

Temperament and the Spiritual Life

“*God takes our humanness seriously.*” – Fr. Thomas Dubay

by Art and Laraine Bennett

Human nature, created by God in His image, is essentially good. Part of our human nature, and God’s gift to us, is our *temperament*. Our temperament is our predisposition to react in certain ways--our natural sociability, reactivity, and emotionality. Our temperament is not the whole of our personality, nor are we ever determined by our environment or by our nature, but temperament is a key aspect of our personality and thus worthy of our study.

As Saint Thomas Aquinas noted, grace never destroys nature, but rather builds upon it and perfects it. Many spiritual writers (such as Saint Francis de Sales and Romano Guardini) stress that *imperfections* that arise out of our natural temperament are weaknesses, but are not themselves sinful. But they can make certain virtues more difficult to acquire. For example, some people are, by temperament, prone to sadness, and find it extremely difficult to attain the virtue of joy and magnanimity; others tend to be impulsive, and attaining the virtues of constancy and self-control is a true battle. Still others seem to be prone to action rather than reflection, and others find it easy to forgive, but difficult to persevere.

The Four Temperaments and the Spiritual Life

The choleric temperament possesses almost naturally the virtue of zeal for souls, while peacefulness and mildness seem quite difficult to attain. The sanguine naturally exhibits joy, yet must do battle to acquire self-control. The melancholic seems naturally capable of piety and perseverance, while joy must be consciously acquired and prayed for. The phlegmatic is naturally quite gentle and humble, yet perhaps needs to acquire the virtues of audacity and fortitude. However, although imperfections may flow from one’s temperament, these can still be moderated or corrected by practice of the opposite virtue.¹ Nothing is impossible with God’s grace.

Transformation in Christ

Growth in the spiritual life is not merely a matter of adding a virtue or dropping a defect; it is not about harnessing a naturally virtuous temperament, or, conversely, about growing in virtue through great effort of the will; nor is it about self-perfection. It is, rather, a complete surrender to Christ, who draws us ever closer to him. This friendship with Christ requires us to change. We must be transformed in Him, yet we remain essentially who we are. We don’t start out human and become angels. Nor does God fashion us with a particular temperament, only to require us to become its opposite. Thus, one who is an enthusiastic, talkative *sanguine* will not necessarily be compelled to become a contemplative monk with a vow of silence. He may, however, having learned to control his passions, become a highly enthusiastic apostle for Christ!

Are some temperaments better suited to sanctity?

No single temperament is ideally suited to holiness. Every Christian is called to holiness. Each temperament has its own unique strengths and weaknesses. One might think that the melancholic, more naturally given to reflection and the interior life, would be uniquely suited to contemplation. However, Father Adolphe Tanquerey, author of the spiritual classic *The Spiritual Life*, writes that “There have been and there are contemplatives of every temperament and of every condition of life.”²

The following paragraphs will highlight particular aspects of each of the four classic temperaments that will apply particularly to the spiritual life. Bear in mind that most people have a combination of temperaments, so it would be wise to read the sections that apply to both temperaments.

The Choleric

Cholerics can be great saints...or great sinners. Once they perceive a goal, they will wholeheartedly pursue it. The key is pursuing the right goal! A choleric without a spiritual life, or one who is totally living on the natural level, is likely to be passionate, driven, prideful — even cruel and violent — in the pursuit of his goals. Saint Paul is thought to have been choleric. Prior to his conversion, Saul was rabidly anti-Christian, “laying waste” to the Church, dragging off the early followers and throwing them in prison (Acts 8:3). After his encounter with Christ, he became even more fervent in spreading the gospel, becoming, perhaps, the greatest apostle.

Cholerics are neither joiners nor followers, preferring always to lead, and they are not naturally docile to direction. They must learn to follow Christ. Without spiritual guidance, the choleric tends to do his own will, and to be stubbornly attached to his own ideas (“my way or the highway”). This may cause difficulty for the choleric in his personal relationships as well as in his spiritual life. The choleric will tend to question, argue, and debate everything first.

The active and decisive choleric would be wise to remember the Benedictine motto *Ora et labora* (“pray and work”); work alone will never suffice in the spiritual realm. Virtues to work on include humility and compassion.

Spiritual keys for the choleric: With good direction and a deep prayer life, you will be zealous in the pursuit of holiness. You can be resolute in overcoming obstacles and difficulties and will exhibit zeal for souls. Strive to combat pride and individualism, and develop charity, humility, and a trustful surrender to Divine Providence. Assiduously avoid becoming a “clanging gong” without love. Remain rooted in prayer and in love for Christ, and you will also grow more compassionate, gentle in dealing with others, and patient in achieving spiritual goals. A challenging motto could be: “Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like yours.”

The Melancholic

It is said that a melancholic so longs for heaven that he can never be happy with less than perfection here on earth. Even as small children, melancholics are concerned with truth, beauty, and justice. They are naturally inclined toward reflection, prayer, and piety. They are sensitive, intelligent, and introspective, and drawn to a rich interior life.

If a melancholic is not aware of this intense spiritual longing for perfection, he may find himself extremely dissatisfied and frustrated on the natural level, without knowing why. Deep intimacy with God in prayer as well as a trusted confessor or spiritual director will be able to help him avoid a downward cycle of frustration, anxiety, and discouragement.

Saint John, who called himself the Beloved Disciple, may have been melancholic. He was the beloved disciple, the one who laid his head on Jesus’ breast at the Last Supper, the only one who remained at the crucifixion, and the one to whom Jesus entrusted his mother. His was the mystical vision recorded in Revelations. His writing—of all the four gospels—is the most poetic, deeply mystical. “The truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32) is appropriately written by an idealistic, truth-loving melancholic.

Pride, in the melancholic, does not usually manifest itself as an attempt to gain recognition or honor, as it might in a choleric. The melancholic does not seek overt praise or commendation. However, the melancholic does fear failure! Thus, his pride shows up in his desire to be perfect and his fear of disgrace. In his pursuit of “perfection,” he may strive to do everything equally perfectly: work, school, home, church activities. He is tempted to hold everyone – himself and others — to an impossibly high standard. A melancholic can become so critical and exacting that no one else feels competent enough to collaborate on the project! His co-workers give up, feeling like they have done a poor job. In the end, the melancholic is alone, over-burdened, and resentful. In such a way, pride can seep in to destroy spiritual fruits.

Another great stumbling block for the melancholic is self-pity: a tendency which results in isolation, self-centeredness, envy, and even depression. Melancholics have a natural tendency to moodiness, which can be exacerbated by their thought processes. To gain joy, a melancholic should reflect in thanksgiving on God’s gifts. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” Saint Paul tells us (Phil 4:4).

Spiritual keys for the melancholic: Conrad Hock notes that *confidence in God* and the *joyful bearing of his cross* are two pillars upon which rest the spiritual life for the melancholic. Meditating on the Gospels will encourage a deep and intimate love for Christ, helping you overcome self-pity, avoid discouragement, and gain joy. Your goal is not *perfectionism*, but the perfection of love. A spiritual director or good friend can help you discern when you might need to be more active and when it is time to rest, to keep up your physical strength and mental balance.

The Sanguine

Sanguines are quick to react, but not long to remember — naturally gifted with the virtue of forgiveness! They are extraverted, devoted, and life-loving, and have great people skills. St. Peter was a lovable (but inconstant) sanguine. “I will never betray you, Lord!” he promises. A few hours later, he denies Christ three times. At the Transfiguration he enthusiastically offers, “Let us set up three tents!” Even though, as Scripture also notes, “he did not know what he was saying” (Luke 9:33). He impetuously jumps out of the boat to walk on the water, fervently rebukes Jesus after He predicts the passion, and impulsively cuts off the Roman’s ear.

Relationships are important to the sanguine; he is very adept in dealing with people and is naturally considerate, forgiving, and responsive. He is fun-loving, generous, inquisitive, and enthusiastic. But enthusiasm can wear thin, if not augmented with real depth, and the sanguine’s natural friendliness and sociability can become superficial, if his priorities are not in order. He can be tempted to place his trust *solely* in other people, even to the point of denying what he knows to be right in order to please someone. He can be prone to vanity and making himself the center of attention.

In spiritual studies, the sanguine may be tempted to settle for a cursory or superficial understanding. He may find it difficult to stay focused in performing apostolic work: flitting from task to task depending on what appeals to him at the time, rarely persevering. But this can be remedied with motivation. If the sanguine is motivated by love for Christ, and is given good direction, structure, and formation, he will be a zealous and joyful apostle for the Lord! Virtues that are key for the sanguine to develop include self-control and perseverance.

Spiritual keys for the sanguine: Developing a deep interior life is crucial; without strong spiritual formation, you can become superficial, lack perseverance, and become easily driven by your emotions. Without self-discipline, you may neglect mental prayer or meditation. Commitment to daily prayer will bring you to an intimate relationship with Christ, the true friend of your soul.

The Phlegmatic

St. Thomas Aquinas is thought to have been a brilliant phlegmatic. Neither excitable nor loquacious as the sanguine and choleric temperaments, he was careful in speech and thought and detached, dispassionate, and methodical in his arguments. His temperament served him well as a philosopher: he thought things through deeply and thoroughly, never rushing to conclusions nor letting emotion get in the way of his reason.

Adaptable in groups, friendly, respectful of authority and tradition, phlegmatics are valued members of any team. They are gentle, quietly persevering, and faithful. They are naturally humble; they eschew flashiness or the spotlight. With attention to self-formation and motivation on the human level, they can also be superb leaders. Our pastor is a great leader who is phlegmatic. But he has a deep prayer life, is assiduous in his continued spiritual self-formation, seeks intellectually stimulating reading, and listens to motivational tapes every morning! Phlegmatics are solid and hardworking, and value family and country. They are true to their word and value honesty and integrity.

On the other hand, because they are so cooperative, they often fear conflict; they may avoid confrontation and go along with the status quo. Phlegmatics have a tendency to take the road of least resistance. Without spiritual formation and motivation, they can become “spiritual couch potatoes.”

Phlegmatics do not naturally assert themselves, but if they are encouraged to take a leadership position, they can become wonderful servant leaders. They need to allow their talents to shine forth for the glory of God!

Spiritual keys for the phlegmatic: With good human and spiritual formation, you can combat any tendency to laziness or spiritual doldrums. By developing a personal relationship with Christ, through a strong prayer life, you will find the motivation you need to get beyond a “comfortable” spiritual life. Do not hide your light, but extend yourself to work ardently for the salvation of souls and the coming of Christ’s kingdom.

A Word on Teens

A person's temperament can be apparent from birth (cf Stella Chess, MD, and Alexander Thomas, MD, *Temperament in Clinical Practice*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1986). Nevertheless, teens are in a period of transition, so it is possible that during these transitional years their temperament may not be as clearly identifiable as during earlier years; they may reveal one aspect of their personality more readily than others. Teens typically love knowing what their temperament is, and what their friends’ temperaments are. They enjoy discovering what this means about their tendencies, their strengths, and their difficulties. (For example, it often helps to know that a sanguine teen loves being with his friends...far more than he loves studying! Yet, if he has a melancholic parent, that parent will have a hard time relating to his natural preference! Or, on the other hand, a very studious melancholic teen might need a little boost to do something social with his classmates or church group.) Teens are typically quite

interested in how temperaments affect their relationships (whether friendship, dating, or parental relationships). It is important, however, when working with teens to reinforce that one's temperament is only one aspect of our total personality: our total personality is also impacted by our education, our upbringing, our culture, and--most importantly--our free will to respond to God's grace.

Art and Laraine Bennett have co-authored 5 books: [The Temperament God Gave You](#), [The Temperament God Gave Your Spouse](#), [The Temperament God Gave Your Kids](#), [The Emotions God Gave You](#) and [Tuned In: The Power of Pressing Pause and Listening](#). In addition, Laraine is the author of [A Year of Grace: 365 Reflections for Caregivers](#). Art recently retired after 10 years as President and CEO of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Arlington. He co-founded the Alpha Omega Clinics in Virginia and Maryland. He is currently in [private practice as a marriage and family therapist](#). Art and Laraine live in Arlington, Virginia and have four married children and six grandchildren.

¹ cf St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* and Romano Guardini, *Learning the Virtues*, also Jordan Auman OP, *Spiritual Theology*..

² The Very Reverend Adolphe Tanqueray, S.S., D.D., *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*. Originally published in 1930 by Desclee & Co., reprinted by Tan Books: Rockford, 2000, # 1563.