

The life, work and trials of the World's Greatest Pole John Paul II timeline: from boyhood to sainthood

Compiled by Robert Strybel



MAY 18, 1920: Emilia née Kaczorowska Wojtyla gives birth to a baby boy against the advice of her doctor who said the infant didn't have a chance to survive and should be aborted.

JUNE 20, 1920: The Wojtyla baby is baptized at the Wadowice parish church and receives the name Karol (the Polish equivalent of Carl or Charles).

APRIL 19, 1929: Karol suffered his first major tragedy at the age of nine, when his mother died. Right after the funeral, his father Lieutenant Karol Wojtyla senior, an army administrative official and devout Catholic, took him and his elder brother to the Marian shrine in nearby Kalwaria Zebrzydowska to pray for the repose of her soul.

SEPTEMBER 1930: Karol, known to his friends and classmates as Lolek, enrolled in the Wadowice middle school. He did well in his studies, was good at sports and was goalkeeper in school soccer matches between Catholic and Jewish students. It was there that his literary and acting inclinations began emerging. He also stood out for his piety and served as an altar boy.

DECEMBER 5, 1932: A mere three years after his mother's death, tragedy struck again, when his 26-year-old brother Edmund, an MD, died of the scarlet fever he had contracted from a patient he was treating.

MAY 14, 1938: Karol Wojtyla passed his secondary-school-leaving exam with flying colors and decided to study Polish Language and Literature at Kraków's Jagiellonian University. He and his father moved to Kraków to facilitate his academic studies and lived in a two-room rented basement apartment.

1939: Karol readily absorbs the intellectual and artistic climate of the Jagiellonian and the city of Kraków in general. He makes new friends and joins a student theater group.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1939: World War II begins with Hitler's attack on Poland.

SEPTEMBER 6, 1939: German troops march into Kraków. Nazi Governor General sets up his headquarters in Poland's historic Wawel Castle.

NOVEMBER 6, 1939: The Germans close down Jagiellonian University and sends its professors to a concentration camp. To help shore up his and his father's deteriorating financial situation, Karol finds work in the limestone quarry of the Solvay Chemical Works..

FEBRUARY 18, 1941: One day, when he brings home dinner, Karol finds his father dead. The loss of his last family member comes as a devastating blow to the 20-year-old who moves in with the friendly and supportive Kydrynski family.

SPRING 1941: Karol is promoted to the job of blaster's assistant at the quarry under head blaster Franciszek Labus, a devout Catholic. Labus is believed to have suggested that Karol study for the priesthood. Karol attends a religious retreat where he meets tailor Jan Tyranowski, an expert on the teachings of St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila, who helps him find his religious vocation. Karol takes part in the activities of the now underground Rhapsodic Theater.

1942: Karol surprises his fellow student actors when he decides to enter a clandestine seminary to study for the priesthood. In the early morning he serves mass for Metropolitan Archbishop Prince Adam Sapieha before going to work at the Solvay; at night he studies.

FEBRUARY 29, 1944: Karol is struck by a German truck, but a German officer stops a car and orders its driver to drive the Pole to a hospital. He is treated for a brain concussion and lacerations to the head.

AUGUST 6, 1944: Startled by Warsaw Uprising on August 1, the Germans seek to prevent a similar outbreak in Kraków by rounding up all young males. Karol and other seminarians take refuge at the Episcopal Palace.

JANUARY 18, 1945: Soviet troops march into Kraków – a sign that World War II is winding down. Like people all over Poland, Karol is not sure whether Poland is being liberated or whether one totalitarian occupation will be replaced by another.

NOVEMBER 1, 1946: After successfully completing his studies, on All Saints Day Karol Wojtyla is ordained to the priesthood by Cardinal Sapieha and celebrates his first mass at St Leonard's Crypt in Wawel Cathedral.

NOVEMBER 15, 1946: Father Wojtyla is sent to Rome to study at Angelicum, the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas. While in Rome, he gets to meet the famous mystic Father Pio who, according to some accounts, predicts that the Polish priest is destined for the papacy.

JULY 1948: Father Wojtyla's first assignment is that of vicar at the parish in Niegowic, a village not far from Kraków, where he serves 13 months.

AUGUST 1949: Cardinal Sapieha re-assigns Father Wojtyla as vicar to St Florian parish in Kraków. There he has good rapport with the parish youth for whom he organizes excursions, theater outings, discussion circles and Gregorian Chant practice. He also attracts throngs of faithful to his religious retreat.

1950: Father Wojtyla begins publishing his poetry in Kraków's Catholic weekly "Tygodnik Powszechny" under the pen-name Andrzej Jawien.

JULY 1951: Following the death of Cardinal Sapieha, who had looked after Father Wojtyla. Archbishop Eugeniusz Baziak, serving as archdiocesan administrator, urges him to continue his post-graduate studies.

DECEMBER 12, 1953: His dissertation is unanimously accepted by the council of the Jagiellonian's Theology Department, but the communist education authorities do not approve the subject until 1957, when he is given the title of docent (assistant professor). He begins lecturing at the Kraków Theological Seminary and Jagiellonian University as well as the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), 170 miles away.

JULY 28, 1958: At the age of 38, Father Wojtyla becomes Poland's youngest bishop and is given the post of auxiliary bishop of the Kraków Archdiocese.

1959: Bishop Wojtyla heads KUL's Ethics Chair, where his lectures attract crowds of students. He shows he has a way with young people who affectionately call him "Wujek" (uncle) and whom he takes on mountain hikes and canoe trips. During that period he publishes extensively in the Catholic journal "Znak" and "Tygodnik Powszechny".

1960: Bishop Wojtyla begins petitioning the communist authorities for permission to build a church in Kraków's new industrial suburb of Nowa Huta; the regime regards it as a model socialist workers' community which should be devoid of religion. His book on marriage "Love and Responsibility" triggers controversy in conservative Catholic circles for its treatment of sexuality.

1962: Bishop Wojtyla becomes actively involved in preparations for the Second Vatican Council ordered by Pope John XXIII. He deals with media issues and favors replacing Latin with national languages in the liturgy.

DECEMBER 30, 1963: Pope Paul VI appoints Bishop Wojtyla the Metropolitan Archbishop of Kraków, a post that has been vacant since the death of Cardinal Sapieha in 1951.

1964: Archbishop Wojtyla helps convince Polish Primate Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński to approve a crucial letter to the German Episcopate containing the words: "We forgive you and ask for forgiveness."

1965: The letter sent to the German Episcopate infuriates Poland's communist rulers who accuse the Church of meddling in Poland's international affairs; the regime penalizes bishops by denying them passports for travel to Rome and by drafting their seminarians into the army.

1966: The communist regime celebrating the Thousand Years of Poland throws obstacles in the path of the Church celebrating the Millennium of Christian Poland.

MAY 1967: Pope Paul VI announces Archbishop Wojtyla's elevation to the rank of cardinal.

AUTUMN 1967: Cardinal Wojtyla declines an invitation to attend the First Bishops' Synod in Rome to express his solidarity with Primate Wyszyński, barred by the regime from traveling outside Poland. But the cardinal does take part in subsequent synods.

JULY 1968: Many of Cardinal Wojtyla's views, including his opposition to abortion and contraceptives, are reflected in Pope Paul VI's encyclical "Humane vitae".

AUGUST 12, 1978: Polish Cardinals Wyszyński and Wojtyla travel to Rome to attend the funeral of Pope Paul VI and elect his successor.

AUGUST 26, 1978: The Archbishop of Venice Albino Luciani is elected pope, but dies on September 28.

OCTOBER 4, 1978: The funeral of Pope John Paul I is held, followed by preparations for the next conclave.

OCTOBER 16, 1978: Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyla is elected pope and takes the name John Paul II. He is the first non-Italian elected to the papacy in 455 years. Church bells ring out and a wave of euphoria sweeps Poland and Polonia in celebration of the unprecedented event. Alarm bells ring at the Kremlin and other Soviet bloc capitals as communist leaders deliberate how to react to this new challenge.

OCTOBER 22, 1978: The official inauguration of John Paul II is held. It is memorable for the historic embrace of the new pope and his mentor, Cardinal Wyszyński, as well as the words "Do not be afraid", due to become a key element of the Wojtyla pontificate.

JANUARY 25, 1979: The new pope visits Mexico, the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas in his first apostolic trip abroad. The most traveled pontiff in history, John Paul II visited 129 countries and logged 725,000 miles during his 27-year pontificate, earning the title of "Pilgrim Pope".

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