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Pope to Mafiosi: Turn away now from the road to hell

by Francis X. Rocca by Catholic News Service

The Francis Chronicles

Rome — Surrounded by survivors of innocent people killed by the Mafia, Pope Francis made an emotional appeal to Italian gangsters to give up their lives of crime and avoid eternal damnation.

"Men and women of the Mafia, please change your lives, convert, stop doing evil," the pope said at a prayer vigil Friday. "I ask on my knees and for your own good.

"This life you have now, it will not give you pleasure, it will not give you joy, it will not give you happiness," the pope said. "The power, the money you have now from so many dirty deals, from so many Mafia crimes, blood-stained money, blood-stained power -- you will not be able to take that with you to the other life."

"There is still time not to end up in hell, which awaits you if you continue on this road," Pope Francis said. "You had a papa and a mamma. Think of them, weep a little and convert."

Every year since 1996, the Italian anti-Mafia group Libera has observed March 21, the first full day of spring, in memory of innocent victims of organized crime. According to the group, the approximately 700 people gathered with Pope Francis in a Rome church this year represented the families of an estimated 15,000 such victims across Italy.

In his greeting, Fr. Luigi Ciotti, founder of Libera, denounced the Mafia as the "assassin of hope" and recalled a range of its victims. The priest mentioned women caught up in human trafficking, people fallen ill owing to illegal disposal of toxic waste and even children, including Domenico Gabriele, an 11-year-old shot to death while playing soccer in 2009, and Nicola Campolongo, a 3-year-old murdered in January, reportedly to avenge an unpaid drug debt.

Ciotti thanked the pope for coming, saying, "We thought we had found a father, we have also found a brother."

The pope listened for about 45 minutes, head bowed and hands folded in prayer, as members of the congregation stepped up to the lectern and recited, in some cases with breaking voices, the names of people killed by the Mafia.

"Let us pray together to ask the strength to move ahead," the pope said, "to be not discouraged but to continue to struggle against corruption."

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