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**A baby's death made his sister's life possible**

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WORCESTER – Their mother's death brought new life to their grieving father, who, with his second wife, gave life to more children. Michael Pakaluk shared these experiences from his life as he talked about the just-released book he edited, "The Appalling Strangeness of the Mercy of God: The Story of Ruth Pakaluk: Convert, Mother, Pro-Life Activist." Ruth Van Kooy Pakaluk, his first wife, a former director of pro-life activities for the Worcester Diocese, died from breast cancer in 1998.

Mr. Pakaluk is now chairman of the philosophy department at Ave Maria University in Florida, where his current wife, Catherine Hardy Pakaluk, also teaches. He returned to Worcester as keynote speaker for the 6th Annual Potluck Benefit Dinner for Visitation House April 28 in St. Paul Cathedral's cenacle.

Visitation House, at 119 Endicott St., is a Catholic, non-profit transitional home for pregnant women in crisis. This year the house's annual Ruth V. K. Pakaluk Award was given posthumously to James P. Walsh, a local Catholic physician who supported the house until his death last year. His niece Margaret Megron received a clock with a commemorative plaque in his honor. Eve Lindquist, the house's executive director, said the evening raised \$20,000.

In her welcome, Raeanna Williams, whose husband, Joseph Williams, is Visitation House board president, recalled how she once told her children she and her husband were expecting another baby, and her 7-year-old exclaimed, "Great! Mama's so lucky! She gets to go and live at Visitation House." Her children saw the ministry their parents supported as good enough for their mother, she said. Visitation House has welcomed more than 100 people and saved more than 50 babies, she said, to applause.

Mr. Pakaluk said this was his first engagement since the publication of the book, a collection of letters and talks by Ruth Pakaluk with biographical information by him. Bishop Reilly wrote the forward. Mr. Pakaluk summarized parts of the book, including his late wife's conversion from atheism to Catholicism, her orientation toward heaven after their son died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and after she contracted cancer, and her passion for pro-life truths and for life in general.

"Love of heaven made her love this life more," he said. "I think Ruth's life is a testament to hope. If your body's breaking down, your children are growing up and you're going to leave them behind, you could easily become very despairing." But his wife displayed "extraordinary cheerfulness," he said. He said she was taken with the line "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God," and noted that things that look grim can have a happy ending.

"Then I thought, a strange thing in her life, our son Thomas Matthew died when he was 7 weeks old," Mr. Pakaluk said. But if he hadn't died, their daughter Sarah, born less than a year later,

would not have been conceived, as his wife did not conceive while breastfeeding, he said. “Thomas Matthew’s death was the price for her life,” he said.

A similar thing happened with his wife’s death. “In the final months she matched me up with my current wife,” he said. The children they had together would not exist if his first wife was still alive, he said. His grief and suffering over her death was turned to joy in marrying his second wife.

He recalled a story in which one person tells another how God brings good out of bad. The other responds that if the price of good is something horrible, “I say to God, ‘I respectfully return the ticket.’” Mr. Pakaluk said his first wife wanted to be a co-redeemer with Christ. He said he thinks that is somebody who says, “I’ll take the ticket.”

Do you know about the Visitation House? It is a house that offers help, a home, meals, health care assistance, and spiritual guidance, to women in crisis pregnancies. It is a Catholic home, staffed by Catholics, funded by Catholics, with a Chapel where the Blessed Sacrament is always present. I’ll never forget the story of a baby girl who didn’t give up because the people in the house didn’t give up, and neither did her mother. It was a miracle of perseverance.

There was once a mother who was told that her baby had Down Syndrome. Well over 90% of those babies are aborted in the US today because of early genetic testing. The mother refused to abort her child, and when the father turned her away for that decision, she and her young son sought solace at the Visitation House. During her pregnancy, she had complications and was put on bed rest and care was provided not only for the mother to avoid miscarriage, but also for the little boy. People in the community prayed. The baby girl was born prematurely, weighing only two pounds, and to everyone’s surprise, she did not have Down Syndrome.

The Visitation House also provides help for the mothers after the baby is born and helps them transition to independent living. They don’t just care for those in need, they help them become able to care for themselves in dignity. The little family eventually found a new home and the means to provide for themselves. I don’t know about the father, but it is nice to think he was given a second chance at love. Many people need that at times in life.

That’s as it should be. You see, Visitation House was envisioned out of love, too, by Mrs. Ruth Pakaluk, a mother of seven who died at age 41 after a long battle with breast cancer. Even though she didn’t see the house open, her wish did come true. Because of her and the people that made the Visitation House a reality, there is a place for women to go when they want to embrace life in our community. The house has had to establish a waiting list at times, which is sad because pregnancies don’t wait. Join me in prayer and assistance for the house that, in the spirit of Elizabeth, who welcomed her cousin the Virgin Mary with awe-filled joy and true hospitality of heart, doesn’t give up on life.