Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Leo XIV shakes hands with author and journalist Gareth Gore at the Vatican March 16, 2026. (Courtesy of Gareth Gore/Vatican Media)

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Editor's note: *A version of this column was posted by the author on his Substack account. It is republished here with permission.*

I was in Silicon Valley for a work trip a few weeks ago when a curious message flashed up on my phone. "Podrías contactarme? Es importante," it read — *Can you get in touch? It's important*. The message was from Pedro Salinas, a fellow journalist from Peru whose excellent work had helped to bring about the suppression of an abusive Catholic group there — and who I had gotten to know through my own work exposing the abuses of Opus Dei. We had last spoken in early December when we both appeared at a conference in Argentina and so my first instinct on seeing the message was to assume the worst: Opus Dei is threatening to sue, I thought — again!

I called him from a parking lot across the street from the futuristic Googleplex campus in Mountain View, where I had just been to meet with a contact. Pedro had come to know Pope Leo XIV — known as Cardinal Robert Prevost back then — through his work detailing widespread abuse inside the Sodality of Christian Life and the two remained in touch. Pedro explained to me that the pope was well aware of my own work on Opus Dei — and that he was keen to speak with me in a private audience, just the two of us. Would I be open to meeting him? I took a minute to compose myself, before replying: Yes, of course I would.

Over the next few days, I exchanged WhatsApp messages with an intermediary at the Vatican, who had been asked to arrange the meeting. Then, the lines of communication went mysteriously quiet. Had someone inside the Holy See scuppered the meeting, I wondered — was my audience with the pope being postponed indefinitely? After reporting on Opus Dei for the past seven years, I knew all too well about the group's influence inside the Vatican. Thankfully, my suspicions proved misplaced. Two weeks later, confirmation arrived — in the form of an ornate invitation from the Prefecture of the Papal Household.

On the morning of March 16, I presented myself to the Swiss Guards outside the main entrance to the Apostolic Palace — and showed them my invitation and passport. I had flown in from my home in London the previous evening. They ushered into the pontifical palace and into a wood-panelled elevator. After that I was taken through various ornate rooms to a first waiting area — and then to a second, where I was told to leave my phone. After a short while I was taken into the private

library, where the pope posed for pictures with me — and congratulated me on my book, which he called a "rigorous piece of work." We then sat down and began our conversation.



Pope Leo XIV speaks with Gareth Gore at the Vatican March 16, 2026. (Courtesy of Gareth Gore/Vatican Media)

Anyone who has read my Substack before will know how critical I have been about the way that the Catholic Church has handled — or more accurately *mishandled* — decades of abuse allegations made against Opus Dei. The group has been accused of a long list of misdeeds: of grooming children, of trafficking and enslaving young girls, and drugging members to hide the mental health epidemic within its ranks. It is also accused of breaking the seal of the confessional and using "spiritual guidance" sessions to collect information about its members so that it can manipulate them into serving its own interests. There are literally hundreds of testimonies from victims online, on websites such as OpusLibros.org and Reddit.

I have been outspoken about the church's complete failure to address these very serious abuses. While Pope Francis raised hopes among victims when he issued a surprise *motu propio* in July 2022 ordering Opus Dei to rewrite its statutes, in the years that have passed since it began to look increasingly like reform of the group was little more than a public relations exercise. The Vatican never once reached out to former members to understand what it was that needed reforming — in fact it completely ignored approaches from people who offered to help with information and documents smuggled out of the organization.

My conclusion was that the Vatican didn't want to know the truth. I suspected that it was worried that a full investigation into Opus Dei might be hugely embarrassing for the church. I deduced that it was content with just making a few superficial changes and moving on without properly understanding — or tackling — the problem. But my meeting with the pope forces me to reassess those conclusions. It is of course possible that Leo invited me to meet him to make it look like he was hearing from all parties — after meeting with the leader of Opus Dei twice in the past year. But it is also possible that he actually *wants* to do the right thing, that he *wants* to hear the truth.

I'm not going to go into detail about what the pope told me, or what questions he asked — I will leave it to the Vatican to decide what it wants to say about the meeting. But I'm very happy to talk about what *I said* in the meeting and what information *I provided* to him. I believe such transparency is important: Not only does it offer hope to Opus Dei's many victims that these allegations are now being heard — but, perhaps even more importantly, it creates a public record of what the pope and wider Vatican are now aware of. By putting on record what information I shared with the pope in the meeting, nobody can now turn around and say: *Well, we didn't know*.



Pope Leo XIV poses with Gareth Gore at the Vatican March 16, 2026. (Courtesy of Gareth Gore/Vatican Media)

I spoke at length about what former members had told me about the way that Opus Dei operates: about how the group abuses the legitimacy conferred upon it by the Catholic Church to lure unsuspecting victims into its clutches. I detailed allegations about how the group actively targets young children, how it grooms and manipulates them into a lifelong commitment to serving its interests from the tender age of 10 or 11 — without their parents ever being consulted. I shared testimonies and documents backing this up and offered to connect the Vatican with people who were involved in such grooming who will testify to these allegations.

I also shared with the pope documents and testimonies detailing how the group controls and manipulates the lives of its members — and how it is accused of breaking the seal of confession and abusing "spiritual guidance" sessions to collect information about unsuspecting Catholics, so that it can manipulate and take advantage of them. I talked about how Opus Dei abuses the faith of its members to

extract money, favors and obedience. I argued that the group should be considered an abusive cult that has zero regard for its victims — or the wider church.

I also shared disturbing firsthand accounts shared with me of a psychiatric facility in the north of Spain known to those inside Opus Dei as *la cuarta planta* — the fourth floor — where members were quietly sent to be treated for the devastating impact that life inside the group has had on their mental well-being. I offered to connect the Vatican with people who have been treated there — and former senior members of the organization who were pushed to send people to the facility. I also shared testimonies detailing the widespread use of prescription drugs to conceal mental illness — and of members committing suicide.

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Naturally, I also spoke about the case in Argentina, where Opus Dei has been formally accused of human trafficking: of luring vulnerable young girls into a life of servitude by offering them false promises of a good education and a better life — and then trafficking them around the world to work as unpaid servants. I personally handed the pope a copy of the report written by Argentinean public prosecutors following a two-year investigation into the group's practices. I also made it clear that this isn't a one-off — that similar allegations had surfaced in many other countries including Ireland, France, Mexico and Spain. I shared details of the network of "hospitality schools" set up across Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia accused of recruiting such girls.

I also spoke about Opus Dei's efforts to cover up its abuses — of how it sought to threaten and intimidate me and my publisher into pulping my book, of how it launched a disinformation campaign to discredit and undermine me as a journalist rather than answer for the allegations made against it. I detailed how this appeared to be the *modus operandi* of the group: how it had previously used "lawfare" to intimidate whistleblowers and force websites to remove internal documents that could be considered damaging to its reputation — how the group had used its power and its wealth to cover up the truth and suppress the voices of its many victims.

I ended the meeting by imploring Leo to take action against this abusive group. I urged him to immediately launch an independent inquiry into Opus Dei abuses

headed up by both clerical and lay experts — covering allegations of spiritual, psychological, emotional, physical and financial abuse. I said that he should stand ready to close down the organization if the evidence merits it. I also urged him to reopen the beatification and canonization of the group's founder, Josemaría Escrivá, because of information that has since emerged indicating potential irregularities in the process. I presented him with documents proving how Opus Dei's system of grooming, abuse and control had been personally designed by this supposed "saint."

We ended the meeting on good terms and shook hands. As we parted, I urged the pope to meet with victims for himself — to listen to their accounts and offer them some hope that justice might prevail. As I emerged out onto the street and headed to the airport for my flight back to London, my mind turned to them. So many people have had their lives ruined by this group. For years, they have felt that nobody was listening. But perhaps things are changing. One thing is certain: Leo's tenure will be marked in no small part by what he does next to address this abusive group.

Read this next: Pope Leo XIV faces major test over Opus Dei reforms