

Session 8. I Do

Movement III. The Consent

Passages: Song of Songs 8:6-7; Matthew 5:33-37; Genesis 1:28; Matthew 19:6; Ruth 1:16-17

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That each participant compares what they privately thought they were promising against the words the Church will actually ask them to say, and can then state what each part of the consent commits them to.

Catholic Touchstone. Marriage arises from the consent of the parties, freely given, and the consent must be a human act by which the spouses mutually give and receive one another. If the consent is defective in its object, there is no marriage, however beautiful the day was (CCC 1625-1632; canons 1057, 1101).

What You Need to Know

This is the center of the study and the session the sealed sheets have been waiting for. Prepare it more carefully than any other night.

Before the session: get your parish's actual ritual book, or a printed copy of the consent questions and the forms of consent that your parish uses, and work from that text rather than from memory or from a website. English translations have been revised, parishes use different forms of consent, and other countries use different texts. Reading them the exact words they will say is the whole mechanic of tonight, and it only works if the words are right.

THREE QUESTIONS BEFORE ANY VOW IS SPOKEN

In the Roman rite, before the consent itself, the priest or deacon asks the couple a set of questions. In substance they ask whether the couple has come freely and without coercion, whether they are prepared to love and honor each other for as long as they both shall live, and whether they are prepared to accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church. The third question may be omitted when circumstances suggest it, for example when the couple is advanced in years.

Notice what has happened before anyone says I do. The Church has asked, out loud, in front of witnesses, about freedom, permanence, and openness to children. Those are not sentiments. They are the essential properties and ends of marriage, and the questions exist so that nobody can later claim they did not know.

FREE, TOTAL, FAITHFUL, FRUITFUL

Marriage preparation commonly summarizes the consent under four words: free, total, faithful, fruitful. Be honest with your couples that this is a teaching summary rather than a formula from the Church's official texts. It is used because it maps accurately onto what the Church does require.

- **Free.** Consent given under force or grave fear inflicted from outside is invalid (canon 1103). This is why the first question is asked, and it is also why a wedding driven entirely by family pressure or a pregnancy is a genuine pastoral concern rather than a technicality.
- **Total.** The spouses give and receive one another, not a share of themselves. This is why deliberately withholding a part of the person, or marrying while intending to keep an escape available, damages the consent itself.

- **Faithful.** Exclusive, and for life. Consent that positively excludes fidelity or permanence by an act of the will does not produce a marriage (canon 1101 §2).
- **Fruitful.** Open to children. Consent that positively excludes children by an act of the will likewise does not produce a marriage.

Draw the line carefully on the last two. Fearing that you might fail is not excluding. Doubting your own strength is not excluding. A couple that cannot have children is not excluding. Exclusion is a positive act of the will that rules the thing out, and it is not the same as anxiety about it.

THE FORMS OF CONSENT

The Roman rite provides more than one form, and one form uses a question and answer structure that produces the familiar I do. Different parishes and countries use different texts. What is constant is the content: each takes the other as spouse, promises fidelity in good times and bad, in sickness and health, and promises love and honor for life.

Two things to point out from whatever text your parish uses.

- The promises are about what the speaker will do, not about how the speaker will feel. Nobody is asked to promise an emotion.
- The hard conditions are named in advance. Bad times and sickness are written into the promise. Nobody can later say the marriage encountered something the vow did not anticipate.

AFTER THE CONSENT

The priest or deacon receives the consent in the name of the Church and asks God to strengthen it. Rings are blessed and exchanged as a sign of love and fidelity. Later, after the Our Father, comes the nuptial blessing, which is one of the oldest and richest prayers in the Roman liturgy and which most couples never read in advance. Encourage them to read it this week; it will tell them what the Church is actually asking God to do to them.

THE SEALED SHEETS

Session 1 asked each person to write, alone, what they are actually promising on their wedding day. Tonight they open them.

Run the ritual in this order and do not improvise it. First, each person opens their own sheet and reads it silently. Second, each person reads their answer aloud to their fiancé only, in pairs around the room, not to the group. Third, you read the Church's consent questions and the form of consent aloud to the whole room. Fourth, each person turns the sheet over and writes a second answer, alone, in silence, and keeps it.

Give the fourth step at least five minutes of real silence. This is the moment the study is built around.

Do not ask anyone to share either answer with the group. If someone volunteers, let them, and do not comment on the content beyond thanking them.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 2:24 stands behind the leaving and cleaving that the consent enacts.
- Genesis 1:28 stands behind the third question, about children.
- Matthew 19:6 stands behind the permanence: what God has joined together, let not man put asunder.
- Ruth 1:16-17 is the great Old Testament model of a binding promise between persons, sworn with God as the guarantor. Note honestly that it is spoken by a daughter in law to her mother in law, not between spouses, which makes it a poor choice for a wedding reading but a fine illustration of covenant speech.

- Matthew 5:33-37, where Jesus tells his disciples to let what they say be simply yes or no, is worth setting beside a wedding vow. The Church does not ask for an oath here. She asks for consent, which is graver still.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE CHURCH'S OWN WORDS AT THE WEDDING

Before the consent, the Church asks the couple in front of witnesses whether they have come freely, whether they will love and honor each other for life, and whether they will accept children lovingly from God and raise them in the faith.

Consider what kind of institution asks those questions out loud before allowing the wedding to proceed. She is not decorating a decision already made. She is making sure, publicly, that the thing being consented to is marriage.

The Order of Celebrating Matrimony, the questions before the consent. Note for the leader: a liturgical text, not the voice of a canonized saint. Use your parish's own ritual book for the exact wording.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON WHAT LOVE ACTUALLY IS

St. Thomas taught that to love is to will the good of another. Not merely to feel warmly toward another, and he does not despise feeling or reduce love to it, but to will their good.

This is why a vow to love is not a promise about emotions and is not dishonest. A person can promise to will another's good for life. Nobody can promise a feeling, and the Church does not ask anyone to.

Summary of his teaching on love, Summa Theologiae I-II, question 26.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. FRANCIS DE SALES ON THE ORDINARY WORK OF IT

St. Francis de Sales taught, in substance, that devotion belongs in the married state as much as in the cloister, and that married people become holy through the actual conditions of their life rather than in spite of them: patience, faithfulness in small things, and the daily work of preferring one another.

He wrote for lay people in the world at a time when spiritual writing largely assumed a monastery. That is why he is worth quoting on a night about vows: he is describing what keeping them looks like on a Wednesday.

Summary of his teaching on the married state in the Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1625-1632 covers the consent directly: who can marry, the requirement that consent be a free human act, and the Church's insistence on preparation so that the consent is what it appears to be.

CCC 1627 states that consent is the indispensable element that makes the marriage, and that if consent is lacking there is no marriage.

CCC 1628-1629 treats freedom and the consequences of its absence, and is where the Church's practice of declaring nullity is grounded.

CCC 1643-1645 describes the unity, indissolubility, and openness to fertility of conjugal love.

Canon 1101 §2 is the legal statement of exclusion: if either or both parties by a positive act of the will exclude marriage itself, or an essential element or property of marriage, they contract invalidly. Cite this precisely rather than paraphrasing it loosely, because couples hear looser versions and become frightened of their own doubts.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

The sealed guess opens tonight. Run the four step ritual exactly as written in the preparation notes. The order matters: silent reading, then reading to the fiancé only, then the Church's words, then a second answer written in silence and kept.

One Flesh pays off in a new register. The group has watched this verse move through Genesis, Matthew, and Ephesians. Tonight they discover it is about to come out of their own mouths.

They Have No Wine returns in Session 10.

Watch for the couple who go very quiet after the second writing. Sometimes the second answer surfaces something real. Be available afterward, do not chase, and have the priest's availability in your pocket.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A couple where one is marrying under pressure. Tonight is the night this becomes visible, because the first question the Church asks is about freedom. Watch for a person who hesitates or laughs at that question. Follow up privately, ask an open question, and route it to the priest. Consent given under force or grave fear inflicted from outside is invalid, and the Church would rather find that out now.

A couple where one has privately decided about children. If the second sealed answer or the discussion reveals that one of them intends to exclude children permanently, this is not a preference difference to be negotiated later. It touches the validity of the consent. Do not adjudicate it. Tell them, kindly and clearly, that this must be discussed with the priest before the wedding, and that the Church asks the question out loud precisely so that it is not discovered afterward.

A couple where one is not telling the other something significant. You may have flagged this in Session 2 or Session 7. Tonight is the deadline. Say to the room generally, without looking at anyone, that consent is given to a real person and not to a presented version, and that anything serious being withheld should be said before the vows rather than after. Do not imply that every undisclosed fact touches validity. Canon 1098 concerns deception carried out in order to obtain consent about a quality that can gravely disturb the partnership, and that judgment belongs to the priest and the tribunal.

A pregnancy. Freedom is the question tonight, and a couple marrying primarily because of a pregnancy needs to hear that the Church wants them free. Do not imply the marriage is suspect. Do send them to the priest for a real conversation about freedom.

Session Goals

1. Every participant reads the actual consent questions and form of consent their parish will use.
2. Each person compares their private idea of what they are promising against the Church's words, in writing, before and after.
3. Every participant can name the four qualities of consent and give one concrete example of what excluding each would look like.

4. The group can distinguish fearing failure from excluding an essential property, and nobody leaves frightened by their own ordinary doubts.
5. Every couple knows to read the nuptial blessing before the wedding.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 4 minutes. Win questions, 8. The sealed sheet ritual, all four steps, 20. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Live discovery moment, 12. The steelman and Build questions 5 through 7, 18. Send and Live It, 4. Closing prayer, 2.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut the Win section to one question, cut the Dig Deeper box, and cut Build question 6. Never shorten the sealed sheet ritual, and never shorten the silence in step four.

Protect the silence. Five minutes of quiet in a room of engaged couples feels like an hour to the leader and like a gift to the participants. Do not fill it.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord, tonight we read the words we are going to say to each other in front of you and everyone we love. Do not let us say them lightly, and do not let us say them afraid. Show each of us anything we have been holding back. Give us the freedom to promise everything, because you promised everything first. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** What is the most serious promise you have ever made, apart from this one? Did you keep it?
- B.** When someone makes you a promise, what makes you believe it?

Build. Into the Text

THE SEALED SHEETS

Run all four steps now, before any teaching. Read the steps aloud so everyone knows what is coming.

One. Each person opens their own sheet and reads it silently.

Two. Each person reads their answer aloud to their fiancé only. Nothing goes to the room.

Three. You now read aloud, from your parish's ritual book, the questions before the consent and the form of consent your parish uses. Read slowly. Read them twice.

Four. Each person turns the sheet over and writes a second answer, alone, in silence. Give five full minutes. They keep both.

Then, and only then, begin the questions below.

- 1.** Without telling us what you wrote, what is the difference between your first answer and your second?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

There is no answer box for this one in the usual sense. Take what comes and do not evaluate it.

What typically emerges: first answers describe a relationship, second answers describe a commitment. First answers say things like being there for each other. Second answers say things like permanence, children, fidelity, and honor.

If someone says their answer did not change, that is fine and may be true. Do not treat it as a failure.

- 2.** Before any vow is spoken, the Church asks three questions in public. What are they asking about?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Freedom, permanence, and openness to children. In substance: have you come freely and without coercion, will you love and honor each other as long as you both shall live, and will you accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church.

Note that the third question may be omitted when circumstances suggest it, for example when a couple is advanced in years, which tells you something important: the Church is asking about the openness of their will, not making a prediction about biology.

Ask the room why the Church asks these out loud and in front of witnesses rather than privately. Because the public questions make the Church's understanding of the commitment unmistakable and invite an honest answer. They do not settle later questions about validity, which turn on evidence.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

The instruction: here are the three things the Church asks about before the consent. Freedom. Permanence. Openness to children. Find where the Scripture we have read illuminates each one, and be ready to say which session of this study we met it in.

Ten minutes, in pairs, no hints.

What they will find: permanence at Matthew 19:6 and Genesis 2:24, which they met in Sessions 1 and 4. Openness to children at Genesis 1:28, which they met in Session 1. Freedom is the one that takes longer; expect them to reach for the free consent of a covenant, the giving and receiving of persons in Ephesians 5, and possibly Hosea 2:19-20 where the betrothal is a free act on God's side.

Then say this and stop: every question the Church will ask you at the altar is illuminated by something you have already read in this study. Freedom of consent she states in her own law rather than derives from a proof text, so say that plainly if someone presses. She is not adding requirements. She is asking whether you mean what marriage has always been.

3. The consent promises love and honor, and fidelity in good times and bad, in sickness and in health. What is being promised, and what is not?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

What is promised: actions and a disposition of the will. To be true. To love and to honor. To remain.

What is not promised: a feeling. Nobody is asked to swear that they will always feel a certain way, and the Church has never asked that.

St. Thomas Aquinas defines love as willing the good of another. A person can promise that for life. That is why the vow is not dishonest.

Point out the second thing: the hard conditions are named in advance. Bad times and sickness are inside the promise. The vow does not assume a good outcome and then get surprised.

BUILD THEN PRESS: NOBODY CAN HONESTLY PROMISE FIFTY YEARS

Build it at full strength.

Build it well. This is the objection your couples' unmarried friends actually hold, and several people in the room half hold it themselves.

Human beings change. The person you are at twenty six is not the person you will be at fifty six, and neither is your spouse. Promising to love a stranger you have not met yet, on the basis of feelings you cannot control and

circumstances you cannot foresee, is not a serious promise; it is an aspiration dressed as an oath. Worse, treating it as binding traps people in marriages that have become empty or destructive, and the evidence that many marriages end suggests the promise is one that most people cannot keep. The honest thing would be a renewable commitment, seriously meant, revisited as people grow. That is not cynicism about love. It is respect for it.

Then press.

Concede what is true. People do change. Some marriages become destructive, and the Church does not require anyone to remain in danger; separation is permitted and Session 13 covers it. And it is true that a promise about feelings would be dishonest.

Press first on what is actually promised. Read the words again. Be true. Love and honor. Nothing in the vow is a prediction about emotion. It commits the will, and the will is exactly the faculty that can be committed.

Press second on the renewable alternative, and press hard, because it is weaker than it looks. A conditional promise changes the thing being received. If the other person can leave when the terms stop suiting them, then what you have been given is access, not a self. The very security that makes it possible to be fully known, which is where this study began in Genesis 2:25, depends on the promise being unconditional. A renewable marriage is a different object, not a more honest version of the same one.

Press third on the source of the confidence. Christians do not claim to be able to keep this promise on their own strength. That is precisely what the sacrament is for (Session 7). The disciples in Matthew 19 said it would be better not to marry, and Jesus did not answer by telling them it was easier than it looked.

Do not overclaim. Do not suggest that a couple who divorced simply failed to try. Many were left. Some were in danger. The Church's teaching is about the bond, not a ranking of people, and saying so is part of answering the objection honestly.

4. Canon law says that if someone by a positive act of the will excludes marriage itself, or an essential element or property of marriage, they contract invalidly. What is the difference between excluding something and being afraid of it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Excluding is a decision of the will that rules the thing out. Standing at the altar having privately decided that this will end if it stops working, or that there will be no children ever, or that fidelity is negotiable.

Being afraid is not excluding. Doubting your own strength is not excluding. Hoping to delay children for a time, for serious reasons, is not excluding, and Session 11 will treat that properly.

Say this clearly, because it matters pastorally: ordinary anxiety about whether you will be good at this does not endanger your marriage. A private reservation does.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you, and this is the most serious one in the study.

Read your second answer to each other. Both of you.

Then, each of you answer out loud: is there anything I am privately reserving? Anything I have decided in my own mind that I have not said to you? Say it now, or make a plan tonight for when you will say it, this week, before another session passes.

DIG DEEPER: THE NUPTIAL BLESSING

After the Our Father in the wedding Mass comes the nuptial blessing, one of the oldest prayers in the Roman liturgy. Most couples hear it for the first time on the day.

Read it in advance. It tells you what the Church is actually asking God to do to you: to bind you in mutual affection and peace, to give the wife a share in the blessings promised to the holy women of Scripture, to give the husband strength and integrity, and to bring them both at last to the kingdom.

Ask your priest for a copy this week and read it out loud together once before the wedding.

5. The Church calls the wedding day the giving and receiving of persons. What is the difference between giving your love to someone and giving yourself?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Love can be given in portions and withdrawn. A self cannot. That is why the Church speaks of the spouses mutually giving and receiving one another rather than exchanging affection.

And that is why the promise has to be unconditional to be the thing it claims to be. A conditional gift of self is not a smaller gift of self. It is a different kind of thing entirely.

Close here: next week we will look at what the Church does when it turns out that this was never actually given.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y. What do you now know about your wedding day that you did not know two hours ago?
- Z. Who do you need to tell that you have decided to mean these words?

Live It This Week

- **Keep both sides of your sheet.** Put it somewhere you will find it on your first anniversary. Do not throw it away.
- **Say the reserved thing.** If you named a private reservation in the Couple Conversation, say it out loud to your fiancé this week. If it is serious, bring it to the priest together.
- **Ask for the nuptial blessing text** and read it aloud together once this week.
- **Read the consent aloud, once, to each other, in private.** Not as a rehearsal. Just to hear yourself say the words before the day arrives.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we have read the words. They are heavier than we thought and they are better than we hoped. Give us the freedom to mean them entirely, without reservation and without fear. Where we have been holding something back, give us the courage to say it out loud this week. And on the day, when we stand in front of you and say these things, give us the grace to know what we are doing.

Our Lady, Queen of Families, pray for us. St. Joseph, most just, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death.

Song of Songs 8:6

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- The Order of Celebrating Matrimony: the questions before the consent, the forms of consent, and the nuptial blessing. Use your parish's ritual book.
- Song of Songs 8:6-7. The memory verse and the closing image.
- Genesis 1:28; Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:6. Found by the group in the discovery moment.
- Hosea 2:19-20. Often found by the group when looking for freedom of consent.
- Matthew 5:33-37. Let what you say be simply yes or no, read beside the wedding consent.
- Ruth 1:16-17. Covenant speech. Note that it is spoken to a mother in law, not a spouse.
- Canon 1101 §2 and canon 1103. The legal statements on exclusion and on force or fear.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 1625-1632, 1627, 1628-1629, 1643-1645. Code of Canon Law, canons 1057, 1101 §2, 1103.

Before Next Session

Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 before Session 9, and notice which cases St. Paul treats differently from each other.