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Mother Julia's Solemn Place of Prayer becoming a reality in Kingsville

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Tony Melendez joined Sister Maxie of Kingsville in raising funds for a center that will pass on the faith legacy of Mother Julia.

Almost thirty years ago lived a gardener and his family in Mexico. One day outside of their country home, his wife began to wash the family's clothes while her son went out to play. Firmly instructing the boy to keep an eye on his little sister, she worked all day under the sun until she reached the end of the load. It was not long before she knew something was terribly wrong. She could not find her daughter, neither inside the house nor outside. With agonizing panic, she began to scream out her name to no avail.

She became wrenched in agony with what she saw next— the sight of her daughter floating face down in the tub of wash water.

The gardener and his wife rushed her to the doctor, who declared her dead. Still hopeful, they then took her to another doctor who again said the child had died. Together, holding each other, they began to pray.

The gardener then asked a friend who had died not long before, a very special woman whom he once worked for, to intercede for them from heaven in reviving their daughter. Moments later, they swiftly turned their attention to the little girl's toes, which softly began to move from their rest.

"We have been granted many favors by the intercession of Mother Julia, but in reality this was the first," explained Sister Maxie Cruz, as she detailed the miraculous waking of the gardener's daughter through the intercession of Mother Julia Navarette Guerrero. Known affectionately as "Mother Julia," this holy woman, who was born in 1881 and died in 1974, is the foundress of the Missionary Daughters of the Most Pure Virgin Mary, who have had a long-time presence in Kingsville.

In 2004 Pope John Paul II declared Mother Julia, who had previously been entitled servant of God, (the first step of the canonization process), venerable. She now stands as a candidate for beatification, the final step before sainthood is affirmed by the church.

Meanwhile the sisters along with some faithful volunteers are working to transform the places that Mother Julia worked and prayed into a center where the faith can be experienced by others.

An Aug. 7 fundraiser, featuring internationally known singer and musician, Tony Melendez, was held to raise much needed funds for the project.

Sister Maxie, herself a long-standing Daughter of the Most Pure Virgin Mary, assured that though she may not yet have the honorable title of saint, Mother Julia has been nothing less to the order she founded. When asked how well she knew Mother Julia, Sister Maxie's response affirmed with few words just how endearing their relationship was. "I was her nurse," says Sister Maxie, who entered the congregation in 1964 and spent a full decade tending to Mother Julia.

Born in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1881, Mother Julia heard the call to enter the religious life from a very early age. A Jesuit priest and spiritual director to Julia, Father Alberto Mir, saw immense faith and courage in the young woman who was only 19 at the time.

He told her he believed it to be God's will that she establish a new congregation of women religious. Since the founding there have been about 45 convents in Mexico as well as several in the United States that she personally established. According to Sister Maxie, when Mother Julia came to Kingsville her mission was very simple and focused. She sought to reach out to the youth.

In addition to the convent and chapel, Mother Julia spent much of her time in Kingsville in her cuartito ("little room"). It was here, in this compact structure, that she would instruct teenagers of the teachings and beliefs of the church.

At this time and place during the early twentieth century, very few couples were married through the church. Records reveal that when Mother Julia arrived, the amount of marriages administered by the church reached a scope of hundreds.

Another significant part of her charism was her insistence on always remembering to celebrate one's culture. Within her school house, Mother would also engage the youth with Mexican literature, drama and dances. Sister Maxie recalls Mother Julia's words to her as she lay sick and dying. "I want you to take care of that house. It's for all of you," spoke Mother Julia, referring to her cuartito.

Mother Julia's original Kingsville school room, which sits directly across from the chapel built for the congregation, was used in the 1950s as a classroom for kindergarteners. This was to be its final function for many years.

Not long after her death, the Missionary Daughters of the Most Pure Virgin Mary lost the property which contained both the cuartito and chapel. Mother Julia's wish to Sister Maxie, that the schoolhouse remain in use, has forever reverberated within her. For years, Sister Maxie's dream has been to buy back the property and, in doing so, reclaim the treasure that Mother Julia so faithfully offered her surrounding community.

Only recently, with perseverance and a wealth of graces from God, has this dream been realized. The original chapel, which has for some time been a Kingsville native's house, will be returned to its early function as a spiritual oasis for Kingsville residents. Mother Julia's cuartito will once more serve the youth of Kingsville, as in the days when Mother would teach area teenagers their faith in a very life-changing way.

Mother Julia's Solemn Place of Prayer, as the old school room will soon be called, is to be a retreat center dedicated entirely to the growing youth of the area. In addition, a conference building will be added to the property to accommodate the Catholic presence in Kingsville. According to Sister Maxie, however, the project is far from complete.

The sisters are now hard at work to raise the necessary funds to carry the Place of Prayer through to its completion. The Melendez concert was a big boost. Additionally, the John G. and Marie Stella Kenedy Foundation has graciously donated what will be required to refurbish the chapel directly across from the Place of Prayer.

Standing where Mother Julia once stood talking to her students, Sister Maxie looked around Mother's old cuartito and saw no students looking up at her as Mother did. Instead, she saw this former school room full of furniture, statues and common household appliances, which will soon be sold in a rummage sale to even further benefit this ambitious project that the sisters have now begun.

It is the prayer of Sister Maxie, as well as the other sisters of the congregation, that it will not be long before today's young people will be seated where the rummage items now lay, indeed still being impacted by the venerable sister who first came to Kingsville nearly a hundred years ago.

For more information regarding Mother Julia's Solemn House of Prayer, the upcoming rummage sale or other fundraisers, contact the convent for the Missionary Daughters of the Most Pure Virgin Mary at (361)-595-1087.

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