



Father Charles,

I'm Roman Catholic, and my husband is Greek Orthodox. My family's been here for generations, and my husband's family has been here at least since the early 1900's.... Recently we rented "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," and have some comments and a question for you. I found the movie entertaining, but it didn't relate much to us.... We never experienced the kinds of problems that this couple faced. Our problems were related more to our religious backgrounds, and hardly had anything to do with our ethnic backgrounds. He wanted to attend the Greek Orthodox Church, and I wanted to attend my church. This leads me to my question. How realistic was this movie?

An E-mail respondent

Dear Friend in Christ,

You've made a very astute observation. It's true, all intermarried couples are not the same, nor do they experience similar challenges. However, I didn't always think this way. I've come to this understanding after allowing hundreds of intermarried couples and individuals like you to guide my thinking.

Today, even though I tend to classify these couples with the descriptor, "intermarried," I also think of this group as being comprised of unique individuals and couples who face distinctively different and diverse challenges. My work has taught me that, while couples choose to enter interreligious, interethnic, intercultural and in some cases, interracial relationships, each couple is unique, and will experience slightly different challenges. Let me offer more details.

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

Not all intermarried couples and spouses have the same level of connection to their religious backgrounds. Some may have a low connection, while others will have a moderate or high connection. If partners have a low connection to their religious background, I've discovered that their religious differences will likely not create big challenges.

While talking about the role that religion played in their lives, one couple offered the following observations: "We believe in God, but we're not very religious. Sometimes we go to church, but it doesn't really matter where.... I guess religion isn't a big part of our life" Since religion has such a peripheral place in this couple's life, it's likely they will not experience many serious challenges unless one or both partner's attitude toward religion changes.

Conversely, if spouses have a moderate to high connection to their religious backgrounds, they will likely encounter some challenges – especially those with a high connection. Your own E-mail reinforces this point. Among other challenges, partners in these marriages may struggle to reconcile their need to participate in their faith background with their need to pray together. This is not generally an easy task, but most – with God's help – seem to find a mutually satisfying resolution.

ETHNIC AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Beyond religion, my research has taught me that many intermarried spouses and couples who attend the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America have some level of connection to their ethnic background. This connection can be thought of on a continuum from low to high.

If couples have a low connection to their ethnic roots, then it is likely that they will not experience many challenges related to their different ethnic backgrounds. Take Cathy and Joe for an example. Together with a mixture of other ethnic

backgrounds, Cathy's background is half Greek. By his own admission, Joe is "a mutt" who has "a little bit of almost everything in me." When asked how their ethnic backgrounds challenge their lives, Joe speaks for the couple and observes, "I don't think this is an issue in our marriage."

Conversely, Athena and Hector both have very high connections to their ethnic backgrounds. When asked how this impacts their lives after a few months of being married, Hector states, "...profoundly. We want a home that respects my own Hispanic background and my wife's Greek background. Sometimes this creates problems, but nothing we haven't been able to handle so far." Unlike Joe and Cathy, this couple will have to remain vigilant across the marital and family life cycle regarding this difference. They will also likely experience some challenges in their efforts to respect both partner's ethnic backgrounds.

THE CHURCH SEEKS TO HELP

As you imagine, there are numerous potential interesting combinations that emerge when we begin considering all the various shades of differences that exist between couples with regard to religion, ethnicity and race. Moreover, these differences will create challenges that vary slightly from one couple to the next. Add to this complexity - personal needs, preferences and expectations, personality differences, nuclear and extended family needs and others. All of a sudden, things get really complicated.

That's why the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese has developed a special ministry to intermarried couples. It's aware of how religious, ethnic, cultural differences can impact religious and spiritual development. It is also aware of how these differences can potentially have an adverse affect on children's religious and cultural development. It is also attentive to how these differences, can create challenges that can fester into unresolved problems and issues that can have a negative impact on individual, marital and family well-being.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

If you're currently intermarried, and would like more information about this subject I'd like to recommend the following two resources. They've been developed specifically for intermarried couples like you.

- A book I've written entitled, *When You Intermarry* (2002), should prove informative and helpful. It can be ordered at a nominal cost by either calling Holy Cross Bookstore at, 800-245-0599 or through www.amazon.com.
- Another great resource is the Interfaith Marriage Web site. This site's address is www.interfaith.goarch.org. It has a great deal of information on this subject.
- For problems of a more personal nature, you can e-mail me at joanidesch@aol.com.

CONCLUSION

Research indicates that recent newcomers to this country will encounter many of the challenges that Toula and Ian encountered in the movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* - no matter whether they are or are not associated with the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. In my opinion, that's one primary reason why this movie was able to enjoy such a universal appeal. We are essentially a country of immigrants with similar challenges, and the movie's producers unknowingly hit on this universal phenomenon.

With that stated, as this article has suggested, when couples choose to mix ethnic, cultural, religious and, in some cases, racial backgrounds, they will experience a host of new challenges related to these differences. Moreover, these challenges will vary slightly from one couple to the next.

However, my work shows that as long as a couple is able to respectfully discuss these challenges, and both partners are generally comfortable with what emerges from these conversations, these challenges can enrich their lives, and if God blesses them with children, their future children's lives.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

INTERFAITH WEB SITE

www.Interfaith.goarch.org

OUTREACH & EVANGELISM WEB SITE

www.Outreach.goarch.org

PUBLICATIONS

When You Intermarry

By Charles Joanides, Ph.D, LMFT

Ministering to Intermarried Couples

By Charles Joanides, Ph.D, LMFT

Attending to Your Marriage

By Charles Joanides, Ph.D, LMFT

OUTREACH & EVANGELISM:

Some Practical Steps

Department of Outreach & Evangelism



INTERMARRIAGE

Differences & Challenges



Icon by the hand of Athanasios Clark

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