One day in February 1941, Karol and a friend, Maria

cont’d on page 2

Kydrynska, came home to a grim discovery—his father, dead in bed of a heart attack. Distraught, Karol threw himself into Maria's arms, and, barely able to speak through his tears, kept repeating, "I was not present when my mother died, nor when my brother died." Years later, he told writer Andre Frossard, "I never felt so alone."

Shortly after this, Karol moved out of the little house he had shared with his father. He made daily cemetery visits. For support, he leaned on an older man who became his mentor and lifetime friend, Jan Tyranowski, and he began to reflect, as never before, on the meaning of life. A year and a half after his father's death, Karol emerged one evening from a confessional, several hours after having entered it, with startling news for a waiting friend: "I have decided to become a priest and that is what we were talking about."

Priest, Bishop, Cardinal, Pope

Throughout the remaining years of Nazi occupation, Karol had close calls and narrow escapes as he secretly studied for the priesthood. In the years of Soviet domination that came next, there were artful dodges and reasoned compromises in all dealings with communist authorities. As a priest and later as an auxiliary bishop and an archbishop, Karol attained a reputation with his communist foes as "tough but flexible."

In the Church at large, he shone as a guiding light at Vatican II, especially in the area of human rights. In 1967, Pope Paul VI made Archbishop Wojtyla a cardinal. Eleven years after that, his brother cardinals made him the new pope, following the brief reign of John Paul I.

The news of his election struck the world like a thunderbolt from heaven. The first non-Italian pope in 455 years! The youngest pope in 132 years! A pope from a communist country! What might people expect from him? Cardinal Wojtyla sent out a strong signal when he selected for himself the name "John Paul II."

The new pope's immediate predecessor had named himself "John Paul I" for the two popes who had initiated and implemented the reforms

of Vatican II. Therefore, John Paul II was proclaiming to the world that he, too, would continue in the path that had been blazed by John XXIII and Paul VI.

Almost from the beginning, people marveled at what seemed to be his many internal and external contradictions. (Documentary filmmaker Helen Whitney preferred to call him a man of many layers—an important distinction.) In the area of moral theology, he quickly established himself as a social progressive but a moral conservative. In capitalist nations, he argued for justice for the poor and a more equal distribution of wealth. In communist countries, he argued for basic human rights, especially religious freedom.

Everywhere he went—without regard to local habit or majority opinion—he argued against materialism in all forms and against practices that he associated with a "culture of death": artificial birth control, abortion, capital punishment, weapons proliferation. With few nations on earth spared the sting of his criticisms, he should have become one of the most disliked figures in recent history. Instead, he became one of the most revered. People admired him for his consistency and for his devotion to his duties as he saw them.

Young people listening to me, answer the Lord with strong and generous hearts! He is counting on you.

Pope John Paul II

World Youth Day, Toronto 2002

One of those duties, he decided early in his tenure, would be extensive travel. It wasn't that he saw himself as so important that the whole world needed a chance to meet him personally; rather, he believed that the Church he represented needed to redouble its efforts in reaching out to people in the everyday places where they lived and gathered. Why hide behind the walls of the Vatican when there was a gospel to preach?

John Paul II will be remembered as a pope with accomplishments too numerous to elaborate here and many would say— as God's "Man of the Century."