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What Black America Really Needs: Committed and Faithful Fathers

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers Discusses Ways to Affirm the Family Unit



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Harold Burke-Sivers is a permanent deacon for the Archdiocese of Portland, Ore., and is a full-time Catholic evangelist (*see DeaconHarold.com*). He is regularly featured in the Catholic media, and he has been a host on a variety of EWTN broadcasts. He is on the road frequently giving lectures, retreats and seminars at parishes and conference centers throughout the nation and overseas.

Deacon Burke-Sivers was born in Barbados, West Indies, and came to the United States as a child. His father was a calypso singer; he and his three siblings grew up in Hillside, N.J. His mother was a convert to the Catholic faith and raised the children Catholic. Deacon Burke-Sivers was always drawn to the Catholic faith, served as an altar boy and spent four years in a Benedictine monastery.

He previously worked in security for a university before becoming a full-time evangelist in 2012. He and his wife, Colleen, have four children.

Deacon Burke-Sivers recently spoke with Register correspondent Jim Graves about the decline of the family unit in the United States, with special attention as to how it has affected the black community.

The family unit has been in a state of decline across the nation, with significantly higher rates of illegitimacy, divorce, cohabitating couples, neglected and abandoned children and many other social ills than a few generations ago. Why do you think we have come to this place where family life has suffered so much, particularly in the inner city?

We've lost the moral compass that was once a part of our country's ethos. This is due to a variety of factors: the sexual revolution of the '60s and '70s, no-fault divorce, absent fathers, dependence on government and, certainly, the legalization of abortion.

The black community has been particularly hard hit. When I was a kid, there was a television show about a black family called *Good Times* [1974-79]. It reflected the undaunted determination of black families to stick together despite challenges they faced in the post-slavery era of our country's history.

Slavery had separated families, and they fought doggedly to reunite, stay together and succeed, despite obstacles of racial oppression and poverty. A few generations ago, 78% of black families were headed by married couples. However, today, that number has reversed, with over 70% of families not being headed by married couples.

My own parish, Immaculate Heart in Portland, is predominantly black, and we have an inordinate number of children being raised by grandparents. When, as a deacon, I perform the rite of baptism, I have to change some of the words that refer to fathers because they are, so often, not there.

I know personally what it is like to grow up without a father in the home. My father was seldom around when I was a boy. He loved women, alcohol and cigarettes more than us. He was not a man of faith. The reason my mother stayed married to him as long as she did was to give us the illusion that we had a traditional family unit. She was sensitive to this because she and he had both grown up without a father in the home. My father did come home sometimes, but was involved with numerous affairs, and my parents eventually divorced. [Editor's note: Deacon Burke-Sivers would later have an emotional reconciliation with his father, who came to embrace religion after watching a series his son did for EWTN.]

Hence, when I was growing up, I did not learn what it was like to be a "real man" from my father. Children, especially when they get older, need the strength and guidance from a man in their lives. In my situation, I had to find other men I could look up to. I was an Eagle Scout, so one role model for me was my scoutmaster. I went to a Benedictine high school, and the monks became like fathers to me. Also in school, there was a wrestling coach I admired.

And, ultimately for me, it was my Catholic faith that acted like super glue that held my life together.

You were able to go on and live a successful life despite having an absent father, but many black children have not been as fortunate.

No, they have not. There are other negative factors doing great harm as well. For example, half of young black men don't finish high school, and without an education, they can't find good jobs. Drugs are prevalent in the inner city, and many boys choose to embrace a drug lifestyle and hedonistic culture. They mimic selfish lifestyles of rap and hip-hop artists they observe.

They become sexually promiscuous, yet have no interest in being fathers or living in committed relationships. They physically, emotionally and spiritually abandon their own children. The result is that many single women with children rely on government programs to survive, and their children are at risk of falling into the same decadent, hedonistic lifestyle of their parents.

It's a real challenge for black families, and we've reached a critical point. We, as black men, need to come back to ourselves and come to understand that fathers are not optional and unnecessary. In the black subculture, love does not mean commitment, self-gift and sacrifice.

The hip-hop culture glorifies the thug life and the degradation of women. Also, many black actors, athletes and politicians who should be role models are not.

Are there any public policies or practices that you think are particularly harmful to blacks?

Yes. The first thing that comes to mind is the prevalence of contraception and abortion. It's called "family planning," "reproductive choice" or even "low-income health care," but these are all code words for pushing an agenda of contraception and abortion and the devastation of the black family.

Black leaders talk about civil rights and racism and the need to raise ourselves out of poverty, but few understand that we're killing ourselves through an abuse of our freedom through contraception and abortion. When we support abortion, we support the elimination of our race. If we keep doing so, none of these other issues will matter, as there won't be enough of us around to make a difference. We've bought into the contraceptive mentality and abortion culture hook, line and sinker. We've absorbed the moral relativism of the culture.

The sad part is that it didn't used to be this way. Our spirituality comes from Africa, and our people once had an intense awareness of the presence of God. In America, we struggled together for equality and acceptance.

Our families once welcomed children and made a place for them in the family. We need to bring God back into our lives, restore marriage to its proper place and once again welcome children into our lives. We need to go back to our roots, not just take on African names and wear African clothes. Once we restore our relationship with God, we can begin asking: How do I get from where I am to where God wants me to be?

How do you respond when people who fight for the legalization of same-sex "marriage" compare it to the struggle for civil rights?

Same-sex "marriage" is not a civil-rights issue; being black is not a lifestyle choice. It's like comparing apples and oranges. God defined the nature of marriage, and it is not for us to try and redefine it.

What were your thoughts on the Trayvon Martin–George Zimmerman case?

The not-guilty verdict certainly unleashed a firestorm and spawned some senseless acts of retaliatory violence (blacks committing crimes against whites and saying, "This is for Trayvon.") On Zimmerman's side, we hear him saying it was a legitimate act of self-defense. The other side says it's racially motivated, and we can't hear Martin's point of view. It's a complicated issue.

What I will say is this: Racism of all kinds exists because evil and sin exists. We look at another person and make decisions on how he looks and not seeing him as God sees him. Racism puts blinders over our eyes.

I myself have had the experience of walking onto an elevator with a woman I have never met; she sees me, and she grabs her purse more tightly and steps away. She doesn't know me and is making a decision based on the way I look.

That said, we can't blame everything on racism. In the black community, we have to ask ourselves: Why are we getting drunk and high? Why aren't we taking on the responsibility of being husbands and fathers? Why are we treating women as objects? Why are we allowing street gangs to replace families? We need to look inward to examine ourselves. Also, we have to realize that the Catholic Church has a lot to offer.

Where do we have to go as a society?

We have to return to the place where fathers are the center of family life and where men have a conscientious work ethic.

When kids are young, it's all about being with mom and bonding with mom. But now that I have two teenage daughters, I see how important my role in the family is. My girls seeing that I'm here at home, working and sacrificing for the family and offering advice whether or not they want it — it's extremely important that they experience that dynamic.

Also, today in society, with the Internet and social networking, kids are exposed to potentially harmful things at a young age. A father needs to be a protector of his family, acting as a doorstop to all the harmful things that are out there.

He needs to be an example of virtue and provide for the spiritual needs of the family, making Christ the heart and center of family life. He is head of the domestic church, the church of the home. The priest's job is to offer sacrifice; the father offers the sacrifice of his life in loving service to his wife and children.

Who are some black leaders you admire?

There are many. Alveda King has devoted her life to many good things, particularly in the area of life. Some others who have been good in promoting the pro-life cause are Clenard Childress of BlackGenocide.org, Walter Hoye and Gloria Purvis, with whom I did an EWTN special.

Damon Owens has been outstanding in promoting the theology of the body and introducing couples to natural family planning. And Bill Cosby — I know he's controversial — has been outspoken on the need to rebuild the black family.

Historically, one of my favorite black leaders was Father Augustus Tolton [1854-97]. He's a great role model for black Catholic men. He was a slave who became a Catholic priest. None of the American seminaries would take him because he was black, so he had to train in Rome.

He faced unbelievable odds. His critics called him the "n****r priest." Some white clergy told their parishioners that going to his Mass on Sunday didn't fulfill their obligation. If anyone had a reason to leave the Church, he did. But he knew that, despite the failings of men, the teachings of the Catholic Church were still true.

How has your full-time evangelization ministry been going over the past year?

It's going well, and I enjoy it. It's given me a deeper appreciation of the priesthood. I typically stay in rectories with priests, and as we're both ordained members of the clergy, we enjoy some fellowship and camaraderie.

I see how their lives are. Recently, I was having dinner with a priest at a rectory, and he had an urgent sick call. He left for the hospital, so I finished dinner alone and did the dishes for him. I very much admire the dedication of our priests.

Financially, it's been a sacrifice and has required some prioritizing in our family budget. I went from being a high-level administrator doing well financially to a much more modest income. But I believe God is calling me to evangelize Catholics and help them connect their faith with everyday life.

I don't miss my old life. Jesus said, "Once the hand is laid on the plow, no one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God" [Luke 9:62]. I've put my hand on the plow, and I'm not looking back.

And how is your message received?

Interestingly, when I speak to groups, the least receptive are those from the black community. Black Catholics often separate their faith from their political lives. When I speak about values from the pulpit, many black Catholics think along political rather than faith lines. When it comes to voting and standing up for issues, they take a more liberal position. People so often associate topics with politics and get upset.

I love being black, and I'm grateful for the gift of being a black Catholic. However, when I'm judged by God in the next life, he will not ask me how black I am. He'll ask me how I've lived the Catholic faith. It's not about race or color, but about living the tenets of our faith with conviction and passion.

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