

*Let's Find a Neutral Church Home

Some parents abandon their faith traditions and find a "neutral" church home. The problem with this strategy is that it's difficult to find such a church. Moreover, most couples who adopt this strategy are unhappy with their choices, often because neither parent is entirely satisfied with the church they attend.

Quoting from one such parent:

"The choice we made to find a neutral worship sight was good in theory but didn't prove to be the case in practice. The truth is, I miss the liturgy and can't warm up to the rituals and hymns in our new church home. We haven't talked much about this choice for several years, but I suspect my wife feels the same about the switch we made. And here's the biggest irony. Since neither of us attends church as often as we once did, the kids' religious training suffers. . . . Maybe we need to revisit this decision."

*Avoid the topic until after marriage

Couples who choose to postpone discussion of this issue until after marriage often regret the decision and find no benefit in the postponement. The following observation is indicative of what many couples in this situation experience.

"We never talked about which church the children would be raised in until I was three months pregnant. . . . I just assumed we were going to raise our children in the Greek Orthodox Church, especially since we were getting married in the Greek Church. But when my husband began to resist this I got really upset. . . . It wasn't that he was totally against the idea, but he wanted to wait to allow us some time to make a decision. But I wanted to make the decision before the baby arrived. . . . I would recommend that couples work through this issue before marriage – especially if they both have strong religious convictions."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

INTERFAITH WEB SITE
www.Interfaith.goarch.org

Center for Family Care
www.family.goarch.org

OUTREACH & EVANGELISM WEB SITE
www.Outreach.goarch.org

PUBLICATIONS

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***When You Inter marry
Ministering to Intermarried Couples
Attending to Your Marriage***



Marriage and Family

Department of Marriage and Family

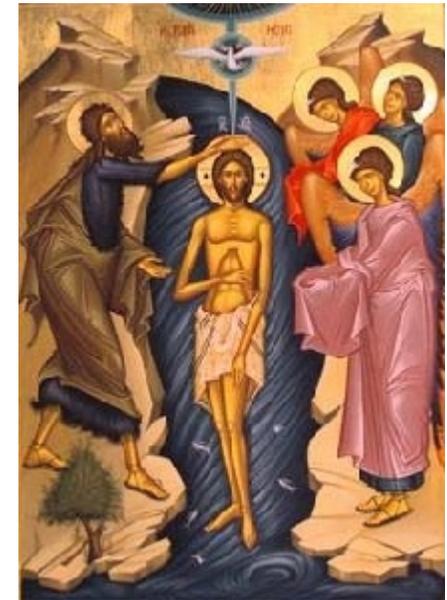


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Part I

Where Will Our Children Be Baptized and Raised?

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LMFT***



"I'm so upset. . . . I'm Greek Orthodox and he isn't. . . . Until recently we were thinking about starting a family. But that's been put on hold until we figure out where the children will be baptized and raised. . . . If we can't get past this issue, I'm afraid of what this will mean for us and our future. . . . Can you help?"

An Upset E-mail

Respondent

I received this E-mail several months ago; it prompted many exchanges over the course of several weeks, involving serious questions and some

rather candid responses. In time, the frequency of contact decreased, until it stopped completely.

Since the last few exchanges with this respondent suggested that she and her husband were making good progress in resolving their differences, I wasn't too concerned by her sudden silence. I assumed I'd eventually hear back from her, and I did.

About six months later, I received one final E-mail: *"I wanted to let you know that we're expecting. . . a girl. . . . She'll be raised in the Greek Church. . . . We also decided to raise her to respect her father's Irish, Catholic background. . . . Thank you for your guidance and help. . . ."*

The purpose of this article is twofold: to explore flawed strategies inter-faith couples use to deal with the issue of the baptisms of their children; and to outline successful strategies to help couples make good decisions about this issue. My conclusions are based on work with hundreds of inter-faith and intercultural couples in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (GOA).

Flawed Strategies:

***Who will give in first?**

This strategy creates gridlock, with each partner waiting for the other to give in first. Often, however, neither partner concedes. Instead, with the passage of time, both partners become more entrenched in their positions, as illustrated by the following statement.

"He should have known that the baptism of our future child is very important to me. Why didn't he ask? Well, now he's getting what he deserves because I won't give in. . . . I can be as stubborn as I need to be to get my way. . . . Our future baby will be baptized in my church or the baby won't be baptized until he gives me what I want."

This strategy can lead to a marital meltdown and a markedly negative impact on family stability and the

religious and spiritual development of the children. Couples who use this strategy should seek help because this gridlock is difficult to resolve.

***Let's Take Turns . . .**

Some couples decide to "take turns" with the baptism of their children, baptizing their first child in one partner's faith tradition, their second child in the other's faith tradition, and so forth. They reason that this is the fairest way to meet both parents' needs, while also avoiding couple conflict.

In theory, this strategy may sound attractive, but it's inherently flawed because it fails to place the children's religious and spiritual needs first. Moreover, such a strategy often compromises family cohesion in matters related to faith and the observance of religious holidays. Other possible consequences are articulated in the following observation from one partner who adopted this strategy.

"It seemed fair and good in principle when we decided to baptize and raise two of our children in the Roman Catholic Church and the other two in the Greek Church. But if I had it to do over again I'd never make the same mistake. . . . It only confused our children and compromised their religious development. Today, none of my adult kids go to church, and I believe it's got everything to do with our initial decision."

***Let's Postpone Starting a Family**

Some couples decide to postpone a family until they reach a mutual decision about the baptisms of their future children. Unfortunately, the extra time often only serves to increase tension and further irritate frayed feelings, as illustrated by the following comment.

"We've been married for five years, and we're childless because we can't decide in which church the baby will be baptized and raised. Sometimes I

think we'll never get past these issues. . . . Fact is, I want children, and I want them baptized in my church. He also wants children, and he wants them baptized in the Greek Church."

***Let's Postpone Baptism**

Some parents decide to have children and postpone baptism. However, once again, additional time doesn't always help couples reach a mutual decision. Often, as the months turn into years and the children remain un-baptized, tension builds, and the frequency of arguments increases, serving to compromise family stability, marital satisfaction, and even extended family relationships. One spouse who adopted this strategy offered the following observations.

"If I had known it was going to be this way, I wouldn't have married her. . . . Whenever the subject comes up these days, she becomes so emotional and irrational that I can't talk to her. . . . I sure wish we had figured this out before marriage."

***Let the Children Decide**

Sometimes parents decide to wait until the children are of age to make their own decision. While this strategy may spare parents and households of conflict, it also reflects an abdication of parental responsibility. While responding to an E-mail respondent who asked my opinion regarding this strategy, my response to her included the following comments. Interestingly, I never heard back from her.

"Would you take this position with anything else related to your children's development and well-being? Then why would you consider taking this position with your child's religious and spiritual development? From my perspective, parents who leave the decision to their children are abdicating their responsibility. Children require the same degree of proactive parental involvement in their spiritual and religious development as they do in other dimensions of their lives."