In an excerpt from his new book ***OPUS: The Cult of Dark Money, Human Trafficking, and Right-Wing Conspiracy inside the Catholic Church****, author Gareth Gore examines the ties binding* ***Supreme Court*** *kingmaker* ***Leonard Leo*** *and Opus Dei, a radical organization on the fringes of the* ***Catholic Church*** *that is accused of serious abuses and dedicated to the complete "re-Christianization" of the world.*

Leonard Leo was born on Long Island in the mid-sixties. When he was only a toddler, he lost his father — a pastry chef — to cancer. At the age of five, his mother remarried, and the Leos moved to New Jersey, where he attended Monroe Township High School. Leo was chosen as the "Most Likely to Succeed" distinction he shared with classmate Sally Schroeder, his future wife. In the yearbook, the two were shown sitting next to each other, holding wads of cash and with dollar signs painted on their glasses. He was so effective at raising money for his senior prom that his classmates nicknamed him the "Moneybags Kid."

Throughout his life, he remained steeped in the deep Catholicism of his grandfather, who had emigrated to the United States from Italy as a teenager; his grandparents attended Mass daily, and encouraged the young Leonard to follow their lead. After high school, Leo went to Cornell University, studying under a group of conservative academics in the university's department of government and with the wider national backdrop of iconoclastic scholars led by Yale University's Robert Bork and the University of Chicago's Antonin Scalia, who were building the case for a novel legal doctrine known as originalism. He got a series of internships in Washington, D.C., during the final years of the Reagan administration, then returned to Cornell to join the law school, where in 1989 he founded the local chapter of a student organization called the Federalist Society. That group had been set up by three conservative-leaning students from Yale, Harvard, and Chicago seven years earlier as a way of challenging what they saw as the dominance of liberal ideology at the country's law schools.

After graduating, Leo married Sally, who had been raised as a Protestant but who used to go to Catholic Mass five times every weekend because she played the organ. She decided to convert not long before her marriage. The couple moved back to Washington, where Leo clerked for a judge on the court of appeals and became close with another appellate judge who had recently been appointed to the D.C. circuit — a man from Georgia called Clarence Thomas, who had toyed with becoming a Catholic priest. Despite being ten years older and from much more humble origins, Thomas shared Leo's conservative outlook, and the two soon developed a deep friendship that would endure for many years. During this period, Leo was asked by the Federalist Society to become its first employee — although he delayed his start date so that he could help his good friend Thomas through his contentious confirmation process for the Supreme Court. Despite accusations of sexual harassment hanging over him, Thomas won Senate confirmation by a slim margin. It would be the first in a series of fights in which Leo would have to put aside the teachings of his Christian faith as he focused on the greater goal of pushing through a conservative revolution of the courts and of society at large.

Backed by a cabal of wealthy conservative patrons like industrialist David Koch, banker Richard Mellon Scaife, and the devout Catholic entrepreneur Frank Hanna, the Federalist Society under Leo became a breeding ground for conservative judges who were recruited at law school, groomed through the society's program of events and talks, and then bound together through their careers. "The key was to figure out how to develop what I call a 'pipeline' — basically, where you recruit students in law school, you get them through law school, they come out of law school, and then you find ways of continuing to involve them in legal policy," Leo later explained. In 2005, the Federalist Society began openly advocating for John Roberts — a former member — to be nominated to fill a vacant seat at the Supreme Court, the first time it had campaigned publicly for a particular candidate. A few months later, its sway had grown so much that it torpedoed President George W. Bush's own preferred candidate for another vacant seat on the Supreme Court — Harriet Miers, a judge and close friend of the president who wasn't a member of the Federalist

Society — and pressured him to nominate Samuel Alito, one of its members, in her place.

Leo worked closely with the Judicial Confirmation Network, a new nonprofit organization set up using funds from Robin Arkley, a California businessman known as the "foreclosure king," who had made billions buying up mortgages of people in financial difficulties. The idea for JCN had been hatched at a dinner in Washington attended by Leo and Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia shortly after Bush's reelection in late 2004. JCN spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on radio and online advertisement to shape public opinion. It was run by Neil and Ann Corkery, a couple who had been members of Opus Dei since at least the eighties. Neil had been a critical figure in getting a new residence for male, celibate members of the Catholic movement built in Reston, Virginia. "Opus Dei members preach their faith through their work as well as the friendships they develop," Ann explained. She and her husband would later preach their faith by becoming central figures in a series of nonprofits that would channel dark money for Leo's efforts.

Through his role in securing the nominations of Clarence Thomas, John Roberts, and Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court, Leo's political cachet began to grow. An avid networker, he cultivated friendships with other members of the court, spending a weekend in Colorado hunting with Judge Antonin Scalia — himself a devout Catholic and, like the Corkerys, close to Opus Dei. Surrounded by such religious zeal, it didn't take long for their example to reawaken his own Catholic faith, and Leo soon began tapping his network of dark-money backers to support religious causes. He twice bailed out the Becket Fund, a nonprofit named after a twelfth-century English martyr, that officially worked to protect religious freedoms, especially those that were important to conservative Catholics. He reveled in his reputation as the financial savior of this important community.

Soon afterwards, President Bush picked Leo as his representative to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, a federal agency set up to police religious freedom around the world. Despite its

lofty aims, the commission had a tiny budget and its commissioners were unpaid. Within Washington circles, many saw it as nothing more than an office for amateurs who meddled in foreign policy. Undeterred by the skeptics, Leo made the most of his time at the commission to push his own Catholic agenda — traveling to places like Iraq, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, and Vietnam to investigate allegations of religious persecution. His own faith seemed to grow during that time, with Leo occasionally reprimanding his staff for putting him in a hotel too far from a church, making it difficult for him to attend Mass. Some colleagues began to note a particular bias in the way he carried out a role that conflicted with the commission's stated aim of championing the freedom of *all* religions. He became embroiled in a lawsuit after one former colleague accused him of firing her because she was Muslim. Several staff members resigned because of the controversy, and Leo was fired not long after. Despite the scandal, his time at the commission deepened Leo's faith and helped him cultivate his image as a serious political figure.

By the time of the Federalist Society's twenty-fifth anniversary dinner in November 2007, his influence was clear. Leo shared the stage with the president and three sitting Supreme Court Justices — Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, and Samuel Alito. Chief Justice John Roberts sent a video message. "Thanks in part to your efforts, a new generation of lawyers is rising," President Bush told the assembled members.

At the time of this dinner, Leo was still recovering from the sudden death of his daughter Margaret just a few weeks before her fifteenth birthday — an event that had a profound impact on him. Margaret had been born with spina bifida and used a wheelchair. Events around her death had reinforced Leo's faith. The previous summer, during a family vacation, Leo had promised Margaret that he would try to go to Mass more regularly. Over the years, Margaret had developed an obsession with anything religious, and would nag her parents to take her to Mass. She especially loved angels — and priests, insisting on a hug every time she saw one. The day after they returned from vacation, Leo got up early to go to Mass — as promised — and looked in on Margaret. As he was walking down the hall,

she started gasping for breath and died shortly afterward. “I will always think that she did her job,” he later said. “She did her job.”

After her death, strange signs appeared. The real estate billionaire Robin Arkley — the man who had provided the money to lobby for Roberts and Alito’s nomination to the Supreme Court — invited the Leos to spend some time at his ranch in California. On the way there, they spent a night in a hotel in San Francisco. After checking in, they went up to their room and Margaret’s younger sister Elizabeth rushed over to a bowl of complimentary candy and dug her hand into it. In it, she discovered a Sacred Heart medal. On the last day at the ranch, Leo’s wife Sally came across another medal. A few weeks later, someone visiting Leo at work told him they found another medal in their airplane seat. The Leos told friends that they were convinced these medals were signs from heaven that Margaret was both safe and still with them. The experience would deepen his faith, marking him out as a crusader — and a target for Opus Dei.

AS CHAPLAIN OF the Catholic Information Center, the Opus Dei chapel and bookshop on K Street, just a stone’s throw from the White House, Father Arne Panula introduced a number of new initiatives in the early 2010s to generate a steadier stream of donations — and to better integrate the movement with wealthy Catholics. Blue-eyed and silver-haired, Father Arne was a big figure within Opus Dei. For a period in the nineties, he was the organization’s most senior man in the United States. A native of Minnesota, he had grown up in a small town on the shores of Lake Superior and had joined the Work while at Harvard. He moved to Rome after graduating, where he lived alongside the Opus Dei founder Josemaría Escrivá and trained to become a priest. After ordination, he moved back to the States to take on the role of chaplain at The Heights, an Opus Dei school in Washington, which was still in its infancy. During his forty years in the movement, he had also spent some time in California, and had become a close friend of Peter Thiel, the billionaire entrepreneur who helped found PayPal and who had been an early investor in Facebook. On long hikes in the Marin headlands, just north of San Francisco, the two men bonded over their shared disdain for government — and the dangers

of liberal attempts to correct the ills of society through policies like affirmative action.

His first big initiative at the Catholic Information Center copied a popular strategy that had proved lucrative in almost every industry: the awards dinner. By bestowing an award on Washington's most respected conservative Catholics, and then hosting a lavish dinner in their honor — to which all the city's wealthy Catholics were invited — he generated hundreds of thousands of dollars in a single evening and established the CIC at the heart of this influential community. And so the John Paul II Award was born in 2012. The inaugural award went to Cardinal Donald Wuerl, the Archbishop of Washington, who was popular with conservative members of his flock and who had recently stoked controversy by becoming one of the most senior members of the Church to sign the Manhattan Declaration. This was an ecumenical statement drafted by Robert George, and co-signed by the Opus Dei operative Luis Tellez, Maggie Gallagher, and other members of the Catholic right, which called on Christians not to comply with laws permitting **abortion**, same-sex marriage, and other practices that went against their beliefs. The following year the award went to George Weigel, a biographer of Pope John Paul II and a big figure within the American Catholic right. The Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, an influential and wealthy Catholic brotherhood; the founder of the Becket Fund, a lobby group championing religious rights; and Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia would all become recipients over the next few years.

Father Arne set up another initiative called the Leonine Forum, a program for top graduates designed to provide them with "intellectual and spiritual seriousness." It, too, brought in generous donations from wealthy Catholics keen to steep the leaders of tomorrow in Church teachings. As ever, the Opus Dei name was kept out of any promotional material — but, even so, such events deepened the organization's presence among America's most influential Catholics. For Father Arne, the ultimate goal of this outreach was transforming the political sphere, almost every aspect of which had grown more and more secular over the years. He believed that

policy simply couldn't be made by people who weren't versed in the universal truths of the Church. His mission was to reverse this creeping secularism — and put Opus Dei at the heart of a spiritual awakening.

Around the same time, Luis Tellez, a celibate member of Opus Dei at Princeton, organized a conference at the Vatican that was billed as "an interreligious colloquium on the complementarity of man and woman." While the initiative was officially the idea of the Princeton academic Robby George, Tellez and his Opus Dei colleagues in Rome oversaw the organization of the conference. The Witherspoon Institute, an organization set up by Tellez and George, made a large donation to the Opus Dei university in Rome around the same time. "Oftentimes, Robby will open the door, you know," Tellez explained. "I'm a nobody." The Humanum conference created some additional cachet for Opus Dei operatives in the United States, who used this important gathering of religious leaders as an enticement to woo big-name Catholic conservatives. Leonard Leo was one of those invited to participate.

The invitation dovetailed with a wider effort at the Catholic Information Center to entice Leo into the Opus Dei orbit. At around the same time as the Humanum conference, Leo was invited onto the CIC board. Their two worlds were already entwined. Leo's children went to the two Opus Dei schools — The Heights for the boys and Oakcrest for the girls — and he and his wife played an active part in school life, donating thousands of dollars a year in addition to the many thousands they were paying in tuition for their various children. The Leos were also regulars at a deeply conservative church in McLean, not far from their home, that was popular with many of the city's Opus Dei members. Both parties were also becoming ever more aggressive politically. In 2011, Leo teamed up with Clarence Thomas's wife Ginni to co-found another nonprofit that successfully opposed an Islamic center being built near the site of the 9/11 attacks in New York, denigrated as the "Ground Zero Mosque." A year later, he joined the board of the Catholic Association, another non-profit linked to the Corkerys, that funded campaigns to oppose same-sex marriage. For its part, the Catholic Information Center — despite in theory

being apolitical — had also joined a suit against the Obama administration, challenging the requirement that employers provide and pay for contraception, sterilization, and abortion-causing drugs as part of employee health insurance plans.

The appointment of Leo came despite misgivings among the Opus Dei national leadership, and illustrated a transactional attitude toward this increasingly influential figure with deep connections to dark money. “He’s a figure in Washington, and he may have had kids in the school down there,” explained Father Tom Bohlin, who headed Opus Dei in the United States at the time — and who met Leo at the Humanum conference in Rome. “I’m not sure he even understands Opus Dei, but at a certain level, he likes what we do — certain things — and wants to support that.” The appointment of Leo marked a shift in the CIC board. For years, it had been run by Father Arne, another priest, and a smattering of volunteers drawn from the congregation. The makeup of the board was decidedly unpolitical — a mix of academics, lawyers, and volunteers who helped run the bookshop. Pat Cipollone, a lawyer who had been an assistant to Attorney General Bill Barr in the early nineties but who had since returned to the private sector, was the only board member who was remotely connected to the Washington political scene. But in 2014, all that changed. Alongside Leo, Bill Barr, the former attorney general, was also appointed.

Leo and his ilk would soon become a bridge connecting the prelature with important people on Capitol Hill — and the world of dark money populated by secretive billionaires with a deeply conservative agenda. Together, they would form a coalition — unified by their political connections, religious fervor, and money — that would reshape American society and destroy many hard-won civil rights.

In Father Arne’s view, his successful renewal of the apostolic mission of the bookshop and chapel on K Street was all part of a “Great Awakening” that was about to wash over the United States — and the world. In the wake of the Occupy Wall Street movement and the general disgruntlement of young people following the financial crisis, he saw this “Great

Awakening" starting on university campuses, where Opus Dei had again begun to plant its flag with what he called "counter-institutions" such as the Catholic Information Center's Leonine Forum and the Witherspoon Institute at Princeton. "It isn't only a spiritual awakening that's coming," Arne Panula explained. "Students leave these schools with no jobs, no intellectual sustenance of worth, and a huge financial debt . . . students are being duped. There will be a utilitarian reaction to that chasm between what they're promised and what they're actually taught — market correction, of sorts, in education. But the deeper reaction is more personal. It's about betrayal. Some of these students come to realize that there's a world out there that they never knew existed. They've been purposefully sealed off from it by their teachers and other authorities. That begs for reaction. They've been sold a bill of secular progressive goods!" Opus Dei would help guide them toward this new world.

Arne Panula was right — a new "Great Awakening" was coming. But it wouldn't rise up from the student population. Instead, it would emerge out of the dark-money networks. The recruitment of Leonard Leo would cement ties between Opus Dei and the U.S. Supreme Court that had been developing for decades. Antonin Scalia had once been at the center of this relationship — the Justice had given talks at the Catholic Information Center and at the Reston Study Center, which was the male numerary residence in Washington's suburbs that hosted regular get-togethers for Opus Dei members. Only the year before, Scalia had also attended an Opus Dei retreat at the prelature's $10 million, 844-acre property near the Shenandoah Mountains. His children and grandchildren attended Opus Dei schools. He was best friends with Father Malcolm Kennedy, an Opus Dei priest who often came around for dinner at Scalia's house, after which the two would often belt out Broadway tunes. But with Leo and his network of dark money, Opus Dei's penetration of Washington's political and judicial worlds would now reach unprecedented levels. That Christmas, like many Christmases before it, the Supreme Court hosted its annual holiday party. As always, Father Malcolm was seated at the piano, playing carols for the assembled dignitaries, having been invited by Scalia. As he played, the Justices — the most powerful legal figures in America — sang along to

the tune played by the Opus Dei priest. It was a dark portent for what was to come.

LEONARD LEO'S CONTRIBUTION to this reshaping of the Court would soon involve much more than providing a list of amenable conservative justices. Within weeks of Scalia's death in February 2016, he began to mobilize hundreds of millions of dollars to make his dream of reshaping the Court — and wider society — a reality. While his appointment to the board of the CIC was still relatively recent, in reality Leo had been juggling several side hustles during his more than twenty years at the Federalist Society — usually at nonprofit organizations linked to Catholic causes close to his heart. In 2008, he had become the chair of Students for Life of America, an organization conceived along the same lines as the Federalist Society, but dedicated to setting up local chapters at high schools and colleges across the country devoted to fighting abortion. In 2012, he joined the Catholic Association, a small nonprofit dedicated to promoting the Catholic voice in the public arena that had been set up by the Opus Dei activist Neil Corkery. Leo's entrance coincided with a sudden upswing in the finances of the Catholic Association, which hitherto had raised next to no money — but which suddenly saw almost $2 million flood in. The money was used to set up two advocacy groups. One was called the Catholic Association Foundation, which soon became a conduit for funding various media initiatives — including a radio station in Maine, where a referendum on same-sex marriage legislation was on the ballot. The other was called Catholic Voices, which had been started by Jack Valero, Opus Dei's spokesperson in London, as a way to shift media narratives concerning Catholic issues. Within months of being set up, "volunteers" from the group had given interviews or published comment pieces on a variety of issues, including abortion and same-sex marriage, in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times.* At one conference hosted by the organization, a priest from Opus Dei was on hand to offer the benediction.

Much to the consternation of his Federalist Society colleagues, Leo had also begun cannibalizing the organization's own deep-pocketed donors to

help finance some of his more personal initiatives — and those of his friends. In 2010, he co-founded along with Ginni Thomas an organization called Liberty Central; Thomas was the wife of his good friend Justice Clarence Thomas and they used a $500,000 donation from Dallas real estate billionaire Harlan Crow, also a donor to the Federalist Society. The group billed itself as "America's Public Square," promising to preserve freedom and reaffirm the core principles of the Founding Fathers. The following year, he joined the board of Chicago Freedom Trust, which had been set up by manufacturing billionaire Barre Seid as a pass-through to anonymously channel funds to initiatives he wished to support and to take advantage of the recent *Citizens United* ruling shielding big donors from disclosure. Leo met Seid through Eugene Meyer, president of the Federalist Society, who envisioned the wealthy manufacturing tycoon as a potential donor to the law society. Instead, Leo cultivated him as a funder of his own dark-money network. The move brought Leo into contact with other central figures of the conservative dark-money world — like Whitney Ball and Adam Meyerson, the main actors behind DonorsTrust, who were responsible for anonymously funneling hundreds of millions of dollars to various conservative grassroot groups, including some linked to the far right. He also used his influence there to divert funds to Opus Dei, with the pass-through soon becoming a regular donor to the Oakcrest School.

As Leo's access to the world of dark money grew, his Opus Dei friends the Corkerys became critical as a front for the tens of millions of dollars streaming through Leo's hidden network of nonprofits. Neil and Ann had provided crucial cover for him during the campaign to secure the confirmations of John Roberts and Samuel Alito in 2005, hiding the hundreds of thousands of dollars spent to influence public opinion. As more dark money poured in starting in 2010, they began to do the same again through various nonprofits such as the Wellspring Committee and the Judicial Crisis Network. Their importance only grew following Scalia's death, as Leo pumped his network for ever larger sums. In the weeks after Scalia's death, the Corkerys began opening the purse strings in what would eventually become a $17 million campaign to stop Obama

from replacing Scalia and instead ensure a reliable conservative filled the vacancy. It was just the start. Over the next five years, Leo and the Corkerys would oversee the transfer of almost $600 million of dark money to right-wing causes. Their hidden ecosystem would eventually enable a conservative takeover of the Supreme Court that would disassemble hard-won civil rights and turn back the clock on issues close to their hearts — on abortion, on affirmative action, and on vast swathes of what they saw as a progressive agenda.

They also used the network to line their own pockets. Over the next few years, their personal wealth would skyrocket as they skimmed off tens of millions of dollars in advisory fees. These pools of dark money were also used to boost various initiatives directly or indirectly that were associated with Opus Dei: the Catholic Association, the Catholic Association Foundation, Catholic Voices USA, and the Catholic Information Center on K Street, where Leo now sat on the board, all became beneficiaries of this largesse.

DURING THE **DONALD TRUMP** YEARS, conservatives — led by Leonard Leo — took control of the Supreme Court. Following the appointment of Neil Gorsuch to replace Antonin Scalia, two more seats had become vacant during Trump's presidency, allowing him to create a solid conservative majority. One of those seats had become vacant just weeks before the election, following the unexpected death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Leonard Leo was once again asked to help find a replacement. At one Federalist Society event, his good friend Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas jokingly referred to Leo as the third most powerful man in the world, presumably behind the pope and the president of the United States. "God help us!" Leo had responded. But following Ginsburg's death, not even God could rein in his ambition.

Rather than offer a concession candidate, given the proximity of the election, Leo put forward Amy Coney Barrett, a protégé of Antonin Scalia who was openly hostile to *Roe v. Wade*. It was no coincidence. A few months earlier, Thomas E. Dobbs, the Mississippi health officer, had

lodged an appeal at the Supreme Court after the Jackson Women's Health Organization — Mississippi's only abortion clinic — had successfully challenged a state law that banned abortions after fifteen weeks. An injunction against the state's enforcing the law had already been upheld by two separate courts, but a Dobbs win at the Supreme Court directly challenged the premise of *Roe v. Wade* and created the opportunity the Catholic right had craved for so long to overturn almost fifty years of abortion rights. Coney Barrett was confirmed on the Supreme Court just eight days before the election, critically giving the court a strong anti-abortion bias as the case was being considered.

Leo's status as the world's third most powerful figure soon made him a rich man. During his time at the Federalist Society, he had hardly been a pauper, bringing in around $400,000 a year. But with six children attending The Heights and Oakcrest, the two Opus Dei schools that charged up to $30,000 tuition annually per student, and a burgeoning taste for good food and expensive wines, it didn't take long to burn through his salary. But his life had taken a lavish turn after Trump's victory and his appointment as an unpaid advisor to the president on judicial appointments. The dramatic uptick in his personal fortune dovetailed with his joining a for-profit entity called CRC Advisors, alongside another CIC board member Greg Mueller. Mueller had spearheaded the National Organization for Marriage's vitriolic public relations strategy, and CRC quickly established itself as the go-to advisory firm for the dark-money network of nonprofit entities that Leo had helped set up over the years. Once again, the Corkery name was all over the money flow. The majority of CRC's income came from The 85 Fund, a dark money non-profit that Leo repurposed to fund conservative causes nationwide, and that fund paid $34 million in fees to his new advisory firm over a single two-year period. As the money rolled in, Leo began to enjoy some of the same luxuries as the billionaires he had spent years courting. For most of his three decades in Washington, Leo had led a modest home life, living for years in a small apartment in the Randolph Towers complex in downtown Arlington, before moving to a single-story five-bedroom family home in suburban McLean in 2010. But in the years since 2016, he had spent millions of

dollars on two new mansions in Maine, bought four new cars, and hired a wine buyer and locker at Morton's, an upscale steakhouse three blocks from the Catholic Information Center. It was only a foretaste of what was to come.

In 2020, Leo stepped back from his duties at the Federalist Society to focus on the dark-money network he had fostered as a side hustle during his time there. With him, he took one of the Federalist Society's biggest donors: a manufacturing billionaire from Chicago called Barre Seid, who was Jewish by heritage but who shared many of Leo's conservative views. Over two decades, Seid had pumped at least $775 million into campaigns for libertarian and conservative causes, quietly transforming himself into one of the most important donors on the political right. Almost ninety, Seid had decided to leave his money continuing that work — and concluded that Leo was the man to oversee that largesse. Leo had betrayed his bosses, who had tasked him with wooing the billionaire as a potential donor for the Federalist Society. Instead, Leo had cultivated him for his own network. Seid signed his business over to Leo, giving him control over a $1.6 billion war chest and transforming him from a proxy for dark-money donors into a donor himself.

Opus Dei soon benefited from these dark-money streams. DonorsTrust, which had provided the lion's share of funding for The 85 Fund, the source of much of Leo's newfound wealth, soon began donating millions to a foundation linked to the Catholic Association. The organization, which had been set up by Neil Corkery, had for years funded various media initiatives to promote Catholicism in the public square — including Catholic Voices USA, the failed Opus Dei–linked media training programs. It soon directed money to other Opus Dei initiatives. One of the biggest beneficiaries of the foundation was the Catholic Information Center on K Street. Before long, Opus Dei had begun cultivating donations directly from many of the billionaires who had also given huge sums of money to Leo's dark network.

OPUS DEI'S COZINESS with rising, controversial figures of the Catholic right was clearly displayed — on a plaque honoring the biggest donors to the Saint Joseph the Builder Campaign — at the grand reopening of the Catholic Information Center, following its lavish refurbishment in September 2022. Among the highest, so-called Saint Josemaría Circle of donors were Leonard and Sally Leo, as well as Tim Busch's Napa Institute and Leo's business partner, Greg Mueller. As regulars wandered around the new white interior, some couldn't help but gape in wonder at the portrait which hung in the foyer, even more prominent than the photographs of Saint Josemaría, which were tucked away in a passageway off the main communal area. It was a painting of a young girl in a blue dress and a white cardigan, who sat smiling, her eyes bright and content. Behind her was a figure of Christ, whose right hand was raised in blessing while his left hand caressed the head of the young girl. From that hand, a golden light emanated, surrounding the girl's head like a halo. It was Margaret Mary Leo, the eldest daughter of the conservative activist who had passed away fifteen years earlier.

At the reception desk, prayer cards bearing her image were being handed out, with "Margaret Leo of McLean, pray for us!" written at the bottom. In the portrait and on the prayer cards, Margaret was wearing a sacred heart medal like the ones that had supposedly appeared unexplainedly shortly after her passing. The story of the medals had begun to circulate ever more widely following the publication of a book, written by the Opus Dei supernumerary writer Austin Ruse, who like Leo was one of the founders of the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast. His book was called *Littlest Suffering Souls: Children Whose Short Lives Point Us to Christ* and it detailed the miracles. Ruse's public demonstration of love toward the disabled daughter of his wealthy, powerful friend Leonard Leo contrasted starkly with the vitriol he doled out online to those who disagreed with him. And that vitriol included publicly taunting a thirteen-year-old for his stutter and declaring that "single women should not be allowed to vote." He had previously supported Russia's anti-gay propaganda laws as a means to "curb the homosexual advance," and he had stated that "the hard left, human-hating people that run modern universities" should "all be

taken out and shot." The contrast in the supernumerary's rhetoric between his friends and his enemies was a clear demonstration of how his worldview was shaped by an ultra-conservative ideology — rather than any desire to spread Christian values of love, compassion, and respect.

The prayer cards on display at the Catholic Information Center were a logical first step toward potentially beatifying young Margaret. Opus Dei had offered the lobby of its most public-facing institution in America to further this cause. The portrait symbolized a growing symbiosis between Opus Dei and Leo. The bookshop and chapel would soon provide a platform for Leo as he detailed the philosophy and worldview that would inform his decisions about spending the $1.6 billion bequest from Seid. The Washington Opus Dei crowd brimmed with pride and admiration as they gathered at the Mayflower Hotel, just around the corner from the CIC, to confer the center's greatest honor — the John Paul II New Evangelization Award — at a black-tie dinner in October 2022. The award ceremony was especially pertinent, given the success of the *Dobbs* case at the Supreme Court, which had overturned *Roe v. Wade* and had ended a woman's constitutional right to legal abortion in the United States. "It's particularly fitting that the very year in which *Dobbs* was decided we are honoring Leonard Leo," Bill Barr said in a congratulatory video played before the award ceremony. "No one has done more to advance traditional values and especially the right to life than Leonard." Paul Scalia spoke, too, recounting his memories of Margaret Mary. Father Trullols, the Opus Dei priest who had taken charge of the Catholic Information Center following the death of Father Arne in 2017, was shown holidaying at the Leo's mansion in Maine.

"Thank you so much, Father Charles — for this privilege, for your leadership of the Catholic Information Center, for your friendship," began Leo in his acceptance speech. "It's been a real privilege to be a part of this great enterprise and have you as a friend. I do think the real honor this evening should go to the CIC — along with the Leonine Forum, which I think is a very important piece of our future." By 2022, the "spiritual enrichment" program that had been started by the Opus Dei priest Father

Arne Panula a decade earlier had been expanded to other cities, including New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and counted more than 800 alumni. "They are the cutting edge of the New Evangelization," continued Leo. "Few organizations are doing more to raise up a new generation of courageous and faithful Catholic men and women."

Without irony, Leo suggested that the audience that night, some of whom had paid as much as $25,000 a table, were the oppressed minority. "Catholicism faces vile and amoral current-day barbarians, secularists, and bigots," Leo continued. "These barbarians can be known by their signs: they vandalized and burnt our churches after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, they show up at events like this one trying to frighten and muzzle us. From coast to coast, they are conducting a coordinated and large-scale campaign to drive us from the communities they want to dominate." Only a few weeks earlier, after a group of protestors had scrawled "dirty money lives here" on the sidewalk outside his home, Leo used his awards speech to blame such attacks on "the progressive Ku Klux Klan." "They spread false and slanderous rhetoric about Catholic apostolates and institutions like the one represented here tonight," he said, referring to Opus Dei.

Within weeks of giving his speech, Leo had begun work on his next big project — offering a glimpse into how he and his network would spend the $1.6 billion donated by Seid. Having orchestrated a conservative, Catholic takeover of the Supreme Court, Leo now set his sights on things much broader — and outlined his ambitions for orchestrating a similar revolution in other sectors of society, such as education, the media, Wall Street, and Silicon Valley. "Wokeism in the corporate environment, in the educational environment, one-sided journalism, entertainment that's really corrupting our youth — why can't we build talent pipelines and networks that can positively affect those areas?" Leo asked in a promotional video for his latest initiative Teneo, which promised to "crush liberal dominance." In short, he was creating a Federalist Society for everything. Almost a century after Escrivá's vision for Opus Dei, the organization — through the Catholic Information Center, through the Leonine Forum, and

through the initiatives of prominent sympathizers like Leonard Leo — had its biggest opportunity yet to definitively influence society, just as the Opus Dei founder had envisioned.