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Afghanistan my love

An elderly Italian religious who spent more than 18 years as the only Catholic priest in Afghanistan mourns for the country he came to love



Picture: Father Giuseppe Moretti. (Photo by GIANLUCA GASBARRI/PARALLELOZERO for LA CROIX)

By Loup Besmond de Senneville | Vatican City

La Croix International (01.09.2021) – <https://bit.ly/2Ykg4EL> - On this particular morning, an elderly man opens the door of the immense building that is home to the Barnabite religious community in the center of Rome.

He is dressed in an impeccable black suit and is wearing a clerical collar.

There is nothing to suggest that for 18 years this man was the only Catholic priest in Afghanistan.

Nor that in recent hours, the heart of 82-year-old Giuseppe Moretti is overwhelmed by the news coming out of Kabul.

The city, which fell to the Taliban in mid-August, is a place he left in 2014 but never stopped loving.

This morning, with his eyes lingering over the coffee table in the small living room where he has led us, Father Moretti laments: "I am madly in love with Afghanistan. Madly in love."

"When I first set foot there, there were people waving at us on the tarmac, because the planes were attracting the curious. I looked at this crowd and I said to myself: 'Now, either you keep your presupposed western superiority and you will not understand anything about this country, or you can drop it and try to understand.' I chose the second option," he says.

"There are probably Afghan Catholics. But they risk death"

Originally from the Marches, Father Moretti experienced several different Afghanistans.

First was the country at peace, as seen during the first year of his presence, in 1977, before the coup d'état took place a year later. Only diplomats, humanitarians and technicians remained.

The priest also left the country, not knowing that he would return in 1990 for another four years. During the interim, he taught Latin and Italian literature in Florence.

When he returned to Afghanistan, the Soviet army was omnipresent at first, before the country was plunged into civil war. As in the 1970s, Father Moretti ministered in the only chapel in the city, frequented only by the international community.

No Afghans: this was one of the two conditions set by the Afghan authorities when Father Moretti's distant predecessor was sent to Kabul in the early 1930s.

The second condition? "An absolute ban on proselytizing," says the priest, the fifth Barnabite to work in Afghanistan.

"There are undoubtedly Afghan Catholics. But they risk death," he notes.

Moretti celebrated Mass each day in the country's only Catholic chapel, located within the Italian Embassy compound.

Then in 1994 a missile landed on his house.

The priest was seriously wounded and had to go back to Italy. He would not return to Afghanistan until eight years later, when Italy decided to reopen its embassy.

That was in 2002, just a few months after 9/11.

The slow reconstruction of the country

Oddly enough, for years, and despite the Taliban, the church has remained standing.

The Islamists had, however, identified the chapel.

And for good reason: the building of the religious police was located exactly on the other side of the embassy wall.

After his second return to Afghanistan, Moretti witnessed the slow reconstruction of the country.

The situation was closely followed by John Paul II, who regularly spoke of Afghanistan in his speeches.

The words of the Polish pope carried far.

When the John Paul II died, no less than seven Afghan ministers attended the memorial Mass that Moretti celebrated.

The priest continues to follow the situation in Afghanistan, hour by hour. And he does not hide his nostalgia. "Those were the most beautiful years of my priesthood," he smiles.

In his little church, "the American 5-star general" and "the Filipino house staff" rubbed shoulders.

"It was there, when it was as though we were on an island, cut off from everything, that I felt Catholicism," he recalls.

In these hours when Afghanistan has fallen like a house of cards, he also expresses his sorrow. "I have great sadness. A deep disillusionment.

For years, I hoped and saw a positive spiral of freedom and democracy. And now everything has been swept away in a few days," Moretti says.

He actually went back to Kabul briefly during the summer of 2019. His Barnabite successor asked him to fill in for a month and Moretti quickly accepted.

He left with enough money to buy 500 new benches for the school he had founded years earlier. It now had 2,500 students from kindergarten to high school.

"My sadness is that I could not reach the school from Kabul. I was prevented from doing so for security reasons," he laments.

Then there is silence. "You know, it wasn't a dazzling presence, but a silent presence.

We were little stars," he says.

"But even tiny stars can shine."

Read more at: <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/afghanistan-my-love/14816>

World Evangelical Alliance expresses concern over Afghanistan

World Evangelical Alliance (16.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3ya6jVJ> - The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) expresses its deep concerns over the take-over of Afghanistan by the Taliban who in the past have been known for persecution of religious minorities, suppression of women, drug trade and human trafficking. The WEA calls on churches and believers to pray for the country, especially for Afghan Christians and others who are vulnerable, and those who have already fled or are trying to flee abroad.

"We are very concerned about the recent developments in Afghanistan and the dire prospects for all those who do not fit within the Taliban's view of a society. Women, who will be among those who have most to lose, will likely again be prevented from enjoying

basic rights, including tertiary education, professional careers, and even freedom to move around on their own. What is less reported is the plight of religious minorities, including Christians, who have suffered severe oppression during the past twenty years and who are now at even greater risk,” said Bishop Dr. Thomas Schirmmacher, Secretary General of the WEA.

“We should not pretend as if everything was well in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban taking control of the country now. Converts from Islam have been killed in areas under the former official government, and war lords who controlled part of the country, and are now losing their power, were not much better,” Schirmmacher noted. “The Constitution of 2004 stated that Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic with Islam as its state religion, leaving no place for religious freedom in the country. In reality, all religious minorities suffer in Afghanistan and will suffer even more now – including Muslim minorities like the Shiites and those Muslims who have become followers of Jesus Christ.¹”

Highlighting the complexity of the nation’s history and culture, Schirmmacher also pointed out that the media at times portray the situation too simplistically, as if the Taliban represent only a small group of insurgents imposing their will on society.

“While there has been improvements for women’s rights and other developments in recent years under the official government, these changes have not been welcomed by all Afghans. Instead, it should be noted that the backing of the Taliban in society has been much more significant than Western countries thought, with many people even voting for them in elections,” Schirmmacher said.

In addition to the oppression of religious minorities and the restrictions on women that are already being felt in many of the regions that fell to the Taliban in recent days, the country will likely again see a significant increase in illicit trade and slavery.

“Taliban finance themselves to a large extent through all kinds of criminal means, especially drug trade and human trafficking. Selling girls into sex slavery is no problem for them, especially if they do not belong to their faith community,” Schirmmacher said.

Calling on believers to pray, he said “our hearts cannot help but ache for the many Afghans who are longing for freedom but once again have to live in fear within their own nation, as well as the many who have fled to other countries as refugees leaving behind everything. Join us in prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ that they would be protected and comforted. Scripture reminds us that we are one body in Christ and ‘if one part suffers, every part suffers with it’ (1 Corinthians 12:26a). And let us pray for new hope for the whole nation that is facing a very dark moment at this time.”

¹*Shiites are the largest Muslim minority, especially among the Hazaras and Qizilbash. For decades, the Taliban sought to eradicate the Hazaras in the regions it controlled, killing thousands of them for no reason. Many of them will now come under Taliban rule for the first time, and among those are also many Christian converts from the Hazara who will face even greater risk. Besides them, the vast number of adherents of Muslim sects like the Sufi order Ahl-e-haqq and non-Muslim religions have left the country by now. Those staying behind, however, live in constant danger and include Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha’i, Zoroastrians, Christians, atheists and others holding a secular worldview. Among all of them, the greatest threat is directed against those who changed their religion – a basic human right in international law – which are mostly Muslims who became followers of Jesus. Many of them belong to smaller ethnic groups that are already discriminated against by the Pashtuns, a Sunni Muslim ethnic group that historically dominated Afghanistan.*

Afghan police say Kabul mosque bombing kills 12 worshippers

By Tameen Akhgar

AP News (14.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3w7iQJ2> - A bomb ripped through a mosque in northern Kabul during Friday prayers, killing 12 worshippers, and wounding 15, Afghan police said.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the bombing, the latest in a surge in violence as U.S. and NATO troops have begun their final withdrawal from the country, after 20 years of war.

According to Afghan police spokesman, Ferdaws Faramarz, the bomb exploded as prayers had begun. The mosque's imam, Mofti Noman, was among the dead, the spokesman said and added that the initial police investigation suggests the imam may have been the target.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid denied any insurgent connection to the mosque attack, condemning it and accusing Afghanistan's intelligence agency of being behind the explosion.

Both the Taliban and government routinely blame each other for attacks. The attackers are rarely identified, and the public is seldom informed of the results of investigations into the many attacks in the capital.

One worshipper, Muhibullah Sahebzada, said he had just stepped into the building when the explosion went off. Stunned, he heard the sound of screams, including those of children, as smoke filled the mosque.

Sahebzada said he saw several bodies on the floor, and at least one child was among the wounded. It appeared the explosive device had been hidden inside the pulpit at the front of the mosque, he added.

"I was afraid of a second explosion so I came immediately to my home" he said.

An image circulating on social media shows three bodies lying on the floor of the mosque.

The explosion comes on the second day of a three-day cease-fire announced by the Taliban for the Muslim holiday this week of Eid al-Fitr, which follows the fasting month of Ramadan. The Afghan government has also said it would abide by a truce during the holiday.

So far, many of the attacks in Kabul have been claimed by the Islamic State group's local affiliate, though the Taliban and government routinely trade blame.

Last week, a powerful car bombing attack in Kabul killed over 90 people, many of them students leaving a girls' school. The Taliban denied involvement and condemned the attack.

Earlier this week, U.S. troops left southern Kandahar Air Base, where some NATO forces still remain. At the war's peak, more than 30,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Kandahar, the Taliban heartland. The base in Kandahar was the second largest U.S. base in Afghanistan, after Bagram north of Kabul.
