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Sr. Maria Rosa Leggol: 'Nobody gave me this job -- I made it'

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Although Roman Catholicism may be a boy's club on top, it's an open secret that without women at every other level, the church would grind to a halt. Often these contributions come behind the scenes, but every so often a particular Catholic woman's vision and accomplishments make her a celebrity. Such was the case with Mother Teresa, and in the small Central American nation of Honduras, such is the case with another formidable nun: Franciscan Sr. Maria Rosa Leggol, founder of the Sociedad Amigos de los Niños.

My wife and I are in Honduras this week as the guest of Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa, doing further research for my book on "Mega-Trends in Catholicism."

The aim of the Sociedad Amigos de los Niños is to give abandoned and abused Honduran children a loving home, an education, and prospects for future employment, thereby creating a future not only for them but for the country. In the half-century she's been at it, Leggol estimates she's been a "mother and father" to roughly 40,000 such children, many of whom are what she calls "moral orphans" -- so badly failed by their own parents as to be effectively without a family.

Leggol, a short, portly woman with an infectious smile, in her spare time founded a chain of 86 free health clinics across the country, giving badly-needed employment to recent graduates of medical schools, as well as providing basic health services to rural and low-income Hondurans. She's launched a training center for young Honduran girls who work as housemaids, as well as a holistic boarding school for boys

from deeply impoverished rural communities. Leggol is also one of the founders of the Honduran National Telethon.

A full list of her credits, in fact, would require more space than I've got.

But Leggol is not just a social entrepreneur. She also puts herself directly on the line; during 1974's Hurricane Fifi, for example, she almost died near the small Honduran town of Choloma while swimming through the floodwaters to save a drowning child.

My proof of her notoriety? My cab driver in Tegucigalpa could name Leggol and the cardinal as prominent Catholic figures in the country ... no other priest, no bishop, no other sister, nobody.

"Sor Maria Rosa," he assured me, "is known in all the world."

Leggol exemplifies a classic personality type within Catholicism: the charming, holy sister with a will of iron, who simply won't take "no" for an answer.

At 80 years old, Leggol still rises at 4 a.m. each day for prayer, Mass, and a holy hour. The small chapel at the society's headquarters is one of the most beautiful spaces in Tegucigalpa, and each morning it's perfumed with the aroma of fresh lilacs. She then begins a series of meetings with staff and visitors, which usually commence around 6 a.m. She works a 16-hour day, much of it these days from a seated position over the phone, since her legs have begun to buckle under the strain of her enormous lifelong drive.

Born in Puerto Cortes, Honduras, in 1926, Leggol was initially raised by a single Honduran mother. (Her French-Canadian father abandoned the family when she was just 11 months old.) Eventually, she ended up in an orphanage.

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At the age of six, she caught a glimpse of a group of German nuns on a train passing through her hometown. She had never seen sisters before, and a local priest explained what religious life meant. She decided then and there to be a nun. At the age of nine, she prayed to the Virgin Mary to help her locate those sisters so she could begin her new life. Lo and behold, as she left the church, she spotted a train arriving with two of those very sisters on board.

"Never has a prayer had such a direct answer," Leggol laughed.

The precocious young girl approached the sisters and demanded to join them. After a series of adventures,

she ended up a member of the community, the School Sisters of St. Francis. She was formally received in 1949 at the age of 23, meaning that she has marked 58 years of religious life. (Though the sisters are German, the Mother House of Leggol's province was in Milwaukee, and she did her novitiate there.)

"I learned how to pray, how to work, how to have courage from these German nuns," Leggol said.

As a young sister, Leggol was assigned to work in a hospital in Tegucigalpa. She threw herself into her work, becoming famous for her willingness to comfort those in danger of death. (Among other examples, the father of the future Cardinal Rodriguez died in her arms.) As a former orphan, however, her heart ached in a special way for poor young children in the capital city, especially those whose parents had been jailed. In those days, whole families were thrown into prison together, leaving the children bereft of any education or normal opportunities for socialization, and exposed to all manner of abuse.

"You almost had to put them back in the womb and let them be born again, in order to make them normal," she said. "But it's amazing, even in a very quick time, what a huge difference love and care in their lives can make."

The idea began to dawn on Leggol that she would have to be the one to provide that love and care.

While still working night duty at the hospital in the early 1960s, Leggol began to use her days to scout out locations for a home for children. She eventually found a neighborhood that had been slotted for low-income housing, and without any money to her name whatsoever, she signed up for 10 homes.

Before long, the builders called her residence seeking a down payment on the homes. Her superior took the call, and was caught a bit off guard -- largely because Leggol hadn't mentioned anything about it! In fact, Leggol said, she had cleared it with the Mother House in Milwaukee, but decided not to mention anything to her local superior, under the rubric of "better to ask forgiveness than permission."

In the end, the superior told her she could continue, but she would have to do it entirely on her own -- don't expect any money from the community.

"It was for the best," Leggol said. "Had this been a project of the community, I would have been under holy obedience. Now I could do things my way."

To finance the down payment, Leggol applied for funding from President John F. Kennedy's "Alliance for Progress." (Leggol today refers to the late president as "Blessed Kennedy," and insists that he's already in Heaven.)

To finalize the grant, Leggol had to secure commitments from sponsors to fund the rest of the cost of the homes. She eventually lined up enough wealthy Hondurans willing to help. When the day came to turn in the paperwork to the U.S. embassy, however, she was missing one signature from a sponsor, so she asked

a taxi driver to take her to this Honduran businessman's home, even though she couldn't afford the fare. Once there, however, she was told that the businessman had gone to the airport to leave for a business trip. In a panic, Leggol begged the taxi driver to take her to the airport, and he agreed. Leggol sped to the ticket counter, where she was informed that the plane had already boarded and was taking off.

For most people the story would end there, a tale of what might have been.

Leggol, however, refused to surrender. In full habit, her blood coursing with adrenaline, she promptly ran onto the runaway. (This was the early 1960s, before today's security measures at airports). Waving her arms like a banshee, she forced the plane to stop and demanded that they lower a staircase. She then marched back to the flabbergasted businessman's seat, and extracted his signature. At that moment, she laughed, he probably would have signed anything she put in front of him.

Naturally, she got the grant, bought the 10 homes, and the rest is history.

Leggol's confidence in divine providence is legendary, if also sometimes a bit frustrating to her more practical-minded associates, who wonder how they're going to pay the bills and care for all the kids she agrees to receive. (Her motto is, "We always have room for one more.")

To take just one example, Leggol used to be a frequent visitor to the main penitentiary in Tegucigalpa. (She says the only good thing about Hurricane Mitch is that it knocked the structure down, which she described as filthy and inhuman.) On one visit during the 1980s, she saw 40 kids living in conditions she called "fit only for animals," and without hesitation she told the prison authorities that she was going to take them in. Impulsively, she flagged down a passing bus and asked the driver to transport her and the kids, despite the fact that her homes were already bursting at the seams.

When they arrived, Leggol said she got off the bus first and spoke to her staff.

"Curse me later," she recalls telling them. "But for now, put on happy faces and make these children feel welcome."

The children got off the bus, and the worried staff did their best to be upbeat. Yet, Leggol said, the undertone of fear about how they were going to accommodate the new influx was palpable.

Just as the bus pulled out, Leggol said, a large truck pulled into the compound. To everyone's astonishment, on board was an unexpected and unannounced gift from a local benefactor who happened to own a furniture store: 40 new beds, exactly the number they happened to need.

That remarkable coincidence seemed a sure sign of divine favor, but one doubting Thomas in the group nevertheless ventured: "Okay, they can sleep, but how are we going to feed them?"

As if on cue, Leggol said, another unexpected truck arrived, this one groaning with donated surplus food from the United States Air Force: ham, sausages, eggs, and other staples of the American diet that seem luxuries to many poor Hondurans.

"We ate for a month and a half from that truck," Leggol said.

Given such experiences, it's not difficult to understand why Leggol is convinced that God wants her work to continue. It's also easier to understand her iron will.

Like her faith, her will is also legendary. For many years, for example, Leggol had a working agreement with the international S.O.S. Kinderdorf foundation in Austria, relying on them for 10 million lempira, or roughly \$500,000, each year. In time, however, she said that S.O.S. officials became more rigid in insisting that Leggol follow their protocols -- for example, she was not to accept mothers along with their children, and she was not to accept handicapped children.

"I did it anyway," she recalled, saying that she told the S.O.S. administrator: "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't think the man who will give me orders is in this world yet."

Thus it was that in 1989, Leggol walked away completely from S.O.S. and its money, and essentially started over. With typical bravado, she launched a sprawling new project called Nuevo Para'so (New Paradise). Essentially a city in miniature, it offers shelter, vocational training, education and health services, child care and spiritual guidance to single mothers and their children. The project is located on a spacious plot of land about an hour outside Tegucigalpa, which she had been using for a cooperative farming program with poor campesinos of the area.

I asked Leggol if she ever felt that the male-dominated ethos of Latin American culture got in her way.

"If you really understand God's call, if you're clear that you have a vocation that comes from God for which you are responsible, then nothing stops you," she said. "I'm very strong in that way. Nobody gave me this job -- I made it."

Although she had only five years of formal education, Leggol is nobody's fool, and she understands that to be a public figure in a society where women are usually expected to move in the shadows has sometimes required her to beat men at their own game.

"I'm not an easy person," she concedes, smiling. "I try to think 15 steps ahead all the time, which is why some people think I'm crazy. If I had ever been married ... all I can say is, poor man!"

Perhaps. But the fact that Honduras has brought out a postage stamp in Leggol's honor is some small indication that this "poor man's" loss has been her country's gain.

More information about the Sociedad Amigos de los Niños can be found here: <http://www.saninos.org.hn/>

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