News



Evacuees from Afghanistan queue in line after arriving at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci international airport in Fiumicino Aug. 24 thanks to a scheme of women activists of Nove Onlus, an Italian NGO working for women rights in Afghanistan, of wearing a red scarf on their wrist to identify themselves to Italian military at the Kabul airport in order to be evacuated. (AP/Paolo Santalucia)

Claire Giangravé

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As tensions rise in Afghanistan following the takeover by Taliban forces in mid-August that threatens the small Christian community in the country, a Catholic priest managed to flee with a group of disabled children and nuns on Aug. 25.

"We thank the Lord for the success of the operation" Fr. Giovanni Scalese, 66, a Barnabite priest overseeing the only Catholic parish in Afghanistan, said in a Facebook post published shortly after landing in Rome.

"I thank all of you who in these days have raised incessant prayers to Him on our behalf, prayers that were obviously fulfilled," Scalese wrote in the post. "Continue to pray for Afghanistan and for its people."

Accompanying the priest were 14 children with disabilities and four Catholic nuns of the Missionaries of Charity who looked after them. The orphans are between the ages of 6 and 20, and some of them are in wheelchairs, which created a challenge for Scalese and the sisters in transporting them safely to the airport.

"I would never have returned to Italy without these children," Scalese said. "We could not leave them there."

Sr. Shahnaz Bhatti of the congregation of St. Jeanne-Antide Thouret also landed in Rome Aug. 25. Since 2006, she ran the Pro Bambini charity in Kabul, which cares for disabled children and their families. But 50 children under her care, with a varying range of disabilities, still remain in Afghanistan.

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After the United States troops began the evacuation of Afghanistan on Aug. 16, chaos took over the country, and many feared the Taliban's ascent to power would

set back the clock on women's rights and religious freedom.

While they "experienced a bit of fear" during the first few days, Scalese said that even though the Taliban crowded before the gates of the Italian embassy, they were not harmed. "If they had wanted to hurt us, they could have," the priest told Agensir, the news service of the Italian bishops' conference, "but nothing happened."

The group was eventually able to escape Afghanistan by boarding an Italian aircraft to the Roman airport of Fiumicino with the help of Italian and Vatican institutions. "We never felt alone," Scalese said, calling faithful to continue to pray for "the suffering country."

Italy, with the help of the Catholic lay movement St. Egidio, has created humanitarian corridors to help Afghans flee the country. While government data shows over 4,000 Afghan refugees have already been brought to Italy, getting more to safety remains a challenge. On Aug. 26, two suicide bomb attacks near the Kabul airport killed 13 U.S. service members and at least 170 Afghans.

Pope John Paul II created the first official Catholic outpost in Afghanistan, known as a *mission sui iuris*, in 2002. It's illegal to convert from Islam in Afghanistan, so when Scalese was sent to Kabul by Pope Francis in 2014, his work mostly focused on charity and assistance for the poorest and most disenfranchised.

Scalese told journalists upon his arrival that he has not given up hope Afghanistan might find its stability in the future and that he's eager to return.

"If one day we will once again have the chance to be present and continue our pastoral work and our social work for the poor, then why not?!" the priest said. "But for now, we can and we must especially pray for peace."