



## Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers: 'We have a part to play' in evangelisation

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**D**eacon Harold Burke-Sivers is a popular international speaker, writer and host of several television shows. His career has included 23 years in law enforcement and anti-terrorism in the United States, and millions of people have heard him speak. But not even Deacon Harold was prepared for the welcome that awaited him in Papua New Guinea, a recent stop on his 2023 tour through Oceania with Parousia Media.

'We walk to the top of the jetway, and there's a photographer, there's the media, and I'm like, "What's going on here?"'

The greeting included a traditional welcoming ceremony, the chance to meet the Prime Minister and his family, blocked-off roads and a police motorcade to escort them to their accommodation. Deacon Harold was informed that since he was one of the first international Catholic speakers to tour the country, they were treating him like an international dignitary.

'It was insane. We were in the motorcade, and I started breaking down crying. It was just totally unexpected,' he says. 'I'm used to being on the other side of those details.'

In Papua New Guinea, Deacon Harold spoke with politicians and government officials about 'ethical leadership', and with priests, religious and young Catholics about issues of faith. 'It was an incredible experience to see the joy, and the hunger ... The young people were asking deep questions. They're thinking about serious things.'

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I've been to 31 countries, and that was tremendously moving.

Plans are already in motion for him to return to Papua New Guinea next year and to visit more of the country than before.

The current Oceania tour has also included speaking engagements in New Zealand, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. In Melbourne, he spoke at a several events, including at the regular *God and Beer* event hosted by the Knights of the Southern Cross Victoria.

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## From police officer to evangelist [#from-police-officer-to-evangelist]

For some people, Deacon Harold's career transition is a strange one. Over 23 years in law enforcement, Deacon Harold rose to become the President of the Western Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators. In the United States, universities and colleges are

like their own little cities, he explains, with their own water, electricity, hospitals and police services. He was in charge of campus police for the whole western region of the country.

On the side, he also ran his own anti-terrorism threat-assessment company, a consulting firm that pulled in a comfortable six-figure income. He has received advanced training with the FBI, US Secret Service, US Marshals, Naval Intelligence and Navy Seals.

'People come up to me and say, "How did you make that transition? You left that to go talk about Jesus and write books?" he says.

Having been ordained a deacon in 2002, he initially exercised that ministry on the side. But in the end, 'God had other plans.'

In fact, his experience teaching police has informed his own personal style. Referred to as the 'Dynamic Deacon', Deacon Harold is renowned for his 'no-nonsense' approach to living the faith, something he drew from his career. When it came to teaching police officers, the priority was always to 'get to the point':

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Cops hate sitting in class. They didn't become police officers to sit around; they want to go out there and make a difference in the community. But I'm giving information that's going to help save lives. So I said to myself, 'How do I get this information across in a way that's interesting, informative, engaging, but at the same time, that's not boring these guys to death.'

'And so I think that helped developed my style. And then God just took it and married it to my theology.'

This style has made him especially popular among men, he says, who tend to respond positively to him speaking to them 'firmly and directly'. In 2015, he even published a book called *Behold the Man: A Catholic vision of male spirituality* (Ignatius Press), an opportunity to 'elevate the conversation a bit' around the vocation of men. A lot had been written about men among Protestants, but he saw very little in the Catholic world and wanted to make that contribution.

Drawing on the opening chapters of Genesis, Deacon Harold says he offers a positive vision in which the vocation of men is to “till and keep” everything God has entrusted to us’ (cf. Genesis 2:15)—based on the Hebrew text of Genesis, he argues it might be better to translate this as ‘serve, protect and defend’.

This contribution was also inspired by his experience of reading Pope John Paul II. It was encountering the pope’s letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (on the dignity of women) that led him deeper into the faith many years ago.

‘I read that and it floored me,’ he explains. ‘I’d never read anything so beautiful about women and femininity, and it really started changing the way I thought about women, about my faith, about the Blessed Mother ... From there, I just started devouring the guy.’

While Pope John Paul II offered much on what he called the ‘feminine genius’, Deacon Harold felt called to reflect on what might be meant by the ‘masculine genius’.

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## Evangelisation today [#evangelisation-today]

With his focus on the practical dimension of faith, Deacon Harold says maybe this is what’s absent from evangelisation today.

There are cultural forces and ideas that present a real challenge to the Church’s mission, he says. But what is really going to help young people is knowing the *what*, the *why* and the *how* of their faith.

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We’re not giving them good responses to the challenges they’re facing in the culture. They need to know the *why* of the Catholic faith—what any of this stuff has to do with our life ... How does it inform how I live, how I think? That’s the piece that’s missing.

Although some of the issues that need addressing are difficult, it has to be done. ‘Just because it’s hard to talk about, you can’t not talk about it.’

In fact, he believes young people especially respond well to having a high bar set for them. While we must always speak the truth in love, as St Paul says (Ephesians 4:15), 'You also have to love the truth,' Deacon Harold says. What the Church needs to present is a loving, compassionate, yet truthful 'counter message' to the messages young people are hearing from the culture.

When it comes to evangelisation, too, we need to understand what part belongs to us and what belongs to God.

'We can't convert anybody. Our job is to throw the seeds ... It's God that does the heavy lifting,' he says. 'But the seed has to be thrown. We have a part to play. We can't be afraid to go out there, even if it's with a message that's counter to the culture.'

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## Living an integrated life [#living-an-integrated-life]

In his twenties, Deacon Harold also spent time with the Benedictines discerning a vocation. To this day, the inspiration of St Benedict of Nursia and his *Rule* remains with him. He thinks St Benedict can be an inspiration for us today as well, especially when it comes to evangelising the culture.

'Benedict's approach was *ora et labora*: pray and work,' he explains. 'He saw those two things as being integrated, not disparate.'

Part of the 'genius' of St Benedict was in how he managed to create a community and infuse the daily rhythms of life with spirituality and prayer. Not only do Benedictines sanctify the day through prayer at regular intervals, but they also consider their work to be, in a sense, 'prayer'. As a Benedictine Oblate, Deacon Harold took this into his family life, trying to integrate the faith with every aspect of life.

Deacon Harold believes there's something powerful in the Benedictine tradition for families. Evangelisation begins in the family, and we can start with what he calls 'gap-time': even when our days are crowded and too busy, we can still fill the day with prayer, like Benedictine monks.

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Fill in those gaps, those spaces in your day with time for prayer ... It's about sanctifying the day.

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