



FROM THE FORTHCOMING BOOK

BEFORE YOU SAY "I DO"

At the Altar

A Marriage Tribunal Judge's Essential Catholic
Marriage Preparation Manual for Engaged Couples

A F R E E C H A P T E R

for those who have completed the
Marriage Readiness Diagnostic

REV. FR. MICHAEL C. CHIME, JCD

President, Interdiocesan Marriage Tribunal, Enugu

CatholicMarriageLife.com

A Letter from Father Michael



Dear Friend in Christ,

You have just taken the Marriage Readiness Diagnostic. Twenty questions about your understanding, your freedom, your capacity, your intention, and your unity in the marriage you are preparing for. Some you answered with confidence. Others may have given you pause. Whatever score you received, you have already done something most engaged Catholic couples never do: you have asked yourself, before the wedding, the questions a tribunal judge would ordinarily ask only after a marriage has failed.

The chapter you are about to read is the foundation on which all five pillars of valid consent rest. It explains, in language drawn from canon law and twenty years of judicial work, what the Catholic Church is actually doing when two people exchange vows at the altar. The answer is both simpler and more demanding than most couples have been told.

It is simpler because the whole architecture of Catholic marriage rests on one thing: the consent of the parties. It is more demanding because that consent must be specific in its content. Not the form of agreement, but the substance. Not what you mean to say, but what the Church requires to be said and meant.

Read this chapter slowly. Read it more than once if you must. Read it with your fiancé(e) if you can. Then bring whatever it surfaces into the conversation with the priest who is preparing you for the sacrament. This is the help I wish every engaged couple had before their wedding day, and that, in twenty years on the tribunal bench, I have come to believe might have prevented much of the sorrow that has crossed my desk.

May the Lord, who instituted marriage and raised it to the dignity of a sacrament for the baptised, lead you safely to a marriage that is valid, joyful, and indissoluble.

In the service of Christ and his Church,

Fr. Michael C. Chime, JCD

President, Interdiocesan Marriage Tribunal, Enugu

Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

P I L L A R I
C L A R I T Y

Canon 1096 §1. The minimum understanding required to consent.



C H A P T E R 3

What the Church Requires



There is a scene I have witnessed more times than I can count, and it never loses its power.

The couple has arrived early. The church is not yet full. Flowers are in place. The photographer moves quietly around the perimeter, framing shots of empty pews and candlelight. The couple stands near the sacristy door, not yet separated for the processional, still side by side.

They are dressed for the most important moment of their lives, and the expression on their faces is one I have seen on every face in that position: the look of people who believe that what is about to happen is a wedding.

They are right, of course. It is a wedding. But there is a question beneath that word which most of them have never been asked, and which, standing there in that moment, they would not know how to answer.

What, precisely, is the Church doing when this ceremony takes place?

Not what does it look like? Not what does it feel like. What is the Church actually constituting?

The answer is more precise and more demanding than most couples expect.

The Moment That Makes a Marriage

Canon 1057 of the Code of Canon Law opens with a sentence so direct that it is easy to miss what it is doing:

"The consent of the parties, legitimately manifested between persons qualified by law, makes marriage; no human power can supply this consent."

Read that again, slowly.

Marriage is brought about through the consent of the parties.

Not through the ceremony. Not through the priest's words of blessing. Not through the exchange of rings, or the signing of the

register, or the reception that follows, or the family's recognition, or the completion of bride-price, or the approval of the community. Through the consent of the parties.

That second clause deserves its own moment.

It is a statement of where, in the entire architecture of a Catholic marriage, the weight actually rests. Families can negotiate. Priests can witness. Communities can celebrate. Lawyers can notarise. Bishops can grant dispensations.

None of them can give consent on behalf of the two people standing at the altar. No authority in the Church, no family patriarch, no village elder, no arrangement however carefully constructed, can substitute for the act of the will that each person must perform personally.

The consent is the marriage.

Everything else exists to surround, protect, and solemnise that consent: the ceremony, the witnesses, the canonical form, the blessing. But the consent is the cause. Consent is the cause that brings marriage into being, what canonists call the efficient cause.

Remove it, or fatally compromise it, and there is no marriage, regardless of what took place in the church. There is a ceremony. There may be years of shared life, children, a household, and a reputation in the community. But canonically, sacramentally, there is no marriage.

This is why the tribunal does what it does. It examines consent, not the ceremony, not the history of the relationship, not the sincerity of the couple's intentions as others perceived them. It asks whether, at the moment those words were spoken, the consent that constitutes marriage was actually present.

That examination is retrospective. This book is the prospective alternative.

What Marriage Actually Is

Before examining what consent must be, it helps to understand what it is you consent to.

Canon 1055 §1 contains the most important single sentence in the entire canonical treatment of marriage. I return to it so often in my own judicial work that it has become, for me, something like a measuring rod. Every case that arrives at my tribunal eventually comes down to this:

"The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptised."

The Latin phrase for "partnership of the whole of life" is *consortium totius vitae*. Whole of life. Not a partnership for the good years. Not a partnership for as long as it remains mutually beneficial. Not a partnership subject to conditions that either party privately reserves the right to revisit.

A whole-of-life partnership, ordered to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children, and raised, for the baptised, to the dignity of a sacrament.

This phrase, *consortium totius vitae*, is the governing theological image of this book. Every examination the following chapters invite you to make, every question the Five Pillars ask, is ultimately a question about whether you are genuinely capable of consenting to this: a whole-of-life partnership, understood and willed in its full dimensions.

Notice what the canon says this partnership is ordered to. Two things: the good of the spouses, and the procreation and education of children. These are not optional additions. They are constitutive of what marriage is.

A person who consents to a permanent partnership but privately excludes children has not consented to the *consortium totius vitae* that the Church describes. A person who uses the external form of the vow while privately intending something fundamentally different has not given the consent that brings marriage into being.

Notice also the final clause. Canon 1055 §1 teaches that what two baptised people enter, when they validly consent, is a sacrament. The

spouses are not merely entering a legal covenant. They are the ministers of a sacrament to each other.

The Church, in her wisdom, places the giving of consent at the very centre of the rite for this reason: it is the consent that constitutes the sacrament, and only persons who can truly give it can truly be its ministers.

The priest does not confer the sacrament on them. They confer it on each other through their consent. The priest witnesses. The Church ratifies. But the two standing at the altar are the ministers.

The Scene That Illustrates the Difference

Paschal's case appeared in an earlier chapter. Here is what it looked like from the inside, before the tribunal ever opened a file.

Paschal had entered the engagement with genuine affection and, to him, complete readiness. He had fulfilled every external requirement. He had attended the required preparation sessions. He had paid the bride-price, which in his family's understanding was itself a statement of serious intent. His family approved. His fiancée's family approved. The date was set.

What Paschal had not examined was a private understanding he carried about what marriage actually meant, an understanding shaped not by what he had been taught explicitly, but by what he had absorbed over years of watching the marriages around him.

In the culture of his upbringing, a civil separation, while not ideal, was a recourse available if a marriage became genuinely unlivable. Nobody had told him this was incompatible with the Church's understanding of indissolubility. Nobody had asked whether his interior understanding of permanence matched the vow he was preparing to speak.

He stood at the altar and said the words. He meant them, as far as he understood what he was meaning. But the *consortium totius vitae* he was consenting to in his own interior understanding was not, in a critical respect, the *consortium totius vitae* the Church defines.

That gap, between the external form and the interior reality, is what a declaration of nullity examines. It does not ask whether the ceremony happened. It asks whether the consent did.

What the Church Requires of Consent

Canon 1057 tells us that consent makes marriage. But what must consent be, for it to make a marriage in the canonical sense?

The Code is precise. Consent must be:

An act of the will. Not a feeling. Not a cultural performance. Not in compliance with family expectations. Canon 1057 §2 defines matrimonial consent as "an act of the will by which a man and a woman mutually give and accept each other through an irrevocable covenant to establish marriage." The operative phrase is the act of the will. Marriage is something you do, not something that happens to you.

Free from grave external pressure. Canon 1103 addresses consent given out of fear: "A marriage is invalid if it is entered into due to force or grave fear imposed from outside, even if not intentionally, from which the person has no easy escape..."

The word grave matters. Not every social pressure, family expectation, or economic circumstance rises to the level that invalidates consent. But pressure that removes the practical freedom to say no is a different matter entirely.

Rooted in sufficient understanding. Canon 1096 §1 requires that the parties know, at minimum, "that marriage is a permanent partnership between a man and a woman ordered to the procreation of offspring by means of some sexual cooperation."

This is a canonical floor, not a ceiling. The Church does not require philosophical sophistication. It requires that the parties understand, in substance, what they are entering.

Free from a positive act of the will against the essential properties. Canon 1101 §2 addresses simulation: a person who, while using the external form of consent, excludes marriage itself, some essential element, or an essential property, does not give valid consent.

The exclusion must be a positive act of the will, a deliberate internal withholding, not merely a vague hope or an unarticulated assumption.

Given personally. Canon 1104 §1 requires that both parties be physically present at the ceremony, or, in cases of proxy marriage permitted under Canon 1105, that consent be explicitly delegated. Nobody can consent on your behalf by default.

These requirements are the Church's way of insisting that marriage is serious enough to demand the whole person. Not the performance of willingness. The reality of it, understood, free, interior, and meant.

Why This Matters Before the Wedding

Everything described in this chapter is, in the ordinary course of things, examined retrospectively, after a marriage has broken down, after a petition has been filed, after years of evidence have been collected.

The tribunal asks these questions because nobody asked them first.

That is the logic of this book. Not to substitute for pastoral preparation, nor to replace the priest who will witness your vows, nor to introduce anxiety into a moment that should carry joy. The purpose is to bring the tribunal's questions forward in time, to give you, before the wedding, the same examination that would otherwise happen only after it.

The Five Pillars that follow in Part Two of the book are not invented categories. They are drawn directly from the canonical requirements this chapter has set out: understanding (Clarity), freedom (Freedom), psychological capacity (Capacity), genuine intention (Intention), and shared vision (Unity).

Each Pillar asks, in the language of your own life and your own relationship, what the Code asks in the language of law.

Part Two begins with the first question the tribunal always asks: What did you understand when you said yes?



Now That You Have Read This Chapter



This chapter is the foundation. The whole book builds on it through the Five Pillars of Valid Consent: Clarity, Freedom, Capacity, Intention, and Unity. Each pillar asks, in the language of your own life and your own relationship, what canon law asks in the language of the Code.

If this chapter has shown you something worth bringing into your marriage preparation, here are three steps worth taking next.

- 1. Join the waitlist for the full book.** When *Before You Say "I Do" at the Altar* is released, you will be the first to know. Visit CatholicMarriageLife.com.
- 2. Subscribe to the teaching channel.** Each week, a short video brings the same kind of canonical and pastoral guidance found here, drawn from twenty years on the tribunal bench. Search "CatholicMarriageLife" on YouTube.
- 3. Share the diagnostic with another engaged couple.** You have already done the work. A friend or family member preparing for marriage may need exactly what you have just received. The diagnostic is free, takes five minutes, and lives at CatholicMarriageLife.com.



*May the Lord, who instituted marriage and raised it to a sacrament,
lead you safely to the altar he has prepared for you.*

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