

THE CATHOLIC WORLD REPORT

Three black Catholics reflect on faith, race, and the prevailing narrative

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, filmmaker Jordan Pacheco, and non-profit leader Muji Kaiser talk about being Catholic and black, racism, Black Lives Matter, and more.

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Left to right: Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, Jordan Pacheco, and Muji Kaiser.

As the national conversation about race, prompted by the killing of George Floyd, dominated headlines and social media this summer, many Catholics turned their attention to racism in the Church and among believers, both throughout history and in our present day. The most prominent example of this public reckoning was an August 6 article in the *New York Times*, [“How the American Catholic Church is wrestling with the Black Lives Matter movement,”](#) penned by Catholic opinion writer Elizabeth Bruenig and profiling EWTN Radio host Gloria Purvis. Purvis, a faithful black Catholic known for her outspoken defense of the pro-life cause in particular, has also been vocal in her criticisms of the Church’s handling of racial issues.

Among black Catholics, Purvis has perhaps received the most attention of late, but hers is not the only black Catholic voice out there. In an effort to better understand how fellow believers are grappling with issues of faith and race, I set out to find other black voices who could speak from firsthand experience from within the Church.

As one might expect, the topic evoked a passionate response from those with whom I spoke. I did very little talking, and a lot of listening. The result was a series of powerful and deeply moving conversations. My subjects: a deacon, a filmmaker, and a non-profit leader. I found their responses were not cookie-cutter answers to fit a prevailing narrative or my personal expectations; on the contrary, the range of responses compelled me to revisit my own assumptions.

“What is their plan to actually end racism?”

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers is a much-sought-after Catholic speaker. Known as “the Dynamic Deacon,” he has an extensive media presence; he co-hosts EWTN Radio’s [“Morning Glory” program](#) (with Gloria Purvis and Msgr. Charles Pope) and Mater Dei Radio’s “Living Stones,” has appeared on EWTN many times and in the feature film *Power in My Hands*, and is the author of several books, including *Behold the*

Man: A Catholic Vision of Male Spirituality (Ignatius Press). His published articles include, most recently, a June 2020 CWR article titled "[A Catholic Response to Racism](#)".

Deacon Harold made time for me between radio interviews, speaking from Portland,

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers (Image: DynamicDeacon.com)

Oregon, where he lives with his wife, Colleen. His schedule is crowded these days; as a black Catholic, former law enforcement officer, deacon, and father of four, he has unique credentials to discuss the current situation.

As we start our conversation, he reflects on how sensitive discussions on race can be: minutes after the morning's radio broadcast, he is already experiencing social-media fallout for simply using the phrase "black lives matter" in the radio promo.

I ask about institutional or systemic racism—terms that are everywhere these days.

Burke-Sivers distinguishes between institutions, which may not be racist but may include racist individuals. "Unfortunately, people are blurring the discussions here... So when you see things like what happened to George Floyd or Breonna Taylor or someone who has died at the hands of law enforcement, your mind automatically goes to 'the institution of law enforcement itself is racist,' which is not true."

Is the Catholic Church racist? Burke-Sivers makes the same distinction: "The Church is an institution. The Church was founded by Jesus Christ. So, the Church itself is not racist."

"The thing is, the church is made up of human beings, who are all sinful and in need of God's mercy, so we have to keep the message going strong."

How do we do that? He emphasizes the importance of conversation and dialogue in the Church, and of getting to know Catholics of other races, at a parish level, "So they don't become caricatures; they're actually real people of flesh and blood."

"Even today," Burke-Sivers acknowledges, "there are still people who don't feel really accepted in the Catholic Church, so we have to make sure we're creating environments where people do feel welcome."

Can I, as a Catholic, support Black Lives Matter, I ask, although I may not agree with all the things the organization espouses?

Burke-Sivers' response is immediate and clear: "When you put those three words together—black lives matter—as a social movement, it's a statement of truth, which is a good thing. But the *term* 'black lives matter' has been conflated with the *national organization*, Black Lives Matter. In a lot of people's minds, when you say 'black lives matter,' people automatically think of the national organization."

As we talk, he begins to read Black Lives Matter's statement of purpose, "[What We Believe](#)." "To love and desire freedom and justice," is a worthy goal, he observes, but he notes other items that should

“raise some red flags.” The list of goals includes phrases like “space for transgender brothers and sisters,” and the statement, “We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family requirement.” A frequent speaker and writer on fatherhood, this last goal particularly disturbs Burke-Sivers. He notes sadly that there is no mention of fathers in the Black Lives Matter manifesto.

“Look at all that, plus the violence that is being perpetrated, the rioting, the looting, the tearing down statues, all of these things,” he says. “No Catholic in good conscience can have anything to do with a group like that. Period.”

I counter that, in the pro-life movement, Catholics and Protestants work together, although we hold different things. Can't the same be true for Catholics and Black Lives Matter?

Catholics and non-Catholic Christians can work together, Burke-Sivers responds, because “there are values that we share. We're all on the same mission, to live with God forever in heaven. There are some doctrinal things on which we disagree, but the goal is focused and centered on Jesus Christ and on a deepening intimacy with Jesus Christ.”

He sees the Black Lives Matter organization differently. “The organization is using ‘black lives matter’ as a cover for what they're really trying to promote,” he says. “They're trying to redefine society, redefine sexuality, redefine marriage, restructure the family, based on Marxist-Socialist principles.”

“If black lives really matter to the national organization,” Burke-Sivers asks, “Where is their plan for stability and development in black neighborhoods? What is their plan to end drugs and gang violence? To strengthen families? Seventy percent of black children are born out of wedlock. The vast majority of those black people who are incarcerated have no fathers at home. And yet, they want to dismantle the family and get rid of fathers! What is their plan to create educational opportunities? What is their plan for black entrepreneurship? What is their plan to actually end racism?”

For all his criticism of the Black Lives Matter organization, Burke-Sivers does understand why some people are put off by the phrase “All lives matter.” “There is no question that all lives matter from the moment of conception to natural death,” he says. “But when you conflate ‘black lives matter’ and ‘all lives matter,’ it sounds to some people like you're devaluing or lessening the importance of their bringing a voice to the injustice that is being done.”

“You can't take my anger and use it for your agenda”

Jordan Pacheco followed his dream of being a filmmaker from an alpaca farm in rural Colorado to Los Angeles. At 25, he is living the LA life, with commercials, films, and a History Channel documentary on his resume. The cinematography reel on [his website](#) is impressive.

A cradle Catholic, Pacheco was attending Mass in Los Angeles but felt he “just

Jordan Pacheco (Image: Jordan Pacheco)

wasn't being fed.” He Googled “Traditional Latin Mass” and shortly after found himself at a sung high Mass, “openly weeping.” He now attends the Latin Mass as a parishioner of St. Vitus parish, run by the

Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter. His videos on the Mass can be found on his website alongside his secular work. And his enthusiasm for all things traditional drove him to create a podcast, “GladTrad,” with friend Rudy Carlos.

Young, black, living in Los Angeles, immersed in the world, nonetheless Pacheco is taking a different path from many of his peers. Weekends this summer found him, not at protests, but leading the Rosary at the beleaguered Junipero Serra statue in downtown LA. What makes him different?

Pacheco feels that his family background is important to understanding where he comes from. “I’m adopted,” he explains. “All my siblings are adopted, no blood relation to each other, no blood relationship to my parents. Both of my parents are Hispanic. My older sister is white, my younger brother and sister are black.”

Growing up in a mixed-race family, in an overwhelmingly white town “in the middle of nowhere,” Pacheco “should have a pretty good conduit on what racism is.” What was his experience of racism?

“The answer is, I was one of the most popular kids in school,” he says. Not that his growing-up years were without conflict. But, he says, “I was a teenage boy, I was on Xbox Live being called every name under the sun, and I knew, this isn’t racism, this might just be because I’m a teenage boy.”

I remark that he sounds extremely secure. “You give other people power if you make yourself a victim,” he responds.

In terms of racism in the Church, he feels too many people conflate individual “actions, responses, and histories” with the institutional Church. “The Catholic Church has been very good about one thing: that Christ calls Jews and Gentiles forward into Christianity, and that’s the only indication that God cares about race.”

“No one denies” that Catholics in the South owned slaves, or that Catholic colleges were segregated, Pacheco says. But he points to the institutional Church’s record on race: for example, the Church insisted that the mixed-race children of the Spanish Conquistadors be recognized, under pain of excommunication. And between 1435 and 1890, numerous popes condemned the practice of slavery.

“The question is, [are racist actions] the fulfillment of Catholic teaching, or are these the actions of human individuals who are Catholic?” Pacheco asks. “As a black man, I was banned from the Mormon priesthood until the 1970s by virtue of my skin color. That doesn’t exist in Catholicism. In Catholicism, you can have priests who are different skin colors, you can have interracial marriages—something the Church was really first and foremost in fighting for. I think that the Catholic Church has been extraordinarily fair on race.... How this has been expressed, whether by popes or individuals, is a whole different matter.”

What about a black Catholic walking into a church full of white Catholics—might he feel unwelcome, as if all eyes are on him? Pacheco acknowledges, “I hear some of that too.” He points out that blacks make up only about one percent of all Latin Mass attendees, making this a likely scenario at the liturgy he himself frequents.

His response, however, is characteristically positive: “It’s true, you might look different, but the question has to be, are people actually looking at you with prejudice, or is that just a feeling because we all know our differences?”

“If you’re feeling intimidated because you’re the only black person in church, my answer is to do what black people have a really good history of doing: toughen up and just deal with it,” Pacheco says. “We’re all here for Christ. Believe that we’re all here for Christ and just do your thing. That’s the only thing that matters—what’s in the tabernacle.”

“When someone feels anxious or unwelcome in a place, we can blame it on a myriad of options—race, gender, class,” he continues. “If you’re saying ‘I’m not feeling welcomed, I’m not feeling talked to, I’m not being invited to dinner,’ try this: say hello to somebody, invite somebody over to dinner, strike up a conversation. If you do that three Sundays in a row, and nobody’s biting, I think you have a good case there.” He laughs.

I asked Pacheco for his thoughts on the Black Lives Matter movement. “We start with Black Lives Matter as an important conversation on police violence,” he says. “But I’ve read their ten-point manifesto and although initially it sounds like a ‘no-duh’ statement that everyone can believe in, I read just a little bit further and I find them insidious. I think that in terms of blacks flourishing and fixing things in the black community, BLM doesn’t have it right.”

In particular, he points to BLM’s rejection of the nuclear family, “despite the fact that it’s proven that the nuclear family is important for eradicating certain things like cycles of poverty, and education, how boys and girls view themselves, crime rates. I see a lot of very leftist talking points, a lot of secular, left, materialist talking points. And it breaks my heart because I think it utilizes what can be a very legitimate anger, about conversations on police violence, brutality, and that sort of thing.”

“You can’t take my anger and use it for your agenda that way,” he says. “People have the right to peaceful protests. I think it’s a little strange when protests turn into riots. Businesses were broken into, places were looted, places in the black community were looted and boarded up. Yet again, it affects the black community first and foremost. I think it’s been co-opted. Most people are peaceful. They just want to express their anger, frustration, and rightly so. But it’s silly to pretend that therefore the whole movement can have a blessing.”

“People think because it’s not as bad as it was, the issue doesn’t exist”

Muji Kaiser’s first impression of the United States was two-sided: it was simultaneously a place of remarkable opportunity, and a place of slights and slurs. Shortly after her third birthday, she mysteriously lost her ability to walk; doctors in her native Nigeria were unable to help her. Her mother brought her to the United States, where doctors diagnosed a bone infection of unknown origin. Kaiser credits her mother’s prayers, a year in a New York hospital, and the skill of her American doctors with saving her life and helping her regain her ability to walk.

It was in America that Muji, **Muji Kaiser with her three children. (Image: Muji Kaiser)**
then a sensitive third-grader,

got her first bitter taste of racism, at a Catholic parochial school. The only black child in the school, she was the target of “blatant and really hurtful” attacks, she remembers. It was all the more hurtful because, coming from a strong Catholic community in Nigeria, she did not expect such treatment at a Catholic school. The attacks followed her through high school, and students who tormented her in the classroom continued to harass her on social media—“reaching out to me with directly racist things,” she says.

This dual impression of the U.S. remains with her as an adult. At 31, married with three small children, and with a career as the head of a non-profit, she loves the country that has given her so much. But she is still alert to the occasional sense that she is being treated less than kindly, and that no matter how she tries to explain it away, it has to do with skin color.

“Often it’s not as overt” as it was when she was a child, she says, but “I still experience it to varying degrees, although I’m not hearing ‘that word.’ I’m never one to just assume that it’s racism. Sometimes someone is having a bad day, or it could be a number of things. But being an adult and being of sound mind, I feel like I’m able to interpret certain experiences.”

Kaiser worries about her brother, who lives in Florida and does hear “that word,” yelled from passing cars as he jogs. It’s not the yelling that worries Kaiser—it’s the concern that violence could follow. “That’s what’s so scary about racism, and violence connected to racism—the random nature of it,” she says. “Statistically, you know it’s probably never going to be someone you know, but...” She leaves the sentence unfinished.

From the beginning of our conversation, I realize that Kaiser is not as cheerfully sanguine as Jordan Pacheco—but neither is she angry. She’s just matter-of-fact.

Her mother is largely responsible for that attitude, she explains. Well-educated and well-traveled, she told her young daughter she had never experienced racism until she came to the United States. Kaiser describes her mother as “an incredibly strong woman.” “She ingrained in me that these things happened,” Kaiser says. “She gave me advice on how to handle it, but said ‘you need to just be tough.’ After a while, sad to say, you get used to having these experiences.”

“It can make you really angry,” she continues, “and that’s not healthy, and it’s not good for the soul. I think she was sad for me but she wanted me not to be consumed by it. As a child, if that’s how you deal with a situation it is utterly exhausting, and I think I would have grown up with a lot more resentment. I think a lot of my attitude has to do with my mom trying to make me strong. She also recognized that just because certain people do things, it doesn’t mean that their entire race is responsible. Sure, these young white girls did this to me and treated me in this way, but I had a lot of other wonderful white friends who were not doing that.”

Her baby fusses as we talk, and Kaiser quietly soothes him. She and her husband, Nick, are members of a close-knit Catholic parish in Santa Paula, California, with many young families. “As an adult in this Catholic community,” she says, “I’ve never directly experienced any racism. I think I’m surrounded by really wonderful, devout Catholics who have helped me grow in my faith and definitely prayed with me during and after the loss of my parents.”

Kaiser's mother, Maggie Okaja Mbu-Abang, died suddenly in 2015, followed a few months later by Kaiser's father. Her mother's name is memorialized in the foundation Kaiser began in 2017, the Okaja Foundation, which exists to help underprivileged children in Nigeria. When she married, Kaiser left a thriving career in public relations in the non-profit sector. Directing the Okaja Foundation allows her to meld her expertise with her love for her Nigerian homeland, while staying home with her children. Support from the local community has been crucial to the fledgling foundation's success.

Kaiser has particular words of praise for her local Catholic parish: "They practice their faith in a way that is very moving to me, and they're very loving. I'm here without any of my family and my friends, and I feel welcome, absolutely accepted."

However, she says, she sometimes experiences "what I'd describe as a racial insensitivity, which is problematic in a different way. It's what I perceive as defensiveness when issues pertaining to race arise, especially in the news, and in social media."

She continues, "I've also witnessed push-back and disagreement about the existence of racism in the US. Obviously things are a lot better than they were in the 60's. I think people see that and think because it's not as bad as it was, the issue doesn't exist or it's being overblown, because the media has an agenda."

Kaiser thinks some of the push-back she gets happens precisely because people are not racist. "But they might not have grown up around African-Americans," she says. "So they aren't seeing direct examples from their black friends to give them that insight."

A common criticism is that blacks are overly sensitive to instances of racism, and may see it when it is not there. While Kaiser says she has "no doubt" that this happens sometimes, "Most people are more level-headed than that, and are able to distinguish. You have to give people the benefit of the doubt that what they are experiencing is true."

What about Black Lives Matter? Kaiser thinks "the majority of people" are not familiar with the BLM organization's website—she herself wasn't until recently. She calls it "eye-opening" and says, "I don't support them as an organization at all. I think they're really harmful, I think they're divisive."

However, she believes "the majority of people who are hashtagging BLM aren't supporting it as an organization; they're supporting it as a cause."

There are conversations that Kaiser would like to have. "My experiences have been overwhelmingly good ones, but there are things that happen, and that have happened, that I'm willing to shed light on, in the hopes that it would be eye opening and informative." She is aware that "many people don't want to offend so they may not have the conversation [with me] and feel more comfortable having it with their white peers... I wish people would have the conversation with me because I'm not afraid to talk about it."

Despite the problems she has encountered, Kaiser is grateful to be in the US, where she feels that "it's evident that citizens are valued and their voices are heard." Although she misses Nigeria, with its

vibrant Catholic culture, she is grateful for the opportunities and experience that this country has provided.

What about her children? I ask. How will Kaiser handle the issue of racism with them?

She pauses. “I think about my kids a lot. I’m grateful that they are little right now and I don’t have to have this conversation with them yet. Because it’s not easy to be good in this world. It’s not easy to uphold your Catholic faith in this country that is very secular in a lot of ways. So I’m glad that they’re growing up with other good, faithful Catholics. But I definitely worry a bit about what experiences they’ll have. I know that they’ll have some negative experiences, because that just tends to happen.”

“It’s important for me that they know their African heritage,” she says. “I’m proud of my heritage, and even though I’ve had some negative experiences that’s not what I reflect upon when I think about my life. And as I think about being here in Santa Paula, I’m hopeful.”

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