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Vatican spokesman says church condemns ivory hunters' slaughter of elephants

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — The Catholic church has never encouraged anyone to use ivory for religious devotional objects and, in fact, teaches that animals must be treated with respect, the Vatican spokesman said in a letter to "friends of the elephants."

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, responding to questions posed in an online *National Geographic* editorial, said, "thinking that there is an important ivory trafficking center to uproot here (in the Vatican) in order to save African elephants makes no sense."

Within the boundaries of Vatican City, "there is no store that sells items made of ivory to the faithful or to pilgrims," Lombardi wrote in a letter Tuesday to *National Geographic*.

The October 2012 issue of *National Geographic* magazine featured an article titled "Ivory Worship" about how the use of objects made of ivory in the devotions of many religions -- not just Catholicism -- are contributing to the slaughter of elephants in Africa.

In an online editorial Jan. 17, *National Geographic* said by taking a stand against the use of ivory for religious objects, the Vatican could help slow the slaughter. The article included the personal email addresses of Lombardi and his secretary.

Responding to the editorial, Lombardi said many people had written to express their concern and not all of them were "particularly kind or profound."

However, he said, many of the messages conveyed compelling arguments regarding "the duty to combat a serious and unjustifiable phenomenon."

Lombardi, who also serves as general director of Vatican Radio, promised that staff members of the radio's broadcasts to Africa in English, French, Swahili and Portuguese would investigate the problem and encourage Catholics in Africa "to engage in the fight against poaching and the illegal ivory trade."

He also said he would bring the editorial and magazine article to the attention of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which handles questions connected to environmental protection and works with local Catholic bishops to promote efforts to safeguard creation.

In addition, he said, he would study ways to publicize the research on the importance of biodiversity done by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences -- a high-level panel of scholars from a variety of religious backgrounds.

Lombardi wrote that as a 70-year-old Catholic who has had contact with Catholic leaders from around the world, "I have never heard or even read a word that would encourage the use of ivory for devotional objects."

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"We all know that there are ivory objects of religious significance, mostly ancient, because ivory was considered a beautiful and valuable material," he wrote. "There has never, however, been encouragement on the part of the church to use ivory instead of any other material. There has never been any reason to think that the value of religious devotion might be connected to the preciousness of the material of the image you use."

As for the slaughter of elephants, the Catholic church always has taught that while animals do not have the same dignity as human beings, he said, animals also were created by God, they can feel pleasure and pain, and they must be treated with respect and "cannot be arbitrarily killed or made to suffer."

Lombardi said that as far as he could remember and as far as he could ascertain by speaking with others, no recent pope had ever given an ivory object as a gift.

In November, however, in separate audiences, two visiting African presidents gave Pope Benedict ivory gifts: The president of Ivory Coast gave the pope a chess board, and the president of Benin gave the pope a wooden cross with an ivory corpus. Both presidents assured the pope that the ivory was obtained legally.

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