

Mob threats aside, Pope Francis will pray with victims of organized crime

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ROME (RNS) The Vatican said Monday (March 17) that Pope Francis will preside over a prayer vigil dedicated to victims of mob violence in Italy and their families.

It's a sensitive issue for Francis after a famed anti-mob prosecutor last year said the pope's financial reforms were making mob bosses "very nervous" and could expose the pope to assassination plots.

The special service, to be held Friday (March 21), is expected to include at least 700 Italians who lost a family member to violence connected to Italy's various organized crime organizations.

"The meeting with the pope is a gift for the families of innocent victims," said the Rev. Luigi Ciotti, the Turin-based priest who will host the prayer vigil, calling Francis' decision to attend a symbolic nod "to our fragile and wounded humanity."

The tribute is timed to a national memorial day to commemorate victims of mob violence. (The commemoration day has no official ties to the Vatican.)

In Italy, the Sicilian Mafia and other crime organizations dominate many criminal enterprises, including drugs, prostitution, counterfeiting, kidnapping and extortion.

In November, famed anti-mob prosecutor Nicola Gratteri, said Francis' reforms at the Vatican were making the 'Ndrangheta—the Calabrian mob—"very nervous." At the time, the Vatican downplayed the threat, with the Vatican's chief spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, saying the Vatican was "extremely calm" about a possible mob-related hit on the pope.