

Criticism grows over Rhode Island governor's 'holiday tree' label

PROVIDENCE, R.I. - A 17-foot Colorado blue spruce is standing tall at the center of controversy in the Rhode Island Statehouse rotunda for what it is being - or more importantly, not being - called.

Gov. Lincoln D. Chafee invited the public to attend a "Holiday Tree Lighting" ceremony Dec. 6 at the Statehouse, leaving many, including Providence Bishop Thomas J. Tobin, to question the governor's choice of such secular terminology in referring to a symbol most commonly associated with the Christian celebration of Christmas.

"Governor Chafee's decision to avoid the word Christmas at the Statehouse ceremony is most disheartening and divisive," said Bishop Tobin, in a statement released to the media the evening of Nov. 29.

"It is sad that such a secular spirit has swept over our state. The governor's decision ignores long-held American traditions and is an affront to the faith of many citizens," the bishop said. "For the sake of peace and harmony in our state at this special time of the year, I respectfully encourage the governor to reconsider his decision to use the word Christmas in the state observance."

Earlier that day, Chafee said in a statement that he is only following in the footsteps of how previous governors have termed the event.

"Use of the term 'holiday tree' is a continuation of past practice, and does not represent a change of course on my part," the governor said.

The governor, attempting to diffuse the controversy, then suggested that those with opinions on both sides of the tree issue instead refocus their energy on helping the less fortunate.

"I would encourage all those engaged in this discussion - whatever their opinion on the matter - to use their energy and enthusiasm to make a positive difference in the

lives of their fellow Rhode Islanders.”

Father Timothy Reilly, chancellor of the diocese, reaffirmed the irony of Chafee’s message.

“In the governor’s attempts to unify, his decision has done quite the opposite,” Father Reilly said. “The irony is that we see more confusion and lack of unity. Christmas is a precious and sacred word in our faith vocabulary.”

The son of the donor of the Statehouse blue spruce said he was disappointed that the governor has “removed the word Christmas” in describing the tree.

“We provide him with a Christmas tree,” said Timothy Leyden. “It came from Big John Leyden’s Christmas Tree Farm. It is not a holiday tree. We don’t sell holiday trees.”

Noting that the farm has donated a Christmas tree to the Statehouse annually for about seven years, Leyden said he has no intention of donating a tree next year.

“We are proud to provide the people of Rhode Island with a Christmas tree,” Leyden said, adding that Chafee’s attempt to “be politically correct has gone overboard.”

“It’s time to get back to the basics and traditions,” Leyden emphasized, stating that he can’t remember ever hearing a customer refer to a Christmas tree as a “holiday tree.”

Leyden said that the farm, which has been selling Christmas trees since 1970, would donate a Christmas tree to the Diocese of Providence that was scheduled to be lighted Dec. 6 by Bishop Tobin at St. Patrick Church on Smith Hill in a ceremony beginning with a prayer service.

Father John Codega, pastor of St. Brendan Church in Riverside, told WPRO News that Christians are “frustrated” with Chafee’s decision.

“The governor is continuing to turn his back on the faith community,” Father Codega continued, adding that by suggesting that Rhode Island lawmakers and others involved in the debate should focus their energy and enthusiasm on feeding those

less fortunate, Chafee is insulting the faith community.

“These are the people that are serving the poor,” he said.

For example, the priest added, St. Patrick Church, where the bishop was to lead the lighting ceremony, serves the needy through several outreach ministries including a soup kitchen and food pantry.