

For centuries, priests and bishops have been intimidated by Italy's ruthless gangs. Now the Vatican and the state are combining forces to fight the menace of organised crime / BY JOHN LAURENSEN

No more pews for the godfathers

UP IN the hills of Calabria in southern Italy, at the end of a long winding track, there is a sanctuary in honour of Our Lady of the Mountain. It is called Polsi, a cluster of grey stone buildings so insignificant that it does not even figure on a car satellite navigation system. But every September, around 200 members of Italy's most powerful, and probably most cruel, Mafia organisation join the pilgrims here to give their devotion to the Virgin Mary.

The 'Ndrangheta has long been even bigger in organised crime than Sicily's Cosa Nostra. It is *la Piovra* ("the Octopus") with its tentacles all over the Italian – and international – econ-

omy. It is involved in almost all the cocaine trafficking into Europe and is worth an estimated 3.4 per cent of Italian GNP – twice as much as the car maker Fiat. And the 'Ndrangheta's ties to the Catholic Church are old and close. Polsi is a good example.

"In 1966, the parish priest was murdered. Not because he resisted the Mafia but because he supported the wrong family," says Calabrian journalist Arcangelo Badolati, author of 15 books about the 'Ndrangheta. "The police found a revolver in the dead priest's pocket. In 1989, the priest who was then treasurer of the Polsi sanctuary was murdered. Again, not because he refused to deal with the Mafia.

He was found to have two billion lire – then about £750,000 – on his bank account."

Until very recently, intimacy between the Church and the Mafia was just part of life in southern Italy, as Badolati explains: "The most important religious festivals in the towns were all managed by 'Ndrangheta members. Priests received Mafia cash to celebrate baptisms with 'Ndrangheta godfathers. The religious processions were stopping in front of the houses of 'Ndrangheta leaders."

And then there was money laundering said to involve the IOR – the Istituto per le Opere Religiose, more commonly known as the Vatican bank. Pope Benedict began steps to clean up the bank, a process continued by Pope Francis. The latest stage, under negotiation, is a proposed agreement between the IOR and the Italian state that would lead to the closure of the remaining secret bank accounts held by Italian nationals in the Holy See. There are reportedly 359 individuals who, illegally, have €183 million (£133m) in such accounts. Under the agreement, they will have until September to report this money to the Italian tax authorities after which time they will become liable to legal proceedings. The Vatican has closed around 3,000 such accounts since 2013.

Badolati describes Pope Francis as a public enemy of the Mafia. Just over a year ago, the Mafia murdered a three-year-old boy in a town in Calabria, prompting the Pope to



DON PINO DE MASI (above), who has turned a building confiscated from the Mafia into a youth club, and (right), a card depicting Our Lady of the Mountain, the sanctuary in Calabria where many in the 'Ndrangheta pay homage to the Virgin

excommunicate not just the boy's killers but all Italy's Mafia gang members.

"It is a re-awakening of souls," says Salvatore Nunnari, Archbishop of Cosenza-Bisignano. "For a simple priest in a little town, when a Mafia member comes and says, 'You must do this for me', it is not easy to say no. Now, he can say, 'I can't disobey the Pope!'"

But well before Pope Francis' declaration of excommunication, other priests were resisting the Mafia. In 1995, a priest from northern Italy, Don Luigi Ciotti, set up an organisation called Libera that called on the authorities to put confiscated Mafia property to good use. The following year, the Italian Parliament agreed a law to allow this.

IN LAMEZIA TERME, where seminarians are this weekend to receive instruction on resisting the Mafia, parish priest Don Giacomo Panizza recalls that more than 200 properties were confiscated from Mafia families but there were no takers when they were put up for sale. Don Giacomo agreed to take over the villa of the most powerful Mafia family, the Torcasios, to house his association for disabled people. The Torcasios left but kept their keys.

Over the following months, while builders were renovating the huge, four-storey building – installing access ramps and lifts for the wheelchair users – intruders came at night and broke windows and ripped out the electricity, Don Giacomo says. No one in Lamezia dared come and change the locks on the doors.

And Don Giacomo was, he admits, afraid for his life. He started to have a recurring nightmare: "There's a young man running. Two armed killers are chasing him. He runs but eventually collapses exhausted and the killers shoot him. I arrive and take the dead man in my arms. And the young man looking up at me has my face."

Don Giacomo may have been worried for

his life, but the Torcasios were disorientated too. "Instead of men with guns they had, as their enemies, disabled people they despised. This is the wonderful thing about this story," says Don Giacomo, his blue eyes gleaming. "It was them with machine guns and us with wheelchairs. They opened the way ... they led others to dare to make good use of this confiscated property and stand up to the Mafia. They started a revolution. It's beautiful."

Stocky and energetic with a bulky black parka zipped up to his clerical collar, Don Pino De Masi is the Calabria representative of Libera and the parish priest in Polistena. In 2000, he led a group of schoolchildren to the square in front of the Mafia building where they staged what he calls an occupation. One of the Mafia godfathers, from his office on the fifth floor, offered to buy all the children ice cream. Don Pino made sure they turned down the offer but promised the children that one day they would be on that fifth-floor balcony looking down on the square. In 2009, the building was confiscated. Don Pino has turned it into a youth club.

We drive out of town to see an agricultural cooperative he has set up called Valle del Marro on 130 hectares of confiscated 'Ndrangheta land. It is useful proof for young people that you can make an honest living in Calabria, Don Pino says. They grow lemons, tangerines and aubergines and make olive oil, tapenade and Calabrian chilli pepper paste.

One of the workers, Antonio Napoli, tells me this: "We young people had a great desire to free this land of the Mafia mentality. The Mafia try to stop this project. They come here and destroy the olive trees and agricultural equipment. But we are not afraid. Our determination is reinforced by the courage and optimism of our Catholic faith."

John Laurenson is a freelance journalist.

PRISON PERSPECTIVE

Mass for men condemned to isolation until death

The mafiosi in Rebibbia prison, on the periphery of Rome, are totally isolated in individual cells where they will probably remain until after they die, writes John Larsen. They are often middle-aged men. It would be safe to say that almost everyone is relieved that they remain right where they are – in the highest security blocks in the bowels of the prison.

Is there any appropriate Christian response to this situation or do we just leave them to languish in the guilt of their atrocities against society as they await the Resurrection on the last day?

Each cell has two adjoining doors – one of cast iron, with a small shutter; the other with bars. For the men inside, their only contact with the outside world comes via a television set and the small group of prison personnel who are permitted to enter, among them the chaplains. Sometimes, as a volunteer chaplain, I have been asked to celebrate Mass there.

I enter with a sinking feeling in my gut, as the security doors clang behind me. The guard announces that the priest has arrived if the prisoners want to hear Mass. Sometimes, some of the wings say "No". Recently, one inmate complained to me that it was unjust that only the Catholic priest visits; he wanted to see a Protestant pastor.

Sometimes the men say they would like to hear Mass, and even complain that it does not happen often enough. Once, the guard pronounced that the priest was late so it would have to be a very quick Mass. A prisoner retorted: "What's the hurry? We haven't got a train to catch."

A guard puts a table in the middle of the corridor with cells to the left and right, in front and behind me. I set up the altar and we begin the Mass. The prisoners' situation seems hopeless. What could be good news to such a group of isolated, condemned individuals? I have tried speaking of Thérèse of Lisieux, who was also cut off completely from the world but with a life of conversion of

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CAFOD
Just one world

Pray with us

Creator God,
who made our beautiful world,
appointed us as its guardians
and gifted us with everything we need,
forgive us
for the times we cause it harm;
for the times our way of life
affects our neighbours.

Inspire us
to care for the environment;
to help rebuild lives and communities;
to share in the griefs and anxieties,
joys and hopes of all your people,
so that all your creation may flourish.

Amen

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