

Church and the Mafia

Mons. Gennaro Matino* (June 18, 2014)



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Fifteen years have passed since Pope John Paul II launched his attack on the mafia: "Convert! One day God's judgment will come! No man can trample this holy right of God. Mafia, stop the killing!"

Not long before, the Pope had met privately with the elderly parents of Judge Livatino, a young magistrate murdered by the mob. That experience prompted his public outcry, which still echoes today, from the Valley of the Temples through the streets where innocent people are butchered every day. Pope Francis repeated his predecessor's appeal after meeting with victims of mafia crime



last March.

"I feel that I cannot conclude without saying a word to the ones missing here today," said Pope Francis, "to the men and women of the mafia: please change your lives, convert, and stop doing evil." To convert, to renounce your past and embark on a new way of life, is considered the greatest act of faith.

"Convert!" continued Francis, gently yet firmly. "I'm down on my knees asking. It is for your own good. The life you lead today will not bring you gratification. It will not bring you joy. It will not bring you happiness."

Conversion means directing your whole existence toward your faith. And if for Christians the truth is handed down by the Lord, then converting is doing as the Lord wishes. "The power," said Francis, "the money that you have gained by dirty business and crime, is blood money. It's power bought with blood. And you cannot bring it with you into the afterlife." Asking members of the mafia to convert is a means of declaring the faithful's complete and total aversion to a sinful way of life. There is no social, historical, environmental or cultural justification for doing evil.

Sadly, for the mafia to survive it needs a strong, well-organized group of people. It needs consensus and recognition. And those things are gained by using the kind of language and rites that grow out of religious superstition. The mafia has not always found an enemy in the Church. In "The Sopranos," to take an example from popular culture, one of the bosses complains to his priest that 23 years of good works cannot guarantee him ascension to Paradise. It is not uncommon to hear about churchgoing Camorra bosses who carry saints and Madonnas in processions, or read scripture, or go on pilgrimages to sanctuaries.

Pope Francis firmly asks that those in the mafia convert. It is a just appeal to the members of the mafia, but also to a Church that has not always been able to free itself from its more ambiguous role, proposing piety on the one hand, and insidious superstition on the other. The latter has terrible consequences when used to justify bad behavior. In the world of believers—of all faiths—it's hard to root out superstition. Even in Hindu India, Vikram Chandra describes a crime boss who justified himself by saying: "It has all been written, and I am carrying out the role that God has given me."

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