St. Pius X was born Giuseppe Melchiorre Sarto on June 2, 1835 in the little Italian town of Riese, in the province of Treviso near Venice. His father was Giovanni Sarto, a cobbler by trade, who was also caretaker of the city hall and the town’s postmaster; his mother was Margherita Sanson, a seamstress. The family had few worldly goods and the early life of young Giuseppe, eldest of eight surviving children, was a difficult one. He attended the parish school and while there, his intelligence and high moral character attracted the notice of the pastor, who arranged a scholarship for the lad at the high school in Castelfranco, a larger town two miles from Riese. After completing the course of instruction at Castelfranco, he made known that he had felt the call to the priesthood for some time, but had considered the means of attaining this end beyond his grasp. However, his parents saw that the will of God was in their son’s calling, and they did all in their power to encourage him, while the pastor again came to the rescue by arranging another scholarship to the seminary at Padua. In November of 1850, young Sarto arrived at Padua and was immediately taken up with the life and studies of the seminary. The same high qualifications of intellect and spirit, later to blossom forth in his work as bishop and Pope, were much in evidence as a seminarian. Giuseppe worked hard and finally on September 18, 1858, Father Sarto was ordained at the cathedral in Castelfranco.

Interested in politics, he encouraged Italian Catholics to become more politically involved. One of his first papal acts was to end the supposed right of governments to interfere by veto in papal elections—a practice that reduced the freedom of the 1903 conclave which had elected him.

In 1905, when France renounced its agreement with the Holy See and threatened confiscation of Church property if governmental control of Church affairs were not granted, Pius X courageously rejected the demand.
While he did not author a famous social encyclical as his predecessor had done, he denounced the ill treatment of indigenous peoples on the plantations of Peru, sent a relief commission to Messina after an earthquake and sheltered refugees at his own expense.

No reform of Pius’ was more widely acclaimed than the Decrees on Holy Communion, and Pius X is often called “the Pope of the Eucharist.” These decrees, issued from 1905 through 1910, allowed the reception of first Holy Communion at an earlier age than had formerly been required, encouraged the frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist by all Catholics, and relaxed the fast for the sick.

On the 11th anniversary of his election as pope, Europe was plunged into World War I. Pius X labored for the Master until the very last days of his life. His 79 years had not set too heavily upon him, but overwork and anxiety over the impending doom of a World War began to take their toll. Pius saw clearly the horrors of the coming conflict and felt helpless that he could not prevent it. A little more than a month after the outbreak of the war, the Pope was seized with an attack of influenza, and his weakened constitution could not combat the illness. The end for the Christ-like Pius came peacefully on August 20, 1914, and the world, though in the throes of a death struggle, paused to mourn the gentle and humble man whose last will and testament gave such an insight into his character. It read, in part, “I was born poor, I lived poor, I die poor.” Shortly after his death, the faithful began to make pilgrimages to his tomb, bringing flowers, prayers, and petitions for favors. He was canonized in 1954.

The inscription on his tomb in the crypt of the basilica of St. Peter’s gives the most eloquent testimony to a life spent in the service of God:

“Born poor and humble of heart,

Undaunted champion of the Catholic faith,

Zealous to restore all things in Christ,

Crowned a holy life with a holy death.”

[Compiled by Deacon Dave & Thérèse Ream, O.F.S., Revised July 2017]