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Friar Daniele Aucone, foreground, deputy director of the Basilica of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, guides journalists through the basilica's cloister in Rome March 18, 2026. St. Catherine of Siena and the Renaissance painter Fra Angelico are buried in the basilica. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

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A hidden cloister just a few steps from Rome's Pantheon is a peaceful place for silent meditation — if the millions of tourists who trudge past even know it's there.

Behind the large wooden door, its frescoed walls closed to the general public reveal details of the compound's dramatic history, including papal conclaves and the Inquisition interrogation of Galileo Galilei.

At the center is a pond with goldfish and turtles surrounded by olive trees, two large palms and a tree laden with bright oranges that the friars use to make marmalade. Well-fed cats lounge about in sunny spots on the grass. There are still 20 friars who live in the convent around the cloister carrying out their duties.

"It is designed to be a place of prayer, of meditation and therefore in some way to encourage prayer and the meditation of the friars," said Friar Daniele Aucone, deputy director of the Basilica of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva.

Over the centuries, this space has attracted important figures, including St. Catherine of Siena and the Renaissance painter Fra Angelico, both of whom are buried in the adjoining basilica. It was the scene of historic events, including two conclaves and the Roman Inquisition.



A depiction of the beheaded Friar Nicholas of Toulouse appears on the frescoed vaults of the cloister of the Basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome March 18, 2026. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

The name of the basilica next to the cloister, Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, is indicative of its past, a Catholic basilica dedicated to the Virgin Mary over what was

once a pagan temple to the Roman goddess of wisdom, Minerva.

"This cloister of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva is one of the largest and perhaps the most beautiful in all of Rome and it was a great cultural center in ancient times and it is even now," said Claudio Strinati, an art historian.

It was an area where people gathered to cast their ballots when Julius Caesar was in power. Then in the late 1200s, the Dominican Friars built a church on the site. The original cloister was replaced by one designed by architect Guidetto Guidetti, a student of Michelangelo, around 1570.

Some of the frescoes covering the walls and vaulted ceilings depict the mysteries of the rosaries and were meant to encourage the contemplative life of the Dominican friars living in the convent. Other frescoes, nestled in niches and corners around the cloister, reveal the fraught history of the location and the activities of its inhabitants.



Frescoed vaults adorn the cloister of the Basilica of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome. The convent served as the offices for the Roman Inquisition in the 16th century. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

The convent served as the offices for the Roman Inquisition in the 16th century. Several portraits in medallions high on the walls of the cloisters show decapitated Dominican Friars who worked as inquisitors with just a stump for a neck and their heads held in their hands.

In a room on a side of the cloister Galileo Galilei was forced to renounce his "heretical" idea that the earth and other planets revolve around the sun as he stood in front of judges of the inquisition in 1633.

Renaissance painter Fra Angelico, a Dominican, stayed at the convent while he was painting the frescoes on the Niccoline chapel in the Vatican. Fra Angelico was in his 50s but he looks much older in a medallion of him on the wall of the cloister. In it a wrinkled, old man in a friar's habit hunched over a painting.

Another medallion shows St. Catherine of Siena, who spent time at the convent and whose tomb is the basilica next to the cloister. Friar Aucone notes wryly that while they have her body, they had to give her skull to the Dominican Friars in Siena.

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The building surrounding the cloister was the site of two papal conclaves that elected Pope Eugene IV in 1431 and Pope Nicholas V in 1447. Five popes are buried inside the basilica.

According to Strinati, it's hidden treasures like the cloister next to Santa Maria Sopra Minerva that make Rome so enchanting.

"There is all the history hidden and therefore sometimes something is found and all generations, including mine, have discovered things," he said. "The generations that will come later will continue to discover why it is so great and so profound that much is secret and hidden. And that is an element of its charm."