

# Sr. Maria Rosa of Honduras: Faith and an iron will

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.  
Tegucigalpa, Honduras

Holiness over the centuries has had at least one thing in common with obscenity, best captured by what Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said of the latter — it can be tough to define, but one knows it when one sees it. In the case of Franciscan Sr. Maria Rosa Leggol, often described as the “Mother Teresa of Central America,” most people who enter the orbit of this remarkable Honduran woman, Catholic or not, usually come away convinced they’ve seen it.

Despite a society in Central America, and for that matter a church, long dominated by a culture of *machismo*, Leggol’s remarkable life story also shows that a determined woman can nevertheless move mountains.

Leggol is the founder of the Sociedad Amigos de los Niños. The aim of the organization is to give abandoned and abused Honduran children a loving home, an education and prospects for future employment, 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.

In her spare time Leggol, a short, portly woman with an infectious smile, 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 and a holistic boarding school for boys from impoverished rural communities. Leggol is also one of the founders of the Honduran National Telethon, a foundation that supports a network of rehabilitation centers for the handicapped.

A full list of her credits, in fact, would



Franciscan Sr. Maria Rosa Leggol, founder of the Sociedad Amigos de los Niños in Honduras

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.

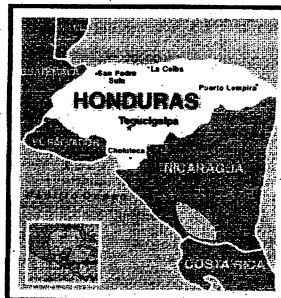
My proof of her fame? My cab driver in Tegucigalpa could name Leggol and Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga as prominent Catholic figures in the country — no other priest, no bishop, no other sister, nobody.

“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.

Canadian father abandoned the family when she was just 11 months old.) Eventually, she was placed in an orphanage.

At the age of 6, 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 9, 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 and has marked 58 years of religious life. (Though the sisters are German, the motherhouse 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.

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 is 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 over the phone from a seated position, since her legs have begun to buckle under the strain of her enormous lifelong drive.

## Sisters on a train

Born in Puerto Cortes, Honduras, in 1926, Leggol was initially raised by a single Honduran mother. (Her French-

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