

100th Anniversary of Saint John Paul II's Birth

Last May 18th marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of Karol Wojtyla in Wadowice, Poland. His birthplace is now a museum that brings his example of sanctity and human warmth closer to visitors.

10/21/2020

Karol, the third child in the Wojtyla family, was born on May 18, 1920, at five in the afternoon. It was a hot

afternoon and the windows were wide open. From a nearby church the singing of the litanies to Our Lady could be heard, a tradition that continues today in Poland during May.

80 years later, on June 16, 1999, Pope John Paul II made a pastoral visit to his hometown: “Once again, during my ministry in the Holy See to the universal Church, I come to my birthplace of Wadowice. I look with great emotion upon this city of my childhood, which witnessed my first steps, my first words. The city of my family home, my baptismal church....” Later that day, the Pope had a moving encounter with the thousands of people who filled the central square of Wadowice and the millions of Polish people who followed the event on television.

A building’s varied history

After that trip, one of the descendants of the owners of the building where little Karol had been born began negotiations with the Polish government to recover the property, lost during the communist period. After several years, once the complicated legal aspects had been resolved, he was able to put it up for sale.

That offer coincided with the death of John Paul II. Ryszard, a prosperous local businessman, deeply moved by the exemplary life of the Polish Pope, decided to acquire the property and pay for its remodeling so that the John Paul II Family Home Museum could open there.

Basia and Jaroslaw, a Polish couple who were specialists in narrative museums, offered their assistance, along with Pawel, author of a four-volume biography of John Paul II, and another Pawel, a specialist in

20th century Church history. Between 2010 and 2014, the building underwent extensive renovations that resulted in a large exhibition area, divided into 16 sectors that inform visitors about the life of Karol Wojtyła. The heart of the museum is the Wojtyła family apartment, where Karol was born and lived for 18 years.

See, hear, take part in a story...

“A narrative museum is a place where the objects exhibited take on life. They interact with the other objects and, above all, with the emotions of the visitor,” Basia and Jarosław point out. A dialogue is opened up with the visitor, a dialogue that varies its rhythm.

In these kinds of museums everything has importance and meaning: the architecture, the lighting, the sound... The visitor can walk through it in an hour and a half

or in five hours. A child's experience is not the same as that of an adult or an elderly person. To assist those who decide to undertake this journey, a team of guides has been trained who contribute not only their work but also their hearts.

Basia and Jaroslaw, besides their experience in setting up this type of museum, come from Adrychow, a nearby town, which has helped them to contact the local people and thus obtain more information about the life and times of the protagonist.

For example, among the objects Cardinal Wojtyla left behind in Krakow when he was elected Pope, is a small, elegant silver-threaded purse that belonged to his mother Emilia. Inside was a photograph taken around 1917-1918 of Karol's older brother Edmund and their mother dressed very elegantly with that purse. What was the fate of the

purse after Emilia's death in 1929? Basia, who besides her organizational talents also possesses detective abilities, discovered that it had been used by Stefania Wojtyła, the sister of the father of the future pontiff, and that she later gave it to her nephew Karol as a memorial of his mother. For many years, it was kept in the Krakow curia. It was found shortly after John Paul II's death and is one of the few physical remembrances we have of his mother.

In the Wojtyła's bedroom there is a painting that appears in the photograph of Karol's first communion day. John Paul II himself gave this small image to the nuns who in the 1980s opened a provisional museum there. He kissed it and said: "This should hang it in its original place, on the wall of my house."

The “cursed object”

One of the objects in the exhibition that arouses the most interest from visitors is what one of the guides calls the “cursed object.” It is the weapon used by Ali Agca on May 13, 1981, a 9-millimeter Browning with a 13-round magazine. Agca shot the Pope twice and then the gun jammed. While escaping, the terrorist tried to shoot the police chasing him and Sister Letizia Giudica, who blocked his escape. Fortunately, the weapon refused to fire.

Shortly after the attack, John Paul II wrote a letter to Ali Agca, which he decided not to send because he wanted to visit him in person. The original letter is preserved in the museum, along with videos, photos, and sound recordings that help make this dramatic moment in the Pope’s life come alive for the visitor.

It wasn't easy to get the attack weapon loaned to the museum. It was part of the material evidence during the investigation and trial and is now owned by the Roman Museum of Criminology. Thanks to the help of ecclesiastical institutions and the recommendation of the Polish government, in March 2014 the Papal Museum in Wadowice received the weapon on loan for a limited time.

Basia spent many hours visiting friends and witnesses to the life of John Paul II, and had lengthy conversations with Cardinals Stanislaw Dziwisz and Stanislaw Rylko. Little by little, she and her husband managed to collect more than 200 remembrances of John Paul II and his family, as well as 140 photographs. They also received many objects from schoolmates or people who in their youth had

benefited from Karol Wojtyła's pastoral work.

A quick visit

In the 16 thematic spaces spread over the four floors of the museum, visitors can follow the stages in Karol Wojtyła's life: from the family home in Wadowice, where "it all started," to the "world home" that the entire world became for him. The visitor learns about the inter-war Wadowice (1920-1939), his excursions to the mountains as a young priest, and information about the 104 apostolic journeys he undertook as Pope.

The Wadowice the future Pope grew up in was rich in cultural and spiritual wealth. In the area dedicated to "The Little Homeland," the history of the Wadowice Jews is narrated. Approximately a fifth of the city's inhabitants were Jewish. The Bałamuth family, who owned the building and sold it for the museum

to be set up there, made it a condition of the sale that part of it be dedicated to their Jewish ancestors living in Wadowice.

Basia and Jaroslaw designed a section reminiscent of Chiel Bałamuth's shop there in the 1920s. The building had some shops in the front, facing the central square; in the back were a crafts workshop and three or four apartments for rent. The memorial section to the Jews of Wadowice has several photographs, including that of Jerzy Kluger, a great friend of Karol Wojtyła from primary school days right to the end of his life in Rome. Many other souvenirs donated by Jewish families whose ancestors lived in Wadowice are displayed. The Wailing Wall is also represented there, where John Paul II prayed in the year 2000.

From 1919 to 1938 the Wojtyłas resided on the first floor. The home

was divided into three sections: the kitchen, the bedrooms and the living room, similar to other middle-class families. Basia decorated this part of the museum with period furniture and some original objects belonging to the Wojtylas: Emilia's embroidered napkins, her elegant purse, family tableware and photographs from the family album, among others.

After Emilia's death, in April 1929, the eight-year-old Karol was left alone in the apartment with his father. The bedroom became the main room, and they practically stopped using the living room. In addition to the two beds, there was also the kneeler where, as John Paul II recalled, his father used to pray until very late at night. Through the window Karol could see the sundial on the wall of the parish church with the inscription: "Time is passing quickly, eternity awaits."

University student, worker, actor and poet, priest

Karol Wojtyła spent 40 years of his life in Krakow, a city about 50 km from Wadowice. He lived there from 1938 until his election to the Petrine See. In this part of the exhibition, the visitor can see the objects related to his university studies, his work in the Zakrzówek quarry, and his seminary years preparing for the priesthood. Next come the areas dedicated to the post-war years, including his successive appointments as bishop, archbishop and cardinal.

On November 1, 1946, he was ordained a priest by Archbishop Adam Sapieha; the following day he celebrated his first Mass in the crypt of Saint Leonard, in the cathedral of Krakow. A replica of the crypt has been set up, with the original cross and candles placed on the alter.

The guides make use of the opportunity to speak naturally about issues related to family life, suffering, the value of work, the priestly vocation, the sacraments... When listening to them, one has the impression of listening to the Christian means of formation Basia and Jaroslaw attend regularly. One senses that the John Paul II Family Home Museum is more than just a place where objects from the past can be viewed. The memories come alive for visitors. The objects speak and transmit a clear message: "Holiness is possible, also for you."

Into the deep!

In this part of the museum, the visitor hears the words of Cardinal Pericle Felici: *Habemus papam...* Here one also finds a large replica of a boat from the time of Jesus found on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum. It is a symbol of the

Church, whose helm our Lord entrusted to Karol Wojtyła on October 16, 1978.

John Paul II, as the visible Head of the universal Church, exercised the authority of the magisterium. Hence the covers of his fourteen encyclicals are placed on the fourteen columns that support the dome. A glass showcase contains the manuscript of his first encyclical: *Redemptor Hominis*. In the center of the room there is a replica of the Holy Door opened by John Paul II, adorned with bas-reliefs of Biblical scenes and the coats of arms of the 28 popes who at some point in history have opened the Holy Door. On the back of the replica is this inscription in ten languages: *Do not be afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ.*

During his pontificate, John Paul II traveled almost a million miles on his apostolic journeys, visiting 129

countries. A special memorial of the Holy Father's apostolic journeys is the soil from the places John Paul II visited. Nearly 60 small containers of soil are now found there, a number that is constantly growing thanks to incoming shipments. The side wall is covered with a 15-meter multimedia screen that allows the visitor to view photographs and read fragments of the Holy Father's addresses during his 104 apostolic journeys. The last point of this pilgrimage route is a glass wall with the image of the Merciful Jesus and the inscription "Be Apostles of Divine Mercy," and the text of the prayer dedicating the world to Divine Mercy in 2002.

You are my hope! With this phrase, the sector dedicated to the Pope's apostolic concern for young people begins. It is filled with bright colors and sounds, and one can hear the hymns of the various World Youth Days. One of the walls contains

hundreds of colorful plates that together form a large image of John Paul II surrounded by young people. It is impossible not to smile when listening to the Holy Father's joyful dialogue with young people in Krakow.

There are also reflections on the passage of time: *This fleetingness has a meaning*. The replica of the sundial that the young Karol Wojtyła could see from the kitchen window of his home, and the clock from the papal apartments that stopped on April 2, 2005 at 9:37 pm, when John Paul II went to the Father's house, are both found here. Here the visitor can also see the Bible that Sister Tobiana Sobotka was reading; when the Pope died the nun marked the place where she had stopped and wrote the word: *Amen*.

A story that continues its course

On June 7, 2018, the Family Home Museum of the Holy Father John Paul II in Wadowice received its one millionth visitor. The lucky tourist turned out to be Monika, who came with her husband from a small town near Poznan. More than 80% of the visitors to John Paul II's birthplace are Polish, with the rest coming mainly from Italy, France, the United States, Spain, Slovakia, Germany, Brazil, Austria and Great Britain. But the Museum has welcomed pilgrims from over 100 countries, including Saudi Arabia, Barbados, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Cuba, Mauritius, the Ivory Coast, New Zealand, China, Zambia, Kenya and South Africa.

Every year conferences and concerts are held on the occasion of papal anniversaries, and children and young people can take part in museum workshops. Saint John Paul II's birthplace has become a focus of formation and catechesis. Love for

John Paul II has brought together many different institutions: ecclesiastical, state, local and national. People from many religions and cultures have united themselves wholeheartedly to this initiative.

In March 2020 the beatification process for Saint John Paul II's parents, Emilia and Karol Wojtyla, was opened in the archdiocese of Krakow. Plans are also underway to begin the process of Edmund (1906-1932), Karol's older brother, who died at an early age after contracting an infectious disease in his work as a doctor.

During the first years of John Paul II's pontificate, Blessed Alvaro del Portillo made reference to the possible beginning of Opus Dei's apostolic work in Poland: "We need to wait and pray; everything will come in time." It was impossible to imagine back then the wide-ranging

apostolic work that so many people of Opus Dei would carry out in this land, and the role that some of them continue to have in a museum of great apostolic effectiveness.

pdf | document generated automatically from <https://opusdei.org/en-za/article/100th-anniversary-of-saint-john-paul-ii-s-birth/> (01/21/2026)