Pope St. John Paul II

Pope Saint John Paul II was born Karol Wojtyla (voy-TIH-wah) in the small Polish town of Wadowice. During World War II, when the Nazis invaded Poland, Karol secretly studied for the priesthood in an underground seminary established by the archbishop of Krakow. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1946. In 1964, Father Karol was appointed archbishop of Krakow; just three years later he was made a cardinal. In 1978, Cardinal Wojtyla was elected Pope, the 264th in the Church's history. He took the name John Paul II. He began his papacy on Oct. 22 by telling the world, "Be not afraid"; his life showed everyone that to change the world, we must "cast into the deep for a great catch."

From the start of his papacy, Pope John Paul II made evangelization a key part of his mission, and made pastoral visits to all parts of the world.

In 1981, a Turk named Mehmet Ali Agca shot the Pope twice in an assassination attempt and wounded him. Following Jesus' example of forgiveness and compassion for the sinner, Pope John Paul II later met with Agca in his prison cell and, gently speaking to him of the forgiveness of Christ, forgave him for what he had done.

Throughout his life, Pope John Paul II was an avid sportsman, hiking and skiing even in his sixties. In 1992, however, his health began to decline. It was later revealed that he suffered from Parkinson's disease, a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system. Near the end of his papacy, it became difficult for him to speak, and his poor health and physical suffering made public appearances difficult. Still, he bore his suffering patiently, and continued his pastoral work despite his physical pain. He entrusted his health to God, and joined his suffering with that of Christ.

Pope John Paul II died April 2, 2005, and he was declared blessed on May 1, 2011. He was declared a saint on April 27, 2014 along with Pope John XXIII. His feast day is October 22.

Pope St. John Paul II fast facts …

First non-Italian pope since Adrian VI (1522-23)
First Polish pope ever
Youngest pope since Pius IX (1846-78)
Third longest pontificate in history of the Church (nearly 27 years)
Most-traveled pope in history
First pope to visit a synagogue
First pope to visit a mosque
First pope to call for a day of pardon
First pope to add five new mysteries to the Rosary