

Jersey Man Double-Crossed for Displaying Faith



AP Images/Mel Evans

Double-crossed. That's how you might describe a Christ follower in Livingston, N.J. who's getting flack for displaying his faith in his own front yard.

The Township of Livingston is using a local ordinance against Patrick Racaniello to try to keep him from displaying crosses on his private property.

In April, Racaniello displayed a 31-by-19-inch wooden cross on a tree in his front yard to celebrate Lent. When an irate neighbor screamed objections about the cross at him and his family, Racaniello called the police.

Although the law should have been on his side, the call backfired on him. The police later ordered him to remove the cross because it was located on a tree within eight feet from the curb. Racaniello complied and instead built a 6-by-4-foot wooden cross and put it in his yard—nine feet from the curb.

But township officials found another way to squash Racaniello's freedom of speech, charging him with violating an ordinance that mandates a 10-foot right-of-way into his yard. The zoning inspector then sent Racaniello a letter that demanded he "move the cross to another location on your property, outside of the township right-of-way and not on any tree ..."

Racaniello wants to display a cross on a tree further back in his yard, but hasn't done it because he's afraid of backlash from zoning officials, who are now prohibiting him from displaying a cross on any tree on his property. The Alliance Defense fund is taking up the cause.

"It's ridiculous to stop citizens from displaying a cross on their own property," says ADF Litigation Staff Counsel Jonathan Scruggs. "The Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to express their religious beliefs in this fashion, and no local ordinance can trump that. In this case, however, the ordinance itself doesn't actually even prohibit these crosses. The law is being used in a vague fashion to stop him from doing what he wishes on his own private property."