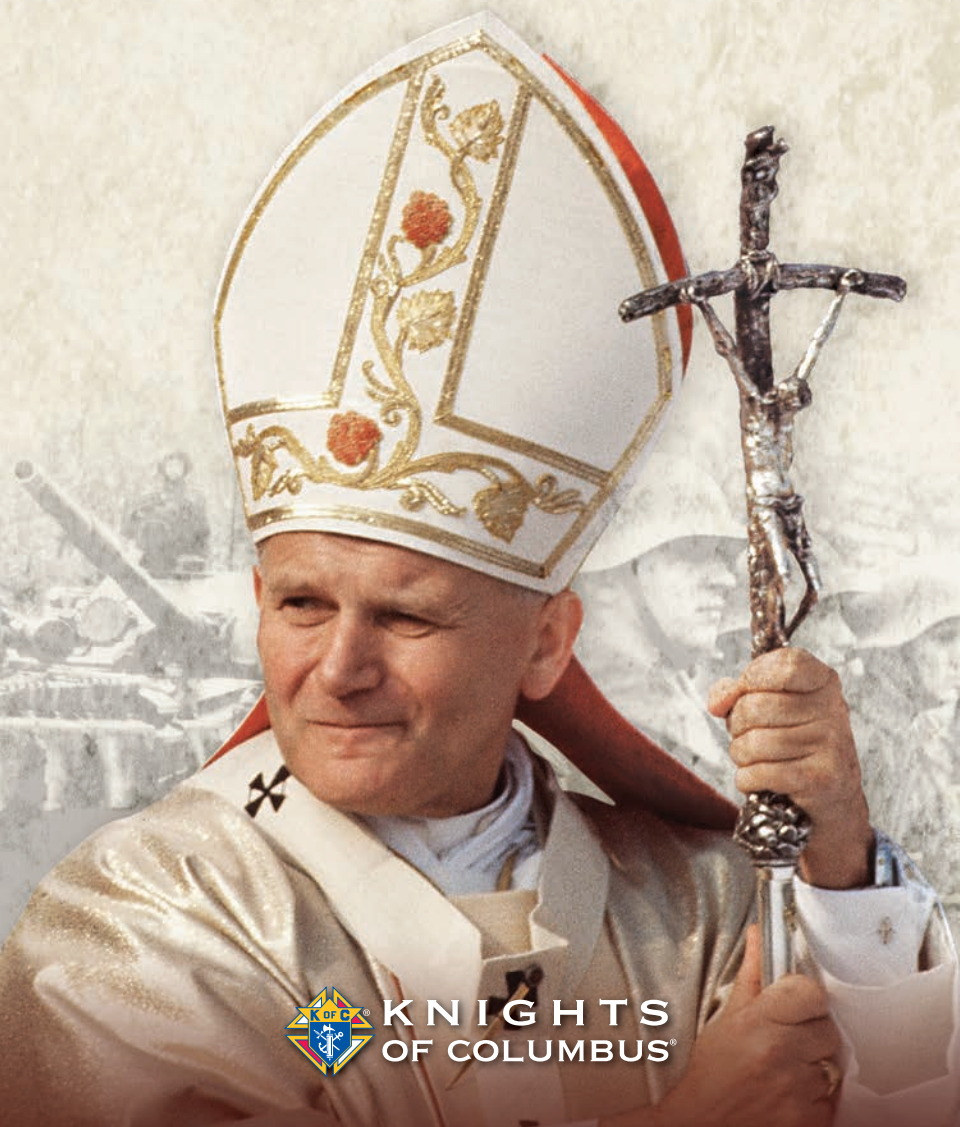


LIBERATING A CONTINENT

Study Guide



**KNIGHTS
OF COLUMBUS®**

❖ Introduction ❖

Imagine this: You are given two maps of Europe — one made in 1695, the other in 1795. Someone asks you to point out the location of Poland. You easily find it on the first map, yet when looking at the second, you are stumped. You know where it should be, but in its place you find only the bordering nations of Russia, Prussia and Austria. Poland had disappeared.

Between 1795 and 1920, independent Poland was essentially nonexistent. Polish uprisings against the ruling powers were again and again defeated, leading to persecution, harsh living conditions and strict controls. The Polish language was forbidden for public communication, and education about Polish history and culture was severely restricted.

By the end of World War I, however, the Poles saw decisive victories, with war treaties partially restoring their land. And two years later, during the Battle of Warsaw, the outnumbered Polish forces pushed back the Red Army. This Polish victory, which became known as the Miracle on the Vistula, was astounding, essentially preventing Soviet expansion into Western Europe.

It was in 1920, during these years of independence, that Karol Wojtyła was born in Wadowice. Unfortunately, this period of independence was short-lived — within two decades, the Nazis invaded Poland, beginning a regime of unimaginable horror. An invasion of Soviet Union forces followed only weeks later. Forcing many Poles to serve in their labor camps, the Soviets killed hundreds of thousands and secretly executed approximately 22,000 Polish officers during the Katyn Forest massacre.

The war left Poland crippled. Millions had been deported or killed, and those who survived now saw their country in the oppressive control of the Soviet Union. Denying the Poles basic human freedoms, the Soviets forced many of them to live and work in cities like Nowa Huta, a factory town built as a “socialist utopia,” where workers lived under a strict anti-religious Stalinist industrialization program.

After enduring decades of communist control, Poland saw a speck of hope in 1978. That year, Karol Wojtyła, now a cardinal and the archbishop of Kraków, was elected pope, taking the name John Paul II. He was something new, being not only the first Polish pope but also the first non-Italian pope in more than four centuries. He would shine light in a world darkened by the threat of nuclear war and bring a hopeful vision of liberty to a people suffocating under tyranny, placing an entire continent on the path toward freedom.

*“And I cry, I who am a son of the land of Poland. ...
I cry from all the depths of this millennium,
I cry on the vigil of Pentecost:
Let your Spirit descend! Let your Spirit descend!
And renew the face of the earth, the face of this land.”*

— St. John Paul II



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❖ Memorable Quotes ❖

George Weigel: I think the Second World War was the formative experience in the life of Karol Wojtyła. Those strong pressures under which he lived for over five years were something like the tremendous pressures under the crust of the earth, and they formed, in his case, a diamond. They formed something brilliant and hard, something that could reflect light and something that could cut through what seemed impermeable, like the Berlin Wall.

John O'Sullivan: Cardinal Wojtyła in all kinds of ways, was providing a kind of canopy of freedom for free discussion among intellectuals. Bringing them under a canopy of limited free speech under the Church, he helped to create the ground on which Solidarity later flourished.

Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz: We cannot forget that he was a man of great faith. That all stemmed from his prayer life, from his union with God. Before he would deal with anything he would turn to prayer — praying on his knees, lying prostrate in his private chapel. It all began with prayer and trusting in God. This is how the path toward freedom began.

Carl Anderson: Where he says, “Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors to Christ,” the pope is speaking directly to the Soviet authorities. It was perhaps their worst nightmare.

Polish people gathered for papal visit, June 2, 1979: We want God. We are your people. He is our King. He is our Lord.

❖ Thoughts for Discussion ❖

1. Karol Wojtyła was born in a newly freed Polish state. During this time, the Poles were able once again to celebrate Polish cultures and traditions, which had remained intact despite the oppressive control of Russia, Prussia and Austria.

Do you agree with biographer George Weigel that it was Catholicism that kept Poland intact? If Poland had not been Catholic, what do think the nation would look like today? In what ways was the Catholic Church the “safe deposit box of national culture?”

2. When 9-year-old Karol Wojtyła goes with his father to the Shrine of Kalwaria, they pray before the painting of Our Lady of Calvary. The painting was miraculous, shedding tears in 1641, a time when Poland was suffering from war and epidemics.

The Wojtyłas lived in walking distance of a basilica which housed an image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and they could have much more conveniently gone there to pray. Why is it significant that Karol's father brought his son all the way to Kalwaria to pray before this particular image? What do you think it means to see life as a pilgrimage, as Karol's father did?

3. Karol Wojtyła endured profound personal tragedy in his life. After the deaths of his parents and brother, he was left alone in a country that was being deliberately destroyed by the Nazis and Soviets.

In what ways did his personal sufferings and labors help shape John Paul II? How did they help him connect to his fellow Poles?

4. Karol's study of Polish drama and poetry convinced him that culture, not politics or economics, is one of the most dynamic forces in history.

Can you think of political and economic forces in our world today that depend upon cultural interests? What does this teach us about the importance of engaging secular culture?

5. John Paul II proclaimed the Catholic belief that men and women are made in the image of God and thus possess inherent dignity. Communism, however, saw people as a commodity, regulating human nature to a series of drives and instincts without any spiritual capacity.

Remnants of the communist view of the human person still exist today. What government rulings have essentially denied the dignity of every human person? If man has no inherent spiritual dignity, can freedom, justice and peace ever really exist?

6. During the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła helped develop the *Declaration of Religious Freedom*, offering knowledge on the relation of freedom and truth.

In your experience, how does freedom relate to the search for truth? On many campuses, students encounter the modernistic view that truth changes in relation to personal, cultural and historical contexts. Believing that human beings should have the freedom to search for the Truth without coercion, how do you think that John Paul II would respond to this? How might you address the same issues on your campuses today?

7. Even though Pope Paul VI thought the Iron Curtain would be a permanent fixture in Europe, Cardinal Wojtyła took a strong stand against the communist authorities.

What do you think motivated Cardinal Wojtyła to take a stand? Dr. Stanisław Grygiel says if only one sentence could be saved from all of Scripture, Pope John Paul II would protect this verse: “The truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32). How do you think his motivations were shaped by this passage?

8. Millions of Poles were revolutionized after the pope’s pilgrimage to their country in 1979, their faith uplifted and renewed in the space of just a few days.

How would you define this “revolution of conscience?” Imagine being part of that revolution and personally hearing the words of Pope John II. Would you feel an obligation to publicly defend the truth? In what ways is the truth being oppressed at present, and how can we meet our own obligation to defend it on our campuses today?

9. When Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass for university students at St. Anne’s Church in Warsaw, he addressed streets overflowing with young people, asking, “Have you thought about how in your life God is supposed to reveal himself through you?”

John Paul II did not tell each student what their purpose was but left the search in their own hands, simply saying: “Think about it.” They were finally free to shed the false lie of communism that claimed man was only a commodity with no intrinsic spiritual worth. Think about your own life. Have your actions revealed your faith and trust in God? What is the purpose of your life and God’s plan for you in the future?

10. The year after John Paul II’s visit to Poland, shipyard worker Anna Walentynowicz was fired from her position in Gdańsk, Poland. Her unjust treatment inspired Lech Wałęsa and other workers to demand better working conditions, the freedom to form independent trade unions and the right to choose their own destiny, sparking a wave of strikes that gave birth to the Solidarity movement.

Although John Paul II never spoke about politics or organizing strikes during his 1979 visit to Poland, how did he provide inspiration during this time? What was it about the Solidarity movement that allowed it to succeed in freeing the continent from years of political persecution and hardship when so many other resistance efforts failed?