

## The Story of Karol

This is the story of an ordinary boy who was called by God to do extraordinary work.

The boy's name was Karol (Charles) Wojtyla. We pronounce his surname [VOY-TEE-WAH.] Karol was born on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1920 in Poland, a country in Eastern Europe.

As a small child, he lived in Wadowice [VAH-DOE-VEE-CHAY] with his father, mother, and his elder brother Edmund. The family had already experienced the heartache of losing their little girl Olga when she was just a baby so you can imagine how precious their two boys were to Karol's parents.

Karol was very proud of his father who was a soldier and wore a smart uniform with medals. His brother, Edmund, was 14 years older than Karol and he became a doctor when he grew up. When Karol's father was at work and his brother was at school, the young boy would stay at home with his mother who cleaned the house, sewed the clothes, and cooked delicious meals for her family to enjoy. When the housework was finished, Mrs Wojtyla would sit down with her little boy and read him stories, many of which were about God. She told him that God loves us so much that He created the whole universe for us, and that he sent his only Son to save us from our sins. His mother taught Karol that God is everywhere, that he is always with us and that he never stops loving us. She explained that God is our best friend who wants us to talk to him and share our sufferings and our joys with him; this is what praying is – talking and listening to God.



Karol began to pray every day, morning and night, and he probably said the Angelus prayer at midday! His mother also talked to her young son about heaven, and about God's mother Mary. The young boy learned to love Mary and to know that she would lead him to know and to love her Son, Jesus. It was during these conversations with his mother that Karol found out that heaven was a place you go to when you die. He learned that in heaven he would see God our Father, Jesus, Mary and all the saints including his own baby sister whom he had never known on earth.

At school, Karol was a well-behaved, hard-working lad who excelled academically and was a skilful athlete. If you had asked him what he wanted to be at this time, he would probably have told you that he wanted to be either a soldier, like his father, or a professional footballer – indeed he was later to prove good enough to play for his country! He was a very happy child.

But not long before his ninth birthday, Karol's mother fell ill and had to go into hospital. Although all the family hoped and prayed that she would soon recover, it was not to be! Emilia Wojtyla died of a heart condition, and this, as you can imagine, caused much sorrow to Karol and the family. However, Karol remembered what his mother had told him about heaven: that everyone in heaven is alive and happy, and they still care about those whom they have left on earth. He knew that his mother still loved him, could see him, and he could talk to her! The knowledge that Jesus had promised that one day he would see his mother again when he too died, gave him great consolation. Despite his own grief, his father supported Karol at this difficult time, and throughout his teenage years. He was a loving father and a wonderful example of faith. He taught Karol to have courage, and to rely on God, who is always faithful. One of Karol's memories of this period in his life was waking up from sleep, looking over, and seeing his father on his knees in prayer.

When Karol was eleven he went to the high school where he learned more about science and new foreign languages. He was popular with his classmates, and in summer they went swimming, played

football, and went hiking; in the winter they went skating and even skiing. It was at high school that he and his friends began to write poetry and put on plays. He really enjoyed his school life!

After just one year of high school, tragedy once again struck the Wojtyla family. Edmund, who was



by this time a practising doctor, caught scarlet fever from one of his patients, and died at the age of just twenty-six. This was a great sadness for both Karol and his father, but Mr Wojtyla said, “God wants Edmund with him in heaven. God loves Edmund. God knows what is best. We will trust God.”

Karol finished high school without knowing what he wanted to do for a living. He no longer wanted to be a soldier, but was thinking of a career in the theatre, as he was a talented actor and an accomplished playwright. Perhaps he would go to university; he couldn't decide. Because he was in the habit of praying, Karol asked Jesus to guide his choice in this matter.

In 1938 father and son moved to a city called Krakow [CRACK-OW] where Karol went up to the university. But whilst they were there, something happened which changed everything for everyone: the Nazis invaded Poland, and World War two began.

The situation was terrible for the Polish people. Many were turned out of their homes and imprisoned, some of them disappeared never to be seen again, bombs were dropped on people's homes, and tanks and soldiers invaded the city. The professors and intellectuals from the university, whom Karol loved and admired, were arrested and some were murdered. No one in Poland was free any more!

Ever since his mother's death, Karol had been drawn very close to his father. The two of them were a great comfort to each other in their loneliness. Now, more than ever, Mr Wojtyla was a source of strength and wisdom to his son. They prayed together every day. As Karol could no longer attend the university, he went to work in a quarry where he had to break up large rocks. The work was very hard and very dangerous as they used explosives to crack open the huge boulders in the side of the quarry. Karol was almost killed because he didn't listen to the warning from his fellow workers – he was too busy reading books! Later, he worked in a factory, but he studied every night after work. In order to boost morale and to preserve Polish culture, together with his friends, he formed a clandestine theatre group. They produced plays in people's houses, even though this was strictly forbidden by the cruel Nazis. During the war Karol did many brave actions, saving people from being killed or locked up in prison. Sometimes he tricked the soldiers and brought secret messages past them, which was, of course, extremely dangerous.



A Krakow street: Many people were arrested and taken away.

During this time of war, Karol's father became very ill. Soon God called him to heaven too. First his little sister, then his mother, then his brother Edmund, and now his father had died. Karol was alone in the world. "Please help me," Karol asked Jesus and Mary. "I have no one else but you." He prayed with all his might.

Finally, Karol understood what God wanted him to do. He realised that God was calling him to be a priest. He knew that this meant that he would have to study hard every night after work. One day as the war grew worse and worse, soldiers came looking for Karol to put him in prison and so stop him from becoming a priest. But that night a lady came to him and led him to safety in the archbishop's house. It was the answer to much prayer! On another occasion Karol was seriously injured when he was knocked off his bicycle by a tram. He was taken to hospital, but once again the power of prayer helped him to a full recovery.

In 1945 the war was over at last. The troops left Poland and the schools reopened. People were able to repair their homes and get back to their everyday life again. Karol finished his studies at the archbishop's house and he was ordained a priest on November 1<sup>st</sup> – All Saints' Day – 1946. Now his name was Father Karol. This was a very happy time for him and he was certain that his parents, his brother and his sister were happy for him. But another trouble came to Poland. This time it was the Communists. They tried to close all the churches and stop people believing in God. But God helped the people who opened the churches again.

Father Karol worked hard teaching everyone about God, and especially the children. The children loved Father Karol; he played football with them, went swimming and hiking, and never missed the chance to speak to them about the goodness of God.

One day, whilst Father Karol was canoeing with some young people, a message came for him from the cardinal. The Holy Father in Rome had sent for Karol to make him a bishop! Father Karol now had even more work to do, but he still spent time with children and young people. He was never too busy for them!

About nine years later another message came for Father Karol; this time from Pope Paul VI! The message said that the Holy Father was very pleased with Bishop Karol's work and invited him to come to Rome to be made a cardinal! When Cardinal Karol returned to Poland, the people held a big party for him.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> August 1978, Pope Paul VI died. He was a holy man who loved God and all men very much. Along with all the other cardinals from all over the world, Karol went to Rome where they gathered in Conclave to pray to the Holy Spirit so that they could elect, with His guidance, a new pope. The new pope was called John Paul 1. He was a kind man and everyone loved him, but he was not a well man. He died thirty-three days later. Now Karol and all the other cardinals had to return to Rome to another Conclave in the Vatican to choose another pope!

Whilst the cardinals were in the Conclave, praying for guidance from God, the people outside in the streets were watching the chimney, which was above the room where the cardinals were. Then a cry went up. They had seen the white smoke, a sign that a new pope had been chosen! There was a great cheer from the people who now waited with baited breath to see who the new pope was. Soon a door opened and a cardinal emerged saying: "Habemus Papam! We have a Pope! His name is Karol Wojtyla!" The people clapped and cheered though most of them had never heard of Karol Wojtyla - they just knew that God had chosen him and were very happy.

The word *Pope* means *father*. The Pope is the leader of the Catholic Church on earth. He is known as the *Vicar of Christ* and the *Bishop of Rome*. The Pope is the successor to St. Peter who was the first Bishop of Rome and represents Jesus in a special way. A Pope takes on a new name, so Cardinal Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II. And he chose as his personal motto: “Totus Tuus” which is Latin for “All Yours” he had given himself entirely to Jesus and the Church.

John Paul II wanted everyone to know the same truth that his mother had told him when he was a small child: that God loves us always and will never stop loving us no matter what else happens in our lives. Wherever he travelled throughout the world, he defended the dignity of each human being. People listened to his words and began to question whether their societies respected this dignity.

Pope John Paul paid a high price for his honesty and courage. On 13<sup>th</sup> May 1981 an assassin shot The Holy Father. He was seriously wounded and almost died. It was the special feast day of Our Lady of Fatima, and Pope John Paul knew that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, had protected his life, and that God had still more work for him to do on Earth. When the Holy Father recovered, he forgave the man who had tried to kill him and went to visit him in prison, just as Jesus forgave the men who crucified him on the cross at Calvary. This was such a strong sign to the world - that love is stronger than death. It gave great hope to many people whose lives had been spoilt by not being able to forgive someone who had done them harm.



One of John Paul’s most important teachings was the holiness of life from the moment of conception (the annunciation) until our natural death. He gave witness to this teaching in his own life. All the times when he was ill or wounded he offered his sufferings up for the Church. Even in his last days when illness meant that he was unable to speak properly, he still served the Church with great courage. He gave the world an example of the dignity of those who are old and weak by showing his own weakness to us. John Paul II went home to Our Lord, to Mary and to his own dear family on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2005, an ordinary boy whom God called to do an extraordinary work. I wonder what you are being called to? One of the most important things that John Paul II said to the young people that he loved so much was:

**“My young people, never be afraid to be holy!”**