

The commitment of the Sicilian Church in the fight against the Mafia. The refusal of the Archbishop of Catania to grant ecclesiastical funeral rites for the mob boss Nitto Santapaola.

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The recent decision of the Archbishop of Catania, Monsignor Luigi Renna, to deny — “for reasons of appropriateness”¹ — ecclesiastical funeral rites to the criminal Nitto Santapaola, who died under the 41-*bis* prison regime at the Opera prison in Milan, has attracted considerable media attention. This choice follows the decision of the Catania Police Headquarters to prohibit — as in similar circumstances²— the holding of public funerals.

In some commentaries, Monsignor Renna’s decision has been hailed as “a change of pace in a Catania where the Mafia remains a powerful attraction for very young people”³.

From an ecclesial perspective, however, the decision of the Archbishop of Catania cannot in any way be described as a “change of pace”. On the contrary, it represents a sign of continuity with the commitment already undertaken by the Italian Church—and, more specifically, by the Sicilian Church⁴—in addressing the phenomenon of the Mafia. This effort has been pursued above all through the introduction of normative provisions aimed at preventing any possible criminal exploitation of rites and religious celebrations, beginning with ecclesiastical funerals and other expressions of popular piety⁵.

Emblematic in this regard is what was already established in 2013 by the neighboring Diocese of Acireale through General Decree No. 983 of 20 June 2013 issued by Mons. Antonino Raspanti, which provides that “anyone who has been criminally convicted of Mafia-related offenses, with a final judgment by the competent judicial authority of the Italian State, and who has shown no sign

¹ Cf. ALESSANDRO RAPISARDA, *Parla l'arcivescovo di Catania: «Vi spiego perché ho negato il funerale a Nitto Santapaola»*, in *Avvenire*, 12 March 2026.

² Pursuant to Articles 26–27 of the Consolidated Law on Public Security (T.U.L.P.S.), in the event of the death of leading figures in organized crime, the Chief of Police, on the basis of a now well-established practice, generally prohibits the public celebration of funerals in church, allowing only the deceased’s closest relatives to attend the funeral rite, which is held directly in the cemetery chapel where the burial takes place.

To this end, an additional precaution—intended to safeguard public order and to prevent the funeral from becoming an opportunity for clan members to gather and establish new territorial balances—is the scheduling of the funeral at an unusual time, typically at dawn.

On this matter, see FABIO BALSAMO, *Pubblica sicurezza e tutela dell'autonomia confessionale. Riflessioni a partire dalla negazione delle pubbliche esequie per i mafiosi*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, Online Journal (www.statoechiese.it), 19 December 2016, especially p. 3.

³ Cf. ALESSANDRO RAPISARDA, *Parla l'arcivescovo di Catania: «Vi spiego perché ho negato il funerale a Nitto Santapaola»*, cit.

⁴ As early as 1994, with the document *New Evangelization and Pastoral Ministry*, the Sicilian Episcopal Conference, in the aftermath of the martyrdom of Don Pino Puglisi, affirmed the possibility of sanctioning Mafia affiliation with the penalty of excommunication, by virtue of the absolute incompatibility of Mafia logic with the Gospel. Cf. SICILIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *Nuova evangelizzazione e pastorale. Orientamenti pastorali per le Chiese di Sicilia*, 13 April 1994, no. 12. On the commitment of the Sicilian Church in the fight against the Mafia see MARIO TEDESCHI, *La Chiesa siciliana contro la mafia*, in *Il Soldo*, 30 October 1982, now also published in Id., *Impegno civile*, Luigi Pellegrini Editore, Cosenza, 2014, p. 127 ff. See also ANTONINO MANTINEO, *La condanna della mafia nel recente Magistero: profili penali canonistici e ricadute nella prassi ecclesiale delle Chiese di Calabria e Sicilia*, Luigi Pellegrini Editore, Cosenza, 2017, p. 93 ff.

⁵ Cf. FABIO BALSAMO, *Le normative canoniche antimafia*, Luigi Pellegrini Editore, Cosenza, 2019.

of repentance before death, shall be deprived of ecclesiastical funeral rites throughout the territory of the Diocese of Acireale”.

Moreover, the Code of Canon Law itself, in canon 1184, §1, provides that ecclesiastical funerals must be denied to “notorious apostates, heretics, and schismatics” and to “other manifest sinners to whom ecclesiastical funerals cannot be granted without public scandal to the faithful”, if they have given no sign of repentance before death.

With regard to the application of this canonical provision to members of organized crime, Mons. Raspanti’s 2013 General Decree has the undeniable merit of introducing an objective criterion—namely, the finality of a criminal conviction for Mafia-related offenses—upon which to base the imposition of the sanction of deprivation of ecclesiastical funeral rites for the Mafia-affiliated faithful as “manifest sinners.”

It would be desirable, in this regard, for a similar initiative to be adopted also by the other Sicilian Dioceses. Indeed, justifying the decision to deny ecclesiastical funeral rites to a mafia boss solely on the basis of “reasons of appropriateness” — that is, to prevent a celebration which “would not only distort the meaning of the Christian funeral, but would become a counter-witness” — appears, in fact, not to meet the objective of promoting an ecclesial action against the mafias that is as uniform as possible, at least within the Dioceses of the same ecclesiastical region.

The application of the “anti-mafia canonical regulations” already in force in numerous Dioceses in Campania and Calabria has, in fact, proven particularly effective in preventing the instrumentalization of religious rites and attempts of criminal infiltration into ecclesial associations⁶.

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⁶ Cf. FABIO BALSAMO, *Chiesa cattolica e contrasto a corruzione e mafie. Il contributo del diritto canonico*, in *Coscienza e libertà*, 70, 2025, p. 45 ff.; SALVO OGNIBENE, *Diritto canonico e contrasto alle mafie. Riflessioni tra passato e futuro nel mondo ecclesiastico di fronte al fenomeno mafioso*, in *Diritto e Religioni*, 2, 2017, p. 812 ff.