

Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul II's views on abortion and embryology have been very influential to the Roman Catholic Church. He strictly forbade abortion and other threats to what he regarded as early human life in his encyclical entitled "Evangelium Vitae," meaning the "Gospel of Life." His authority on moral and social issues was highly regarded during his lifetime. Known around the world for his peace efforts and extensive writings on everything from poverty and Communism to contraception and reproductive issues, Pope John Paul II's legacy consists of his major contributions to the Roman Catholic Church's body of doctrine and the effects of his long period of influence on Catholics and governments throughout the world.

John Paul II was born Karol Józef Wojtyła on 18 May 1920 in Wadowice, Poland, a small town just outside of Krakow. He was born the youngest child in a family of five to Emilia Kaczorowska and Karol Wojtyła. The death of his sister Olga before he was born was merely the first in a series of family deaths for Wojtyła: his mother died in 1929, followed by his older brother Edmund in 1932 and his father, an army officer, in 1941. After his confirmation in 1938, Wojtyła began at both the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and a local drama school. From 1939 until 1942 he was forced to work in a quarry due to school closures by Nazi occupation forces. In his last year working at the quarry, Wojtyła began taking courses at the Krakow Seminary with the archbishop, Cardinal Adam Stefan Satięha. He then worked at a chemical factory from 1942 to 1944 in order to avoid being deported to Germany. After the end of World War II, Wojtyła continued his studies at the seminary and finished his classes at the re-opened Jagiellonian University.

Archbishop Satięha officially ordained Wojtyła into the priesthood in Krakow on 1 November 1946. He was immediately sent to Rome to work for the Church and in 1948 finished his doctorate of theology, with a thesis on the words of "St. John of the Cross." During this time he used his pastoral appointment to serve the Polish immigrants in his area, and later in 1948 Wojtyła returned to Krakow, where he served as a vicar in many different parishes. He also served as a chaplain to many students in Krakow. In 1953 he decided to resume his studies on theology at a Catholic university in Lubin and became a professor at both the seminary in Krakow and at the university in Lubin.

Rapid changes occurred in Karol Wojtyła's life in the period from 1958 to 1967. Pope Pius XII appointed him titular Bishop of Ombi and auxiliary of Krakow in 1958. He was consecrated in late 1958, worked in the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965, and also participated in the assemblies of the Synod of Bishops created by Pope Paul VI. In 1964 he was made Archbishop of Krakow before Pope Paul VI made him Cardinal in 1967. Just over ten years later, Wojtyła was elected Pope at the Conclave on 16 October 1978, taking the name John Paul II.

Pope John Paul II's statements regarding the Roman Catholic Church's policies and approaches to life issues—abortion, IVF, embryonic stem cell research, and contraception in particular—defined and solidified the Church's official positions. He provided guidance to the Church on these topics through his large body of writings, including the encyclical, "Evangelium Vitae." His popular series of homilies on the "Theology of the Body, Promoting Natural Family Planning" along with a theological view of the physical and spiritual in harmony, was later made into a book of the same name. In addition to his publications and presentations, John Paul II often commented on the importance of maintaining the sanctity of life in his interviews and addresses to a wide variety of peoples and nations.

Despite his many updates of Church policy in other areas, Pope John Paul II often came under fire for controversial and tradition-based outlooks on modern technology and reproductive issues, espe-

cially because his influence on Catholic and other religious nations sometimes affected government policies. His dedication to preserving the dignity of human life from conception until death served as an anchor for Catholics questioning the direction of science and clarified the Church's stance for people around the world.

Pope John Paul II died 2 April 2005 in Rome. In the following week over three million people came to Rome to pay their respects to the late Pope, some waiting over twenty-four hours to enter St. Peter's Basilica. His successor, Pope Benedict XVI, announced on 28 April 2005 that the normal five-year waiting period for beatification and canonization would be waived for Pope John Paul II. Throughout his life, John Paul II was well-known for his contributions to other religions and to world peace. "Evangelium Vitae," perhaps his most renowned encyclical, clearly defined the value of human life and condemned killing on any level, whether it be the death penalty, euthanasia, or abortion. He reaffirmed the Church's position on life issues and numerous other doctrines that came to the forefront during his papacy, and John Paul II is quite often regarded as one of the most popular and influential popes in the history of the Roman Catholic Church.

Sources

1. "John Paul II." The Vatican: The Holy See. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/index.htm (Accessed July 7, 2007).
2. John Paul II. "Evangelium Vitae." The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1995. http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_jp02ev.htm (Accessed July 7, 2007).