

Italian Bishop Denies Church Funerals for Mafia

A bishop in Sicily has issued an unprecedented decree that says convicted mobsters will be denied a church funeral.

The measure was announced on Saturday by Bishop Antonino Raspanti, during a meeting with Italy's justice minister, Anna Maria Cancellieri.

Churches in the Diocese of Acireale will refuse to celebrate funerals for mobsters who have been convicted with a final sentence in Italy's three-tier court system, and who have shown no sign of repentance before death, according to the decree.

Raspanti recognized that his act has a "high symbolic value," saying he aims to "increase attention to this issue and to wake up consciences."

"Being a Christian is incompatible with having links to Mafia organizations," he explained.

The Catholic Church in Italy has often been accused of being too timid toward the Mafia. But Raspanti stressed that his move reflected a zero-tolerance policy that has been adopted by Sicilian bishops in recent years.

The change started in 1993, when Pope John Paul II famously called on mobsters to convert and repent during a visit to Sicily.

In May, the Rev. Pino Puglisi became the first victim of the Mafia to be beatified as a martyr. He was killed in 1993 by mobsters for his work with youth in Palermo's slums.

Raspanti is at the forefront of the Sicilian church's stand against the mob. Last year, he hosted a Vatican event in

Acireale aimed at promoting a “culture of legality” as a way to fight organized crime.

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