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Vatican City — November 9, 2017

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Pope Francis has directed the Vatican to stop selling cigarettes at its grocery store, halting a common practice whereby employees of the city-state could avoid paying Italian taxes on their tobacco.

Vatican spokesman Greg Burke said in a statement Nov. 9 that the pope has decided to cease the sales as of 2018.

“The reason is very simple,” said Burke. “The Holy See cannot contribute to an activity that clearly damages the health of people.”

“Although the cigarettes sold to employees and pensioners in the Vatican at a reduced price are a source of revenue for the Holy See, no profit can be legitimate if it puts lives at risk,” he continued.

Several media outlets had reported the possible halting of cigarette sales in recent days.

Cigarettes cost about a third less in the Vatican than they do in Italy, which collects some 12 billion Euro annually in tobacco taxes. Italy is also one of the first countries to tax e-cigarette products.

The Vatican grocery store is open to employees who show their ID card, and who, as of this writing, still have access to tax-free liquor sales.

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