John Paul II

Born: 1920

Died: 2005

Feast Day:

22 October

DERRY DIOCESAN CATECHETICAL CENTRE

Born Karol Józef Wojtyla on May 18, 1920, in Wadowice, Poland, Pope John Paul II's early life was marked by great loss. His mother died when he was nine years old, and his older brother Edmund died when he was 12.

As a boy, Karol was athletic, often playing football as goalkeeper. During his childhood, he had contact with the large Jewish community of Wadowice. School football games were often organised between teams of Jews and Catholics, and Karol often played on the Jewish side.

Growing up, John Paul was athletic and enjoyed skiing and swimming. He went to Krakow's Jagiellonian University in 1938 where he showed an interest in theatre and poetry. The school was closed the next year by Nazi troops during the German occupation of Poland.

Wanting to become a priest, John Paul began studying at a secret seminary run by the archbishop of Krakow. After World War II ended, he finished his religious studies at a Krakow seminary and was ordained in 1946. John Paul spent two years in Rome where he finished his doctorate in theology. He returned to his native Poland in 1948 and served in several parishes in and around Krakow.

He became the bishop of Ombi in 1958, and became the archbishop of Krakow in 1964. Considered one of the Catholic Church's leading thinkers, he participated in the Second Vatican Council—sometimes called Vatican II. The council began reviewing church doctrine in 1962, holding several sessions over the course of the next few years. As a member of the council, John Paul helped the church to examine its position in the world. Well regarded for his contributions to the church, John Paul was made a cardinal in 1967 by Pope Paul VI.

In 1978, John Paul made history by becoming the first non-Italian pope in more than four hundred years. As the leader of the Catholic Church, he travelled the world, visiting more than 100 countries to spread his message of faith and peace. But he was close to home when he faced the greatest threat to his life. In 1981, an assassin shot John Paul twice in St. Peter's Square in Vatican City. Fortunately, he was able to recover from his injuries and later forgave his attacker.

A vocal advocate for human rights, John Paul often spoke out about suffering in the world. He held strong positions on many topics, including his opposition to capital punishment. A charismatic figure, John Paul used his influence to bring about political change and is credited with the fall of communism in his native Poland. He was not without critics, however. Some have stated that he could be harsh with those who disagreed with him and that he would not compromise his hard-line stance on certain issues, such as contraception.

In his later years, John Paul's health appeared to be failing. At public appearances, he moved slowly and seemed unsteady on his feet. He also visibly trembled at times. One of his doctors also disclosed that John Paul had Parkinson's disease, a brain disorder often characterized by shaking, in 2001. But there was never any official announcement about his illness from the Vatican.

Pope John Paul II died on April 2, 2005, at the age of 84, at his Vatican City residence. It was announced in July 2013 that he would be declared a saint in April of the following year.