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EarthBeat



A nativity scene and a 98-foot-tall Christmas tree are lit in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, Saturday, Dec. 7, 2024. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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The large crowd gathered in Saint Peter's Square on Saturday evening (Dec. 7) for the annual ceremony for the lighting of the Vatican's 98-foot-tall Christmas tree heard a message about sustainability, in keeping with Pope Francis' attention throughout his papacy to environmental concerns.

"I'm struck by the majesty of the tree," Francis said at the ceremony, addressing a delegation from Trentino, the northern Italian region that provided the Vatican's red pine. "It was cut in accordance with the ecological principles of the natural renewal of the forest."

The pope's highlighting of the environment may also have been in response to a petition circulated for signatures by environmental activists since October, charging that the centuries-old tree was being cut down for frivolous purposes.

Pointing to the tree's "numerous layers on its large trunk," the pope compared the image of the old tree to the church, "with generations of believers coming together to surround a single origin: Jesus."

Beneath the tree, a nativity scene measuring 36-by-100 feet stands on an artificial lagoon meant to resemble the small Italian seaport town of Grado, often referred to as little Venice, whose residents created it.

"Recreating the lagoon of Grado inside Saint Peter's Square was no easy task," Antonio Boemo, who oversaw the construction of the nativity scene, told journalists on Saturday.

The nativity scene shows roughly 20 life-size figures draped in traditional clothing and performing everyday tasks amid foliage and animals. More than 40 volunteers, expert craftsmen and workers labored for two years to complete the project.

Rather than riding camels, the three Magi are riding in a small boat of the kind typically used for transport in Grado. "To get to Jesus one needs a boat: the church is the boat," Francis said. "You cannot reach him alone — never — you can get to him

together, in a community, on that small, yet large, vessel that Peter continues to guide and where everyone can always find a place if they come closer together."

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The Holy Family stands in the crèche in a wooden and hay hut, a typical "casone" that fishermen lived in for centuries on the islands of Grado’s lagoon.

The nativity scene was also created with a special attention to sustainability and producing zero waste, Boemo told journalists. The team that built it used almost exclusively recycled materials, taking care to collect material that fell from the trees as they worked, putting them to use to decorate the nativity scene.

Since the beginning of his pontificate, Francis has paid special attention to environmental matters, and in 2015 enshrined his concerns in an encyclical, Laudato Sì', which teaches that men and women should coexist and care for creation.

A second nativity scene, offered by artisans from Bethlehem in the Holy Land, is also on display inside the Paul VI Hall, where Francis holds his weekly audiences. The pope met with a Palestinian delegation that worked on the crèche, taking the opportunity to stress the importance of promoting peace and dialogue amid ongoing conflict in the world.

Another 100 crèches will be displayed beneath the colonnade of Saint Peter’s Square, all of them designed and built by schools, organizations and dioceses from all over the world.

The tradition of creating a nativity scene started in 1223 with Saint Francis of Assisi, the pope’s namesake, who sought to recreate the humility and simplicity of Christ’s birth.