News



Leonard Leo, then executive vice president of the Federalist Society, speaks at the 2017 National Lawyers Convention in Washington, D.C., Nov. 16, 2017. (AP/Sait Serkan Gurbuz)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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In October 2022, the Opus Dei-affiliated Catholic Information Center in Washington, D.C., bestowed its highest honor, the John Paul II New Evangelization Award, on the conservative legal activist Leonard Leo. Six months later, he received an honorary doctorate from Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. Both events provided an opportunity for the self-described introvert to give a public speech.

In the two presentations, Leo used the same language to describe a trio of frightening forces — "barbarians, secularists and bigots" — that he said represent nothing less than a war with the devil.

"The barbarians are determined to threaten and delegitimize individuals and institutions who refuse to pledge fealty to the woke idols of our age," Leo told graduates of Benedictine, a conservative school where he likely expected a friendly reception to his strong words.

"The secularists are fine with Catholics in the public square so long as we don't, you know, practice our faith. They want us to draw the curtains at home and keep it in the pews, and it remains to be seen how long they'll accept even that," Leo continued.

"And the progressive bigots distort who we are and what we believe in, and will go so far as to intimidate or harass us in public in an effort to drive us into professional and social exile."

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In the Catholic Information Center speech, he compared the "current-day bigots" to the Ku Klux Klan.

Although he did not give examples of the three evil forces, Leo was specific about the answer to them. It is, he said, "the new evangelization," a phrase popularized during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI that refers to a call to proclaim the Gospel anew to the culture.

Leo, who has perhaps done more to shape this country's judicial and political culture than any other contemporary individual, is now turning to broader U.S. society, where he wants to instill traditionalist values, or what he terms "virtue." This shift won't come through coercion by the courts or legal system, he says, but rather through persuasion.

The apparatus for this task is a network of Catholic organizations, nonprofits and "apostolates" — nearly all of which have Leo's fingerprints on them, as either a funder, leader, board member or adviser. The center of this complicated web appears to be — not surprisingly — a public relations firm called CRC Advisors.



Author Mary Jo McConahay (Macmillan Publishers/Nancy McGirr)

"Leo wanted to see his own moral principles become the law of the land. And now he wants his moral principles to be the culture of the land," said Mary Jo McConahay, author of *Playing God: American Catholic Bishops and The Far Right*.

That means a coordinated ongoing campaign of advertising, social media posts, on-air television commentators and well-placed op-ed writers. That campaign requires not just high-end connections, but high-end money, rarely a hurdle for Leo.

McConahay expects to see Leo and his many connected organizations increasingly using the media for a kind of "apologetics." They have been successful in shaping the Supreme Court and federal judiciary — and may even have the next president, she said.

"What they need now is public opinion."

Creative public relations

For decades, Leo has been the brains behind a conservative legal movement to take over the judicial branch of government — a project that required millions and even billions of dollars. The 58-year-old has been called "the No. 3 most powerful person in the world," but until recently many Americans hadn't heard of him.

As the longtime executive vice president of the Federalist Society, Leo worked behind the scenes to usher in a conservative U.S. Supreme Court that would eventually overturn *Roe* v. *Wade*, the 1973 case that legalized abortion. Former U.S. Attorney General William Barr said of him: "No one has done more to advance traditional values, and especially the right to life, than Leonard."

Leo assisted Clarence Thomas in his confirmation hearings and led campaigns to support the nominations of John Roberts, Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett — all of whom were raised Catholic (Gorsuch later attended an Episcopal church). All three of former President Donald Trump's nominees were said to have come from a list compiled by Leo.



Leonard Leo, left, welcomes Supreme Court Associate Justice Neil Gorsuch for a speech at the Federalist Society's 2017 National Lawyers Convention in Washington, D.C., Nov. 16, 2017. (AP/Sait Serkan Gurbuz)

"Leo's primary conviction is that democracy will not deliver the kind of conservative values-based government that he believes America must have. He is therefore committed to building an oligarchy of the religious and the wealthy," said Katherine Stewart, author of *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. "That involves amassing vast sums of dark money and using it to put 'right-thinking' people on the courts and elsewhere in government."

"The money also goes to building an intellectual ecosystem to push policy to the right," Stewart told NCR in an email interview. "A lot of attention has been paid to Leo's work in stacking the federal judiciary. But he is equally active in promoting theocratic ideologues into positions of influence in federal agencies, state offices, and political organizations."

Leo did not respond to NCR's attempts to contact him for comment.

In late 2018, Leo took a short leave from the Federalist Society to coordinate the contentious confirmation process for Kavanaugh. About a year later, Leo stepped down from his position at the society (staying on to co-chair its board) and joined Greg Mueller in reorganizing CRC Advisors into an organization that could funnel big money and expertise across the conservative movement. The two say they were inspired by the left-leaning Arabella Advisors, which has similarly funded progressive causes and groups.

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Mueller, who is Catholic, has been with the firm from the beginning, when it was founded in 1989 as "CRC Strategies" by Leif Noren, a former executive director of the National Conservative Political Action Committee. CRC stands for "Creative Response Concepts."

Best known for the "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" campaign that cast doubt on Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry's war record, CRC also has been involved in supporting conservative Supreme Court nominees, including Gorsuch and Kavanaugh — two appointees Leo recommended to Trump.

Among CRC Strategies' other clients have been Newt Gingrich, Matt Drudge and political advocacy groups funded by the Koch brothers.

Kellyanne Conway, a Catholic who would go on to become a senior adviser to Trump, once said of CRC: "The rapid-response abilities of the conservative right are in large part thanks to their deftness." This was in 2013, when she owned and ran a political polling firm called The Polling Company.

In 2017, Conway sold her company to CRC to comply with conflict-of-interest rules after she joined the Trump White House. Ethics questions have been raised about whether another Leo-affiliated group helped facilitate the multimillion-dollar sale

while Conway was simultaneously advocating with Trump for some of Leo's favored judicial candidates.

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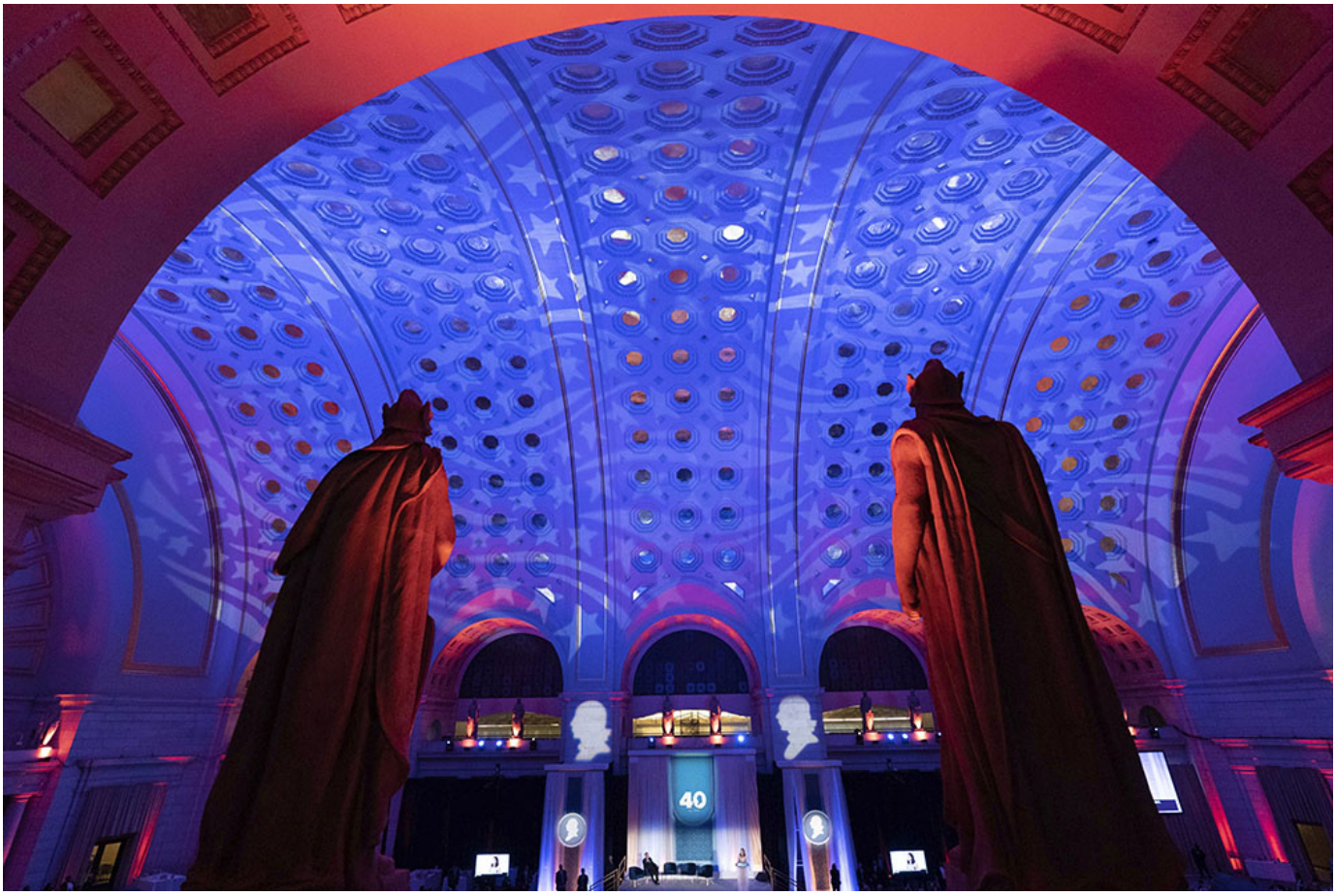
CRC is also currently being investigated by the attorney general of Washington, D.C., for the ways that money has flowed into the for-profit firm from a number of nonprofits that all have a connection to Leo. (See related story.)

CRC's Catholic connections are numerous. A sizable portion of the firm's employees and leaders are conservative Catholics, and the firm donates to many Catholic organizations and groups that are affiliated with Leo. A number of those same groups are also clients of CRC, which in essence serves as the marketing arm for the Catholic right.

CRC's Catholic clients

Other exposés on Leo and CRC highlight the firm's commercial clients, such as General Motors, Chevron and the Walt Disney Company, and of course its political ones, such as the Swift Boat group, the Republican National Committee and the Acton Institute, which have had significant influence on not only the U.S. Supreme Court but broader political trends.

In addition and not surprisingly, given its connection to Leo, CRC also has had a number of clients that focus on religious liberty issues, including not only the Federalist Society but also First Liberty, which bills itself as "the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious liberty."



Supreme Court Associate Justice Amy Coney Barrett speaks during the Federalist Society's 40th Anniversary dinner at Union Station in Washington, D.C., Nov. 10, 2022. (AP/Jose Luis Magana)

But the number of Catholic clients also indicate how influential and deeply woven into conservative Catholic culture this PR firm, and its leader, Leo, are.

NCR has uncovered at least a dozen prominent Catholic clients, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Eternal Word Television Network, and a number of pro-life groups headed by or significantly supported by Catholics.

Several of CRC's clients are media organizations themselves, including EWTN; Regnery Publishing, known for publishing conservative political and Catholic books; and L. Brent Bozell, a columnist, author and founder of the Media Research Center, which exposes alleged "liberal bias" in the media. (Bozell's son was recently convicted for his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection and is awaiting sentencing.)

During the Kavanaugh hearings, it was revealed that CRC represented Ed Whelan, the Catholic president emeritus of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative

think tank, in his attempts to support his friend and Supreme Court nominee by claiming that Christine Blasey Ford's allegations of sexual assault were a case of mistaken identity. Whelan later apologized, saying the strategy was an "inexcusable mistake."

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Other CRC clients will be familiar to those who follow conservative Catholic organizations. They include:

- The Knights of Columbus, which has become increasingly involved in partisan politicking;
- The Franciscan University at Steubenville, Ohio;
- The Catholic Association, a religious freedom advocacy group, which also paid Leo $120,000 for management consulting in 2016;
- The Thomistic Institute, part of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., and dedicated to "promoting Catholic truth in the contemporary university";
- The National Organization for Marriage, founded to fight the legalization of same-sex marriage. Neil Corkery was a founding board member of the group.

Among the anti-abortion organizations that have worked with CRC are Americans United for Life, the March for Life and the Human Capital Project, which did discredited undercover videos under the guise of the Center for Medical Progress.

In testimony in 2019, CRC President Mueller said that the "litigation communications" they provided for defendant David Daleiden, who filmed the videos, were paid for by Students for Life (on whose board he and Leo served). A key donor to the Center for Medical Progress was Raymond Ruddy, a Catholic abstinence-only education advocate, who had joined Mueller and Leo on the Students for Life board.



John Gehring, author of *Reclaiming Catholicism* (Courtesy of John Gehring)

"[Leo's] success in creating this infrastructure and pipelines to power for the conservative legal movement and his ability to raise absolutely prodigious sums of money make him very popular among the most ambitious leaders in the Catholic conservative movement," said John Gehring, author of the forthcoming book *Reclaiming Catholicism: Faith, Politics & the Future of the Catholic Church in the United States*.

"Conservative Catholics have been talking about ending *Roe* for decades. Leonard Leo went out and did it," Gehring said. "So if you're leading a Catholic organization on the right, you want him on your board, you want his ideas for strategy, and you certainly want his money because he has a lot of it."

Other Catholic connections to Leo and CRC

The list of boards that Leo serves on, or has served on, reads like a Who's Who of the Catholic right. In addition to co-chairing the Federalist Society board, other board connections include:

- The Catholic University of America and its Busch School of Business Board of Visitors;
- Students for Life and Students for Life Action;
- The National Catholic Prayer Breakfast;
- The Catholic Association and its affiliated Catholic Association Foundation;
- The Becket Law Fund;
- The Napa Legal Institute;
- The Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Leo is a member of the Knights of Malta, a lay religious order of the Catholic Church dating back to the 12th century, and he and his wife, Sally, were named Stewards of St. Peter, an honor given by the Papal Foundation to those who donate $1 million or more to the Vatican.



Members of Students for Life march with others during the Ohio March for Life, at the Ohio State House in Columbus Oct. 6, 2023. (AP/Carolyn Kaster)

Through these organizations, Leo mingles with powerful movers and shakers in D.C.'s conservative Catholic circles. And a number of these folks end up connected to CRC Advisors.

Leo's association with CRC's Mueller goes back to the Supreme Court confirmation battles of the George W. Bush era, when the two were part of a "war room" of activists dedicated to securing the confirmation of conservative justices.

Mueller previously worked as a senior aide in the Republican presidential campaigns of Pat Buchanan in 1992 and 1996 and of Steve Forbes in 2020. His profile on X, formerly Twitter, says he is a Catholic husband, father and "conservative who likes to shoot, golf and ski."

In a 1997 Washington Post article, a Republican campaign manager described Mueller as "one of the most capable press operatives in the party" and "very versed in hand-to-hand combat." Mueller also was credited for the growing reputation and influence of CRC — then termed "the 'blue-collar' communications arm for the conservative movement" — in Republican political circles.

Mueller and Leo also have worked together as longtime board members of Students for Life, which organizes anti-abortion groups on middle, high school, college, university, medical and law school campuses. Leo was board chair when Mueller joined the board in 2012, and the two have served until 2022, the most recent year that tax documents are available. The current website, however, does not list either as board members.



Kristan Hawkins, president of Students for Life of America (OSV News/Katie Yoder)

Students for Life's website says its staff and budget is "one of the largest in the entire pro-life movement." Recent tax documents confirm revenue and expenses of $12 million-$14 million per year. In 2012, when Mueller joined Leo on the board, Students for Life's budget was $1.5 million.

Leo and Mueller also serve on the board of Students for Life Action, a separate organization organized as a 501(c)(4), which means that it can engage in political activity, has no limit on money it can spend on political causes, and does not have to disclose its donors.

Both groups are headed by Kristan Hawkins, a convert to Catholicism, who previously worked for the Republican National Committee and as a presidential appointee in George W. Bush's administration at the Department of Health and

Human Services. During the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, she served on Trump's Pro-Life Advisory Council.

While Leo and Mueller were on the Students for Life board, the pro-life organization paid CRC $158,912 in media consulting fees, at least in part to work on a campaign to promote Catholic anti-abortion activist Daleiden's undercover videos of Planned Parenthood, which were later determined to be misleading and for which Daleiden faced criminal and civil charges.



President Donald Trump greets Matt Schlapp at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in National Harbor, Maryland, Feb. 23, 2018. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore)

Another CRC employee, Vice President Laura Schlapp, is the niece of Matt Schlapp, who worked in the George W. Bush White House, and Matt's wife, Mercedes, who was Trump's director of strategic communications. Matt Schlapp, now chairman of the American Conservative Union, was the chair of Catholics for Trump and is being sued for making unwanted sexual advances against a former staffer for Herschel Walker's failed U.S. Senate campaign.

But it is the financial connections between CRC, Leo, and CRC Advisors' chief financial officer Neil Corkery that are the most significant — and complicated. Corkery not only serves as chief financial officer for CRC, but he also manages the books for several other Leo-connected nonprofits.

He is married to Ann Corkery, a high-powered D.C. attorney and communication strategist. Both Corkerys have been members of Opus Dei, the traditionalist Catholic organization, and have been influential in conservative Catholic and political circles.

For 10 years, from 2008 to 2018, the couple ran the Wellspring Committee, a dark money group that funded a number of groups that worked to confirm conservative Supreme Court justices, including the Judicial Crisis Network, which has deep ties to Leo. Neil Corkery served as both the network's treasurer and principal officer of Wellspring.

In addition to funding the Judicial Crisis Network, the Corkerys' Wellspring also funded Leo's BH Group, which effectively operated as a shell company to move money to organizations that worked to secure a conservative majority on the Supreme Court. Neither organization discloses the sources of its funds.

Related: Leonard Leo has reshaped the Supreme Court. Is he reshaping Catholic University too?

Wellspring was originally created with the help of the Koch brothers, who used it to secretly funnel money to other political organizations, according to Kenneth Vogel's *Big Money: 2.5 Billion Dollars, One Suspicious Vehicle, and a Pimp — on the Trail of the Ultra-Rich Hijacking American Politics*. Although the Koch brothers broke with Wellspring in 2008, their donor networks continue to overlap.

Longtime Republican operatives, the Corkerys have also been associated with other conservative organizations, including the Catholic League and the Becket Fund for

Religious Liberty*, where Ann previously served on their boards.

What's next for Leo

These groups and individuals reflect a "defensive, fortress Catholicism" that seems to be growing in popularity, especially in some traditionalist circles, notes Gehring. Such a posture may not represent the majority of U.S. Catholics, "but it has a deep resonance with Catholics in certain subcultures who supported Donald Trump and think we need to take back the country and take back the Catholic faith."



Stephen Schneck (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

Stephen Schneck, a retired political philosophy professor, notes that many of the organizations affiliated with Leo overlap with segments of the church that oppose Pope Francis.

"This network he's built has a particular angle on what it is to be Catholic," Schneck said, "and because of the money, the power and the reach of the organizations, that way of thinking about what it is to be a Catholic in the United States has unfortunately become the dominant way."

"This puts a stamp on Catholicism in the United States that all of us, in one sense or another, are impacted by," Schneck said. "And it's a stamp in opposition to the fresh air that's been blowing from Rome."

As for what's next for Leo, Schneck said he has "no doubt" that Leo is working behind the scenes to identify talent and groom people for positions in a potential next Trump presidency. He also seems focused on particular policy efforts: religious liberty, anti-climate-justice issues, and increasingly opposing "woke leftists" of all sorts.

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Despite allegations that Leo has enriched himself through questionable nonprofit-to-for-profit transfers of money, those close to Leo insist he is not motivated by greed but rather by ideas, ideology and influence.

McConahay believes Leo will increasingly try to use the media to shape culture in the next years. "What to watch for now are groups, foundations and other organizations that imitate the Federalist Society at its beginning but that are looking for like-minded journalists and media people," she told NCR.

Earlier this year, ProPublica revealed that Leo had joined forces with a secretive group called Teneo ("I hold" or "I grasp" in Latin) with the plan to "crush liberal dominance" in journalism and education as well as in business and politics.

Modeled as a "Federalist Society for everything" and funded heavily by the Leo-connected Donors Trust, Teneo is "fighting a battle for the heart and soul of our culture," according to its Community Vision Report.

In an internal video obtained by ProPublica, Leo concludes: "I just said to myself, 'Well, if this can work for law, why can't it work for lots of other areas of American culture and American life where things are really messed up right now?' "

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty as a Catholic organization. Becket Law is a secular, nonprofit firm that, as noted in its mission statement, protects "the free expression of all faiths."*

Read this next: Everyone is talking about Leo

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 19-Feb 1, 2024** print issue under the headline: Leonard Leo, architect of conservative Supreme Court, takes on wider culture.