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A visitor kneels in front of "The Last Judgement" fresco by the Italian Renaissance painter Michelangelo inside the Sistine Chapel in Rome, May 3, 2021. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino, file)

by Associated Press

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Michelangelo's "The Last Judgment," the imposing fresco of heaven and hell which dominates the Sistine Chapel, is undergoing its first major restoration in three decades, the Vatican said Monday.

The Sistine Chapel will remain open to visitors during the three-month cleaning, albeit with scaffolding partially obstructing the view of the fresco, the Vatican Museums said in a Feb. 2 statement.

The cleaning, the first major restoration since 1994, will remove microparticle buildup on the plaster caused from so many people visiting each day. The museum called the film a "widespread whitish haze, produced by the deposition of microparticles of foreign substances carried by air movements."

More than 6 million people visit the Vatican Museums each year, with the Sistine Chapel a top destination. With so many people in such a small place, the Vatican is constantly monitoring humidity and temperature levels in the chapel and taking proactive measures to protect it.

The chapel is named after Pope Sixtus IV, an art patron who oversaw the construction of the main papal chapel in the 15th century.

But it was a later pontiff, Pope Julius II, who commissioned the works by Michelangelo. The Renaissance master painted the famous ceiling, the "Creation of Adam" showing God's outstretched hand, between 1508 and 1512 and later returned to paint "The Last Judgment" on the wall behind the altar.

The chapel hosted the May conclave that elected Pope Leo XIV.

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