

EXCLUSIVE

Rupnik and his companions occupy convent near Rome. Cardinal De Donatis is director

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"The nuns have gone out, there's nobody here at the moment, I'm just passing through and can't let you in," answers a woman's voice over the intercom. "But can't we just visit

the church and the grounds, we've heard it's beautiful?" we ask. "No, there's no one here. But we know there are priests... Silence, the conversation abruptly ends. It's Thursday 27 February, and we're standing outside the large metal gate of the convent of the Benedictine Sisters of Priscilla in Montefiolo, in the municipality of Casperia, a small village in the Sabina hills, in the province of Rieti.

What we don't know is that Father Marko Ivan Rupnik, **the former Jesuit expelled from the Order and accused of the serious sexual abuse of women and nuns**, has been residing here for several weeks. Not only that, but he is together with other former Jesuits from the Aletti Centre, once the headquarters of Rupnik and his followers until **the abuse scandal** broke.

Montefiolo is just a hilltop and the only building is the ancient, majestic convent, which originally belonged to the Capuchin Friars.

It was bought and restored in 1935 by Monsignor Giulio Belvederi. The then Secretary of the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology opened the monastery to a group of women who wished to lead a religious life and who, in 1936, founded the Benedictine Oblates Regular of Priscilla, later to join the Benedictine Congregation. But now, shrouded in a mysterious conspiracy, it is passing into the hands of the small group of former Jesuits, favoured by its location. In fact, surrounded by a high wall and a wood, which separates it from the main road, it is an perfect residence for those who wish to live in secrecy.

Rather than **"just passing through"**, we decide to persist and linger at the entrance for a while. Surprisingly, only a few minutes later, the gate opens to allow a lone man in a car to drive out where "there is nobody": he stopped; we asked him for some information and obviously he doesn't know anything either; but a little later, seeing the gate hasn't closed, another man appears and walks towards us: this time he introduces himself: "I'm a priest, my name is Milan". Milan Žust, who for years had been Father Rupnik's superior in the Jesuit community of the Aletti Centre, and from 2018 to 2021 collaborator of the Delegate of the Superior General for the interprovincial houses and works in Rome, Father Johan Verschueren, who sent Rupnik on a tour of the houses and interprovincial works in Rome, despite the fact that he had already been hit by the famous "lightning excommunication" and despite the rumours of other abuses that really were already known. Hence confirming what an informer had told us.

Of course, we pretended to be tourists interested in the church and the convent, but Father Milan remained suspicious and evasive when asked more precise questions:

he said that he had been there for two weeks and that we couldn't go in because the convent was being renovated, because the nuns were moving out and the future of the convent had not been decided.

It's true, the few remaining nuns are packing their bags to move to their house in San Felice Circeo and, according to some sources, the convent will remain in the hands of this small group of former Jesuits who have by now invaded the nuns' area, eating with them in their refectory and laying down the law.

The question is: why here? And above all, why did Rupnik settle here, an hour's drive from Rome, after leaving the Jesuit order and joining the Slovenian diocese of Koper? Don Milan also tells us that he is a diocesan priest, but not from this diocese, instead of Sabina-Poggio Mirteto.

In fact, the convent of Montefiolo was already a well-known place, frequented by the people of the Aletti Centre, who organised retreats in a large wing of the huge building called the "House of the Resurrection". And **the man behind the scenes is Cardinal Angelo De Donatis**, former Vicar General of His Holiness for the Diocese of Rome and now Major Penitentiary. **It is no secret that the Cardinal is Rupnik's great protector**, and that in *illo tempore* he dismissed as slander the numerous and detailed accusations that emerged against the former Slovenian Jesuit, even going so far as to issue a ridiculous note praising the impeccable reality of the Aletti Centre, while Rupnik's victims demanded truth and justice.

Montefiolo, where he has built a two-storey house, called 'apartment', according to those who have seen it (and I have) renovated in a building that the nuns used to park their vehicles in, on the slope overlooking the valley towards Mount Soratte. And then, in the nearby village of Poggio Catino, the Cardinal also owns a former farmhouse with a swimming pool, where it seems he had accommodated Rupnik & Co. until they could be incorporated into Montefiolo.



Meanwhile, in the convent church, all hell seems to be breaking loose. A house protected by the Fine Arts, is being literally turned upside down by the group. They are painting the entire church, which has an external entrance. And then, in the old part of the monastery, an ancient hermitage where San Felice da Cantalice lived as a hermit: they are painting that too,' an informant tells us. He continues: For years, nothing could be done because permission was needed, but now, in no time at all, they have built a wall where the two steps to the altar used to be, and they have frescoed it'.

But also the poor nuns are having a hard time. They are practically hostage to Cardinal De Donatis and Rupnik's group, and are prohibited from opening the convent to visitors. While searching for more information in the village of Casperia, we learn that the nuns, who were once very present in the town and also renowned for the quality of their embroidery, disappeared some time ago and nothing more is known about them. We were also given the personal telephone number of one of the sisters with the suggestion that we ask to buy some of the honey they produce as a ruse to gain access to the convent. We try: 'It's not possible,' the nun replied in a frightened tone, 'they don't want us to let anyone in.' 'They don't want us to? Who doesn't want it?' we asked, laying our cards on the table. 'Cardinal De Donatis? Don Rupnik?' The nun is clearly too frightened at this point: 'I don't know anything, I have to go to mass now'. She hangs up.

It's not difficult to understand her fear because the Cardinal, we don't know on what basis, is in charge of the financial management of the religious institute. In fact, we are told, the Cardinal is also in charge of the property in San Felice Circeo, at the foot of the Morrone hill, donated to the nuns by Cavaliere Carlo Selbmann. In short, for the nuns, De Donatis is the boss who decides everything.

The result is that the Cardinal is the director of the new arrangement that permits Rupnik and the small group that left the Society of Jesus to occupy a property that does not belong to him, but in which he has made a home and which he manages as if it were his own. Since he himself was unable to incardinate Rupnik in the diocese of Rome, which was certainly too much in the limelight after the media scandal, **a bishop was sought and found in Monsignor Jurij Bizjak (noe replaced by Peter Štumpf)**, who was willing to perform a purely formal incardination and then let Rupnik form a new community and continue his artistic activities. Above all, De Donatis had no objection to putting Rupnik back in direct contact with nuns after all that had come to light. And defying the cardinal's wrath (yes, we also hear that sparks are flying between the sisters and De Donatis) could also cause problems that the elderly sisters, some of whom are in wheelchairs, are not in a position to face.

We have tried to contact Cardinal De Donatis directly, but so far he has not replied to our email. The same goes for the Bishop of Sabina-Poggio Mirteto, Monsignor Ernesto Mandara, in whose diocese the new wave of abuses against nuns is taking place. He has carefully avoided answering us. Mrs Daniela, who identified herself as his personal secretary on the phone on 27 February, refused to let us speak to the bishop because "he is not in charge of the Montefiolo convent"; the next day, another member of the secretariat told us that the bishop intended to call us back, but he didn't at least not until now.

Abuses, intrigues, conspiracy of silence: the Rupnik scandal adds a new chapter, with the complicity of bishops and cardinals, while the trial against him remains at a standstill.