News



The Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie, best known as the home of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," sits in Milan, Italy, Feb. 15, 2026. (AP/María Teresa Hernández)

María Teresa Hernández

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Fr. Paolo Venturelli never gets too close when he visits Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper." The Dominican friar prefers to stand away from the wall where it was painted, on the opposite side of the room once used by members of his order for meals.

"From there, the painting looks as though it were painted in the middle of the refectory," said Venturelli of the masterpiece depicting the Gospel story of Jesus' final meal with his apostles. "It unleashes all kinds of human and spiritual reactions."

He lives in Santa Maria delle Grazie, a convent and basilica in Milan where Leonardo worked in the 1490s at the request of Ludovico Sforza, then ruler of the city.

"The Last Supper," which illustrates the biblical account of Jesus announcing that one of his apostles will betray him, is located in the convent's original refectory. Such rooms still serve as dining spaces where monastic communities gather for food, prayer and reading. Yet at Santa Maria delle Grazie it is no longer part of the friars' daily life.

After the Napoleonic suppression of religious houses in the 18th century, the refectory passed into state hands. Today it is known as the Cenacolo Vinciano and is managed by Italy's Regional Directorate of Museums of Lombardy.



A detail of Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper," dating to 1495-1498 and preserved at the ex-Renaissance refectory of the convent adjacent to the sanctuary of Santa Maria delle Grazie church, in Milan, Italy, Aug.4, 2019. (AP/Luca Bruno)

"We don't go often because we have to ask permission to enter," said Venturelli, who can stay inside for only 15 minutes like any other visitor because of preservation rules.

"It no longer belongs to us."

Living beside "The Last Supper"

A dozen priests and nine novices make up Santa Maria delle Grazie's current Dominican community. Dressed in the iconic white robes associated with their order — or brown hooded capes in winter — friars are regularly seen walking inside the basilica.

Not all tourists visiting the Cenacolo make a stop at its adjacent church. But among those who do, some look at Venturelli and the other friars with curiosity.

"We just came from the cloister and saw one of the friars taking care of the garden," said Maria Teresa Bruzzi, who traveled from Genoa with her husband in mid-February.

"We came to see Leonardo's 'Last Supper' but we also wanted to see the church because it's quite special," she added. "This is a Renaissance church that combines two styles and was very important for the Sforza family."



Dominican Fr. Llewellyn Muscat speaks with visitors in the Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie, best known as the home of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," in Milan, Italy, Feb. 15, 2026. (AP/María Teresa Hernández)

According to Venturelli, visitors to the sanctuary are often blown away by its architecture. "When they visit the chapel of Our Lady of the Grazie, they can see that the beauty around them was built to give glory to the one who is beautiful in and of himself — God," he said.

Tickets for the Cenacolo are often sold out and the museum is closed on Mondays, preventing last-minute visitors to Milan from seeing the painting. The basilica, in contrast, opens daily and welcomes those wishing to attend Mass or go to confession.

"Confessions are very much sought after and we maintain this service for the citizens of Milan but also for all visitors," said Fr. Llewellyn Muscat, prior of the Dominican community at Santa Maria delle Grazie.

Venturelli offers confessions to Italian-language speakers. Muscat can support those speaking English, Italian and Maltese, his mother tongue. And while other friars offer their services in French and German, the prior said they all make an effort to understand everyone.

"We cannot hold back the graces that the Lord gives to each one of us," Muscat said.

A life of study and prayer

Dominicans arrived at Santa Maria delle Grazie as the complex was being built in the 15th century. However, the order had established an earlier presence in Milan.

Those first friars' devotion to St. Catherine of Siena is still visible in the basilica. Frescoes depict her alongside St. Catherine of Alexandria, associated with the Dominican tradition of study and considered the patron saint of philosophers.



Worshippers attend Mass at the Basilica of Santa Maria delle Grazie, best known as the home of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," in Milan, Italy, Feb. 15, 2026. (AP/María Teresa Hernández)

That intellectual legacy is also evident inside the convent itself. A few steps from the steady flow of tourists, dozens of shelves filled with books stand in the halls.

"Reading is part of our identity," Muscat said.

Neither he nor his fellow friars follow a strict daily schedule. But study, prayer and their ministry shape their routine.

Priests like him celebrate Mass on a regular basis and assist nearby parishes when clergy are needed. Others oversee the novitiate program, teach at local Catholic institutions, or collaborate with Santa Maria delle Grazie's cultural center, which organizes conferences and events.

"We try to offer the spiritual push that people need," Muscat said.

A bond beyond art

The fact that Leonardo was commissioned to paint "The Last Supper" inside a Dominican convent was no accident. Venturelli said most of his order's refectories have this scene depicted on their walls. And according to Muscat, it echoes Dominican principles.

"For us, it does not awaken an emotion about something that belongs to the past," he said. "It is like a continuation in which we eat together with Jesus and his apostles, as though his words are also spoken to us."

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Muscat, like any other visitor who stands in front of Leonardo's mural, feels deeply moved by it.

In his case, however, it is not only the art but also a shared history that strikes a deeper chord. The painting, like the convent that houses it, has endured centuries of upheaval and has required collective efforts to survive.

" 'The Last Supper' is a call to my personal conscience and a call to the conscience of the order," Muscat said. "Because here in the Grazie there are no individuals, but a community that works and welcomes."

The order's current refectory is housed away from tourists, deep inside the labyrinth-like convent where the friars find the quiet needed for reflection and prayer. It is a modest, wide room, with several square tables instead of a long one, like the table depicted in "The Last Supper."

It's nice, Muscat said. But who knows, he added, maybe one day the old refectory will belong to them again.

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