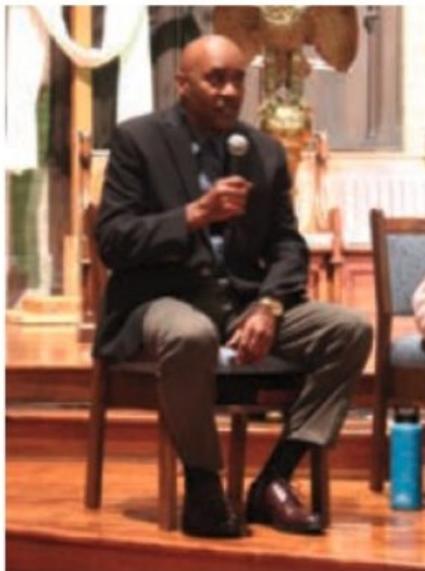


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Deacons Kurt Davis (left), Mel Tardy and Harold Burke-Sivers. Courtesy photos

A Dynamic Contribution to the Church

Black deacons hope that the faithful see a life of service to all people

👤 PAUL SENZ (<https://www.the-deacon.com/byline/paul-senz/>) 🗨️ 0 (<https://www.the-deacon.com/2022/08/15/a-dynamic-contribution-to-the-church/#respond>)

Black men have been a part of the permanent diaconate in the United States since the practice was revitalized by the Second Vatican Council. This is not a recent novelty; in many dioceses, Black men were ordained in the first classes of permanent deacons around 40 years ago.

Deacon Kurt Davis

The importance of the role of Black deacons in their parishes and wider communities cannot be overestimated. “For Black Catholic Christians, it is refreshing to see a Black deacon in a ministerial role in the Church, which is predominantly white,” said Deacon Kurt Davis. Deacon Davis was ordained on May 12, 2018, and serves at St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Hyde Park in Chicago. “We bring a different dynamic to worship,” he said. “It’s in our DNA — singing, dancing and the way we praise God.”

Deacon Davis points out that Black deacons — same as any other deacon — are called to serve all people, not to remain insular to their own communities. He has served at a primarily Croatian parish in the Archdiocese of Chicago and has developed a great rapport with the parish community. Their differing skin colors are unimportant.

Deacon Davis said that one way to assess if his ministry is effective is if people look at him and think, “He’s not a Black deacon, but a deacon who happens to be Black, and I see the image of Christ through him!” This applies to all deacons, not just deacons of color. “Relinquishing this stereotype is the first step!” he said. The life of service, that *diakonia*, should be what people see, rather than the color of the deacon’s skin or any other external characteristic.

Deacon Mel Tardy

Deacon Mel Tardy serves at a historically Black parish: St. Augustine Parish in South Bend, Indiana. Over time, the parish has become multiracial, due in large part to its efforts to be a place of welcome. He has been attending the parish off and on since 1988 and was assigned there after his ordination on May 21, 2011. He also currently serves as president of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.

The first time he thought about becoming a deacon was the result of a chance encounter. Attending a gathering of Black Catholic clergy, Tardy struck up a conversation with a man in a Roman collar, assuming he was a priest, only to find out he was a deacon. “After he explained to me what a deacon was, I thought, here’s a Black man doing similar things as me — maybe I should become a deacon!” he said.

The formation process was difficult due to an opposite experience: “At our first gathering, everyone else was white, even the bishop,” Deacon Tardy said. “As we went through formation, so were my instructors, the scholars we studied, the examples and illustrations used, and the cultural expressions of prayer.”

None of these was problematic in and of itself, but Deacon Tardy struggled with the implication that deacons should be white. But his brothers in formation were encouraging and supportive of one another, even without knowing of his struggles, and have become lifelong friends.

The National Association of Black Catholic Deacons, as well as the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, have further helped to affirm Deacon Tardy’s vocation. It is an incredibly beneficial organization composed of other clergy, and specifically deacons, living and working in a similar milieu and with similar cultural experiences. “The common experiences, the cultural competencies, the things of concern and the things celebrated tend to resonate with me,” Deacon Tardy said.

As a deacon, Tardy recognizes that he is called to serve all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, economic and social status, or anything else. “My personal avocation is to tend to and, in fact, evangelize the often maligned and underserved Black community,” he said. But regardless of who he is serving, he hopes that his ministry and presence might have the same profound effect on someone else that his chance first encounter with a Black deacon had on him.

Deacon Tardy sometimes worries that his race will complicate his diaconal ministry in a given setting. “Will I get the benefit of doubt that I belong in a particular — for example, liturgical — setting? Will I have to prove my credentials? Am I expected to be an expert on racism solely because of my race (rather than because of my expert training and preparation)? Is the latter expected to be the only gift or area of expertise I can offer the world, or is there more to me?”

“Regardless of race, what folks share in common today are hearts and souls challenged by the trials and tribulations of this age,” Deacon Tardy said. As a Black deacon, he acknowledges many of the challenges faced even within the Church when it comes to issues of race, and of preconceived notions (perhaps even unrecognized). “Black folk are challenged by the presence of racism within the Catholic Church,” he said. “When we are not represented in Church leadership, when resources culturally attuned to our folk are considered inherently inferior, and when the Church is as silent about systemic racism as it has been about other scandals,” then the challenge of diaconal service is even greater.

But the problem of racism, as any other problem, is not beyond the work of grace. God’s grace can soften even the hardest hearts. “We walk by faith, not by sight,” Deacon Tardy said. “Racism may complicate the will of God, but with God, all things are possible.”

Deacon Tardy said that Black deacons can have a lot to teach non-Black deacons. “Perhaps non-Black deacons can learn something from the history and enduring faith of Black folk, including deacons,” he said. “Maybe others can learn from the vibrancy of our liturgies or preaching that can fill the pews.” He added that the presence of Black deacons bears witness to the truth of the Gospel and the catholicity of the Church. “We all can benefit from diverse collaborations,” he said, “by praying, walking and talking together on our Eucharistic journey toward a common heaven.”

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers has served at Immaculate Heart Parish in Portland, Oregon, since his ordination in November 2002. The parish is multicultural, with Black and Vietnamese Catholics comprising the majority of parishioners. “Being a person of color really helps me in service to that community,” he said. “The parish gets to see someone that looks like themselves serving them as a deacon.”

Deacon Burke-Sivers is no stranger to such multicultural parish communities. “I grew up in a Black neighborhood, and in a church that was predominantly white, and we were one of the few Black Catholic families,” he said. “So I have been able to integrate well with people of various races throughout my life.”

Deacons do not always have a history of integrating in multicultural contexts, however. “You often have deacons in a parish who don’t do a lot of work with the other cultures in the parish — you have a white deacon who doesn’t do a lot with the Vietnamese community, or a Black deacon who doesn’t do a lot with the Hispanic community,” Deacon Burke-Sivers said. “But we’re not ordained to serve specific communities — we’re ordained to serve the entire Church, which means everyone in our parish communities.”

PAUL SENZ writes from Oklahoma.

PEW SURVEY

Predominantly Black places of worship continue to have a considerable presence in the lives of Black Americans: Fully 60% of Black adults who go to religious services — whether every week or just a few times a year — say they attend religious services at places where most or all of the other attendees, as well as the senior clergy, are also Black, according to a major Pew Research Center survey in February 2021
