

Francis: mafia members 'are excommunicated'

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Pope Francis is calling for Italy's organized crime groups to give up "the adoration of evil," telling members of the mafia they "are excommunicated" from the Catholic Church.

The pope ventured into the heartland of the country's most powerful mafia group, known as 'Ndrangheta, on June 21 to issue the strongest papal attack on organized crime since the late Pope John Paul II attacked the Sicilian mafia in 1993.

"Those who in their lives follow this path of evil, as mobsters do, are not in communion with God. They are excommunicated," Francis told tens of thousands who gathered to celebrate mass in the town of Sibari. "We must fight against this evil, it must be pushed aside. We must say no to it."

He said the church would exert its full force in efforts to combat organized crime. "Our children are asking for it, our young people are asking for it. They are in need of hope, and faith can help respond to this need," he said.

Francis made a one-day visit to the southern region of Calabria after three-year-old toddler Nicola "Coco" Campolongo was killed with his grandfather and his grandfather's companion in a local mafia drug feud. Their charred remains were found inside a burned-out car in January.

The brutal killing shocked Italians, who are accustomed to reports of mafia violence, and prompted a heartfelt response from Francis, who urged the killers to "repent."

Francis's determination to challenge organized crime groups has provoked warnings that he himself could become a target.

One of Italy's top prosecutors, Nicola Gratteri, who investigates the mafia, recently said the pope had created a "revolution" in the church and was at risk of mafia retribution because of his desire to get rid of cronyism and corruption.

"There is a power struggle underway at the Vatican that has nothing to do with the poor, with faith, with religion," he said. "It is a real power game, about real power."

—RNS