

Blessed Are They Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness for They Shall Be Satisfied

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“**I** ran toward my house while [the MS-13 gang member] watched. I heard a very loud noise and felt something whiz by my head. He was shooting at me. He continued to shoot and one of the bullets hit my hand.”

Camila, an unaccompanied child from El Salvador whom I represented, recounted this story before a U.S. asylum officer. To her dismay, the officer denied Camila’s application for asylum and referred her to an immigration judge. Camila hungered for righteousness, and she wasn’t finding it.

Camila and most children we serve at Esperanza Center have fled violent circumstances in Central America’s “Northern Triangle.” A choir of newspapers and reputable magazines agree that the Northern Triangle is among the most dangerous places in the world. There, gang violence—particularly by the MS-13 and

BLESSED ARE THE REFUGEES

Calle 18—is rampant. MS-13 members use knives and machetes to eliminate rivals and anyone who gets in their way. Calle 18 and other gangs shoot to kill and display victims' bodies for all to see. Gruesome images of severed heads and dismembered bodies fill the nightly TV news. Rape and murder are gang initiation rites. Government services as basic as drafting police reports are no longer worth the effort of law enforcement and citizens.

Camila did not ask for help and protection from the Salvadoran police; she was afraid of the police because, according to her, the police acted with the gangs. Hungering for safety, children like Camila leave their neighborhoods in the dark of night and trek the long journey to the United States.

Before journeying to the United States from El Salvador, Camila suffered harassment by a member of the MS-13 gang in El Salvador who ultimately tried to kill her. During these confrontations, Camila learned something about the gang member that he did not want anyone to know. This sparked a reign of terror against Camila and her family. The gang member found out where Camila lived and even described to her, in detail, her family's daily routine. Worse, he pulled a knife against Camila's father and younger brother and threatened to kidnap them. Camila switched schools several times in El Salvador to avoid the gang member's reach,