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The global Catholic peace group Pax Christi International will be hosting its annual award ceremony Oct. 29 in Rome for the first time in the honor's 29-year history. The event will be held near St. Peter's Square to recognize a coalition of indigenous activists that have been leading nonviolent campaigns against fracking in southern Mexico.

The International Peace Award, given by the global coalition of Catholic peace groups since 1988, will go this year to Zodevite, the Indigenous Movement of the Zoque Believing People in Defense of Life and the Earth.

Alice Kooij Martinez, a senior advocacy officer at Pax Christi's headquarters in Brussels, said the group decided to give its annual award to the indigenous activists as part of a new advocacy focus it has undertaken to highlight work against the extractive industry in Latin America.

"Our core business is to promote active nonviolence," said Kooij. "And our work in the region of Latin America really makes it very clear how that could work and what methods can be used for active nonviolence."

"Zodevite ... shows how active nonviolence can actually bring about change," she said. "This is why we gave them the peace prize because not only have they been applying several tools of active nonviolence but they also did it in a very successful way."

Kooij pointed specifically to the demonstrations Zodevite members have organized and the meetings they have held with local legislators in the Mexican state of Chiapas to highlight the environmental damage caused by fracking, when high-pressure liquids are injected into underground rock in hopes of allowing natural gas or petroleum to flow more freely.

Opponents of fracking say it can lead to extensive water contamination and that the buildup of stress in the underground rock layer can even cause earthquakes. The Pax Christi officer said the activists' work led to a halt on fracking in Chiapas state, which is on Mexico's southern border with Guatemala.

Accepting the peace award on behalf of Zodevite Oct. 29 will be Mikeas Sanchez Gomez, a young indigenous woman who was chosen by the group's general assembly to make the trip to Rome.

In a brief phone interview Oct. 24, Sanchez said she hopes the award will bring greater international attention to her and other organizations' work against fracking across the Americas.

Sanchez also noted that while her group is composed of a majority of men it decided to send a woman to Rome to highlight the leadership women in Latin America have provided against fracking.

Before coming to Rome, Sanchez is spending several days with Pax Christi in Brussels, where she is to meet with officials from the European Commission, Parliament, and External Action Service, the respective executive, legislative, and foreign service branches of the EU.

Kooij said she and Sanchez will be giving the EU officials copies of a recent position paper written by Pax Christi on the extractive industry in Latin America. The paper calls on the EU and other international organizations "to exert more pressure on Latin American governments and transnational corporations to respect human rights and environmental standards and to heed the voices of affected communities."

The paper also praises Pope Francis' 2015 environmental encyclical *Laudato Si*', which it says "magnificently reflects our concerns and the urgency of building a Christian and ethical response."

"As Pope Francis has stated, the extractivist model is not sustainable," states the paper. "The problem of the extractivist model is an ethical problem which invites us to think, as described in *Laudato Si'*, of a single world and a common project with shared responsibilities and differentiated contributions."

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Kooij said Pax Christi chose to hold the award ceremony in Rome this year as part of the group's coordination with the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, a new coalition that came together after a landmark 2016 meeting at the Vatican called on the Catholic Church to reconsider its long-held teachings on the just war theory.

The timing of the award ceremony also aligns with the conclusion in Rome of an Oct. 27-29 event organized by the Vatican and the commission of the European bishops' conferences to reflect on the current challenges facing the EU. Among the speakers expected at that event are Vatican Cardinal Pietro Parolin, German Cardinal Reinhard Marx, European Parliament Vice President Mairead McGuinness, and former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta.

Past recipients of the Pax Christi International Peace Award include: Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace of Pakistan and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan; Jesuit Refugee Service in Syria; Nigerian Cardinal John Onaiyekan; and Sérgio Vieira de Mello, a U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights who was killed in a 2003 bombing in Baghdad.

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