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## Parish addressing racial healing



Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers speaks Jan. 20 at Our Lady of the Lake Parish in Lake Oswego. "We must heal with love," he told a large audience at the parish, which is addressing racial healing. (Gordon Oliver/Catholic Sentinel)

Gordon Oliver  
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**"** *I am sick and tired of us being a reactive church. When issues in the culture come forward we are cowards in speaking about them.* " Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers

The evening's topic at Our Lady of the Lake Parish in Lake Oswego was "Healing through Love: A Catholic Response to Racial Injustice" — a difficult discussion anywhere in today's polarized times.

At a heavily-attended Jan. 20 forum, **Deacon Harold** Burke-Sivers of Portland aimed to open that discussion in a kickoff of a parish initiative on racial justice. The University of Notre Dame graduate who is nationally known for his books, lectures, and appearances on EWTN and other religious outlets, exhorted his rapt audience to embrace healing through prayer and small personal actions.

His message was both positive and challenging. "Our Lord tells us we must be good Samaritans," Burke-Sivers said in an animated and energetic speech that drew a standing ovation. "We must heal with love. We must be the Samaritans."



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Burke-Sivers laid the foundation for his message by taking note of the gulf between white and Black Americans, both economically and socially. One little-mentioned indicator of that divide, he said, is that Black women account for 38% of abortions, the highest rate of any ethnic group, even though Blacks represent 13% of U.S. population.

"The truth is that we are now a two-family nation, separate and unequal," he said. "One is striving and intact and the other is struggling, broken, and far too often African-American."

Burke-Sivers said the Catholic Church is not fundamentally racist but that individuals and institutions within the church have exhibited prejudice and racism throughout American history. He pointed to an example in his own North Portland parish, Immaculate Heart. During World War II, African-American Catholics who worked in the nearby shipyard were expected during Mass to sit in the back rows or choir loft at the then-predominately German and Irish ethnic parish, he said.

Yet, he noted, the Catholic Church provides examples of defiance against the racist norms even in the pre-Civil War and Jim Crow eras, including early papal condemnations of slavery.

Burke-Sivers drew some of his analysis from his upcoming sixth book, "Building a Civilization of Love: A Catholic Response to Racism" that is to be released this fall. The book will offer a Catholic perspective on debates over the controversies surrounding Critical Race Theory and the Black Lives Matter movement, he said.

Critical Race Theory lays out a complicated secular critique of the nation's racial divide that is based on a foundation of racial conflict, struggle, and discord, Burke-Sivers said. It is openly dismissive of faith and offers little of value for Catholics, he argued. "It is at its core divisive on racial matters," he concluded.

Burke-Sivers said he accepts and endorses the statement that "Black lives matter" and believes the message should not be diminished by the popular rejoinder that "all lives matter."

"Blacks have experienced centuries of abuse and mistrust, and to simply dismiss the words 'Black lives matter' and replace them with 'all lives matter' feels like others are indifferent and unsympathetic to our pain," he said.

Still, he was sharply critical of the organization Black Lives Matter, saying it lacks policy positions on issues affecting Blacks such as abortion, economic growth, and ending drug and gang violence. He cited the group's stated goals of "disrupting the traditional nuclear family," saying its work for racial justice is a "Trojan horse for promotion and normalization of alternative lifestyle choices."

In responding to the racial divide, Catholics should turn to prayer and simple acts of reaching out to others, Burke-Sivers said. He encouraged Catholics to look beyond stereotypes and fears to see and understand people of other races, and to turn to the Scriptures.

Burke-Sivers urged people in the audience to come together at potlucks and social functions that create opportunities for honest conversations and faith sharing. Churches, he added, should support a broad range of cultural expressions through dance and music, and display art and images of saints from non-white cultures.

He also encouraged Catholics in the pew and church leaders to speak out on racial concerns. "I am sick and tired of us being a reactive church," he said. "When issues in the culture come forward we are cowards in speaking about them."

Burke-Sivers hinted that Lake Oswego's affluence and small minority population make it challenging to build cross-racial dialogue. When he first arrived in Oregon, he recounted, he was told that the community's nickname was "Lake No Negro." The comment drew some audible groans.

The presentation is the first in a planned series of discussions at the parish about racial healing, said Mary Beth Horton, chair of Our Lady of the Lake's pastoral council.

Father John Kerns, Our Lady of the Lake's pastor, had challenged the pastoral council to address issue following the 2020 killing of Floyd George by a Minneapolis police officer and subsequent protests in cities nationwide, including Portland.

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