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Ruth Pakaluk: Wife, Mother, Friend, Activist

Ruth Pakaluk was an extraordinarily warm and talented woman. She entered Harvard University as a pro-choice atheist. After her conversion to Catholicism, she dedicated herself to raising her family and to pro-life activism. At age 33, Ruth was diagnosed with cancer. Shortly before dying peacefully at age 41, she wrote to a friend: "I have loved the life God gave me. There is no other life I would rather have lived."

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This sketch of Ruth Pakaluk is from John Coverdale's book and podcast "Encounters: Finding God in All Walks of Life."

Encounters presents profiles of people living Saint Josemaria's message of finding God in everyday life. Each week a new podcast episode is released with a new profile. You can purchase the entire book from Amazon or Scepter Publishers.

Ruth Pakaluk converted from atheism to Christianity at Harvard and became a Catholic the year after her graduation. The mother of seven children, she was deeply involved in

the Right to Life movement and played an active role in the life of her parish and in organizing the apostolic activities of Opus Dei. She was diagnosed with breast cancer at thirty-four years of age but continued to live a normal life until a month before her death, seven years later in September 1998 at the age of forty-one.

From Atheist to Catholic, Passing through Evangelical

Ruth was born Ruth Elizabeth Van Kooy on March 19, 1957, in South Orange, New Jersey, a suburban town on the outskirts of New York City. Her father was an electrical engineer. Rather than practicing engineering, he taught in a vocational high school as a way of contributing to society. Her mother stayed at home while the children were very young but later worked as an executive secretary. In high school

Ruth produced, directed, and acted in numerous plays and musicals under the auspices of a theater group founded and managed by students. She was an excellent singer, chosen for the All-Eastern choir. She was also an accomplished pianist and played the oboe, flute, violin, and bass drum in various musical groups. Ruth was a good athlete and played on the field hockey team. In her childhood, she attended a Presbyterian church with her family, but as an adolescent, she rejected her parents' liberal Christianity and became a pro-choice atheist.

During her senior year in high school, Ruth considered attending stewardess school because "all you need to do is smile, and you can see the world." She also thought about going to McGill University, where the boy with whom she was having what she described toward the end of her life as "an almost fairytale romance"

planned to go. At the suggestion of a local Radcliffe College alum, she applied to Harvard University. She could not turn down its offer because if she had, “I would never have known if I could compete with the best.”

Ruth did so well in her freshman year that she was asked to serve as a teaching assistant the next year for the course Space, Time, Motion. In her sophomore year, her assigned reading included Governor Bradford’s account of how the Pilgrims survived their first bitterly cold winter in America. She was struck by the heroism and sacrifice with which they cared for each other during the illness which swept through the colony and contrasted it with her own hedonistic and self-centered life. “I want to live like them,” she thought to herself. “I don’t even care if what these people believed is true. I want to live like

them.” Despite her avowal that she didn’t care whether Christianity was true, she soon resolved to search for a truth in which she could believe.

A few years later, Ruth wrote to a friend:

As soon as I came (or rather, returned) to the conviction that God exists, it seemed obvious that the only rational thing to do was to find out more about Him and what He wanted, since by definition God is infinitely more worthwhile and important than anything else. It’s now hard for me to remember or imagine how a person can have a belief in God and yet not think that it’s imperative that he strive to put God at the center of his consciousness. Doing that may sound terribly exhausting to you but consider this—the church has always taught that God made man in such a way that he cannot help desiring

happiness, yet we can only be happy (truly happy, as opposed to momentarily amused or distracted) by being united with Him. So then, constantly turning one's attention to God would be the most natural thing for a man to do.

Among the students in Ruth's section of the course on Space, Time, Motion, was Michael Pakaluk, a lapsed Catholic who entered Harvard as a religious skeptic. After a narrow escape from death by drowning during the summer between freshman and sophomore year, he had set out on a search to determine whether Christianity was true.

Michael and Ruth began dating and soon fell passionately in love.

According to Michael, their "falling in love looked inseparable from being faithful to a common yearning to investigate whether Christianity might possibly be true." Neither of them knew a single student or

professor who was a Christian, so their determination to figure out if Christianity was true immediately became a bond between them.

Both Ruth and Michael were convinced that the key factor was how one lived. By the end of sophomore year, they concluded that to live a Christian life one had to belong to a Christian community, so they began attending United Church Congregational located on the Cambridge Common. As time went on, they became increasingly frustrated with the church's exclusive focus on social and political issues and its lack of interest in theology or spirituality. Although they continued to attend services there, they joined the Evangelical InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) at Harvard. They expected to find frequent intellectual debates about philosophical and theological topics. Instead, they found emotional

enthusiasm and an emphasis on maintaining an upbeat mood.

In fall 1978, Ruth and Michael were married at her parents' Presbyterian church. At the time, only a handful of other Harvard undergraduates were married. The Pakaluks rented a small apartment and lived a very frugal life. They budgeted twenty dollars per week for food, a very small sum of money even then. They could get by on so little because they had become deeply concerned about world hunger and consequently had become vegetarians. Buying in bulk and shunning prepared foods allowed them to eat for less than seventy-five cents per day. They tithed, giving ten percent of their after-tax income, including financial aid, to their church, the InterVarsity Fellowship, and their two favorite charities, Oxfam and Bread for the World, an advocacy group. At first, both Ruth and Michael firmly

rejected Catholicism—Ruth because of the anti-Catholicism of the Reformed church she had grown up in, and Michael because he considered the nominal Catholicism of his childhood a false religion that prevented forming a personal relationship with Christ. They both were appalled when Curt, a friend in the InterVarsity small group that Michael was leading, announced that he was taking instruction to become a Catholic. The couple argued with him at length but found themselves unable to refute his reasons for becoming Catholic.

An important factor in their approach to the Catholic Church was Malcolm Muggeridge's book on Mother Teresa. As Michael recalls:

Mother Teresa was clearly a deeply prayerful woman, a true follower of Christ, who was, moreover, holy. And this posed a problem for us. How

could it be that a false and apostate form of Christianity would be the place where one alone found what seemed to us a true appraisal of suffering, prayerfulness, and holiness? There was an argument in the early Church about Christ: either he was a bad man, or he was God, but there was no intermediate. He couldn't be simply a good moral teacher. We vaguely sensed that we were encountering a similar dilemma here. The Catholic Church was either very bad or very good. Yet Mother Teresa was making the first option appear untenable.

They read many books about the Catholic Church and the early history of Christianity, especially the writings of Fr. John Hardon, SJ. Gradually, they came to accept the Church's positions on both abortion and contraception and admire its courage in defending them. Around Christmas 1978, they decided to stop

using contraception. Michael explains their decision:

The attitudes fostered by contraception (the “contraceptive” mentality) are contrary to the attitudes a Christian ought to have. Christians for centuries had always rejected contraception. It was easy to believe that the change in the teaching of most Christian churches on this matter was an example of the same sort of “secularization”—swimming with the tide—that was apparent in churches as regards abortion, which was unquestionably wrong and unchristian. At the same time, we thought, it would hardly be surprising if rejection of contraception were a kind of “test” of real fidelity to Christ in the modern world. The way we saw it, each generation had its test—for each generation of Christians there was some practice that the world embraced and Christians had to

reject, or which the world rejected and Christians had to embrace—a practice which would require sacrifice; a practice which to “the world” made no sense but which to Christians was evidently the way of true discipleship to Christ. Given that there was likely to be such a test, it seemed to us that contraception was a likely candidate for that sort of thing. Therefore, we decided that as followers of Christ, we should stop using contraceptives. Yet the bigger question of whether we should try to conceive a child was not one that we engaged. We were students and simply presumed that we should not have a baby.

By Spring 1980, both Ruth and Michael were leaning toward the Catholic Church. Since Michael had won a Marshall Fellowship to study in Edinburgh, however, and they were going to move to Scotland for two years in the fall, they did not

want to make an immediate decision. By the time they arrived in Scotland, Ruth had made up her mind, although Michael still had some doubts. In Edinburgh, they both began taking instruction in the Catholic faith at the Catholic chaplaincy of the university. Ruth wrote to her in-laws: “Life is going along so well for us—I am often amazed at the quantity and quality of our blessing. Harder times may very well come—this is always in God’s almighty hands—but I do not worry. How few people receive in a lifetime all the joys I’ve had in just two years!” On Christmas Eve, Michael made a general confession and received Communion, and Ruth was received into the Church and confirmed.

Soon, they began to attend daily Mass. Michael explains their decision:

We insisted that our conversion to Catholicism did not change the fact that we were evangelical Christians. We were now evangelicals who were Catholics, who believed that what we loved and were looking for in evangelical Christianity was safeguarded and found in its most intense form in the saints of the Catholic Church. As evangelicals, we believed that we should have a daily “quiet time,” when we conversed with Christ, developing a personal relationship with him. We wanted to get as close as possible to Christ—that’s why we wanted to be like the early Christians as much as possible. We came to see the Mass as the Lord’s Supper transcending time. To go to Mass was to be at the table of the Lord’s Supper, alongside the apostles, and completely on a par with them as far as our nearness to Christ was concerned. The early Christians enjoyed no priority which was not also enjoyed by someone

who simply attended Mass. But given that that is so, then, we reasoned, what better prayer could there be, and what better way to grow in the personal relationship with Christ which we sought than to attend Mass and pray there? Thus, our practice of the daily “quiet time” led naturally to daily Mass. Not that we didn’t also aim to pray silently and “in secret” at other times in the day; but it seemed to us that the very first time free for prayer, the “first fruits” of our time, as it were, should be given to the Mass.

Ruth and Michael found it hard to keep their resolution to attend Mass every day. They would succeed for a few days or a week and then let things slip for a week or two. Both felt this was unacceptable. They recognized they needed some help, but did not know what this could be, or what form it might take. Years later, when they first learned about

Opus Dei, they recognized that it was exactly what they had been looking for.

Their first child, Michael, was born on November 27, 1981. According to her husband, his birth made Ruth much more selfless. He recalls that twice during the night [Michael] made some slight fussy sounds, and Ruth immediately got up in the dark to pick him up and nurse him. This dedication astonished me. Of course, it makes sense: when a baby cries at night you have to feed him.

But I had never seen that kind of straightforward, spontaneous selflessness in Ruth. She didn't grumble or tarry in bed for a moment. The baby made a sound, and she sprung to her feet to tend grumble or tarry in bed to him.

Michael's birth also transformed Ruth's attitude toward abortion. During the previous year, she had

studied the issue in depth and had become intellectually convinced that abortion involved the taking of an innocent human life. That conviction was bolstered by her acceptance of the Church's teaching on the subject. She was deeply convinced, but was not viscerally committed to the pro-life cause. Her husband noticed that with Michael's birth, she began to look at the abortion controversy in a new and more urgent light. She observed this change in herself, writing at that time, in connection with the miscarriage suffered by a friend, that she was no longer capable of being "philosophical about the deaths of other people's children" and that "what seemed sad and tragic before is now plain terrible to contemplate." Her opposition to abortion was now rooted in her own motherhood and was not simply the cool, intellectual conclusion of the philosophical argument.

In the summer of 1982, after two years in Scotland, the Pakaluks returned to Harvard, where Michael began studying for a doctorate in philosophy. During the six years they would remain at Harvard, they had two more boys, Max (June 1983) and John Henry (March 1986), and a daughter, Maria (October 1987). They briefly considered daycare, but Ruth decided she didn't want her children raised by people who, while they might be competent and even kind, did not love them.

To supplement Michael's meager stipend, Ruth took a part-time job doing bookkeeping and general office work for their landlord. The work would have struck most people of her intelligence and education as extremely dull, but she focused on its good side and wrote to a friend, "It's fun work, very convenient, and adequately lucrative."

Member of Opus Dei

In Scotland, a friend had given the Pakaluks a copy of St. Josemaría's book *The Way*, but their first contact with Opus Dei came when a Harvard graduate student saw Michael at daily Mass and invited him to an evening of recollection preached at the Opus Dei Center near Harvard by Fr. Sal Ferigle. Michael was deeply impressed by what he heard. As he recalls, he thought, "This is the Catholic faith that I converted to. This is what I have read in books written by saints and in the documents of the early Church." He immediately arranged to begin spiritual direction with Fr. Sal and to attend his classes on Catholic doctrine.

When Michael explained to Ruth what he had learned about Opus Dei, she concurred that it seemed to be

exactly what they had been looking for:

Since we converted to Catholicism, we were aware that we need some kind of help, some “external structure” (as we would explain it to ourselves), in practicing the interior life. We were aware, first of all, that we needed a spiritual director. ... The priests of Opus Dei were evidently holy and knowledgeable men of the church who were available to give such direction. Secondly, we realized that we weren’t successful at consistently going to Mass and saying our prayers. We would be better or worse at this depending upon the difficulty of the circumstances, or our subjective feelings; and yet apparently there were many members of Opus Dei who had been consistently living a demanding life of devotion for many years and amidst all the difficulties of life.

Ruth immediately began to attend Opus Dei formative activities and to receive personal spiritual direction from Fr. Sal, whom she considered “the holiest priest I had ever known.” For his part, Fr. Sal was deeply impressed with Ruth, and particularly with her apostolic drive.

About a year later, in summer 1984, Ruth became a supernumerary member of Opus Dei. Michael had joined the Work a few months earlier. They began to live the members’ plan of life, to attend circles and other means of spiritual formation, and to carry out a quiet apostolate based on friendship.

They also began to form friendships with other people connected with Opus Dei, particularly Jan and Tom Hardy. At the time, the Hardys had six children, which struck Michael as an unbelievably high number. “How could they manage?” he and Ruth

asked themselves. “How was it possible to handle so many children and pay for the expenses?” But when they saw the Hardys’ combination of Christian idealism, good sense, and ethic of hard work—and that they were no-nonsense critics of the “pro-choice” culture—they were impressed immediately and wanted to spend as much time with them as they could.

Pro-Life Activist

Ruth’s involvement in pro-life activism was triggered by a debate she attended at Harvard. She was struck by the powerful arguments put forth by the pro-life spokesman and above all by the unwillingness of the pro-abortion spokesman to engage the argument that abortion involves killing an innocent human being. With Paul Swope, a graduate student at the Harvard School of Education, she founded a group

called Harvard-Radcliffe Human Life Advocates.

After a while, so many Cambridge residents unconnected with the university became involved that Ruth decided to form a second group, called Cambridge Unborn Rights Advocates (CURA). Within a year, CURA had over three hundred active members and was sponsoring a variety of activities in Cambridge, including fundraising drives for the statewide right-to-life organization, Massachusetts Citizens for Life (MCFL); an annual dinner with a featured speaker; educational talks; sending buses to the annual March for Life in Washington, DC; door-to-door pamphleting; and collecting food, clothing, and baby supplies for expectant mothers. CURA viewed its own mission as primarily educational, but many CURA members also volunteered for crisis

pregnancy centers and worked on the campaigns of pro-life politicians.

Board Member of Massachusetts Citizens for Life

A member of the Board of Massachusetts Citizens for Life reports that when she met Ruth her “first impression was that she was beautiful—physically beautiful—unbelievably articulate, and very intelligent. I thought, ‘This is someone that we need to groom.’ We knew right away that Ruth was going to be a star.”

In 1984, at the urging of MCFL officers who were impressed with the vitality of CURA, Ruth ran for and won a seat on the board of directors of the statewide organization. She soon found herself leading an effort to pass a state constitutional amendment to limit abortion rights to those explicitly recognized by the United States Supreme Court. The

amendment failed by a small margin, but public debate on the issue gave many opportunities for broadcasting the pro-life view.

Political and Social Activity

Just before the 1984 presidential elections, Ruth wrote to a friend:

I'm on the verge of becoming a registered Republican. The Democratic Party's wholehearted endorsement of abortion is what prompted my shift, but as I think through other issues, I find myself coming closer to the free enterprise, minimize-government mentality of the current administration. I have serious reservations regarding that approach in areas like pollution. I have serious reservations about arms buildup, but I know that abortion kills a member of the human race. That is not a religious belief; it is simply a biological fact.

A few months after the election, she told the same friend:

I did vote for Reagan. I even urged others to do likewise and coordinated the distribution of roughly 3000 pamphlets aimed at persuading people to follow suit. My single reason for doing this (or, rather, the paramount reason for my doing this) is the abortion issue. It is to me quite obvious that abortion kills human beings. I used to ask myself, had I lived under Hitler, would I have spoken out in defense of the slaughter of innocent human beings? I still don't know what I would do if the price of speaking out were my own death, but it is inconceivable to me that I could sit idly by while our society condones the killing of innocent infants. I don't like leafleting. I don't like picketing, I don't like political activism; but I don't have the freedom to choose to remain silent.

Although primarily focused on abortion, Ruth was also concerned about world poverty and hunger. Despite the family's very tight budget, the Pakaluks continued to donate generously to organizations like Bread for the World, Catholic Relief Services, and Oxfam. Ruth also made time to write letters urging the United States to treat poor countries more fairly.

President of Massachusetts Citizens for Life

In 1987, Ruth was elected president of MCFL. Together with Paul Swope, she worked to modernize the offices, increase fundraising capabilities, and develop the group's capacity to issue press releases quickly in response to developing news. Under Ruth's leadership, MCFL grew substantially. The organization's ability to lobby expanded and it succeeded in turning back in committee some

proposed state legislation in favor of abortion rights.

A few months after her election, she wrote to a friend:

I am now president of our state pro-life organization. It's rather exciting. I have to hire staff, deal with the press frequently, make decisions about computer systems, do market research, etc. Thank heavens I don't have a 9 to 5 job, as most previous presidents have had. Towing three boys around with me is hard enough, but they're much more flexible than a boss.

Ruth's gift for public speaking about abortion and other "life issues" became apparent when, as president of MCFL, she was asked to appear on news shows or speak on campuses. She preferred debates to speeches. Even if the organizers of an event had not planned to make it a debate, she would try to persuade them to

invite a pro-choice speaker. “If you hold a speech, a couple dozen people will show up, who are already convinced. But if you hold a debate, a few hundred will attend, many of whom really want to know.”

Worcester, Massachusetts

In 1987, the Pakaluks moved to Worcester, Massachusetts, a city of about 150,000 inhabitants, forty miles west of Boston, where Michael had found a position at Clark University, a distinguished liberal arts institution. From an academic point of view, the appointment was attractive, but it paid poorly. Their search for a house revealed, in Mike’s words, “the reality that the US economy was no longer designed for households supported by a single income. The reality was that even the least expensive starter house in the least attractive neighborhood of a relatively inexpensive city was not

affordable for us, because now two incomes were usually chasing house prices.” The best they could do was a small house in ill repair, in a neighborhood made up largely of illegal immigrants. When they moved in, they had no hot water, the carpets were forty years old, they had almost no real furniture, the stove and refrigerator clamored to be replaced, and their car was fifteen years old.

They worked hard to keep expenses to a minimum. On one occasion they were visiting a couple, both of whom were successful marketing professionals. They asked Ruth about her reasons for buying one product rather than another.

“It’s easy,” she said, “I calculate the cost per unit, and I buy the least expensive brand.”

“You don’t have any preferences for brands? You don’t like Crest

toothpaste over Colgate, for example?”

“Crest or Colgate!” Ruth replied, “You’ve got to be kidding me. Those are much too expensive, even when they are on sale.”

Despite their small income, the Pakaluks lived within their means and did not feel that they always needed more money. They continued to tithe. One year when they discovered that they were going to receive an unexpectedly sizable tax refund, they thought it was too much to spend on themselves, so they gave it to Catholic Relief Services for poor people who, they thought, needed the money more than they did.

Mike recalls that although financially stressed,

Our house was cheerful and in its own way blessed with abundance. For example, every day when school

was over, Ruth would have something freshly baked waiting for the children and their friends; or on a hot summers day she would pile everyone into the car, friends and all, and take them to Bell Pond or Rutland State Park to go swimming.

About a year after they moved to Worcester, Ruth was asked to join the professional choir of the cathedral. She was delighted and wrote to a friend:

I'm singing in a choir again. Not just any old choir, but the Cathedral choir, a professional choir. Get this—I get paid to go out without the kids and sing beautiful music. I just can't get over it. I'm not one of the best singers, but I'm working on it. It's been a very long time since last I concentrated on pitch and blend. Lucky for me I still sight-read reasonably well and I count better

than most of them (why are singers generally such bad counters?).

Death of a Child

The Pakaluks' fifth child, Thomas, was born in September 1989. Seven weeks after his birth, he died of sudden infant death syndrome. The family was devastated, but Ruth and Michael embraced their suffering and saw in it, in Michael's words, "a 'severe mercy,' a sharing in the Cross of Christ which would bring many blessings and graces." Immediately after Thomas's funeral, Michael wanted to go home, be alone with the family, and maybe sleep. Ruth wanted to celebrate. Leaving Church after the funeral Mass, she clasped her hands together, smiled broadly, and said, "Okay, let's have a party!" She wanted to celebrate Thomas's having gained the joys of heaven.

Her desire to celebrate Thomas's being in heaven did not mean that

she did not feel the loss of her infant son or that she failed to grieve his loss. When someone commented that because Thomas was in heaven, he had not really suffered any loss, Ruth responded that Thomas had lost “growing up as a boy and enjoying all of the beauties and joys of the world that God had created.”

A few years later, a friend who had just lost an infant son asked Ruth whether it was true that the wound from that loss never goes away. Ruth replied:

The spiritual or emotional wound, the grief, is a lot like a physical wound. And it heals imperceptibly. You can't function with your heart bleeding all over the floor. And your son knows that. Yet not a day goes by that I don't have recourse to Thomas for something. Find some devotion to your son and weave it into your daily prayer life. That way you don't have

fear of either ripping the wound open or forgetting.

Ruth herself made it a practice to kiss her brown scapular each day when she put it back on after showering, saying,

Let this kiss be a token of affection for Mary, my mother in heaven—asking her to pass along some expression of affection to my son, Thomas—asking him to pray for his mother, to pray for his father, to pray for his siblings, grandparents, and cousins, to pray for the Father's [the Prelate of Opus Dei] intentions, and to pray for the pro-life movement.

Her sense that Thomas was looking at her from heaven helped Ruth become more generous in her interior life. As she wrote to a friend:

Thomas is already doing a good job of keeping me on the straight and narrow. It is not contemplating Our

Lord's wounds or the Virgin at the foot of the cross that moves me to do my norms [the practices of piety that make up the plan of life of members of Opus Dei]. It's the feeling of shame that my infant son is gazing at me and wondering why his mother is so silly that she thinks typing newsletters or folding laundry is more important than prayer.

Michael recalls: "Ruth prayed that her grief might be consoled by another child, and when Sarah Esther was conceived less than a month after Thomas died and was born less than a year after his death, in the manner of many women of the Bible, she regarded this blessing as a concrete answer to her prayer." As Ruth later confided to Sarah, "You brought so much happiness and emotional healing to me after the sadness and emptiness of losing little Thomas. You were a great gift and blessing from God for your mother."

Cancer at Age Thirty-Three

In July 1990, while pregnant with Sarah, Ruth discovered a lump in her breast, but her doctor assured her it was nothing to worry about. By the fallof 1991, the lump was visible and she again brought it to the doctor's attention. Although he again dismissed her concerns, Ruth insisted on a mammogram, which revealed four-centimeter cancerous tumor. She underwent a radical mastectomy for stage 2-B cancer in October and began a five-month course of chemotherapy.

Ruth recovered quickly and easily from the surgery, but she wrote to a friend, "The chemo is just plain unpleasant. [It] really only puts me

back totally for two or three days, but I have to take it a little easy for a week or so." At Christmas, she confided to another friend, "I have total peace that God will bring good

out of this experience, whatever the outcome. Still, I'd appreciate the spare prayer."

In a letter to a woman with cancer, she said:

I did not live a totally normal life on chemo. I spent a lot of time thinking and praying and reading. I did try to force myself to keep some normal things, even though I felt overwhelmed. For instance, I continued to give pro-life presentations at high schools. It was difficult, but I was always glad after the fact. Dropping the baby off at the sitter and getting dressed up and getting out of the house early in the morning often seemed impossible the night before, but I would just keep plugging away and found I was able to do it. Catholic spirituality emphasizes "offering up" our sufferings. That can sound a little pie in the sky, but I found it very helpful.

Jesus came from heaven to share our life. He even wanted to share our experience of pain, fear, loneliness, suffering, etc. When we experience these unpleasant things, it is helpful to think about Jesus alone or in agony on the cross. We want to be like Him. We want to share His sufferings with Him, to keep Him company, not falling asleep like Peter, James, and John. He will accept our patient endurance of trials and turn them into glory, like his resurrection.

She told another woman with cancer that during the chemo she constantly felt vaguely nauseous.

But what was more difficult for me was the toll it took on my psyche. I have never been a worrier, never subject to much anxiety or depression. But while I was on chemo, I would experience dramatic panic attacks. I would be sitting

comfortably on the sofa, and suddenly, my heart would start pounding, adrenaline would flow, and I would experience all the symptoms of total terror. I would try to dispel the symptoms by telling myself there was nothing to fear, but it wouldn't work. I'm confident that this was not suppressed fear of mortality. It was just a side effect of the chemo and it went away within weeks of the end of my treatment. That is the aspect of my experience I most want to convey to you: life after chemo is great. No matter how sick, tired, and depressed you feel during it, you will return to feeling like yourself when it is over. I think some people begin to think that the way they feel on chemo is a result of the cancer, but it isn't. Really it is just the chemo itself.

A few weeks after chemotherapy ended, Ruth reported to a friend,

I'm feeling like a normal human being again. It is so good to feel well — after feeling slightly and vaguely ill for so long, you forget how great it is to feel normal. These days, I'm constantly ecstatic just to be able to taste and smell normally, etc. I wish I could stay in this state and not take it for granted again, but that's human nature.

Ruth's surgeon advised waiting at least three years before trying to have another child. At that point, the risk of cancer recurring would be less.

Earlier, it might come back at any time, and if it did, pregnancy would preclude many forms of therapy. Furthermore, pregnancy might encourage the cancer to grow more rapidly. Ruth and Michael weighed the surgeon's advice carefully and asked God for light. Ultimately, however, they felt, as Ruth put it, that

“it would be better to live life with the hope that my cancer would not recur rather than cowering in fear. Even if my life were to be cut short by recurring cancer, we felt it would be a beautiful thing to give life to more children.” Soon she was pregnant with Anna Sophia, who was born in April 1993.

Malpractice Lawsuit

Michael recalls that when Ruth learned she had cancer, her first reaction was a feeling of humiliation, of being made the fool or a chump, because she trusted her doctor’s statement, “It’s not cancer, “and walked around for a full year with an easily detectable malignant cancer growing within her breast. She had a brief period—very brief, only a matter of a day or two—when she was in great emotional turmoil, feeling first very angry at her doctor,

then feeling emotions of pity for him and forgiveness.

She resolved all of this very quickly—and I was amazed by this. She forgave her doctor personally, and, as far as I could see from everything she did or said, never nursed a grudge or held any continuing resentment toward him.

This did not, however, prevent her from filing a lawsuit. The settlement allowed the family to purchase a better house and pay tuition at Catholic schools and later at private colleges.

Further Pro-life Activities

After the initial chemotherapy ended, Ruth quickly recovered her strength and resumed her whirlwind activities. For about a year and a half, she enjoyed what seemed to be good health. Besides running the household and continuing with Opus

Dei activities, such as giving a weekly class to cooperators of Opus Dei, she had a full schedule of pro-life speaking engagements at Harvard Divinity School, Mount Holyoke College, MIT, Columbia, Fordham, Brandeis, Brown, and Amherst.

After the Supreme Court's 1992 *Casey* decision, Ruth felt it no longer made sense to focus on overturning *Roe*. In her pro-life activities, including many presentations to high school students, her goal was, as she said in an interview, to persuade her listeners

that they don't want to have an abortion themselves, or that if they knew someone who was contemplating an abortion, they might actually dissuade her from doing it. Maybe I can persuade some to become active, as I am. So that's what I try to do, to persuade people

that this is not a good thing, that there are better alternative solutions.

According to Michael, Ruth conceived the abortion controversy not as a difference of opinion as regards some philosophical thesis —“is the fetus a person?” as people often say—but rather as a difference between two cultures: given that (as everyone really knows) the thing in the woman’s womb is a living human, do we act on the principle that all human beings are fundamentally equal, or do we proceed as if we believe that it is permissible to kill some human beings to solve our problems? The first is the Culture of Life, and the second the Culture of Death. These two cultures, she thought, were vying for the allegiance of the young people she was addressing, and her concern was to teach them what they should know in order that they might choose life.

Ruth did not believe in culture wars and their accompanying rhetoric. She constantly sought ways to build bridges and find common ground not only with those who were undecided but even with abortion advocates. One of her adversaries in the abortion controversy, a former president of Mass Choice, wrote to express her sympathy when she learned that Ruth's cancer had spread to her liver. Ruth responded with a cordial and surprisingly intimate letter:

The one thing I most frequently regret about my current situation is not having another baby. ... For a Catholic, it is truly a blessing to have almost certain knowledge regarding the imminence of death. I have enjoyed, no—savored—these past years more than any others of my life. I have almost eliminated committee meetings from my schedule and let only speaking

engagements take me away from my family. I have made greater efforts to make our family life peaceful, joyful, fun, and loving. I think I have had some(modest) success. I do not feel afraid of dying or of being dead. I have to admit that every now and again, I actually look forward to getting out of this fray. If you are given the gift of empathy, you can imagine how painful it must be for us pro-lifers to live in this country. Imagine how frustrating it must be for us to see women viewing their own offspring as adversaries to be destroyed, throwing away the priceless gift God has lavished upon them to love and by whom to be loved. As Mother Teresa says, the greatest evil of abortion is the death of love in those who participate in it.

Involvement in Politics

Ruth gradually became more involved in local politics, becoming a

regular political commentator on a local cable news show. She wrote to a friend:

Here's another piece of funny news. I've been asked to be a participant on a local Cable TV news talk show—the host wants to do a local version of the McLaughlin Group. He said I could be their Eleanor Clift [the progressive commentator]. Over my dead body, I felt like saying—more like Pat Buchanan [the right-wing commentator] in drag). I think this will be lots of fun. You know how I have always loved to argue. But who'd have thought back at Northern Valley that one day I'd be the orthodox Catholic right-wing Republican?

She also began to host her own monthly television show, which involved an interview with some interesting figure or leader in pro-life, Christian, or pro-family circles.

Even during chemotherapy, Ruth had worked with her friend Mary Mullaney to successfully oppose the implementation in Worcester of a sex education program designed by Planned Parenthood, which stressed “safe sex” and treated premarital sex as a perfectly valid personal choice. They formed a Committee for Responsible Sex Education. In a matter of weeks, mobilized hundreds of Worcester citizens to express disapproval to the school committee. Not content with opposing the proposed program, they also crafted guidelines for an alternate program. Ruth would return from meetings completely exhausted, but she pressed on, and eventually the Planned Parenthood program was dropped in favor of a more acceptable, though still imperfect, one.

Perhaps encouraged by the success of this effort, Mary decided to run for

the school board. Ruth, who had by then recovered from the chemotherapy, worked actively on her campaign. She coordinated an effort to distribute leaflets to every house in the city and to get women to stand on street corners with signs. Despite long odds, the efforts paid off. Ruth confided to a friend: "I love politics. It is a great competitive game with real stakes, but if you lose, there's always another election coming up so you can try again."

Ruth's participation in Mary's campaign, her pro-life activities, and her involvement in many other affairs sometimes caused tension at home. Michael recalls she would never commit herself to something like Mary's campaign without first consulting him and that he would enthusiastically encourage her. But when real sacrifices would later need to be made, he would sometimes

gripe and complain about them. He recalls one occasion.

Over dinner one evening during Mary's campaign with the five children sitting around the table with us, we were planning the activities of the coming week. There were a couple of events I really wanted both of us to go to—I can't recall now what they were—but as I mentioned them, one by one, Ruth said that she wasn't free, "I can't because I have this commitment with Mary's campaign." This was after weeks and weeks of Ruth's being tied up with the babysitting, leafleting, strategy sessions, and so on. I had had enough and lost my patience. In anger I stood up and said, "F Mary's campaign!" and then stormed out of the dining room. Just as I was leaving that room and entering the kitchen, I turned and looked at Ruth, who smiled, gave me the finger, and said firmly, "Well, f you!"

The children, who witnessed all this, were horrified—because we almost never fought in front of them and absolutely never used obscenities. But the fight lasted only a few minutes, and naturally, I apologized to Ruth in front of the children.

Ruth also worked on the campaign of a candidate for the State House. She helped hone his message, but she also stuffed envelopes, went door-to-door, and stood at busy intersections with campaign signs.

Wife, Mother, and Friend

The most visible part of Ruth's apostolic activities involved directing pro-life organizations, debating, and appearing on television. But at the core of her apostolate were prayer, sacrifice, dedication to her family, one-on-one conversations based on friendship, and the power of her example. The core of her life lay in

her role as wife and mother. A friend wrote:

I like to dwell on how Ruth chose to be a wife and mother and to grow in holiness doing that. Ruth truly is an example of growing in sanctity

where you are, in the day-to-day, in the laundry, in driving from Point A to Point B. ... I think she grew in sanctity in her duties as a wife and mother, and the way she offered that up. I think that's how she grew in sanctity, and in the moments she had to pray and offer up her works. And from that grace came the energy to use her talents to do the other things. I think the other things were just extra. And at the center of her life, I think, was being a wife and mother.

Ruth herself wrote:

Housewives have lots of physical work and drudgery in 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.

Ruth highly prized friendship and made a point of really getting to know the people she met. One of her friends recalls that “she was very quick to grab somebody, whoever showed up. She wouldn’t let you slip away without really introducing herself and having a conversation.” For example, Mary Mullaney, a Notre Dame-educated lawyer who met Ruth at a monthly meeting of a reading group, recalls:

Neither one of us being much for small talk, we got onto the subject of the infallibility of the church’s teaching on birth control. Ruth said that it was infallible, but I wasn’t

sure about that. The next day Ruth arrived at my house—I remember seeing her trudge up the steps—with four big books in her arms. She sat on the couch and showed me all the citations in support of her position. I was awestruck. I couldn't believe that a casual conversation over coffee would prompt someone I had just met to go home, collect materials, organize her argument, and cross town again to convince me of the error of my position.

From that moment, Mary knew that Ruth was someone she wanted to have as a good friend. Reflecting on Ruth's impact on her life, she realized:

It wasn't so much any argument or anything that anyone said at the meeting [of the reading group] which affected me. It was just plain looking at Ruth. When you're young lady, you don't realize the joy that is part of

motherhood. So that's what Ruth was an example of for me. It was a matter of: look at the joy that is there and then just get in line.

A friend talking with Michael after Ruth's death recalled:

I saw how much Ruth was able to do during a day. And also, your house on Shelby Street was not big. And yet Ruth entertained there. It felt very much like a home. We always had a good time. And, seeing that, I opened up our house more. I invited a lot more people over. I was much more willing to do things, after seeing how much Ruth did in a day.

Another woman, Grace Chaffers, recalled that when she first got to know Ruth she was impressed by how she was "so happy and so at peace. There was a sense of peace that she had. I didn't have that, and I wanted it." This eventually led Grace to rethink many aspects of her life,

and concretely her decision not to have more children. She explained:

Before meeting Ruth, I had just offhandedly rejected the Church's teaching on contraception. I had never been challenged by anybody to rethink that. But it was not by any talk or lesson that Ruth challenged me on that, but just by being the mother of all those children. I gave her the kind of reaction that I always get now: "You have how many children?" (People kind of look at me in disbelief.) And she just very pleasantly explained that this was part of her faith. There was no doubt; there was no wavering. She was just cheerfully doing this.

After she discovered her own vocation to Opus Dei, Grace thanked Ruth for her prayers. Ruth, who didn't have a dishwasher, smiled, looked down at the floor, and said, "Well you've had my breakfast dishes

for the last year.” Grace didn’t say much in response, but she thought, “Wow. This is Opus Dei.”

Cancer Spreads to Her Bones

Just before Christmas 1993, Ruth discovered that cancer had spread to her bones. At the end of her Christmas letter, after talking about each of the children, she shared the news with relatives and friends:

We ended 1993 with some difficult news. My cancer has returned to the right hip and backbone. Conventional medicine cannot cure metastasized breast cancer, so my years are numbered (in single digits). So far, Mike and I are (no doubt supernaturally) accepting of whatever God has in mind. We’ve gotten somewhat used to His ways not being our ways.

Ruth had formed a Rosary group whose members would meet once a

week, bring their small children, and say the Rosary together, followed by coffee and conversation. At the January meeting, Ruth told her friends that her cancer had metastasized. “I’ll tell you everything I know about my condition and the treatment, but after that, let’s talk about something else.” She explained that bone cancer could be controlled for two or three years, and in some cases even longer. So long as it stayed in the bones, she was going to be treated with a hormone, which wouldn’t have such serious side effects as her original chemotherapy. Then she clapped her hands and exclaimed, “Right! —Now let’s pray the Rosary for the intention that Michael finds a young wife to marry!”

The thought that Michael needed to remarry for the children’s sake was not a passing one. She told her friends: “The worst suffering is the

fear of dying while my children are still so young. What are the chances my husband could marry again with six children? . . . I hate the idea of my children growing up without a mother.” Less than three months before she died, in a moment of particular intimacy, Ruth confided to Michael that she thought he should marry Catherine Hardy, the eldest daughter of their friends Tom and Jan Hardy.¹ She wrote to a friend, “I trust God to arrange things for the best, even if it doesn’t appear that way to us. I have total peace that God will bring good out of this experience, whatever the outcome.” To another friend, she wrote:

It’s funny that the prospect of dying does not bother me that much. I really do believe that whatever God wants is going to turn out best. If he wants me to die before getting out of my 30s, I trust that good will come of it. I pray that all my friends will

come to have a strong faith, that my sister will be reconciled to the rest of the family, that my children will grow up in the faith—that sort of thing. I'll ask you again to say this particular prayer card [to the founder of Opus Dei]. This is the guy who ought to be looking out for me. He also has a reputation for blessing people who say this prayer card faithfully. I'd love to see that work for you.

The news that cancer had spread to Ruth's bones put an end to the uncertainty of the previous year of whether she had beaten cancer or not. Ruth wrote about this to a woman also diagnosed with breast cancer:

This [doubt] was resolved for me when I was diagnosed with metastatic disease. But that period of uncertainty was still a good time—it helped me become much more

abandoned to God's will. Now, oddly enough, I am happier than I have ever been in my life. I trust you will also find that this experience brings you closer to God, trusting His sometimes-inscrutable wisdom to bring blessings out of suffering.

Ruth's doctor suggested a well-known hormone treatment that had some benefits but offered no hope of a cure. Ruth was concerned that maybe she should press instead to receive Bone Marrow Transplant (BMT) therapy. This

1. At the time, this seemed highly improbable, among other things because Catherine Hardy was at least fifteen years younger than Michael, not much older than Ruth's oldest children, and about to begin graduate school at Harvard. In 1999, however, Michael and Catherine married painful and debilitating treatment was very risky because the

immune system would be temporarily destroyed and because if the bone marrow transplant failed to “take, “the patient would die quickly. It involved being hospitalized for weeks and debilitated for months. But it might offer some prospect of long-term survival. Ruth felt it would be a shame to ruin the little time she had left with debilitating treatment if it did not succeed. But she was concerned that, maybe even because of her faith in God and her growing desire to get to heaven, she was discounting the potential benefits of the treatment. She spent weeks reading medical literature and consulting with specialists about it. She decided against BMT, but remained open to the possibility if new information pointed that way.

Five Years with Bone Cancer

For five years, Ruth’s cancer was contained to her bones and allowed

her to lead a very active life. She carried on with the many things that had made up her life until then and even did new things. Shortly after her diagnosis, her friends the Swopes proposed that she go skiing for the first time in her life. Ruth enthusiastically accepted their invitation and along with the Swopes and her older sons spent a week skiing in New Hampshire. By the end of the week, she was making it down the mountain without falling.

Ruth had always been a “people person,” but now she began to give even greater priority to spending time with family and friends. As she explained in a letter:

Knowing that I have rather limited time left makes me a lot more willing to abandon the laundry and housecleaning in order to do things like attend the concerts of close friends. This is another very

interesting question (like the interesting question of what is important to pass on to children as “family heritage”). When you know you have little time left to live, how should you conduct yourself? To a certain extent, I am glad that I have no burning desire to live any differently. I really enjoy the way my life has turned out. But I do feel it is important to spend more time with people I enjoy being with.

In January 1998, Ruth learned that cancer had spread to her liver and that she had less than a year to live. That same evening, she gave talks to children at a local school. The next day she attended a dinner for teachers in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine program. The day after that she gave a talk at a high school. Two days afterward she began chemotherapy for liver cancer, and a few days later she gave a talk to more than one hundred high

school students. Until it proved absolutely impossible, she continued to serve as parish Director of Religious Education, run the high school youth group, sing in the cathedral choir, host a monthly book discussion group, and teach classes for cooperators of Opus Dei. All of this in addition to taking care of her home and family.

At the end of June, Ruth co-taught a four-day course at the University of Notre Dame on the Basics of Catholicism with Professor Ralph McInerny. In August, during a family vacation in New Hampshire, despite having a steel rod in her leg to strengthen the bone which had been eaten away by cancer, she hiked down Mount Washington, the tallest mountain in New England, after having driven to the top.

Chemotherapy for liver cancer caused premature menopause and

deeply affected Ruth's emotions. As she wrote to a friend at the end of March:

I've been alternating between deep, painful unhappiness and a kind of serene joy. I try to remember that I should be glad of the opportunity to unite my sufferings with Christ. Then, when I actually feel miserable, this all goes right out the window. It's tedious. Another odd thing is that for many years it seemed to me as if I experienced very few emotions, all within a pretty reasonable range of intensity. There was the happiness caused by the children. There was exasperation when Michael was difficult and contentment when things with him were on an even keel, and that was about it. Now it seems to me my emotions utterly dominate my perception of reality. This must be menopause. It's interesting, occasionally pleasant, often horrible.

At about the same time, she wrote a long letter to a high school friend who was a nonbeliever:

My cancer grinds inexorably on. It has spread to my lungs and liver. I am going to be on one form of chemotherapy or another for the rest of my life, which in all likelihood will not be that much longer. I don't complain, though. I have had a great life. I have known wonderful people. I have done interesting things. I have had many gifts and talents that made life lots of fun (singing, acting, public speaking, etc.). My husband is great. My kids are great. And I really believe the Catholic faith. This life is short and it is merely the qualifying exam for the real thing. I regret that I have not written regularly to you. Your friendship has been a great source of happiness.

At the end of April 1998, Ruth wrote again to the same friend:

I am not afraid to die—not by a long shot. I go beyond just accepting what the Catholic Church teaches. Ever since I knew I had incurable cancer, I have thought long and hard about how I live my life and what I think death means. I have loved the life God gave me. There is no other life I would rather have lived. But I recognize God is the author of this life, as well as the author of the lives of all the people I love and the world, which is so beautiful and interesting. I want to see God; I want to see the One who thought all of this up. I cannot imagine that He will be less interesting and beautiful than all of the things He has made, and of course, I hope to see all the best people in heaven anyway, even you, to whom I (and so many others) owe so much. This life is short and eternity is—well, it's eternal.

Ruth did not finish that letter for another three weeks, when she

added several more pages before sending it off:

Not wanting to seem maudlin, but this could be my farewell letter. I hope not, but just in case, let me thank you for your great friendship and for the world of literature and culture you encouraged me to know and love. Though I have been a very poor correspondent, you have been daily in my thoughts and prayers.

Naturally, I hope you will manage to return to the faith of your baptism. Really, what else could be true? There is no God at all? There is a God, but He hasn't bothered to communicate with us? There is a God, He has communicated with us, but we don't know whether it was through Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus, someone else, or all of the above? The last possibility seems much more likely than the first two. Then it is a matter of figuring out which of the

great religions actually seems to be most likely to be the true communication of God to man. I have no doubt that if you were to turn your considerable intellectual powers to this question, it would only be a matter of time before you realized there is no explanation for the Catholic Church's existence except that, in fact, the guy named Jesus from Nazareth really did die and his corpse really did rise from the dead and he really did walk around talking to those rather uninspiring eleven who somehow, after this experience, transformed the course of human history. And for the better.

Well, thanks again and farewell.
With love & gratitude.

Death

By early September, Ruth was bedridden and on oxygen. In the final days of her life, many people

came to pray with and for her, or just to be with her. She died on the afternoon of September 23, 1998. That afternoon, dozens of people showed up spontaneously. This was before cell phones. No one sent out a message. They just “knew “somehow and showed up. As she lay dying, they kept vigil with her. As the rector of the cathedral, who was their pastor and a close friend, observed,

The place was packed with people, all just sort of sitting around and praying, praying with her. I'm sure that was a source of strength. ... [It] would have been easier to just be quietly with the family; instead of having the front door open, just as on New Year's Eve. But [it was a wonderful thing] to let those people come in and see her in that weakness and those last hours, and the great dignity that was there.

Ruth died as she had lived,
surrounded by people whom she
loved and who loved her.

Photos courtesy of
www.ruthpakaluk.com.

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