

## BLESSED ARE THE REFUGEES

only had one pair of shoes. The house she lived in was so small she had to share a bedroom with her grandparents. She became sick often but was never given medical care.

Even more challenging, she was *humbled* by abuse, oppressed and humiliated as implied by the Hebrew *anawim*. Her father abandoned her when she was four years old. Her mother physically abused her from age four to age eight, almost every day, hitting her in the face with a fist, so hard that Maria's mouth bled. The mother then abandoned Maria when she was eight, leaving her with the maternal grandparents and a twenty-year-old male cousin, all three of whom proceeded to abuse the child. For almost a year, until Maria was nine, the cousin raped her three times a week in a barn near the house.

Then, from ages nine to sixteen, Maria was physically abused at least weekly by the grandmother, and from ages fourteen to sixteen, she was sexually molested by the grandfather weekly. She fled from the house at age sixteen after he threatened to rape her. She moved around several times until she was twenty when she finally fled from El Salvador and took the dangerous trip alone to the United States to seek safety.

Unfortunately, the journey was traumatic as well. She was sexually harassed and assaulted many times. She walked in the desert for three days without food or

*Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit*

water. Each day, she trudged from late afternoon to early morning, except for the last twenty-four hours during which she had no breaks at all. Out of desperation one day, she drank water from a cattle trough—a parallel to the poverty and humility of the Christ Child. Jesus rested in a manger. Maria drank from one. She became extremely ill because the water was contaminated.

She made her way to the East Coast in search of relatives who might help her. A testament to the goodness and loyalty of the vast majority of Central American families, Maria's cousins in Maryland welcomed her into their homes and cared for her with great love and generosity. Her father, who had abandoned her when she was so young and had later migrated to Virginia, invited her to visit him from time to time in order to reconcile.

Child abuse occurs everywhere, including the United States. The unique challenges faced by these immigrant children lie in the inability of law enforcement to protect them from domestic abuse and neglect when it occurs, and from gang violence that is continual and pervasive. This danger exacerbates the poverty and creates ongoing trauma.

As with many of the children served by Esperanza, Maria's resilience and faith are inspiring. The fact that she survived poverty and abuse is a testament to her inner resolve. The fact that she became a kind and