Karol Joseph Wojtyla (Voy-TEE-wah), who would become Pope John Paul II, was born in 1920. The mighty Red Army from the communist Soviet Union had invaded Poland from the east. When Karol was not yet 3 months old, Edmund, his 10 year-old brother, rushed home to tell his mother that in the “The Miracle on the Vistula,” the Polish army had won the war!
Karol’s family consisted of his father, also named Karol, his mother, Emilia, and his older brother, Edmund. They called little Karol “Lolek (LOW-lek). Edmund was away in medical school, so Lolek prayed every day with his father and mother, and they read together from the Bible.
One day, while Karol was still small, one of his friends rushed to the nuns at his school asking for help! Karol needed help at the soccer field!
When the sister reached the soccer field, she saw a dog, barking and running around a tree. And up in the tree was young Lolek, just out of reach of the leaping, snarling, and biting dog. The nun chased away the dog with a stick.
Then, when Karol was not even 9 years old, his family was struck with tragedy: the death of his mother. With Edmund away working as a doctor, Karol and his father grew even closer, living and praying together.
About a year after his mother's death, Karol's father took him on a pilgrimage to a famous outdoor Catholic shrine built in the early 1600's. The two set off walking early in the morning, until a passing farmer offered them a ride in his horse-drawn hay cart.
The shrine, called “Kalwaria Zebrzydowska,” was a series of chapels depicting scenes from the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, a life-sized “Stations of the Cross.”
On the 1st Friday of the month, Karol would go to the Krakow Cathedral for confession, then he would serve the early morning Mass. Then, on the first Friday in September 1939, during morning Mass the German Nazis attacked Poland from the west.
Thousands of people, including Karol and his father, tried to escape to the east on foot. Karol’s father was very weak, making travel hard and slow. But then the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east, and Poland was split between the communists and Nazis. For the next 40 years Karol lived in a Poland ruled by totalitarian regimes, which used the army and the police to oppress and terrorize the people.
Karol’s father continued to weaken, but still Karol would find him kneeling in prayer late at night or early in the morning. "Whoever prays lying down, God hears while He is sleeping!" he told his son. "I’ll pray kneeling."
During the early years of the occupation, Karol’s father died. Karol was now an orphan at 20 years old and without any family, because his brother had died earlier.
During the war, Karol led a group of 15 boys as part of a “Living Rosary.” Each boy promised to pray an assigned “decade-a-day,” so taken together, each group of 15 boys would pray all 15 mysteries of the rosary every day!
Later, Karol decided to study in the secret seminary run by the Archbishop of Krakow, Adam Stefan Sapieha. On All Saints Day in 1946, Cardinal Sapieha ordained Karol to the priesthood and sent him to Rome for further studies.
In 1948, he returned to Poland to become assistant to a pastor in a country parish near Krakow. Like Saint John Vianney, the Cure (KYOO-ray) of Ars (ARZ), Father Wojtyla always kissed the ground and prayed for his parishioners upon entering a new parish.
In less than a year, he was transferred to Saint Florian’s parish in Krakow. Father Wojtyla soon became known for the skiing and kayaking trips he would take with the university students and youth of his parish.
In 1958, Father Wojtyla was made bishop, the auxiliary to Archbishop Baziak of Krakow.
In 1963, Bishop Wojtyla became archbishop of Krakow. Four years later, he was elevated to Cardinal. As archbishop, he presided over Wawel Cathedral where he used to serve Mass before the death of his father.
In 1978, on Oct 16th, the Feast of Saint Jadwiga, the Queen of Poland, Cardinal Wojtyla was elected Pope. He chose the name “John Paul II.” When he was announced as the new Pope, he said, “Be not afraid to welcome Christ and accept His Power!”
Pope John Paul II continued his devotion to the Rosary, even adding a new set of mysteries: the Luminous Mysteries.
Pope John Paul II was the third longest-serving Pope in history, serving over 26 years. He was not afraid to stand up to the communists in Poland and around the world, until finally the communists fell in Poland, and it was again free, as it had been during his childhood.
Pope John Paul II told us to always trust God’s Providence and encouraged us to adore Jesus Christ truly present in the Holy Eucharist.
When Pope John Paul II died in 2005, the Cardinals elected a new Pope: Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Pope John Paul II's good friend. He chose the name “Benedict XVI.”