



YOUR PERSONALIZED COMPANION TO THE
MARRIAGE READINESS DIAGNOSTIC

Reading Your Results

A Tribunal Judge's Guide to the Five Pillars of Valid Consent

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Before You Read Your Pillars



You have just done something most engaged Catholic couples never do. You have sat with twenty honest questions about the marriage you are preparing for, and you have looked at the result. Whatever your scores, that act of honesty is itself the beginning of wisdom.

This guide is written to help you understand what those scores mean. It walks through each of the Five Pillars of Valid Consent in turn, explaining what the pillar is, what a strong result suggests, what a concerning result is asking of you, and most importantly, the conversations each pillar calls you to have before your wedding day.

Two cautions before you begin, one for each kind of reader.

If your scores were high, do not mistake a good score for a finished task. The diagnostic measures only what you were able to recognise in yourself in five minutes. A strong pillar is an invitation to keep building, not a certificate of completion.

If some scores were low, do not be discouraged, and above all, do not read them as a verdict against your marriage. In twenty years on the tribunal bench, I have learned that the couples who face their weak places honestly before the wedding are precisely the ones whose marriages grow strong. A low score is not a closed door. It is a conversation waiting to happen, while there is still time, freedom, and grace to have it.

The score is never the point. The conversations are the point. Read each pillar slowly. Read it with your fiancé(e) if you can. Then carry what you find into the company of the priest who is preparing you. That is where this guide is meant to do its work.

PILLAR I

Clarity

Do you understand what you are consenting to?

Clarity asks whether you truly understand what Catholic marriage is. The Church requires, at a minimum, that the parties know that marriage is a permanent partnership between a man and a woman, ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation of children. This is not a high bar of theological learning. It is a bar of genuine understanding. Many couples who say "I do" have never been asked, in plain terms, whether they grasp that they are entering a bond that the Church holds to be lifelong, faithful, and open to children.

If your Clarity score was strong

You have done the foundational work of understanding what you are entering. Continue it. Understanding deepens over a lifetime, and the couples who keep talking about the meaning of their vows are the ones who hold to them when the difficult seasons come.

If your Clarity score was concerning

In my experience, this is the most fixable of all the pillars because it responds directly to teaching. A gap in understanding is not a flaw in you. It is simply something no one has yet taken the time to explain. Do not let it pass unaddressed, because a vow only means what the one who makes it understands it to mean.

The conversations to have

With your fiancé(e): ask each other, in your own words, what "until death" actually means to you. You may be surprised to find you have pictured different things. With your priest: ask him to explain what the Church means by the permanence and indissolubility of marriage, and what the vow commits you to that a civil marriage does not.

PILLAR II

Freedom

Are you giving consent without grave pressure?

Freedom asks whether your consent is truly your own. The Church teaches that a marriage entered into because of force or grave fear imposed from outside, from which a person sees no escape, is not a valid marriage. Marriage must be chosen, freely, by each party. Family expectation, cultural obligation, fear of disappointing others, fear of being alone, the pressure of a pregnancy: these can quietly compromise the freedom that valid consent requires.

If your Freedom score was strong

You are entering marriage from a genuine choice rather than pressure or fear. This is one of the surest foundations a marriage can have, because a freely given yes can be freely renewed every day of a marriage. Guard that freedom and protect it in one another.

If your Freedom score was concerning

Real pressures may be shaping your decision more than you have admitted to yourself. This does not necessarily mean your marriage would be invalid, but it does mean something important is going unexamined. Pressure that quietly removes your practical ability to say no is a serious matter, and it deserves to be named honestly before the wedding, not buried beneath it.

The conversations to have

First, a conversation with yourself, alone and in prayer: am I marrying because I genuinely want this person and this life, or because something or someone is pushing me toward the altar? Then, have a conversation with a priest or spiritual director you trust who can help you distinguish your own desires from others' expectations. Be cautious about whom else you involve, for the source of the pressure is rarely the right confidant.

PILLAR III

Capacity

Are you able to assume what marriage requires?

Capacity asks whether you are able, here and now, to take on the obligations marriage lays upon you. The Church recognises that a person may sincerely wish to marry and yet lack the psychological or human capacity to meet the demands of marriage. Untreated addiction, serious unaddressed emotional or mental conditions, a chronic inability to handle conflict or responsibility: these touch not the sincerity of your love but your readiness to live the daily reality of marriage.

If your Capacity score was strong

You show the stability and maturity that married life requires. This does not mean you are without faults, for no one is. It means you have the human ground on which a marriage can stand. Keep building that ground through honest conflict, shared responsibility, and the ordinary discipline of caring for another.

If your Capacity score was concerning

A concerning score here is the one that most calls for honesty and, often, for help beyond what a guide can give. If addiction, untreated illness, or a persistent inability to cope is present in either of you, it will not be healed by the wedding. Marriage does not cure these things; it tests them. The merciful path is to seek the right help now, before the vow, rather than to hope the vow itself will carry what it cannot.

The conversations to have

An honest self-examination first, for capacity issues are the ones we are most tempted to minimise in ourselves, then, where there is real concern, a conversation with the appropriate professional: a doctor, a counsellor, a recovery program. And a conversation with your priest, who can help you discern whether this is a normal growing edge or a genuine obstacle that must be addressed before you proceed.

PILLAR IV

Intention

Are you intending the marriage that the Church offers?

Intention asks what you actually mean to do when you exchange your vows. A person may use the words of consent while privately intending something different: excluding children, reserving the right to leave if things go wrong, withholding fidelity, or marrying chiefly to obtain something other than the marriage itself, such as security, status, or a change of circumstance. When the external words and the interior intention do not match, it is the intention, not the words, that the Church examines.

If your Intention score was strong

You intend the very thing the Church offers: a faithful, permanent, fruitful union, given without secret reservation. This is the heart of valid consent. Renew this intention often, especially in the seasons when it costs you something, for an intention held only in fair weather was never quite the whole of it.

If your Intention score was concerning

A concerning score here is more serious than it may feel, because intention goes to the very root of what makes a marriage valid. If you are entering with a private reservation about permanence, about fidelity, or about openness to children, or if you are marrying mainly for a reason other than the marriage itself, this must be brought into the open before the wedding. A reservation kept secret does not protect you. It hollows out the vow from within.

The conversations to have

An honest conversation with your fiancé(e) about the things couples most often leave unspoken: children, and whether you both truly intend them; fidelity, and whether you both truly intend it without condition; permanence, and whether either of you is quietly holding an escape in reserve. Then, if any reservation surfaces, a conversation with your priest before you proceed, for this is precisely the matter a marriage tribunal examines years too late.

PILLAR V

Unity

Are you truly building one life together?

Unity asks whether the two of you are genuinely building one shared life rather than two parallel lives that happen to share an address. The Church speaks of marriage as a *consortium totius vita*, a partnership of the whole of life. That partnership is built on shared values, real communication, and practical alignment on the everyday matters that fill a marriage: money, family, faith, and the raising of children. Love is the beginning of unity, but it is not yet the whole of it.

If your Unity score was strong

You are building a genuine partnership, not merely a romance. The shared values, the honest communication, and the practical agreement you describe are the working parts of a marriage that lasts. These are easy to lose and hard to rebuild, so tend them with the same care that won them.

If your Unity score was concerning

A concerning score here often surprises couples who love each other deeply, and that is precisely the lesson. Love alone does not make a marriage work; shared life does. Significant gaps in values, communication, or practical alignment will not vanish when you marry. They tend instead to harden into the recurring wounds of married life. The months before the wedding are the time to close those gaps, while honesty is still easy and pride is not yet involved.

The conversations to have

The practical conversations couples so often postpone: how you will handle money, how you will relate to each other's families, how you will practice your faith together, and how you intend to raise children. And, if you can, a conversation with an older married couple you both respect, who can show you what a shared life looks like once the wedding is long past.

A Beginning, Not a Verdict



Whatever your results, hold them lightly and act on them seriously. The diagnostic and this guide were never meant to pronounce judgment on your marriage. They were meant to bring forward, before your wedding day, the very questions that a tribunal would otherwise ask only long after. You now hold those questions while there is still time to answer them well.

Take this guide to the priest who is preparing you. Let your scores open the conversations and let the conversations do their slow and gracious work. That is how strong marriages are built: not in the absence of weak places, but in the honest tending of them before the vows are spoken.

One Further Step

If this guide has been of help, there is a deeper foundation beneath it. I have written a chapter, *"What the Church Requires,"* which explains, in plain language, what the Catholic Church is actually doing when two people exchange vows at the altar. It is the foundation on which all five pillars rest, and it is the opening chapter of my forthcoming book, *Before You Say "I Do" at the Altar*.

You may receive that chapter, free, by joining the book waitlist at catholicmarriagelife.com/book-waitlist. There you will also be the first to know when the full book is released.

*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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Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam