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## No time to coast when raising Catholic family

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By The Catholic Herald | May 3, 2012 | General

A deacon for nearly 10 years and a father of four, Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers also works as a security director on a college campus in Portland, Ore.

It's a job that has shown him what can happen when children who have not been raised fully embracing Jesus' teachings become young adults.

"Faith has to be an integral part of our kids' lives because we underestimate the power of this culture. Today's culture is trying to take away religion, it's trying to redefine marriage and trying to distort family," said Deacon Burke-Sivers during a presentation titled, "Raising a Catholic Family in a Fallen World," which he gave last November at St. Charles Parish, Hartland. "The kids get sucked into the culture."

Parents must understand the importance of giving their kids power over evil, and to do this, Deacon Burke-Sivers said, "Children need to have Jesus at the heart of every decision. They must have a heart burning with love for Jesus. We must prepare our kids for battle – they need to be armed with faith, knowing that Jesus is the most important person in their lives."

Deacon shares rollercoaster life

As parents often experience, their kids are likely to complain about the family beliefs and traditions, but those beliefs and traditions are what the kids will draw upon when they are on their own, the deacon pointed out.

Throughout his two-hour talk, attended by about 20 people, including a few children, Deacon Burke-Sivers displayed a down-to-earth, friendly tone, but he raised his voice to emphasize the messages he deems crucial for Catholic parents today.

He stressed that the formation of children is the primary vocation of a married couple's life.

"Marriage is hard," he said. "It's like a rollercoaster, with the curves and twists of good times and bad times. But you can't jump off in the middle of the ride. You got on the ride together – you get out together."

He explained that no family is perfect – not even the Holy Family. In Bethlehem before Christ's birth, with no place to stay, Mary was a homeless, pregnant teenager. She and Joseph lost Jesus when he was 12 years old; and the most difficult hardship any parent can imagine, Mary watched her son die in pain.

"Even the Holy Family was not spared the rollercoaster," he concluded.

For every parent, the goal is to help your family get into heaven, he asserted, and God has put all the special people in our lives to help us get to heaven.

"It's your job to teach the faith to your kids," he said loudly. "Don't just outsource it to youth groups or to your Catholic school. Children need to learn to fall in love with Jesus at home."

Time can seem scarce in a busy family, but being with one's children is a key component of sharing faith and values. He reminded parents that they will need to make sacrifices in order to share time with their kids.

But parents shouldn't be their children's friends; parents need to remember to be the parents, and realize that their kids will not always be happy with their decisions. As an example, Deacon Burke-Sivers told the audience how he researches television shows before he allows his children to watch a program; as a result, he does not let his kids watch many shows on TV.

## experiences

When discussing his fractured family life as a child and teen, followed by the rollercoaster-like twists and turns of his adult life, Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers summed it up by saying, "I have seen the power of Jesus in my family."

Deacon Burke-Sivers was born on the Caribbean island of Barbados. He moved to New Jersey with his mother, grandmother and brother when he was 2 years old. His father, a calypso singer, left Barbados to join them a year later.

"My father had three loves: alcohol, women and cigarettes. He never went to church. The only time he said God's name was in vain," Deacon Burke-Sivers said. "I don't remember Dad telling us he loved us."

Deacon Burke-Sivers's parents divorced when he was a college student.

Throughout his tumultuous childhood, Deacon Burke-Sivers credits his mother for his commitment to the Catholic faith. She converted to Catholicism when she was 12 years old, and Deacon Burke-Sivers was the first infant baptized Catholic in his family's history.

He became a United States citizen at the age of 17, and he was the first in his family to attend college; he received an academic scholarship to the University of Notre Dame.

A year after he graduated from Notre Dame, he was accepted into a Benedictine monastery in Newark, N.J.

"My mom was thrilled; my dad asked me why I was wasting my life and my college degree," he said.

For 18 years after that, Deacon Burke-Sivers did not speak with his father.

Another rule he has: Don't call adults by their first names.

"We need to teach children to respect adults," he explained.

### Tips for teaching Catholic values

Although parenting is challenging, God is with us and his design for the family provides fertile ground to sow the seeds of faith, Deacon Burke-Sivers said. He offered several suggestions for what a family can do to strengthen their children's faith:

- Know your faith. Kids do get excited learning about the Catholic faith, he said.

"After I talked about Mass to a youth group recently, 300 friended me on Facebook. We have to show our kids how to live, and show them that their Catholic faith is a treasure. We have to show them the beauty of our faith," he said.

He believes adults can be too worried about being politically correct on topics like stem cell research, in-vitro fertilization and euthanasia.

"Young people want to hear the truth," Deacon Burke-Sivers said.

"When I talk to youth, I use Scripture and I show the research studies, and they get it."

- Consider participating in eucharistic adoration at your parish.

"I use that hour to pray for my kids," he said.

- Plan family fun nights. In his home, this means doing one thing together as a family for one hour. The activity is selected by each family member on a rotating basis.
- Go to Mass as a family, and pray together at home as a family. He suggests the rosary, and if the kids are at young ages, start by just doing a decade.

"The father leads the prayer," he added, "because he's the priest of the home."

- Parents should plan a date night at least once a month; they need to keep their relationship strong. "When the twins were babies, we even got two sitters so we could go out," he said.

God saw family as so important, he had Jesus come from a family as a way to save us, Deacon Burke-Sivers noted.

"But my mother asked me to pray for him, so I did," he said.

During those years, Deacon Burke-Sivers moved to Portland, Ore., married, started a family and became a deacon.

"I sent a wedding invitation to my father, I sent him messages when each child was born, but still no response from my dad, who had moved back to Barbados," he said. "But I had promised my mom to pray for him, so I did."

Deacon Burke-Sivers appeared on a television series for the Eternal Word Television Network, which aired in Barbados. Not long after that, "my brother told me that Dad has been watching the Catholic channel, so he sees my show, and he watches Mass on TV," Deacon Burke-Sivers said. "But I didn't really care – we hadn't spoken in so many years."

That changed unexpectedly five years ago, when his father called him.

"I was driving when I answered my cell phone. I almost got in an accident when I realized it was my dad," he recalled. "Then Dad spent the next 30 minutes talking about his relationship with Jesus."

At first it was hard for Deacon Burke-Sivers to understand that his father had changed.

"I wanted him to say he was sorry for all the years he put me, Mom, and the rest of the family through hell. But God taught me a lesson: To just accept the person he is today," he said.

His father then came to Portland to visit the deacon's family and mother, who had moved there and was ill. His parents had not spoken to each other in 20 years, but they reconciled, and his mother died four months later.

"Dad was devastated," Deacon Burke-Sivers said.

"We need courage to stand up for our faith; we must live our family life with courage and conviction," he stated. "We need to show this culture Jesus!"

He talks to his father frequently, "and you can't get the guy out of church now."

Deacon Burke-Sivers and his wife, Colleen, have four children: Claire, 13; Angela, 11; Benjamin and Sophia, 9. A deacon since 2002, he serves Immaculate Heart Parish in the Archdiocese of Portland.

He also is the founder and director of Servant Enterprises Inc., an evangelization and apologetics organization, and shares his thoughts on his website, [dynamicdeacon.com](http://dynamicdeacon.com). Deacon Burke-Sivers travels about 100,000 miles a year to speak about the Catholic faith, marriage and family life.

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