

Pope Francis to Mafiosi: "On My Knees, I Ask You to Convert"

Judith Harris (March 22, 2014)



In a moving homily in a Roman church Friday, Pope Francis addressed family members of the Italian victims of organized crime here in Italy. "I ask you on my knees to convert--there is still time for you not to end in the hell that awaits you if you continue," said the pope. His participation in the prayer vigil was organized by the Italian anti-Mafia association Libera, headed by Don Luigi Ciotti, to honor the annual "Day of Memory" for Mafia victims. This was the first ever meeting of a pontiff with the families of victims.

ROME - In a moving homily in a Roman church Friday, Pope Francis addressed family members of the Italian victims of organized crime here in Italy. "I ask you on my knees to convert--there is still time for you not to end in the hell that awaits you if you continue down the road to evil," said the pope, whose participation in a prayer vigil at the Church of San Gregorio VII was organized by the Italian



anti-Mafia association Libera to honor the annual "Day of Memory" for Mafia victims.

Emotions are running particularly high this year because of a recent spate of brutal killings which took the lives of several children. In Don Ciotti's list were 80 children, or almost one out of every ten of the 842 victims whose names were read aloud. Only last week hit men forced off the road a car near Taranto, then fired 15 bullets. Presumed mobster Cosimo Orlando, his girlfriend Carla Fornari and the three-year-old boy she held in her arms were killed. The hit men missed her two other children of six and seven, cowering in the back seat and now being kept in an undisclosed location. Earlier this year a boy of three was killed in a car in a similar gangland spray of bullets.

There is little new under the sun. According to "pentito" Gaspare Spatuzza, a Mafia killer now turned state's witness, in order to punish a man who had testified against the Mafia, his young child was kidnapped in 1993, tied up "like an animal" and held almost three years before being strangled and his body dissolved in acid. Spatuzza admits having participated in the kidnapping.

Leading the day's prayer vigil was Italy's well known anti-Mafia priest Don Luigi Ciotti. "In the past and even today, unfortunately, the Church has not always confronted a problem with such enormous consequences for people and society," said Ciotti. The Mafia is a socio-cultural, and not only a judicial problem, he continued, but instead of action, the response of civil society has been "excessive prudence, silence, empty words, " and to resist the idea and underestimate the danger."

The problem has been neglected. An earlier anti-Mafia priest, Giuseppe Puglisi, was murdered at age 56 on September 15, 1993, in the Mafia-controlled Brancaccio quarter of Palermo in which he was raised. Father Puglisi had struggled to keep the children in his tough parish from becoming involved in mob activities, beginning with the drug traffic. In a step toward sainthood he was beatified on May 25, 2013.

Back in 2007 Italy backed off from payments to Mafia victims and to those who turned state's witnesses--often women, often because a family member had been murdered.

Speaking to the Mafia victims' families, Don Ciotti said that, "Investigating magistrates must not be left to face this alone," and specifically named Judge Nino Di Matteo, recipient of death threats from the Sicilian Mafia boss Toto Riina, despite the fact that Riina is in prison in Palermo. Corruption and a swap for votes remain a grave problem, the priest said. Palermo chief prosecutor Francesco Messineo agrees. Speaking before the Parliamentary Anti-Mafia Commission last week, Messineo testified: "In our data bank are 5,000 names linked to Cosa Nostra. Many live in civil society. I leave you to imagine their strength in an election." Even local gas stations are under clan control, he added, with petrol columns that cheat on the amount of fuel.

Although organizations like the Mafia in Sicily, the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria, the Sacra Corona Unita in Puglia and the Camorra in Naples have historical bases in the South, since the 1960s they have penetrated the entire country. Last November in Rome one of the city's most elegant four-star hotels was seized by the judiciary because its ownership was an 'Ndrangheta mobster. In 2009 the famous Cafe de Paris on Via Veneto was similarly confiscated by the judiciary; last week it was burned in a suspect arson attack.

The various Italian Mafias are now active throughout North Europe and the Balkans as well, creating what Franco Roberto, Italy's chief national anti-Mafia prosecutor, last week called "a judiciary emergency." The 'Ndrangheta--one of the most dangerous of the 300 Italian criminal organizations--is now present in 40 countries, he said, while the Sacra Corona Unita has links to the drug traffic and cigarette pirating in Albania and to gambling activities in Great Britain.

Even as the Italian Mafias (in this sense a collective word) have expanded their interests geographically, they have also moved into other areas of activity: immigration, falsification of company budgets, money recycling. Meanwhile foreign Mafias have moved into Italy, recycling Asian drug profits into real estate and into chains of massage and beauty parlors that offer such cut-rate prices that they drive legitimate businesses into bankruptcy. Altogether, said Judge Roberto, there are some 3,600 organized crime bands, whose recycled profits amount annually to \$165 billion, of which half in Italy.



Roberto Saviano, the courageous investigative journalist from Naples, wrote in Saturday's *La Repubblica* that the Catholic faith and organized crime have long walked hand in hand, the Camorra inventing its legitimacy through an imagined special relationship with the church, and perceiving of no contradiction between church teachings and the violence necessary to protect "the family." One Mafioso explains that he was saved from a rival's bullet through the intervention of the Madonna. Another bankrolls the restoration of a statue of the Madonna beside a Neapolitan church, henceforth known as the "Madonna of the Camorra" (he was murdered shortly afterward). A boss's sister, knowing when a raid on rivals is to take place, retreats to a church to pray that the Madonna would intercede with God to explain that the murders were necessary. "This is the culture of the clans," says Saviano, hailing the pontiff's meeting with the brave Don Ciotti, and with the victims' families, the first pope ever to do so.

Concluding, Francis appealed for "responsibility [to] triumph over corruption in every part of the world, and may justice prevail over iniquity."

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