News
EarthBeat



Early morning light hits St. Peter's Basilica as workers prepare to hoist a Christmas tree in the center of St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Nov. 23, 2023. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

Carol Glatz

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — November 15, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A local Italian group launched an online petition urging Pope Francis, the Vatican and others to stop the "fir tree-icide" of cutting down a 200-year-old red pine to decorate St. Peter's Square for Christmas.

"Sign up to say 'no' to the exclusively consumerist practice of using live trees for short-lived use, for mere advertising purposes and a few ridiculous selfies," said the petition on change.org.

The Bears and Others Association, a land and wildlife conservancy group located in the northern Italian province of Trento, launched the petition, titled "Let's save the centuries-old trees from Christmas cutting for the Holy See," Oct. 13. It had gathered more than 49,800 signatories by midday Nov. 15.

Citing the pope's teachings on caring for creation, the group said, "It is necessary to give clear and concise signals" to change people's attitudes toward respecting nature, especially given the rapidly evolving climate change.

The Christmas tree "is a pagan tradition and has nothing to do with the birth of Christ," the petition said, and it suggested the 60,000 euros the town of Ledro has earmarked for cutting and transporting the tree to Rome instead should be spent on something for the "common good," like offering shelter to someone living on the street.

In a statement released Sept. 24, the Vatican City State governing office announced that the small mountain town of Ledro, located in the province of Trento, was donating this year's Christmas tree, a 95-foot red pine, to adorn St. Peter's Square — a tradition that began with St. John Paul II in 1982.

Renato Girardi, mayor of Ledro, told the Italian state television network, RAI, that the donated tree comes from a certified sustainable working forest that follows strict forest management practices, which include thinning out towering, older trees to open up the canopy and facilitate the growth of multiple younger trees below.

Advertisement

"The trees that get cut here in Trentino are all this same dimension" and age, he said Nov. 12, standing next to the red pine destined for Rome. "If this (tree) here doesn't go to St. Peter's, it will end up as boards or to make wooden pallets."

The town had offered to donate the tree back in 2015, he said, and just this year a gardener from the Vatican visited to look at about 10 trees that were destined for cutting.

The tree in question was chosen, he said, because it did not have a big canopy and so its branches were thinner, making its transportation easier.

While the change.org petition implied the 39 other trees the town was donating to decorate different parts of the Vatican were also old trees being cut from the forest, Girardi said those trees are smaller, younger trees grown on a tree farm elsewhere because the Vatican wanted a different kind of evergreen that did not shed its needles.

The mayor told reporters Nov. 11 that the town follows the same strict timber harvesting laws in effect for the entire province of Trento. "Our program calls for 3 cubic tons of new growth each year and we cut 2 cubic tons a year, which is part of our local economy. Trees have always been cut; it's part of harvesting a forest."

The tree was expected to arrive in Rome Nov. 19 to be decorated and then lit Dec. 7. It was to remain in the square until Jan. 12, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

After the festivities, the tree was to be shipped back to Ledro where the town will hold a wood-sculpting contest, Girardi said. Professional sculptors will carve the tree based on the winning design, and it will be permanently displayed in the town.

Grado, an Italian island, was to donate this year's larger-than-life Nativity scene, the Vatican City State governing office said Sept. 24. The scene will replicate the traditional fishing boats and thatched rooftops characteristic of the town, located on a lagoon on the Adriatic Sea in the northeast near Slovenia.