

Blessed Are the Pure of Heart

struggled for years to gather the payments by working hard in a strange but safer land.

The first family I worked with for Catholic Charities not only exemplified to me the meaning of “pure of heart,” they helped me link their story with mine and my family’s. Months earlier in a restaurant, I had met Scott, a pro bono lawyer and coauthor of this book, for whom I provided translation with clients. Scott introduced me to his young clients, Salvadoran brothers Victor and Jorge. Victor, the oldest brother, in his early twenties, had lived in America for several years and was now sponsoring his newly arrived teenage brother, Jorge.

Both young men had fled abuse in Central America at the hands of their father who suffered PTSD and emotional scarring from being forced to kill fellow citizens as a paramilitary soldier in the Salvadoran civil war. The father drank often and became violent with his family. The brothers’ oldest sister was the first family member to escape to the United States, where she worked to pay for Victor’s escape when he was in his late teens. Victor in turn worked and brought Jorge. The two older siblings worked diligently so the youngest could attend high school.

Victor’s warmth, smile, and enthusiasm contrasted dramatically with what I knew of his history. The siblings hid well from the world the scars of their father’s

BLESSED ARE THE REFUGEES

abuse, meeting the future with hard work and joy.

Scott's pro bono services guided the family through the long and successful process of gaining a green card for Jorge. Months later, Scott asked Jorge to testify for a bill before the Maryland State Legislature. Since the 1990s, federal immigration law has allowed a special citizenship path for children under age twenty-one if a state juvenile court determined that they had been abused, abandoned, or neglected by a parent. Most states, however, only give jurisdiction to juvenile courts for children under eighteen. The Maryland bill sought to increase to age twenty-one the juvenile court jurisdiction age in order to match the federal immigration law.

My job in the effort to get this bill passed was to coach Jorge with his testimony and to translate for him. Jorge was especially motivated because he knew his older sister, Veronica, might flee El Salvador soon, and she was over eighteen. Perhaps because of this deep love for her, Jorge did not want me to translate for him in the legislative hearing; he wanted to improve his English and speak for himself. He wished to speak directly to his audience. Long hours of pronunciation practice, writing words out in transliteration, and rehearsal ensued.

In Annapolis, on a crisp January day, the state delegates, tired from long hours of testimony and fact-