

## **Lesson 16: Pope St. John Paul II**

*Please click twice to watch the video* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9lYvkmY874>

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.

### **The Pope and Mary**

His devotion to Mary began as a child. When he was 9 years old, Pope St. John Paul II lost his own mother, and he was raised by a very devout father. In his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (pp. 214-5), St. John Paul mentioned three ways his devotion to our Blessed Mother increased.

At his parish church in Wadowice, he prayed regularly before the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, which portrays Mary holding the Child Jesus. Jesus sees the instruments of His Passion—the spear, wine-soaked sponge, nails, crown of thorns, and cross. Jesus grasps the hand of Mary, who provides comfort and protection. St. John Paul knew Mary would protect him from harm and help him to endure whatever sufferings he faced.

He and his father made pilgrimages to the nearby shrine of Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, particularly on the feast of the Assumption. Here pilgrims walked the Way of the Cross. They also venerated another image of our Blessed Mother holding the Child Jesus. St. John Paul commented, "From

my earliest years, my own devotion to Mary was deeply joined to my faith in Christ. The shrine of Kalwaria helped me greatly in this.” From the time he was 10 years old, he wore the scapular (which he received at the shrine), relying on the maternal protection of Mary.

The Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa with the icon depicting the Blessed Mother holding the Child Jesus had a profound influence. Since the 1300s, the Polish people have venerated this icon and invoked the prayers of our Blessed Mother for her maternal protection, especially in difficult times. His devotion to Our Lady of Czestochowa was evident during his pontificate: On his first trip to Poland in 1979 after his election as Pope, St. John Paul visited the shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa. He said, “The call of a son of Poland to the Cathedral of St. Peter contains an evident and strong link with this holy place, with this Shrine of great hope: *totus tuus* (“I am all yours”), I had whispered in prayer so many times before this Image” (June 4, 1979).

On Aug. 26, 1982, the feast of Our Lady of Czestochowa, Pope John Paul II preached a special message of encouragement to his Polish compatriots, who at that time were struggling for independence from communist tyranny: “My dear compatriots: However difficult the lives of Poles may be this year, may consciousness win in you that this life is embraced by the Heart of the Mother. As she won in Maximilian Kolbe ... so may she win in you. May the Mother’s heart win. ... May she ensure that we shall not desist from trying and struggling for truth and justice, for liberty and dignity in our lives.”

Without question, from an early age, St. John Paul had a beautiful devotion to our Blessed Mother as mother, and he relied on her maternal care, protection and encouragement. Later, at about age 20, he was introduced to the works of St. Louis de Monfort and his Treatise of True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin. St. John Paul reflected, “I was already convinced the Mary leads us to Christ, but at that time I began to realize also that Christ leads us to His Mother.” From this understanding, he took as his motto, *totus tuus* - “All Yours”.

On Oct. 16, 1978, when elected as the Successor of St. Peter, Cardinal Jean Villot, asked then Cardinal Wojtyla, “Do you accept the election?” He replied, “In the obedience of faith before Christ my Lord, abandoning myself to the Mother of Christ and the Church, and conscious of the great difficulties, accepto.” St. John Paul II took for his motto, *totus tuus*, and had an “M” for Mary placed on his papal coat of arms below the arm of the cross, symbolizing how Mary, the faithful mother and disciple, stood at the foot of the cross.

In 1980, he noticed the lack of any monument dedicated to our Blessed Mother in St. Peter’s square, so he commissioned the beautiful mosaic of “Mary, Mother of the Church.” When it was installed Dec. 7, 1981, he remarked, “Now all who come to St. Peter’s Square may raise their eyes to Mary to greet her with filial trust and prayer.”

To mark the 25th anniversary of his pontificate, St. John Paul II added the Luminous Mysteries to the Rosary, i.e. five significant episodes of Our Lord’s public ministry. He noted in his apostolic letter “Rosarium Virginis Mariae,” “With the rosary, the Christian people sits at the school of Mary and is led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of His love. Through the rosary, the faithful receive abundant grace, as though from the

very hands of the Mother of the Redeemer”. Here again, the Holy Father underscored the maternal care of our Blessed Mother for us.

Pope St. John Paul II also invoked our Blessed Mother when he was shot May 13, 1981, as he was passing through the crowd of St. Peter’s Square. Struck with two bullets, he fell into the arms of his secretary, Archbishop Dziwisz, who asked, “Where?” “In the stomach,” the pope replied. Archbishop Dziwisz asked, “Does it hurt very much?” The pope faintly responded, “Yes. Oh Mary, my mother, my mother,” and fell from consciousness. His survival was miraculous. No vital organ had been disturbed; the bullet had only brushed the organs that, if damaged, would have entailed death; the bullet had passed the main artery by millimeters. Dr. Crucitti said that it was as though the bullet had hit a steel wall and had changed directions. St. John Paul II later said, “Someone’s hand had shot me, but Another Hand directed the bullet. For in everything that happened to me on that very day, I felt that extraordinary motherly protection and care, which turned out to be stronger than the deadly bullet.”

Yes, Mary is our queen, but even more beautifully, she is our loving mother. Pope St. John Paul II firmly believed so.

