



Father Paolo Tartaruro with one of the children he wants to keep off the Mafia-controlled streets; and Giuseppe Puglisi (inset), killed for his ideals

TURBULENT PRIESTS

Once the Church in Sicily was silent about Mafia murders. Then a priest was killed for doing his job: speaking out against evil. Mark Franchetti reports on the battle between Italy's Godfathers and the true men of God



MALZ

THIS IS a typically Sicilian tragedy. And yet it is a unique one. On a sultry afternoon last September, more than 8,000 people packed the streets of the Brancaccio district in Palermo to pay tribute to the passing coffin of Giuseppe Puglisi. Anti-Mafia figures

made speeches, citizens carried protest banners. For a few days Brancaccio was invaded by reporters sent to find out who the victim had been.

Two days earlier, at 8.15 on the night of his birthday, Puglisi walked out of his local church in the heart of Brancaccio. He was cheerful, as always, but looked tired after a particularly

busy day. A popular and respected man in the local community, he spent a few minutes chatting to a friend in the evening breeze, strolling around the quiet streets which lead to the little church of San Gaetano. After the last birthday wishes, the two men parted. Puglisi stepped into his car.

He drove through Brancaccio for just more than a mile to his house in Piazza Anita Garibaldi, parked in the usual spot and switched off the headlights. He stepped out on to the small, badly lit square and began to walk towards his front door, carrying a bundle of papers and his diary. As he pushed the key into the lock, a voice from close behind called his name. As he turned round to see who it was, a second person slipped behind him, pressed a 7.65 calibre against the back of his head and fired. No one saw or heard anything.

Puglisi was found lying in a pool of blood by a passer-by. He was still alive. The local police had just been notified following an anonymous

male caller who simply stated: "There has been a murder." The paramedics, the police and shocked onlookers crowded round. Puglisi was rushed to hospital but died on arrival.

The pattern is familiar. In Palermo these events are no novelty. Sicilians are used to mourning. But Giuseppe Puglisi's murder was different. He was a parish priest, the first ever to have been killed by the Mafia in Sicily for his ideals.

IT IS DIFFICULT to drive into Palermo without thinking of the Mafia. After a few miles caught between steep barren hills to the right and the sea to the left, the bus which links the airport to the city speeds by the green exit sign for Capaci, a few miles before Palermo. It is a small, insignificant town which Italians do not visit, but know well. There the tarmac suddenly turns darker and smoother for a few hundred yards. It is less than two years old.

It is on this short stretch of motorway ►

that the leading anti-Mafia judge Giovanni Falcone was blown up with his wife and three bodyguards in May 1992 as he travelled from the airport to Palermo. The bomb, which contained 2,200lb of explosive, killed all five instantly, leaving a huge crater which devastated all four lanes. For the Mafia this exit sign is no doubt a symbol of the unlimited power with which for generations it has ruled Sicily. For others the Capaci road sign is a modest memorial to those killed fighting it. It is a daunting welcome.

Falcone's was one more name added to the long list of people who have been systematically assassinated in Sicily because of their anti-Mafia stance: magistrates and police officials who simply had the courage to do their job; small entrepreneurs who, after years of oppression, publicly refused to continue paying protection money to the local Mafia; individual citizens who dared to break *l'omertà*, the Sicilian code of silence.

If the brutality of these killings continues to shock the country, the targets had long ceased to. At least, that is, until Father Puglisi was killed. He remains the only priest to have been gunned down by the Sicilian bosses for his anti-Mafia convictions. Clergymen have been killed before in Sicily, but always as a result of personal family vendettas.

This gruesome novelty is spreading to other parts of the south of Italy. Last March, Padre Diana, another parish priest who was well liked by most of his community, was murdered in Caserta by the Camorra, the Neapolitan Mafia.

These killings have marked a turning point in the fight against organised crime in Sicily. For centuries the Catholic Church had failed to take a clear stand against the Mafia. It was either guilty of collusion, or it simply refused to acknowledge its existence. In the past, many priests in Sicily preached that communist atheism was far more evil than the Mafia, since more died as a result of abortion than those gunned down by local mafiosi. Others, when prompted, looked puzzled. "The Mafia? What is it? The brand name for some new washing powder?"

THE FACT THAT A murder like that of Father Puglisi is unprecedented demonstrates how silent the Church was in the past. The Mafia had no reason to fear the Church. The two literally shared the same altar. But his death also suggests that the tacit understanding between the two is giving way to confrontation. There is a new tension in Sicily. The mood is changing.

Father Nino Fasullo, a cheerful Jesuit who founded *Segno*, a well-established journal in which the leading anti-Mafia figures have written, has no doubts. "The relationship between the Church and the Mafia is on the table. The Church is maturing. It is gradually learning to accept its moral responsibility and to condemn the Mafia as being totally opposite to all notions of Christianity. The Church still lacks unity of purpose and its anti-Mafia consciousness is still young, but nothing is as it was. After Puglisi, it simply cannot be."

The last time the two priests saw each other was at the anniversary of Falcone's death. Fasullo tells how Puglisi spoke of certain difficulties he was having in his parish which he wanted to discuss. They agreed to meet at the end of the summer, but Puglisi died shortly after. "Don Pino showed us what can



Father Turturu oversees the burning of toy guns during Sicily's celebration of All Souls Day

be achieved," Fasullo adds. "He is proof of what can flourish. His work had a clear impact on the Mafia's power within a well-defined territory. It is a sign for us all. He died a free man."

These words have a special significance for Father Mario Golesano, the priest who was chosen to take Father Puglisi's place in the Brancaccio district. He walks the same streets and faces the same people Don Pino did. Far more dangerous is that he is determined to carry on the same work. In Palermo the name Brancaccio inspires hesitation in people's voices. Directions are given with reluctance and are usually followed by fatherly warnings. This labyrinth of narrow streets on the southwesterly edge of the city is as poor as it is Mafia-ridden. Brancaccio has always been home to some of the most powerful Mafia families, and it continues to live up to its reputation as one of the most fertile recruiting grounds for new generations of mafiosi and hitmen.

On the surface, Brancaccio is no different from any other poor metropolitan quarter. There is even an unexpected peacefulness. Small groups of old men spend their days chatting in the sun. Old ladies lower a basket from their balconies to collect the mail from the local postman, who exchanges a word with everyone. A procession of children visit the shelter Puglisi founded in 1991 to receive a *colomba*, the traditional Easter cake from the local nuns.

Father Mario takes you by the arm and walks down to the local café for a quick espresso surrounded by a group of children who swarm around him. The locals come out of their front doors, shops and cars to touch his hand and kiss him on both cheeks.

Ten minutes later, however, in the solitude of his sacristy, surrounded by his neatly folded habits, Don Mario brings you back to reality. "We Sicilians are haunted by fear; me too. Those who travel through in five minutes don't sense it, but there is great tension here. The Mafia has no heart. We know full well that if there is a punishment to

be inflicted, the Mafia won't care who the victim is." In Brancaccio the Mafia is never seen, but its presence is unmistakable. Everyone knows it, but few discuss it.

Puglisi lives on in the memory of Brancaccio as one who tried to change this age-old order of things. He was careful not to become a public anti-Mafia figure and was little known outside his parish. Instead, he sought to have a practical impact on everyday life in the community simply by fulfilling his role as a priest. The shelter was founded to encourage children off the streets and to involve them in educational activities, depriving the local Mafia barons of lucrative new recruits. Nuns and social workers were brought over. A cultural centre and a playground were opened. Debates and evening classes were organised, all in complete freedom and without the Mafia's permission. He soon refused to give communion to those whom he knew were linked with the Mafia and later banned all dubious local building firms from competing for the contract to restore his church.

His fellow priest, Father Gregorio Porcaro, who now assists Father Mario, recalls how Father Puglisi would shrug off the various warnings and threats. "What can they do to me? Kill me?" he would say. The two friends would joke about the service the Mafia would have done Puglisi had they set fire to his old car.

BOTH FATHER GREGORIO and Father Mario know full well why Father Puglisi had become a threat to the Brancaccio bosses. "The Mafia is order. It is a closed circle. Everything within it is under its control and anyone who has the daring to open the circle is under fire. Puglisi did just that. The respect he gained here disturbed the social balance of this district. He was winning back the territory. And now that I don't feel like budging one inch from his stance," added Father Mario. "I can see that I, too, am beginning to disturb."

There was a strong sense that this gentle, warm man is living up to his predecessor. He has turned down the bodyguards who most think he should have with him and he tells his parish that it they who are his best custodians. People accompany him everywhere until late at night and make jokes about how dangerous it is becoming to be seen with him. He makes a point of sneaking into the many narrow side streets to establish personal contacts and to hear of the misery and personal tragedies which his community hides behind its closed shutters. He smiles and describes it as "regaining possession of the streets of his parish".

Until now, Father Mario has not received threats, but he explained how he and the local Mafia are observing one another from a distance. He talks aloud in the café about

'The Church's anti-Mafia consciousness is still young, but nothing is as it was. After Puglisi it simply cannot be'

sensitive issues and registers all the passing comments which get back to him. Messages and signals are tossed to and fro. Not long ago he was politely asked whether the huge billboard condemning Father Puglisi's murder which covers the front of his shelter could be taken down, since "someone" did not like it. Father Mario calmly explained how he'd had five made. As soon as the present one looks worn out, he will replace it with a brand new one.

He concedes that his battle is desperately unequal, above all because people are terrified. The morning after Father Puglisi's murder, he drove several times through the streets of Brancaccio with a friend, "to see", he said, "just what happens in a parish when its priest is gunned down". Unsurprised, ▶

but emphasising each word, he concluded that "it was as if absolutely nothing had happened. Why? Simply because this is not a groundless fear. We *Palermitani*, we all want to see the spot where Falcone was blown up. We face a beast which bites with force and tears to shreds".

Despite this harsh reality, surrounded by his many little friends, Father Mario makes his point forcefully, but with great serenity. "I don't want to be arrogant and say, 'Mafiosi, I will send you to hell', but it must be clear that there is no turning back here."

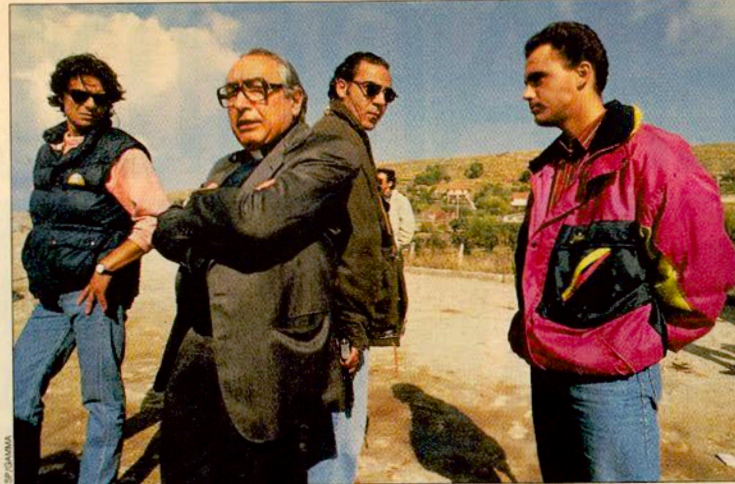
As an institution, the Church still lacks a strategy to strengthen its new-found anti-Mafia consciousness. There are still many priests in Sicily who fail to take a stand and limit their work to saying Mass in the safety of their own church. But men like Father Porcaro and Father Golesano are not alone. Others like them are prepared to face the full wrath of the Sicilian Mafia just to do their job.

One of the most celebrated is Father Paolo Turturu, the 48-year-old parish priest of Santa Lucia in the Borgo Vecchio district, another precious jewel in the Mafia's crown. Turturu's lifelong anti-Mafia work has always been well known in and around Palermo. But he achieved near international fame last Christmas during midnight Mass, when he told his packed church that a young mafioso had asked for forgiveness during confession for taking part in five Mafia killings, including that of Judge Falcone.

THIS UNPRECEDENTED revelation deeply divided the Sicilian anti-Mafia community. Many accused him of violating the secrecy of the confessional and of endangering the young man's life. Others defended his gesture as a poignant proof that mafiosi, too, are human beings who can repent and that God's forgiveness is unlimited. Turturu intended it "as a sign from God to show his love and mercy in this tormented city". He regrets the incident, but claims he was misunderstood and manipulated by the media.

Six months later the hype has died down, the media have forgotten him, but he continues to dedicate his life to challenging the power of Borgo Vecchio's bosses. A small bullet-proof pillbox containing two soldiers holding machine guns and a dark blue car with two armed policemen inside guard the entrance to the large modern church. Across the street, a few yards away, is L'Ucciardone, Palermo's prison, a squalid stone building which dominates the road. Its grey iron gate splits down the middle and slides open to let delivery vans in and out. As it closes, the clang resounds across the nearby square. Outside, armoured personnel vehicles oversee large groups of women and children queuing noisily for morning visits.

A large banner with the words "Better in here than over there" used to hang over the church door, but Father Turturu took it down to avoid alienating the many mafiosi held in L'Ucciardone. He admits that his first contacts with them were difficult, but with time he has succeeded in establishing a dialogue. Tucked away in one of his cupboards in his pristine office is a pile of copies of a letter he encouraged the inmates to write to the Italian press in May 1992. It condemns Falcone's murder and denies before God all allegations that they had cheered the Capaci massacre. "It is a message," it reads, "which comes from the depths of our heart. A cry to tell everyone that there are many inside L'Ucciardone who



Prominent anti-Mafia campaigner and Jesuit priest Ennio Pintacuda with his bodyguards

have learnt from their suffering... Our hands are not stained with this crime."

Turturu read it, emphasising the key words with obvious pride. *L'omertà* is deeply rooted in the Sicilian character. It owes its strength to a combination of fear and pride, and to a quintessential mistrust of the authorities. Cosa Nostra has always thrived on it. "For the Mafia," said Father Bartolomeo Sorge, a prominent Jesuit who has lived the past nine years under armed protection, "*l'omertà* is like the water which keeps the fish alive. If you drain it, the fish soon dies."

In Palermo, the Ucciardone letter marked a turning point. It violated all unwritten rules of Mafia conduct because it challenged Sicily's culture of consent. For Father Turturu these are encouraging signs. Another is that increasing numbers of families are hanging a white sheet from their balcony as a symbol of protest after a Mafia killing. It is an important statement, not least because for Sicilians the sheet stands for the marital relationship and is deeply private.

This kind of symbolism is at the heart of Father Turturu's daily work. His association, Painting the Peace, strives to encourage young children off Borgo Vecchio's Mafia-infested streets by turning his church into a safe haven where they can eat, play and learn that there are alternatives to crime. Their drawings and paintings decorate the church interior under the hand-painted heading, "Palermo, do away with your fear".

On November 1, All Souls Day, when children in Sicily traditionally receive toy guns and are exhorted to be strong, Turturu encourages them to burn their weapons in a massive public bonfire in return for a football. The same has been done with bags of heroin. With a smile on his face, he tells how on one occasion the response was so overwhelming that, not knowing what to do with the haul, he hid it under the statue of the Sacred Heart. Still touched, he keeps a \$1 note in his wallet which a *New York Times* reader once sent him to buy a football.

Like Father Golesano in Brancaccio, Turturu intends to use donations to fund scholarships for a few adolescents who will be taken on as trainees by local artisans and manufacturers. He, too, believes that the Mafia has used the street as a sophisticated

economic network. By winning over young children, parish priests like them hope to deprive the Mafia of its future manpower.

If the threats are anything to go by, the Mafia is feeling increasingly menaced by the social work being carried out by the Church. Father Turturu has had numerous bodies of young men killed by drugs left on the church's front door. In 1992, he was visited in his pristine office by a leading Palermo boss whose name he did not want to reveal. "Turturu," the man said several times, "you are a dead man. You know it, don't you?"

"There is an anti-Mafia consciousness growing, both in the Church and in civil society. But it is just born. It is still that of a child. It needs to grow in strength to provide us with new entrepreneurs, new politicians, a new culture. It is still an unequal struggle," concludes Turturu.

To illustrate his point, just before opening his door to the many volunteers who had come to help prepare the church for the Easter celebrations, Father Turturu pulled out a heavy black book which is about to be published. In it were 365 pages of verse and prose, handwritten by the parish's children, many of them sons and daughters of local Mafia families. It is a catalogue of anti-Mafia statements, demands for peace and praise for his work.

But there is one particular poem which sticks in his mind. It was written by a 13-year-old boy whose family, the Fidanziati, controls part of Borgo Vecchio's drug traffic.

Turturu ran his finger down the neatly written page and picked out a few lines: "The Mafia is a monument... The Mafia is part of me... The Mafia is a beautiful thing... The Mafia is the pride of Sicily." "You see where we live here," he added, with a hint of sadness. "As long as there are these little Fidanziati, these little Riina..."

A SICILIAN PROFESSOR, Innocenzo Fiore, believes it essential for his fellow islanders to learn to recognise the mafioso traits and attitudes characteristic of all Sicilians. Fiore, an expert on the sub-conscious mafioso culture, teaches at the Pedro Arrupe, a Jesuit-run institute which strives to educate a young, enlightened Sicilian ruling class. "The Mafia stems from everyday Sicilian values brought to the

extreme. The protective nature of our families, for instance. Alongside the work of the magistrates and the police, we must turn to ourselves to uncover the mafioso which hides in us all," he said.

Many agree with this analysis. Driving down the noisy streets of Palermo, Fiore's colleague, Father Nageolo Carrara, puts it more bluntly: "Not all Sicilians are mafiosi, but all mafiosi are Sicilians. They can send the army down here, Nato, even the United Nations, but as long as the culture does not change, the Mafia will continue to exist."

Pedro Arrupe has also attracted Mafia hostility for his efforts. Ennio Pintacuda, a prominent priest who used to teach in the institute, ended up with guards outside his room while he was there. Father Pintacuda was undeterred. After leaving the institute, following a disagreement with another member, he went on to become one of the spiritual leaders of the anti-Mafia political party called La Rete. "The Network".

Don Mario is adamant that, without proper investment in jobs and a decent infrastructure, Palermo will not be torn away from the Mafia. "These people will only develop when they are shown that there is a workable and concrete alternative. Anti-Mafia consciousness is one thing, but many people here go back to one room packed with people. The toilet is in the kitchen and parents make love in front of their children because they have nowhere else to go. Said by a priest, these things are controversial, but here we need a sea of money." One cannot help feeling a little ashamed when he starts to add up the figure. His sea of money is no ocean: £15,000 is enough to pay for eight scholarships in one year.

The pride of Father Golesano and Father Porcaro is Massimo, a 16-year-old boy who used to strut arrogantly around the church and disrupt the hour of catechism. Today, he

'They can send the army here, Nato, the United Nations, but as long as the culture does not change, the Mafia will exist'

always attends Mass, leaves hurt if the two priests forget to say hello and looks forward to a different future because of his new-found education. "If Massimo disappears, I will know that he has been lured back again. As long as we have him, it means that the arm-wrestling match is working our way," Father Mario said. "But I will not lose faith because I keep on telling myself that after chasing a child I'll hunt big game and maybe one day I will really succeed in winning over these people's trust."

Driving past the green Capaci exit sign on the way back to the airport, it is difficult to imagine Sicily without the Mafia. But in Palermo, tucked away in the many narrow side streets which make up places like Brancaccio, Borgo Vecchio, La Zisa and the many other miserable quarters which have always been run by the Mafia, something is silently burgeoning. Few discuss it, but everyone is watching. ●