Seven young women in Kirkuk credit the Virgin Mary for their safety after spending a harrowing eight hours hidden underneath beds while Islamic State group fighters used their room as a hideout during an assault on the city.

“The Virgin Mary was with them,” Fr. Roni Momika told CNA Oct. 23.

The priest, who ministers in refugee camps of Ankawa, Erbil in northern Iraq, was in cell phone contact with two of the girls while they hid under the beds. They gave him a play-by-play account of what was happening.

Seven women, university students in Kirkuk, found themselves threatened by the Islamic State group’s assault on the city Friday, Oct. 21.

“ISIS entered the house of our students, the girls,” the priest reported.

When they heard the militants coming, the women quickly darted under four beds in one of the rooms, where they remained undiscovered for eight hours as ISIS fighters used the room as a refuge to eat, pray and hide from Iraqi Army forces.

“I was speaking with them all the time,” Fr. Momika said, noting how there was “a strong girl” who told him “Father, I will continue speaking with you and tell you all our news and what ISIS is saying.”

For the duration of their time there, the militants not only ate and prayed, but used the beds to care for two of their fighters who were wounded.

“On one bed there is a lot of blood,” the priest said.

He shared with CNA some photos taken of the room after the soldiers left. He explained that “when ISIS was attacked by our army (the Iraqi Army) there were two people from ISIS injured, and ISIS put them here on these beds...and under the beds were the girls.”

Fr. Momika said he was in constant contact with the girls, telling them not to forget their faith, and to “pray to the Virgin Mary, she will come to help you.”

In what both the priest and the girls view as a miracle, “ISIS didn’t see them,” Fr. Momika said. One of the girls told him later that “when ISIS entered our room, they didn’t see us (and) we feel that the Virgin Mary closed their eyes from seeing us.”

The attack on Kirkuk took place amid a wider offensive on the part of the Iraqi and Kurdish armies to retake the city of Mosul, which was taken by Islamic State group forces in 2014 and declared a caliphate.

On Oct. 17 Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced the ground offensive to retake Mosul from the clutches of Islamic State, which has been months in the making.

in addition to the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, U.S. troops, British and French Special Forces, and a number of Turkish soldiers are supporting the Iraqi army in the battle, which was initially expected to take between several weeks to several months to complete. However, the process has been going quicker than expected.

Mosul is the last major stronghold the Islamic State has in Iraq. They have been steadily retreating since the end of last year in battles against Iraqi and Peshmerga forces, as well as airstrikes from the U.S-led coalition.

The attack on Kirkuk left some 80 people, mostly security forces, dead. It was largely seen as an attempt to distract Iraqi and Kurdish forces from the Mosul offensive.

According to the U.K. newspaper The Guardian, at least 30 members of ISIS were still holed up in different parts of Kirkuk. However, the assault was officially declared over as of Saturday morning.

Fr. Momika explained that the seven girls were among more than 100 refugees taking university classes in Kirkuk after being driven out of their hometowns by the Islamic State group in 2014.

Many of the girls come from Mosul and other cities nearby such as Bartella, Alqosh and Telskuf, he said. All of them had studied at the University of Mosul before the invasion.

Although their families are living inside the refugee camps in Erbil, the girls, in addition to a number of boys, wanted to continue their studies, but were unable to attend university classes in Erbil.

They then enrolled at the University of Kirkuk. Since traveling back and forth everyday was dangerous, they stayed in houses the Church had been renting in the city, returning to Erbil on the weekends.