

No room at the inn? Vatican Nativity scene gets more figures

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — The Vatican's 2006 Christmas tree did not turn out to be the tallest ever, but its Nativity scene is definitely the most populated.

In addition to Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus and the three kings, the creche in St. Peter's Square also features peasants, a flutist, a bagpipe player and a shepherd named "Titaoca."

The inclusion of Titaoca, who carries a baby lamb under his arm and kneels in adoration before the baby Jesus, is typical of Nativity scenes in northern Italy's Trent region.

He is one of 17 new figures, on loan to the Vatican, that are the handiwork of sawyers and sculptors from Tesero, a town of 2,700 people high in the Alps of Trent.

The Vatican Nativity scene officially is unveiled Dec. 24 and remains in the square until the Feb. 2 feast of the Presentation of the Lord.

Walter Deflorian, president of Tesero's Nativity scene association, said people in his little town have been making Nativity figures from spruce trees for centuries.

"Nativity scenes have been considered an important part of a family's patrimony and are passed on in people's wills," he said.

Gianni Delladio, Tesero's mayor, told reporters Dec. 18: "In our town, the family that does not have two Nativity scenes has three."

The town has identified 30 family Nativity scenes that were made before 1800 and has brought a dozen of them to the Vatican for a yuletide exhibit in the Vatican audience hall.

The core figures of the Nativity scene — the Holy Family and the Magi — made their public debut in 1842 when St. Vincent Pallotti set them up in a Rome parish.

They made their way to the Vatican in 1982 when Pope John Paul II asked the Vatican governor's office to put some Christmas decorations in the square under his window.

Pier Carlo Cuscianna, the new director of technical services for Vatican City, said he was part of the squad that scrambled in 1982 to find the figures.

"The first creche was one-fifth the size, with just one room, and the tree — which I went and got in great haste from the hills outside of Rome — was tiny in comparison to what we have now," Cuscianna said.

Sheltered under a 98-foot tree, the 2006 scene places the Holy Family under a tent nestled in rock. Next to it is a typical caravansary — an inn for travelers. On the other side is a small home.

A dozen officials and laborers from Tesero were at the Vatican the week before Christmas helping to ready the Nativity scene for its unveiling alongside the tree donated by Italy's southern Calabria region.

The Christmas tree seemed like it might be the tallest ever in St. Peter's Square, beating the record of 105 feet, but workers were forced to trim it to fit into the tree stand.