Opinion
Guest Voices
EarthBeat



An oak tree stands in the middle of the village green in Blarney, Ireland. (Teresa Malcolm)



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In his message for this year's Season of Creation, Pope Leo XIV notes that the theme, "Seeds of Peace and Hope" — chosen by Pope Francis before his death in late April — "appears most timely," especially "given the evidence in various parts of the world that our Earth is being ravaged." As we face challenges such as pollution, armed conflicts over access to water, biodiversity loss, extreme weather phenomena, deforestation, and forests that are "peppered with landmines," Leo urges Christians to be "seeds of peace and hope" by caring for creation and protecting the environment.

As Leo notes, Jesus often used the image of a seed when proclaiming and teaching about God's kingdom. The pope mentions the grain of wheat that must die in order to bear fruit (John 12:24). To this, I would add the tiny mustard seed that grows into a large tree (Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19).

After all, trees take a long time to grow and mature. For us to learn how to be seeds of peace and hope, we can consider not only the "lilies of the field" (Matthew 6:28) but also trees of the forest, for they are seeds of peace and hope, too, "pointing to," as Leo says, "the promise of new beginnings."



Pope Leo XIV takes part in a tree-planting ceremony with officers of the Italian Carabinieri at their headquarters in Castel Gandolfo July 15, 2025. The young cypress tree had been propagated using small pieces of plant tissue taken from the 830-year-old "Cypress of St. Francis," the oldest cypress tree in Italy. (CNS/Vatican Media)

I think J.R.R. Tolkien shared such a view. According to biographer Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien loved trees. For Carpenter, the ancient tree-like Ent called Treebeard, a "tree shepherd," is the "being who was the ultimate expression of Tolkien's love and respect for trees." Diametrically opposed to this is the cutting down of the trees by Orcs under the command of the villainous wizard Saruman at Isengard.

Moreover, in "The Scouring of the Shire," the penultimate chapter of *The Return of the King*, the final volume of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the hobbits — Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippen — return at last to their home. To their dismay, the Shire is occupied by ruffians and Saruman, who had many trees destroyed.

For Sam, the "trees were the worst loss and damage," and he "grieved over this more than anything else." After they and their fellow hobbits defeat the occupiers, Sam plants saplings "in all the places where specially beautiful or beloved trees had been destroyed," including in the Party Field, where he plants a silver nut that Galadriel, the elven lady of the woods of Lothlórien, had earlier given him when she referred to him as "a lover of trees." To be sure, that silver nut and the saplings that Sam planted were seeds of peace and hope.

Not only should we be, like Treebeard and Sam, shepherds and lovers of trees, protecting and caring for them; so too we have much to learn from trees. According to Claudia Riiff Finseth, Tolkien meant for readers to see things from "a treeish point of view." Doing so might move us, Finseth says, to become "more aware of trees as living things, as works of art and beauty, and as sensitive and feeling in their own way."

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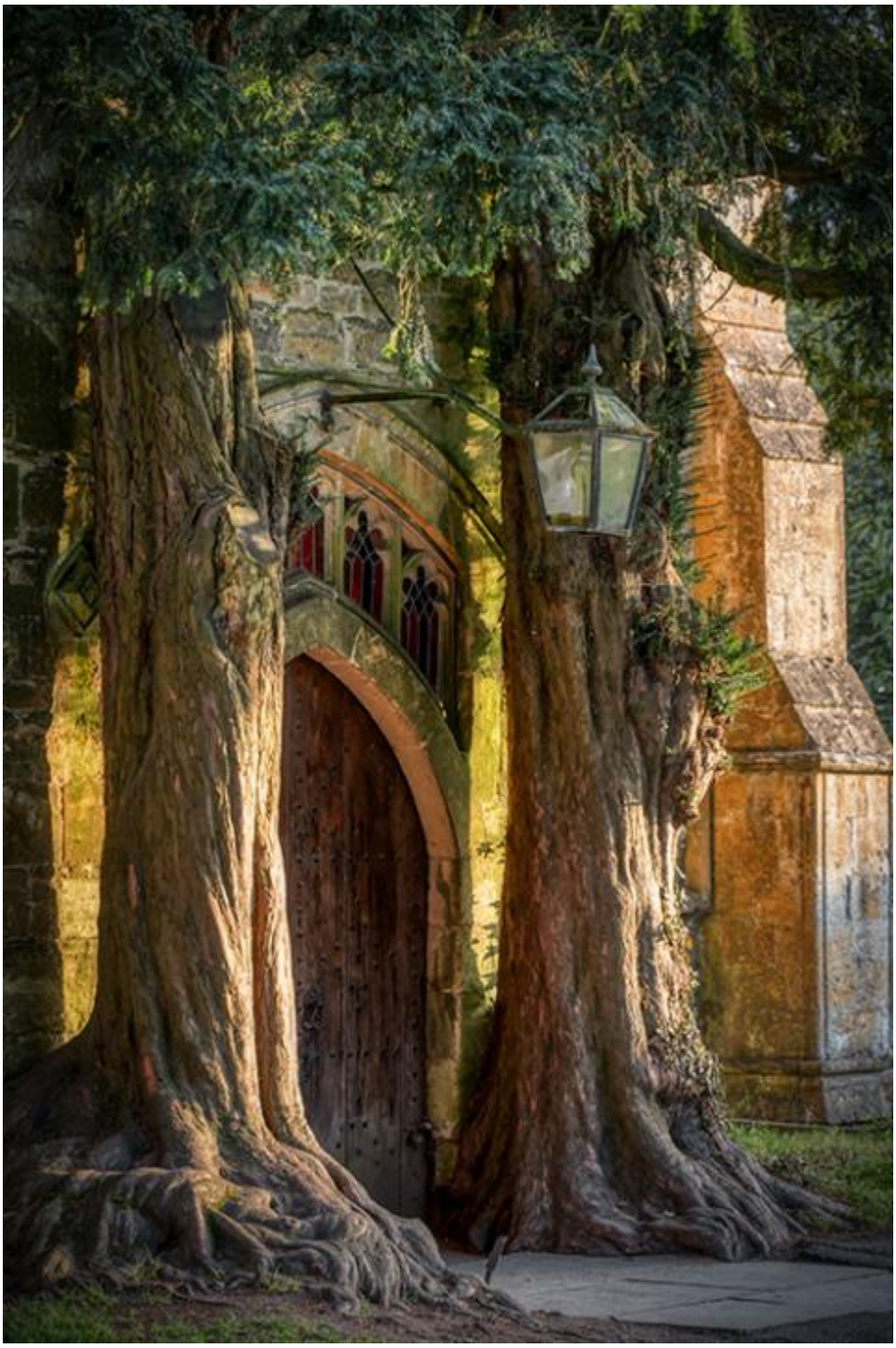
Tolkien paid attention to trees. He climbed them, leaned on them, talked to them and wrote about them.

During my childhood in rural northwest Ohio, I relished exploring the woods on our farm and climbing the trees around our house. My three younger brothers and I built a treehouse on one of them. In it, I studied the ridges of the tree's bark and the veins of its leaves, as well as the caterpillars, ants, aphids crawling on its trunk and limbs.

We also had an apple tree, a peach tree and a cherry tree from which our mother made pies. I enjoyed learning about John Chapman, popularly known as Johnny Appleseed, who settled down in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the early 19th century — around the same time as my great-great-great-great-grandfather Babel Wainwright — and planted orchards in the Midwest.

Over the years, my appreciation for trees grew. As a runner, I sometimes find myself stopping to admire a tree, to touch it, and even to say a word of gratitude to it — especially ones that look ancient: redwoods in the U.S. Northwest, sycamores in Italy, and oaks where I live now in Ireland.

Peter Berresford Ellis notes, "From Irish sources we may suppose that all the Celtic tribes had their own sacred tree, the *crann bethadh* (or "Tree of Life")." The name of the town where St. Brigid established a monastery in the fifth century, Kildare (*cill-dara*), means "church of the oak." In addition to oaks, some other trees that were considered sacred in ancient Ireland include the rowan, the ash and the yew.



Old yew trees frame the north door of St. Edward's Church in Stow-on-the-Wold, England. (Wikimedia Commons/GZagatta)

I have grown particularly fond of yew trees. What is believed to be the oldest yew in Ireland stands at the entrance to St. Patrick's College in Maynooth. Called the Silken Thomas yew, because Silken Thomas Fitzgerald is said to have played his harp beneath its branches on the night before his arrest and the fall of the castle to King Henry VIII's forces in 1535, it is supposed to have been planted by his ancestor Maurice FitzGerald when he built the castle in 1176. Bows were also made from the pliable branches of the yews around the castle.

Thus, "with their great bows of yew," wrote Tolkien in The Hobbit, did men sometimes shoot at the Great Eagles. Likewise, near Oxford at St. Edward's Church in Stow-on-the-Wold, England, there is the "yew tree door" — also called the "Tolkien door" or the "Hobbit door" — that some believe inspired the author. On campus, other yews, planted around 1850, provide an arched entrance to the graveyard for lecturers and professors.

Yews were considered guardians of the dead and are commonly associated with cemeteries. One might say that yews, as "seeds of peace and hope," symbolize resting in peace and hope for the resurrection of the dead.

In his bestselling book *The Hidden Life of Trees*, forester Peter Wohlleben says the yew tree is "the epitome of frugality and patience," taking a century before it reaches 20 to 30 feet. It has a resilient root system that stores nutrients, "and if misfortune strikes above ground, it grows right back without missing a beat." This is why it often has multiple trunks that sometimes merge as the tree ages, and it can live to be a thousand years old or more.

Wohlleben believes we have much to learn from trees, especially — to paraphrase the line by John Donne — that no tree is an island. Trees communicate with and care for neighboring trees. Wohlleben worries that the way we look at trees is distorted, and he tries to help us, like Tolkien, to see everything from a treeish point of view.

At the risk of going out on the limb of anthropomorphic projection, I think Wohlleben is spot on: "When you know that trees experience pain and have memories and that tree parents live together with their children, then you can no longer just chop them down and disrupt their lives with large machines."

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Francis repeats many times in *Laudato Si'* that everything, including all creatures, is related and connected. He urges us to undergo an "ecological conversion," that "entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion."

Moreover, Francis calls for an environmental education that aims at inculcating an "ecological citizenship" that includes planting trees.

Leo also invites us "to follow words with deeds" and "sow many seeds of justice and thus contribute to the growth of peace and the renewal of hope." He highlights the Borgo Laudato Si' project at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, where education in integral ecology is provided.

I would add the 100 Million Trees Project in Ireland, which heightens "biodiversity significantly and importantly, facilitates a very rapid carbon sink." The Benedictines at Glenstal Abbey in County Limerick are participating in the effort.

Similarly, in the Washington, D.C. area, the Laudato Trees program helps Catholic schools and parishes to plant and care for trees.

These examples of Christians being "seeds of peace and hope" by planting trees as "seeds of peace and hope" inspire me. How about you/yew?

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