



A public education and mobilization campaign

FEBRUARY 2024

© STOPTHECOUP2025.ORG

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Who Is Leonard Leo?

Leonard Leo is an American lawyer and co-Chairman of the Federalist Society. He was born in 1965 in Long Island, NY, and raised in suburban New Jersey. He is married with seven children and has long been a staunch Catholic.

According to Leo watchdogs, **his Catholicism is the key to his political activism**. Leo is a knight of the **Sovereign Military Order of Malta**,¹ a Catholic lay organization with 12th-century roots. Leo is also linked to **Opus Dei**,² and sits on its board. Opus Dei is an official arm of the Catholic Church. It has 80,000 members globally and is viewed as a radical Catholic organization for lay members that has long championed anti-Communist views.

The organization gained public notoriety with the film *The Da Vinci Code*, a political thriller based on best-selling author Dan Brown's novel. Brown portrayed a dangerous cult intent on political global domination, modeled after Opus Dei, with past links to authoritarian rightist governments including Franco's fascist regime in Spain.³ The group has also confronted past allegations of sexual abuse by some of its priests.⁴ Opus Dei members strongly object to the accusations of being a sinister cult, and feel maligned by a biased media. They disagree with the secretive label, too; members prefer *privacy*, arguing their faith is a personal matter. But some are open about their membership.⁵ They are dedicated Catholic activists, passionate about God.

As in any large denomination, one finds more and less active members. But Opus Dei does demand a pastoral commitment. Lay members believe they have received a divine calling that requires them to accept the authority of the church without question and devote themselves to living the Gospel and seeking sanctity – saintliness – while in the world. Opus Dei means *Work of God* in Latin; members refer to the organization as *The Work*. The most dedicated members are encouraged to live frugally and donate their money and assets to Opus Dei. In the US, the group has over 60 centers in or near 19 cities.⁶

Leo's daughter Margaret died of spina bifida at age 14, a profound loss and an emotional impetus for his fervent embrace of radical Catholicism, says a former close associate of Leo's.⁷ A big portrait of Margaret hangs in the Washington, DC, headquarters of Opus Dei, the **Catholic Information Center (CIC)** on K Street, which is a corporation of the **Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, DC**.⁸ Leo has reportedly spent years and money lobbying to have her declared a saint – an important personal goal, according to his former media relations director.⁹ He and his



A public education and mobilization campaign

wife, Sally, were named Stewards of St. Peter, a Papal Foundation honor given to donors of \$1 million or more to the Vatican.

In October 2022, the Washington, DC, branch of Opus Dei bestowed its highest honor on Leo, the John Paul II New Evangelization Award, for his long support of their work. In presentations to a Benedictine school, Leo described his faith mission as a battle with “barbarians, secularists, and bigots” that represents nothing less than war with the devil.¹⁰ “Woke liberals” are the earthly enemy, in his view.

Spiritual Warriors

According to Leo watchdogs, **Project 2025 can be seen as part of Leo’s spiritual ‘Work’** – his ongoing personal pastoral mission – to remake America as a Christian nation, under God’s rule. That is the long-term vision, one explicitly embraced by several Project 2025 authors. As a former Leo confidant put it, “Opus Dei believers do not only disagree with the separation of church and state, they believe in church *over* state.”¹¹

Leo has company in the Project 2025 advisory network. **Ann and Neil Corkery**, both high-level Catholic activists, are open members of Opus Dei, as are Project 2025 authors **Roger Severino** (married to **Carrie Severino**, a close Leo associate) and **Ken Cucinelli**; Severino also sits on CIC’s board of directors.^{12 13} Others are on the boards of Opus Dei-linked schools such as **George Mason University** and GMU’s **Antonin Scalia School of Law**, heavily funded by **Leo** and **Charles Koch**. Both megadonors have also been accused of wielding too much influence on GMU’s internal affairs and curriculum.

Another Project 2025 author is also on **GMU’s Board of Visitors: Lindsey Burke**, who directs the **Heritage Fund’s** Center for Education Policy. (She calls for gutting the Department of Education and replacing public secular education with Christian teaching.) (*See our Project 2025 Chapter breakdown: Dept of Education*)

A look at Leo-backed Project 2025 advisory groups shows that he has directed funds to groups who are leading anti-abortion and antigay campaigns, including the repeal of *Roe*. By connecting the dots, the role of others emerges, including more Opus Dei members.

Austin Ruse is the militantly antigay president of the powerful **Center for Family and Human Rights (C-FAM)** in New York, is an openly identified member of Opus Dei; **C-FAM is a Project 2025 Advisory Board** member and focuses on UN issues. (*See Who’s Behind Project 2025*). **Luis Tellez** is a publicly identified Opus Dei ‘supernumerary’ (married persons who contribute financially and serve on board of charities, for example)¹⁴, and founding board member of the



A public education and mobilization campaign

antigay **National Organization for Marriage**. NOM shares office space with **Princeton's Witherspoon Institute**, identified by watchdogs as an Opus Dei affiliate;¹⁵ Tellez is its president.¹⁶

Media articles contend that Opus Dei is a secret major financial backer of NOM and its antigay agenda.¹⁷ **John Eastman**, founding director of the Claremont Institute's Center for Jurisprudence, has also chaired NOM,¹⁸ he is also a staunch anti-LGBTQ Catholic activist with close ties to the **US Catholic Bishops**, which is also **Opus Dei**-linked.

For his part, **Kevin D. Roberts**, leader of the **Heritage Foundation** and a **Project 2025** author, has not shied away from speaking at CIC public events, and in partnership with **The Napa Institute**,¹⁹ also linked to **Opus Dei**. Ally **Tim Bausch** is a Napa Institute Co-Founder and a Catholic activist who publicly identifies an **Opus Dei** "cooperator" – not a member, but an individual who collaborates with the organization on educational and other activities.²⁰

A Political Family

While critics focus on religion, the important question is if or how such ties may open doors to impact policy or law.²¹ ²² During Trump's presidency, media articles charged that Opus Dei gained influential insider access to lobby the White House. Several former Trump White House officials are publicly known to be Opus Dei members, including former Attorney General **William Barr**, a past director of the DC chapter of CIC, and **Larry Kudlow**, Trump's Director of the National Economic Council.

Many media articles have documented their connection to **Father C. John McCloskey**, an Opus Dei priest who was head of the CIC. He is credited with singlehandedly recruiting a high number of DC professional into CIC's orbit in the early 2000s. McCloskey personally baptized **Ludlow**, as well as **US Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS)**, **Judge Robert Bork**, and **Newt Gingrich**, among big names.²³ (Brownback later became **Trump's** Ambassador At-Large for International Religious Freedom).²⁴ McCloskey later caused huge damage to Opus Dei's and CIC's reputation when he was found guilty of sexual abuse allegations against two women who sought his pastoral advice; the Opus Dei center paid over \$1 million to settle with one of the women.²⁵

The more one pokes around the Project 2025 world, the more familiar names pop up as Leophiles, often in key positions or sharing staff, or funding each other's nonprofit projects. Leo is also linked to other influential militant Catholic and Christian groups, including the **Catholic League** and the **Becket Fund for Religious Liberty**. Neither appear on the public list of Project 2025 advisors, but, following the money trail, their affiliations appear: **Ann Corkery** donated to



A public education and mobilization campaign

both groups, and served on both boards, while **Leo** has funded both, too. That's also where Leo-connections to **SCOTUS and federal judges** turn up. (see *Who's Behind Project 2025?*)

Leo's Long Game: Stack the Courts

Leo graduated from Cornell Law School in 1989; he started a student chapter of **The Federalist Society** there, then snagged a job at the Society in 1991. That's where he met and became close to **Clarence Thomas**, while working as a clerk at the Appeals Court. Leo later handpicked the Supreme Court nominee lists given to Trump.²⁶ He helped fund lobbying to shepherd the confirmations for justices **Thomas, John Roberts, Samuel Alito, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett**, pushed for **Neil Gorsuch**, and helped block **Merrick Garland's** nomination. "No one outside government has more influence over this transformation than Leonard Leo," summed up the *Washington Post* in 2019, about the Supreme Court's rightward shift.²⁷

Leo hasn't stopped there. He helped place 25 of 30 Trump-appointed Appeals Court judges, many of them conservative lawyers from **The Federalist Society**.²⁸ He also recruits legal scholars, private sector lawyers, and law students – the conservative legal army called for in Project 2025.

Leo's SCOTUS picks are also devout Catholics or Christians and pop up in Leo-funded entities. **Barrett**, for example, is a **GMU** board member, like Leo. She was raised in the insular Christian charismatic **People of Praise (PoP)** sect and has taught for years at the University of Notre Dame, a Catholic university with close ties to PoP.²⁹ Barrett's husband, Jesse, and her parents are active in the PoP community, which includes people of different Christian faiths.³⁰

Meanwhile, Leo socializes and vacations with some of the justices, including **Clarence Thomas**, who is godfather to one of his children. He's also close to Thomas's wife, attorney **Virginia ("Ginni") Thomas**, also a fervent Catholic activist. Her name also turns up in several Leo-linked **Project 2025** advisory groups. (see *Who's Zooming Who?*)

Not surprisingly, Leo's close, enduring ties to the justices have invited media and watchdog probes into possible ties to **Opus Dei**.³¹ Many journalists, right-wing watchdogs, and ex-members of the organization have named **Clarence Thomas** and the late **Antonin Scalia** as being in Opus Dei's orbit, if not as members, then allies, and named other conservative justices, too.³² If that's so, Thomas, like Leo, prefers to keep that association private, though he and the other justices can't dispute their close ties to Leo, a main player on Opus Dei's CIC's board.

With Project 2025, Leo is heavily redirecting his money to close associates at judicial advocacy nonprofits, or head private law firms, or teach Constitutional law at Opus Dei-linked law schools



A public education and mobilization campaign

like **George Mason University**. Many belong to the **Federalist Society**, as do (or did) six Supreme Court justices.³³

Follow the Money

While faith may foster social ties between influential neoconservatives, watchdog right-wing groups remain focused on the Leo money trail, because that's what really buys influence in Washington, DC, and elsewhere. What it reveals is how he's successful he's been – and is being – using his newish dark money fortune to strengthen the conservative network uniting behind Project 2025. Looking ahead, that money will also be used by **Kevin D. Roberts** and **Paul Dans** at the **Heritage Foundation** to vet and train their future loyalist and legal army to serve on “Day One” of a new GOP administration.

The money is both glue and fuel for the US evangelical political movement. It is building what Leo-watcher Katherine Stewart, a journalist and author of a book on US right-wing nationalism, calls the coming to power of a “pluto-theocratic ruling class in the United States.” Project 2025 is the fruit of Leo's and their shared vision to rule America. – **ACD**.

¹ E-mail correspondence with Tom Carter, former Media Relations Director for Leo at the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. February 2024.

² Donahue, Bill, “Anti-Catholic Bigots Attack Leonard Leo,” Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

³ Yaffe, Deborah. “A Conservative Think Tank with Many Princeton Ties,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, July 16, 2008.

⁴ *Washington Post*, January 7, 2019.

⁵ Martin, James SJ. “Opus Dei in the United States,” *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, February 25, 1995. Online archival article retrieved February 14, 2024.

⁶ Opus Dei website. www.opusdei.org. Information dated January 31, 2006.

⁷ Ibid. Note 1.

⁸ Catholic Information Center.

⁹ Ibid. Note 1.

¹⁰ “Leonard Leo, architect of the conservative Supreme Court, takes on wider culture,” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 4, 2024.

¹¹ Ibid Note 1; also: Olear, Greg. “Leonard Leo and the Unholy Trinity (with Tom Carter),” PREVAIL podcast transcript, February 16, 2024.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Olear, Greg. “Leonard Leo, Opus Dei and the Radical Catholic Takeover of the Supreme Court,” Church and State UK, February 16, 2021.

¹⁴ Ibid. Note 5.

¹⁵ Opus Dei Awareness Network.

¹⁶ Ibid Note 8; also: Truskovsky, Danielle. “Deception, Denial and Opus Dei: Are religious groups illegally funding anti-gay political battles in America? *Bilgimage* blog, June 19, 2014.

¹⁷ Ibid. Notes 12, 13.

¹⁸ Schmitz, Matthew. “The Two Faces of Originalism” *The American Conservative*, May 20, 2022.

¹⁹ Kevin Roberts lecture announcement, Catholic Information Center, September 21, 2023.



A public education and mobilization campaign

²⁰ Dan Morris-Young, “Tim Bausch, conservative activist, philanthropist rejects anti-Francis label,” *The National Catholic Reporter*, June 12, 2019.

²¹ Henry Larson and Francesca D’Annunzio, “A Group of far-right Christian lawmakers aims to merge church and state,” *Arizona Mirror*, part of a series, “America After Roe,” August 11, 2023.

²² Henry Larson and Francesca D’Annunzio, “A Group of far-right Christian lawmakers aims to merge church and state,” *Arizona Mirror*, part of a series, “America After Roe,” August 11, 2023.

²³ Pierce, Charles P. “The Crusaders,” *Boston Globe*. November 2, 2003.

²⁴ “Dangerous Nominee Sam Brownback Confirmed as Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom,” Human Rights Watch press release, January 24, 2018.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. Note 8.

²⁷ Shawn Boburg and Robert O’Harrow, “Five Takeaways from The Post’s report on Leonard Leo,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 2019.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Stephanie Kirchaessner, “Amy Coney Barrett: spotlight falls on secretive Catholic group People of Praise,” *The Guardian*, September 20, 2020.

³⁰ Ruth Graham and Sharon LaFraniere, “Inside the People of Praise, the Tight-Knit Faith Community of Amy Coney Barrett,” *New York Times*, November 8, 2020.

³¹ O’Dowd, Niall, “Right-wing Catholics control the US Supreme Court,” *Irish Central*, July 8, 2022. The six SCOTUS justices are: Brett Kavanaugh, Neil Gorsuch, Clarence Thomas, Amy Coney Barrett, John Roberts and the late Samuel Alito.

³² Clermont, Betty. “Opus Dei’s Influence on the U.S. Judiciary,” *Church and State*, December 21, 2018. Author’s note: Religion reporter Clermont blogs for *The Open Tabernacle*, where this information originally appeared. Clermont, a longtime Opus Dei watchdog, does not provide news citations or original sources for some statements in her report, although the Opus Dei membership ties of the three SCOTUS justices have been widely reported for years by authors of books about the Catholic Right.

³³ Ibid. Note 32.