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A Joyful Warrior for Life

Ruth Pakaluk, a mother of six, pro-life leader and Catholic convert, died from breast cancer at the age of 41. A recently published book gives a glimpse into her short but fruitful life.

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Ruth, a supernumerary member of Opus Dei, died from breast cancer at the age of 41. "The Appalling Strangeness of the Mercy of God," published by Ignatius Press and

edited by her husband Michael, is a collection of Ruth's letters that show her intelligence, deep faith and joyful spirit. The book concludes with several talks she gave for cooperators of Opus Dei.

The book has an introduction by philosopher Peter Kreeft . He writes, "In this book you will meet a truly wonderful person. There are few things in life more precious than that. I invite you to meet a warrior for life whose pen is mightier than death's sword."

Author Michael Novak also praised the book highly: "I have never read a more beautiful and touching book -- a book about a joyous life and overpowering death, and grief and joy."

Reprinted below is a full review by Dwight Duncan from "The Pilot," the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Boston.

"Radiating joy amidst the screaming kids"

Dwight G. Duncan

Boston Pilot, April 22, 2011

Ruth Pakaluk died of metastatic breast cancer in 1998 at the youthful age of 41. She had seven children (one of whom died of sudden infant death syndrome), and was married to Michael Pakaluk, professor of philosophy at Ave Maria University (and columnist for The Boston Pilot). Ignatius Press has just published a magnificent volume of her letters and talks entitled "The Appalling Strangeness of the Mercy of God," edited with a biographical overview and notes by Michael.

One might think that her life, marked by the untimely deaths of her son Thomas, followed by her own, was

tragic. Actually, it is more a divine comedy that has a happy ending, manifesting "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God," one of her favorite lines from a Graham Greene novel.

This is because, as Michael documents in his introduction, Ruth's life was one of continual conversion and joy amidst the ups and downs of daily life. She showed "the greatest love in the smallest things," as Pope Benedict recently said of St. Therese of the Child Jesus. Gifted with a great sense of humor, a powerful and penetrating intellect, and a dynamite writing style, Ruth reminds me of Flannery O'Connor, the great American writer whom Thomas Merton compared to Sophocles.

Okay, I'm biased. I knew Ruth the last ten years of her life, and have always been close to Michael and the Pakaluks. Ruth, Michael and I were

all active in Opus Dei as well as the pro-life movement, and we all had Harvard bachelor's degrees. Funny to think of Ruth (or Michael, for that matter) as a bachelor of anything, since they got married as undergrads. Ruth went on to serve as president of Massachusetts Citizens for Life for a number of years, as if being a mother and homemaker didn't give her enough to do.

Here's Ruth giving a talk on Plan of Life, "a schedule or a system for working prayer and other aspects of the spiritual life into your daily routine": "The love God is really looking for, the love that is true and that counts, is the love of ten thousand mornings of getting up, being cheerful, listening to the kids when they come in from school like a thundering herd of elephants, and smiling at your husband when he comes in from work and refraining from rehearsing all the horrors of

your day. It is these countless, repeated acts of self-denial that makes love deepen and grow."

In a letter to a friend dated Sept. 18, 1993, she wrote: "I understand completely the relief you felt at the end of the day. Mothers long for the same every day starting at about 4:00 p.m. My friend Katy and I call it the Arsenic Hour (it's either you or them, but someone's going to get it in the tea).

"However, we somehow drag ourselves through it, through dinner, through the bedtime bedlam, then collapse at the close of the day after maybe writing a letter (like this one) or reading a chapter or two. But it is a great life. As far as I can make out, everyone has the burden of finding a large part of the day a grind. Just because you experience this in a business suit does not make it more pleasant. In fact, it seems to me to

make it less pleasant, because business suits are uncomfortable. A surprising number of people find the money they make adequate compensation for this experience of drudgery. I don't think I would.

"Housewives have lots of physical work and drudgery and the psychologically difficult task of listening to children fight, cry, and whine. But we have more free time to think our own thoughts and converse with our friends than most people ever do. I cannot picture a job that would be more appealing to me than this."

The pope could easily have been explaining Ruth when he said earlier this week: "Christian holiness is none other than charity, fully experienced." However, in order that charity might, "like a good seed, grow in the soul and there bear fruit, the faithful must listen gladly to the

Word of God and, by its grace, carry out His will through their works, participate frequently in the sacraments, above all the Eucharist and the Holy Liturgy; they must constantly apply themselves in prayer, in the abnegation of their selves, in the active service of their brothers and in the exercise of every virtue" (Pope Benedict XVI, general audience of April 13, 2011).

Get this book. Read this book. It couldn't be more timely: A Hollywood movie out next month entitled "There Be Dragons" depicts the origins of Opus Dei in the early years of St. Josemaria Escriva, its founder. Ruth's story is likewise one of holiness, extraordinary virtue, lived amidst ordinary concerns in modern America. Her story, though practically here and now, is nonetheless timeless and radiant. To be continued...

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