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# Dynamic Deacon Travels the World Preaching the Good News

New Jersey native Harold Burke-Sivers speaks about Catholicism and the Church

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By Trent Beattie

*Growing up in Hillside, New Jersey, Harold Burke-Sivers thought of Philadelphia as the west coast. After earning a degree at the University of Notre Dame, residing for almost 20 years in Portland, Oregon, and making dozens of trips around the country and the world for speaking engagements, his sights have been vastly expanded.*



*Deacon Harold has also attempted to expand the minds and hearts of listeners as he explains the priceless treasures of grace found in the Catholic Church. His overall message is for everyone, but he specializes in masculine spirituality, a topic that has been gaining popularity in recent years. One of Deacon Harold's five EWTN series is called Behold the Man, and he has released a book and a 13-week Behold the Man program based on the show.*

*Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, the father of three daughters and one son, spoke to Catholic Digest about his book, his speaking engagements, what it's like being a black Catholic in the United States, and the continuity of teaching found in the last three popes — all in the context of what he sees as being a deeply challenging but even more rewarding time to be a Catholic.*

### Q. Have you always been Catholic?

Yes, I'm the first child in the history of my family to be baptized into the Catholic faith. My parents came from the island of Barbados in the West Indies to Hillside, New Jersey. My mom is a convert from Methodism to Catholicism, and she made sure I got a good Catholic education.

When I grew up in New Jersey, I thought of Philadelphia as the west coast, so my horizons were expanded by going to the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, for college. After earning a degree in economics and business administration, I decided to discern a possible calling to the priesthood at a monastic community in New Jersey. I loved my time in the monastery. However, I had to leave to take care of my ill mother and the rest of my family.

It was around this time that I attended the wedding of two friends from college. Colleen, who is now my wife, was at this wedding, but it was only after some friends reminded us that we had met briefly — once in freshman year (1984–85) and once in junior year (1986–87) — that we realized we had encountered each other before. The meetings were neither memorable nor impactful, so when we met at the wedding, it was like meeting for the first time.

We got married in 1994 and moved to Oregon, where Colleen grew up. The kid who once thought of Philadelphia as the west coast now has been in Oregon for almost 20 years.

### Q. How did you discern a possible calling to the diaconate?

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After getting married, I knew the possibility of priesthood had ended. I didn't know that being a permanent deacon was possible, as I had only heard of transitional deacons — that is, seminarians who were preparing for ordination to the priesthood.

One day my pastor told me I should consider being a deacon. I told him I couldn't be a deacon because I was married. He informed me that there are permanent deacons who can be married, and he pointed out the description of their service to the Church in No. 29 of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from Vatican II.

Deacons help priests to serve the laity by solemnly administering baptism, assisting at marriages and funerals, bringing Holy Communion to the sick, instructing and exhorting the faithful, reading the Gospel at Mass, and preaching homilies. To be able to do those things while still being married really drew my attention, so I applied for the permanent diaconate program in the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon, in 1997. I was accepted, went through the program of study, and was ordained a deacon in 2002.

Since 2004 I've traveled both nationally and internationally instructing the faithful about the beautiful teachings of the Church and exhorting them to live out those teachings. My website, [DeaconHarold.com](http://DeaconHarold.com), has my speaking schedule and offers other resources about the amazing gift we have in the Church, the bride of Christ.

**Q. You wrote a book with Ignatius Press.**

What is it about? There are many books out today about masculine spirituality, but they all seem to deal with a specific aspect of it rather than the topic as a whole. I wanted to put together something that would be a comprehensive theology of what it means to be a man of God. This was an ambitious task, but I think it's necessary for the troubled times we live in.

Catholic men need to serve, protect, and defend our wives and children. We can't just relax our standards and get swept away by the problems of the culture; we have to confront the problems head-on and transform our culture with the truth of Christ. That is when the natural law is respected, and there is room for the Gospel to be accepted.

I wanted to get this across in my book, *Behold the Man: A Catholic Vision of Male Spirituality*. It is actually the expanded script of *Behold the Man*, one of my five EWTN series. That series is about how Catholic men need to live from the heart of the crucified Christ. We need to function from the most powerful place on earth — the cross of Christ.

In the book, I break down “the armor of God” found in Ephesians 6. I talk about how the “shield of faith,” the “helmet of salvation,” and the “sword of the spirit” can help us resist temptations to evil and instead live dynamically virtuous lives. There is a battle raging, but if we do as God directs us to do, the victory is ours.

**Q. Is it difficult being a black Catholic in the United States?**

If you asked me that question 10 years ago, I would have said yes. The feedback when talking to predominantly black audiences was that I was “too white,” while predominantly white audiences thought I was “too black.” Some people thought I was acting one way or another, but the way I preach is just part of who I am. I'm enthusiastic about the treasures we have in the Catholic Church, and I want to share the immense greatness of our Catholic faith.

Despite any cultural challenges, I know that there's no better place to be than in the Catholic Church. Father Augustus Tolton, the first black priest ordained in the United States, faced much greater challenges than I do today. He was rejected by other priests, parishioners, and even some bishops. Yet he stayed in the Church because he knew it had the beauty of truth, even if Catholics do not faithfully live out the beauty of that truth.

Oftentimes people assumed that I must be a convert — that I couldn't have possibly grown up Catholic. The truth is that black Catholics have been part of the Church since the beginning. For a long time, the majority of black Catholics separated their faith from politics. They supported political agendas that did not follow the teachings of the Church on essential issues such as abortion and euthanasia.

However, this great divide is less pervasive today. Black Catholics are seeing, in greater numbers, that our identity as followers of Jesus must influence everything else we do. We can't belong to a political party only out of family tradition. We have to take a look at what candidates running for office stand for and then vote as Catholics and people who believe in the natural law. Groups like Life Dynamics and Black Catholics for Life are making this easier by showing that the sanctity of human life is the most important political issue we deal with.

**Q. What do you think of Pope Francis, our first South American pope?**

When people ask me about Pope Francis, I have to start by talking about St. John Paul II. Our last three popes have had a wonderful continuity of presenting the Catholic faith, yet they each have had a difference in emphasis. For me, St. John Paul II spoke of the mind, Benedict XVI spoke of the heart, and Pope Francis speaks of the soul.

St. John Paul II, who had a doctorate in philosophy and sacred theology, spoke philosophically and answered, for me, the question: “Why be Catholic?” He laid out the reasons for being a follower of Jesus in his Church. I had been Catholic my whole life, but when I really started to read what St. John Paul II wrote, that set me on fire for the faith.

Benedict XVI gave us a powerful catechesis through his pontificate about the true nature of love. Three of his most important writings have the word “love” in their titles: *Deus Caritas Est*, *Caritas in Veritate*, and *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Love, we were taught, is not a feeling but a *kenosis*, or gift of self, to another.

Pope Francis is teaching us that our religion cannot be merely theoretical; it must be lived in order for it to have real meaning. We have to take what we believe into our homes, workplaces, and anywhere else we find ourselves. We have to be in touch with the rest of humanity, sharing the good news through our actions in our everyday lives. The good news is real, and it is the most powerful thing in the world, so we have to show that to others.

It is such an awesome time to be Catholic!



**Trent Beattie**

*Trent Beattie is a National Catholic Register correspondent and writes from Seattle.*

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We seek the positive in the world and in our Church. We emphasize those things that Catholics are doing right and well as a means of inspiring and encouraging others to do the same. We are hope-filled, optimistic, and forward-looking.

We highlight the goodness and beauty of God's creation and the truths of His Church. We find abundant joy in Catholic living and aim to express that joy through inspiring words, images, and ideas.

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