

# Addressing Intermarried Couples' Unique Pastoral Challenges

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*It is estimated that about 75% of our faithful intermarry. This high statistic compelled the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America to conduct a systematic examination of this growing population of faithful. With Leadership 100's financial support, one of the many useful deliverables to emerge from this study is an Orthodox social ecological developmental theory of intermarried couples and their families. Participants who attend this workshop will receive an overview of this theory's key components. A case study will also be presented to demonstrate this theory's usefulness. It is posited that an understanding of this theory can assist clergy and lay workers in their efforts to address the unique pastoral challenges that this population encounters as a result of their religious and cultural differences.*

## Case Study

### John and Mary

John (27) and Mary (25) have been married for about one year. John is a first generation Greek Orthodox Christian, and Mary is a non-practicing Roman Catholic from a mixed ethnic background. This couple is happily married, but also admits to encountering some serious challenges.

When they began dating, John's parents were quick to point out that "it's fine to date a non-Greek for fun and games, but you should only permit yourself to become serious with a Greek girl, since marriages with non-Greeks do not work out." He politely listened to his parents, but because of his increasing affection for Mary, he quickly found that he could not live up to this advice.

He also determined to hide his parents' opinions about non-Greeks from Mary, fearing that if he shared this information, it would somehow compromise their relationship. Even though John shielded her from his parent's opinions, Mary sensed his parents' disapproval, but said nothing.

Several months passed, and they became very serious, until one day when John proposed marriage, and Mary accepted. The next day, he shared this news with his parents privately, because he was unable to predict how they might react. He didn't want his fiancée to hear any negative remarks regarding their decision to wed.

Predictably, John's parents did not take this news well. They began to issue threats and ultimatums like the following, "If you marry this girl, we will disown you."

After a few days, as they began to notice that John was pulling away from them, their tone softened, and they indicated they would tolerate his decision, but would also "not be surprised if this marriage did not survive."

Since John knew that Mary was a non-practicing Catholic, he asked her if she would agree to get married in the Greek Orthodox Church, telling her that "this would please his parents." He did not, however, share the full extent of his parents' reservations and disappointment with their decision to wed. Mary also failed to ask any questions, even though she continued to be concerned about John's parents' feelings about their decision.

Wishing to improve her rather distant and cold relationship with John's parents, Mary consented to this suggestion, and the couple was married in the Greek Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, after the marriage her in-laws continued to remain distant, but cordial toward her.

About six months after the marriage, John's parents approached him, strongly urging him to ask Mary to join the Greek Orthodox Church. They also told him that he "should convince Mary to convert, since this would be good for their children and family." As a result of these and other similar remarks, John went home that night and awkwardly began making the following proposal, "I think we should have a family church - the Greek Church. It would also be nice if you thought about converting. I think this would be good for our future children."

Dumbfounded and surprised at these suggestions, Mary responded, "Where in the world has this come from John? You've never suggested to me that religion was important to you before today. I don't know, that's a lot to think about."

Not wishing to disclose who prompted him to make this statement, he defensively responded, "So what's wrong with having a family church and being the same religion? And what's to think about. It's no big deal. We go once in a while and everyone's happy."

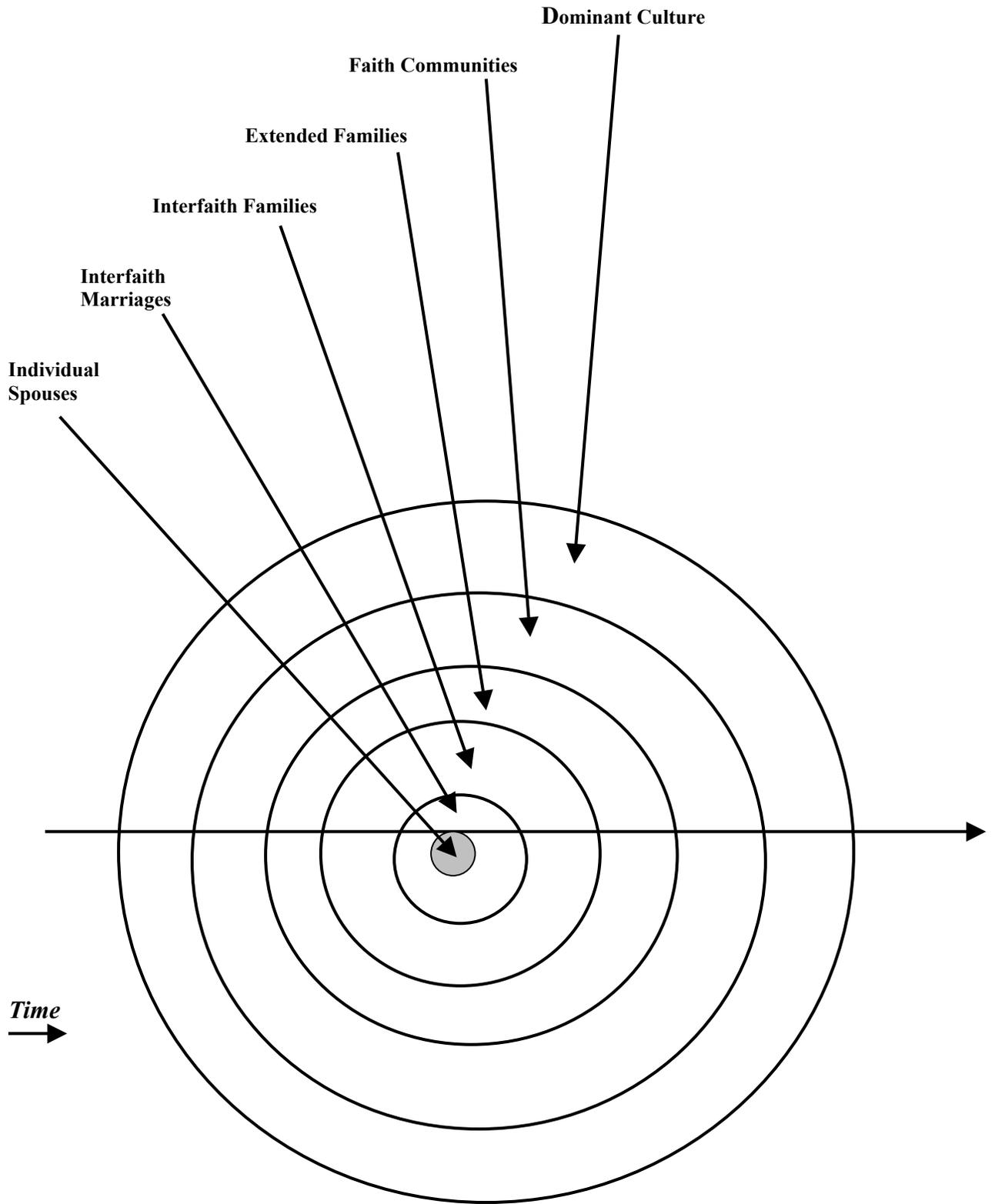
Upon hearing this last statement, Mary replied, "I get it. It's your parents who put you up to this. And now you're siding with them, aren't you?"

"And what if it's true," stated John more defensively.

"Do you know how that makes me feel when you talk to them about things that concern us, before you talk to me. It makes me feel betrayed, John. And another thing, how can I trust you, if I think you're withholding information or siding with them."

That night was a long and emotional evening for both of them. After arguing for several hours with little success, John decides to sleep in the guest room. Neither partner got much sleep. They don't talk for several days. Not knowing how to get past these issues, John decides to consult Father Nick for some counsel. Before doing so, he asks Mary if she would like to come along. She refuses his offer, but doesn't try to stop him.

What would you say to John if you were Father Nick?



An Orthodox Social Ecological Developmental Theory

## **How to Use this Theory**

1. What are the prominent subsystems involved in this scenario?
2. What are their needs?
3. Are any needs ignored?
4. What might you say to John?
5. What might you say to Mary?
6. What might you say to John's parents?
7. If this couple is unable to deal with this challenge, how do you suppose they might be impacted in the future?

## **Other General Guidelines When You Pastor this Population**

- Most intermarried spouses, couples and families reach mutually satisfying resolutions when they encounter challenges related to their different religious and cultural backgrounds.
- Some may encounter challenges they cannot resolve. In these cases, these individuals may consult you for a second opinion.
- When you are consulted, here are some useful suggestions that you might consider as you seek to offer some pastoral direction.
- Resist the temptation to be directive
- Listen attentively
- Try not to own the problem
- Be respectful
- Provide an Orthodox perspective
- Don't be combative

- Draw clear boundaries
- Consider if you are over your head
- Don't be afraid to refer out
- Let the individual or couple know that you are available for spiritual counseling
- Stay connected after offering a referral
- Prayerfully consider the Sacrament of Chrismation
- Remember that most couple problems require time and prayer

### **Questions, Observations and Concluding Remarks**

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## Website

Greek Orthodox Interfaith Marriage Web Site: [www.interfaith.goarch.org](http://www.interfaith.goarch.org).