



The mosaics on the doors of the facade of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary, at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in southwestern France are being covered in an undated photograph provided by the sanctuary. (OSV News/Courtesy Lourdes Sanctuary)



by Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

[View Author Profile](#)

jmclellan@ncronline.org

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Vatican City — September 10, 2026

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At one of Catholicism's most iconic places of worship, Pope Leo XIV will be met with plainly decorated aluminum panels hiding a sinister secret: scores of artwork designed by a disgraced priest accused of abusing more than two dozen women, mostly religious sisters.

The specter of Fr. Marko Rupnik, the once-celebrated Jesuit priest whose artwork adorns Catholic churches, cathedrals, seminaries and shrines the world over, has loomed over Leo's coming visit to Lourdes Sept. 26-27, where his mosaics decorate the facade of the basilica at the sanctuary's center.

Allegations of sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse committed by Rupnik went public in 2022 and set off a churchwide reckoning over what to do with his artwork, which decorates churches from the world's farthest-flung corners to inside the Vatican.

Ahead of Leo's visit, Bishop Jean-Marc Micas of Tarbes and Lourdes said that all the mosaics [will be entirely covered](#) indefinitely, expanding a 2024 decision to cover them in part.

But two weeks before Leo's France visit and an ocean away, the largest installation of Rupnik's art will be inaugurated on the western facade of the Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida in southern Brazil, the world's second largest Catholic church after St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Pilgrims arrive at the Cathedral Basilica of the National Shrine of Our Lady Aparecida, Brazil's

Pilgrims arrive at the Cathedral Basilica of the National Shrine of Our Lady Aparecida, Brazil's patron saint, in the city of Aparecida, Sao Paulo state, Brazil,

Oct.12, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Carla Carniel, Reuters)

The two cases highlight the contrast in how local churches are dealing with Rupnik's artistic legacy following revelations of his abuse, particularly after Leo's own position on the Rupnik case has begun to emerge.

Accusers criticize Aparecida's silence

Although the decision in Lourdes to cover the mosaics followed a consultation that [included](#) listening to accusers of clerical sexual abuse, legal professionals, safeguarding experts and local chaplains, no such process has taken place in Brazil, much to the disdain of accusers and their advocates.

"When an institution must choose between preserving an image and protecting the dignity of those who have been harmed, [abuse] survivors must be at the center of that decision," Valdea Caratchuk, organizer of the Survivor's Network of Ecclesiastical Abuse in Brazil, told National Catholic Reporter about the Aparecida mosaics.



Valdea Caratchuk organized the Survivor's Network of Ecclesiastical Abuse in Brazil.
(Courtesy Valdea Caratchuk)

"Before they put up the works of someone who was an abuser, [the church] should listen to the opinion of victims, but that's not what has happened," she said.

Allegations against Rupnik became public in 2022, and he was expelled from the Jesuits in 2023 for refusing to comply with restrictions imposed on him by the religious order. A five-judge panel was [assembled in 2025](#) to hear his case before the Vatican's doctrinal office in an ongoing trial.

The shrine at Aparecida, which is run by the Redemptorist Fathers, said in a 2023 [statement](#) to the BBC that it is "closely monitoring the case and awaits guidance from the Church for its decisions."

Yet since the initial allegations surfaced publicly, three more monumental mosaic patterns have been installed to cover the basilica's three other facades. The mosaics on the western facade, which alone covers more than 43,000 square feet, will be inaugurated Sept. 12.

Marketing materials soliciting donations for the mosaics make no mention of the controversy surrounding their creator. Though the shrine's original 2019 [announcement](#) of the project said that Rupnik would execute the project, its current [webpage](#) attributes the work to 39 mosaic artists "linked to the Aletti Center in Rome, Italy," which he founded. Meanwhile, the Brazilian bishops [continue](#) to hold their annual assemblies at the shrine.

People light candles in celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Aparecida at the Basilica of the

People light candles in celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Aparecida at the Basilica of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida in São Paulo Oct. 12, 2021.
(OSV News/Reuters/Carla Carniel)

Caratchuk, who says she was abused, said that not all accusers are asking that the mosaics be removed, but rather that the full story behind them, including their controversy, be acknowledged and shared.

"The victims who are pushing back against the installation of the mosaics at Aparecida do not want to erase history, on the contrary, they want it to be told in its entirety," she told NCR. "The story behind a work of art does not end with the image we see. When there is such a large controversy around its author, that also becomes part of its history."

Guilherme Dudus, an attorney who co-founded Scars of Faith, a volunteer network of lawyers, psychologists and doctors assisting clergy abuse survivors in Brazil, called Lourdes' approach an "important first step" toward making the shrine welcoming to abuse victims, but he said the mosaics should ultimately be removed in both France and Brazil.



Guilherme Dudus co-founded the volunteer network Scars of Faith. (Courtesy Guilherme Dudus)

"All art that involves someone who is abusive should be removed, because what they produce is not an art that imitates life, but an art that imitates death," he told

NCR. "That is how our victims feel, but we also know this will never be achieved in Brazil."

Though some have [argued](#) that removing the art would be an unfair punishment to the other artists involved in the project, Dudus said that among victims, "everyone knows this was a project of Rupnik."

"Unfortunately, we see the whole project as contaminated," he said. "We feel deeply shaken, outraged and saddened to see that, unfortunately, a place that should be a place of welcome, of faith and, above all, of simplicity, is the stage for this monumental project which alludes to a man who destroyed the lives of so many women."

Leo distances the papacy from Rupnik

With the pope on the verge of visiting a shrine covered in Rupnik's art, Leo's own view on the situation has increasingly come into focus.

Already, Leo had demonstrated a certain degree of intentionality in distancing himself from the distinctive mosaics.

When he brought the [Lenten Curial retreat back to the Vatican](#) in his first year as pope, he chose not to use the Redemptoris Mater Chapel, where previous popes hosted the retreat and which is plastered floor-to-ceiling in Rupnik mosaics.

Pope Francis and Catholicos Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, primate of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, lead prayers in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Sept. 11, 2023. Former Jesuit Fr. Marko Rupnik oversaw the chapel's renovation beginning in 1996. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Pope Francis and Catholicos Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, primate of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, lead prayers in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Sept. 11, 2023. Former Jesuit Fr. Marko Rupnik oversaw the chapel's renovation beginning in 1996. (CNS/Vatican Media)

And Rupnik's art, which was still used on Vatican websites to illustrate religious feast days well into 2025 — a move [defended by the head of the Vatican's communications office](#) — was abruptly removed shortly after Leo's election.

Micas, the Lourdes bishop, later [revealed](#) that Leo had requested that Rupnik's art no longer be used by the communications office and that the pope supported Lourdes' decision to cover the controversial mosaics.

The nunciature in Paris, which has a chapel decorated with Rupnik's art, will not host any celebrations during the pope's visit to France, OSV News [reported](#).

Seven years since the construction on the Aparecida mosaics got underway, Leo now has his own man in Aparecida — Archbishop Mário Antônio da Silva, who was [appointed](#) by the pope in March and took over for Archbishop Orlando Brandes, who had led the archdiocese since 2017.

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Da Silva, who was installed in May, [visited](#) the shrine's facade for the first time last month and praised their evangelical value, saying that they "impress everyone who looks at them closely." The archbishop declined to be interviewed for this article.

The emergence of Leo's opposition to the continued display of Rupnik's work has not altered plans for Aparecida's Sept. 12 inauguration.

For now, the two shrines remain on opposite tracks: Aparecida will unveil another facade of Rupnik mosaics, and two weeks later, Lourdes will welcome the pope with its own hidden behind aluminum panels.

Any public reference Leo makes to the artwork around him during his visit could reverberate far beyond France.

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in France** feature series. [View the full series](#).