

## Mob boss scandal a chance to 'learn Rome,' warts and all

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 1, 2012 NCR Today

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*Rome*

When Pope John Paul II used to address seminarians studying in the Eternal City, he would often urge them to "learn Rome." By that, he meant that just moving around the city, and especially spending time in its estimated 300 churches, can offer an education in Catholicism.

Today is the one-year anniversary of John Paul's beatification, and it's also the occasion for a reminder that the late pope's tip about "learning Rome" is truer than he probably intended. A recent brouhaha over the burial of a mob boss in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare illustrates that Rome's churches often do, indeed, have much to teach about Catholicism — warts and all.

The scandal centers on the late Enrico De Pedis, a.k.a. "Renatino," who was among the bosses of the *Banda della Magliana*, the "Magliana Gang," named after a Rome neighborhood, which was the city's most notorious organized crime outfit in the 1970s and 1980s. After being gunned down near the Piazza de Fiori in 1990, De Pedis was buried in a crypt within the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare (albeit in what the church's pastor describes as basically a "closet," in an unconsecrated area not open to the public).

From the beginning, it always seemed incongruous that a mob boss should end up buried in the kind of space typically reserved for cardinals, Catholic nobles, and other ecclesial dignitaries. That was perhaps especially so in the early 1990s, in an era in which the anti-mafia activism of courageous Catholic priests such as Fr. Pino Puglisi in Sicily put them at grave risk (Puglisi was assassinated in 1993). Critics wondered how the church could back Puglisi with one hand, and open its doors to De Pedis with the other.

Recently, however, the scandal has erupted anew for two reasons.

First, an Italian news agency carried a report last week that the late Cardinal Ugo Poletti, while he was the pope's Vicar of Rome, had accepted one billion lire, or roughly U.S. \$660,000, from De Pedis' widow in 1990 in exchange for permission to bury him in the church. (At the time, the pastor of Sant'Apollinare was a Roman diocesan priest. In 1992, the basilica was entrusted to an Opus Dei priest as part of the adjacent University of Holy Cross, which is sponsored by Opus Dei.)

According to the report, Poletti overcame his initial reluctance about De Pedis because he wanted the money to fund missions and to restore the basilica. The Vatican has so far refused to comment, but even if the precise dollar amount is off, it's long been taken for granted that a substantial sum of money changed hands; Italy's ultra-Catholic Senator Giulio Andreotti once said, "De Pedis wasn't a benefactor to everyone, but he was for Sant'Apollinare."

Especially on top of other financial scandals, the revelation about the 1990 payoff has struck many observers as a further confirmation of the distorting effect money can sometimes have on good ecclesial judgment.

Second, De Pedis also has been linked to one of Rome's most enduring recent mysteries, the 1983 disappearance of a teenage girl named Emanuela Orlandi, whose family lived and worked on Vatican grounds. Various conspiracy theories have been spun over the years, including that the *Banda della Magliana* kidnapped Orlandi to compel the Vatican Bank to pay back illicit loans, or that Orlandi was taken to try to influence the investigation of Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman who shot John Paul II in 1981.

In some circles, it's become an article of faith that De Pedis took the secrets of the Orlandi case to his grave, literally, and hence there's been growing clamor to open his tomb to take a look.

In January, the brother of the missing girl, Pietro Orlandi, led a demonstration in front of the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare to demand that the tomb be opened. That push gathered steam on April 6, when the preacher of the papal household, Capuchin Fr. Rainero Cantalamessa, said during his Good Friday sermon that too many "atrocious" crimes go unsolved in Italy, and issued this appeal: "Don't carry your secret to the grave with you!"

The line sparked speculation that someone in the Vatican must know something about the Orlandi case.

In response, the Vatican released a statement indicating that it has no such knowledge, and that it has no problem with opening the tomb to inspection. Meetings are now being held to work out the details, not only of opening the tomb, but also relocating it to a non-religious setting. Sources told NCR this week that task could be accomplished within the month of May.

The current rector of Sant'Apollinare, Fr. Pedro Huidobro Vega, has declared himself delighted with the prospect — in part, because it means he'll no longer have to shoo away Italian tourists who routinely show up asking to see the tomb so they can snap a photo of themselves in front of it.

Whatever secrets the tomb may contain, its presence in Sant'Apollinare is a reminder that Rome's churches often do fairly accurately reflect the whole story of Catholicism, which is, and always has been, a mix of shadows and light, of glaring contradictions and logically inexplicable ironies.

That point will remain true, by the way, even after De Pedis is whisked away.

The Basilica of Sant'Apollinare was for several centuries attached to the Jesuit-run German College (later renamed the "German-Hungarian College"), which explains why it contains side chapels devoted to St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, and St. Francis Xavier, the order's great missionary. Because Sant'Apollinare is today attached to Opus Dei's Holy Cross University, there's also a place for devotion to St. Josemaria Escrivá, their founder.

Never let it be said that God doesn't have a sense of humor — what this means is that every day, a sizeable chunk of Opus Dei's brain trust prays in a church with chapels dedicated to the Jesuits!

In addition, the future Pope Pius X was consecrated a bishop in Sant'Apollinare in 1884, and the central corridor of the church today contains the names of bishops and cardinals, etched in stone, who did their studies at the Pontifical Institute the complex once housed — a list, by the way, that includes Eugenio Pacelli, who became Pius XII, and Giuseppe Roncalli, who became John XXIII.

Simply walking into Sant'Apollinare thus offers a reminder of several towering chapters of recent Catholic history, not to mention the breadth of the church, encompassing both the Jesuits and Opus Dei.

Yet there's a less obvious reminder of the shadows of the Catholic past, too. Also entombed in Sant'Apollinare is Cardinal Domenico Jorio, who died in 1954, and who served as head of the Vatican's Congregation for

Discipline of the Sacraments during Italy's fascist era. Based on documents recently brought to light by an Italian historian, we now know that Jorio once advised Pope Pius XI to approve a fascist proposal to ban mixed-race marriages, on the grounds of "hygienic and social reasons" as well as "increased moral deficiencies in the character of the offspring."

Of course, it would be unfair to reduce Jorio's legacy to that one episode, however appalling it may now seem. Still, it's a small reminder that even titans of the church can have their blind spots, and that, too, is part of the Catholic record.

It's a lesson a visit to Sant'Apollinare, or many of Rome's other churches, will still have to offer, even after the mob boss has been expunged.

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