

# The Temperament God Gave You

The Classic Key to Knowing Yourself,  
Getting Along with Others,  
and Growing Closer to the Lord

by  
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*To Pope John Paul II*



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## *Foreword*

You've probably heard the story of the country bumpkin who discovers that every time he leads his horse into the new barn that he has built, the poor horse hits its head on the strut spanning the entrance. One day, he sets his mind to fixing the situation by carving out a six-inch oval of wood from the strut just above where the horse's head passes. As he is getting under way with saw in hand, a friend happens upon him and asks what on earth he's doing, cutting out a section of his barn. The good man explains the horse's predicament. "But," the friend insists, "why don't you just dig out six inches of earth at the entrance to the barn?" Without hesitating, the country bumpkin retorts, "It's not his legs that are the problem; it's his head!"

Sometimes we just miss the obvious — and never is this truer than when it comes to dealing with ourselves! Mood swings, emotional reactions, ups and downs, knee-jerk responses, and apparently incorrigible behavioral ruts are the cause of countless heartaches and frustrations with ourselves and others. We want to know where it all comes from and what we can do about it. We seek answers on the self-help shelf or in the counselor's office, or perhaps at the drug store. Too often, however, we fail to get to the root of our difficulties. Unwittingly at times, we get caught up in dealing with symptoms, without ever getting to the malady itself. Like our country bumpkin, we waste precious time and energy

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(and money!) on quasi-solutions and awkward personal stratagems to rectify negative behavior while failing to perceive that the real solutions lie elsewhere. That's because the obvious often remains obscure until someone points it out to us.

So, if you are seeking *real* answers to what makes you tick, you've got the right book. And if you are a committed Christian, you've got an added value, because the authors are endeavoring to give you not only the key to keen self-understanding, but also an extraordinary tool for achieving personal holiness — the ultimate solution to the problem of the self!

Laraine and Art Bennett have done us a tremendous service in writing this book. Tapping into their vast experience in counseling, and often illustrating the theory with candid, personal (and humorous) self-disclosures, the authors have made learning about the temperaments — *and how to grow in holiness through our God-given temperament* — easy and fun.

Now, I happen to know something about temperaments, because I've got one myself; I'm a textbook case of the choleric-sanguine. I am also a Catholic priest, a confessor, and a spiritual director. I deal a lot with the human heart (an extraordinary blessing and privilege!). I have seen time and time again just how incomparably valuable an understanding of one's temperament can be for living a genuinely fulfilling (and holy) life. How often, for my spiritual directees, has the point of departure for genuine progress in the spiritual life been to finally come to an understanding of their temperament!

*The Temperament God Gave You* is for adults — especially those seeking personal holiness. Who should read it? Moms and dads, single persons, consecrated persons, the engaged, the recently married, the married-with-grandchildren, counselors of all stripes (especially marriage counselors and those who counsel the engaged),

priests (especially spiritual directors and confessors), as well as psychologists and therapists. All will benefit enormously from a book that is bound to become standard reference point for the study of temperaments.

The book reads quickly. It's chock-full of wisdom and common sense articulated in a user-friendly, entertaining prose. So, it's a great time investment. With a minimum of effort, you will assimilate a wealth of information. Almost every page contains a breakthrough in understanding ourselves and others — and we all know how gratifying that is.

*The Temperament God Gave You* equips you to smooth out the rough edges of your personality, to become a better communicator with your spouse and your children, and to become a facilitator of harmony amongst family and friends. It will also equip you as never before to cooperate with God's grace in the life-project of your transformation into Christ.

I know you're going to love this book!

May our Lord use every page to help you understand that your temperament is a gift and that he gave it to you for a good reason — so that *in and through that temperament*, you can become a saint!

May God bless you!

Fr. Thomas Berg, LC, M.A., Ph.D.  
Sacramento, California  
Palm Sunday, March 20, 2005





## *Introduction*

“The temperaments . . . isn’t that sort of like Catholic astrology?”

This kind of question often surfaces when either of us gives a talk on the four classic temperaments. Yet the concept of temperament is neither pop psychology nor self-help gimmick; in fact, it has a long and venerable tradition within Catholic spirituality and moral theology. Many great spiritual writers — such as St. Francis de Sales, the Very Reverend Adolphe Tanquerey, and contemporary theologian Jordan Aumann, O.P. — discuss the concept of temperament and how it affects the spiritual life.

The concept of the four temperaments — choleric, melancholic, sanguine, and phlegmatic — was originally proposed 350 years before the birth of Christ, to explain differences in personalities according to the “humors,” or bodily fluids. And after more than two thousand years of intervening medical and psychological advancement, the concept of temperament itself — and in particular the classic four divisions — is still referenced by contemporary psychologists, educators, and spiritual writers.

Why are we writing about the temperaments, and why should you read our book? Over many years as a professional counselor and speaker on family matters, Art began to realize that there was a place for the study of temperament in contemporary spirituality and psychology. Yet although we found the Christian book market was well stocked with accessible, practical books on temperament

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for individuals and families, for Catholics the only book dedicated to temperament was a short pamphlet written by Father Conrad Hock in 1934, and reissued by the Pallotine Fathers. It offered just enough tantalizing insight to whet our appetite for a thorough, contemporary — and practical — study of the temperaments specifically for Catholics, a study that would show how temperament affects our individual lives, our families, our marriages and even our spiritual lives. Our book is intended to fill that need.

Man is a mysterious union of body and spirit. The only creature on earth that God wanted for his own sake, he is called to greatness. In the Garden of Eden, man was lord of the world, immortal, gifted with preternatural knowledge and God's own supernatural life. His higher faculties perfectly governed his passions and emotions; that is, his spirit ruled his body. The original unity and harmony — within our own persons as well as with one another and with God — was disrupted by sin. After the Fall, man remains divided against himself, alienated from his fellow man and adrift from God, incapable of overcoming the onslaught of darkness, chaos, and evil. St. Paul would later bemoan the loss of that original harmony: "I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want" (Rom. 7:19). Consequently, we experience both a "high calling and a deep misery"<sup>1</sup> that can be reconciled only through Christ. "Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more" (Rom. 5:21); God made Christ to "be sin who did not know sin" so that we might be saved (2 Cor. 5:21).

Man is a mystery to others and to himself. Only in Christ can we discover our true selves and discover that high calling: intimate communion with God. Only in Christ will our lives be renewed and transformed, and so all of creation. "For creation awaits with

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 13.

eager expectation the revelation of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19). Grace never destroys nature, but perfects it.

This book describes the temperaments — part of our human nature — and how they can influence our personality, our motivations, our lives. It is important to understand how our individual temperament affects us and how best to work with its particular strengths and weaknesses to form ourselves both humanly and spiritually. But it is equally important to remember that temperaments never tell the whole story. Understanding temperament doesn’t mean we now have a handy label to slap on our kids and our spouses. Our temperament should never be used as an excuse for bad behavior.

Self-knowledge is a virtue that St. Teresa of Avila said must never be neglected: “Self-knowledge is so important that, even if you were raised right up to the heavens, I should like you never to relax your cultivation of it.”<sup>2</sup> Genuine self-knowledge will result in humility — never in complacency. By better understanding ourselves and our loved ones, we will be able to improve ourselves and grow in our spiritual lives, and help our children and spouses to become successful and holy individuals as well. When we understand our temperaments, we can begin to master those inclinations or untoward reactions that may thwart our growth in virtue and in love. We will develop greater compassion for others and will stand ready to encourage and strengthen our loved ones — to begin that transformation of hearts which, through the grace of God, will build a civilization of life and love here on earth and ultimately, intimate friendship with him.

<sup>2</sup> St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. Allison Peers (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 38.

Chapter 3



*Which Temperament Is Mine?*

“Every temperament is in itself good,  
and with each one man can do  
good and work out his salvation.”

*Father Conrad Hock,*  
The Four Temperaments



Let's now take a quick snapshot of each the four classic temperaments: choleric, melancholic, sanguine, and phlegmatic. Remember: these snapshots represent the "pure ideal" of the temperament and that most people will not find themselves pictured exactly. Most people will have a combination of two temperaments, with one dominating (see chapter 9 for a complete discussion of primary and secondary temperaments).

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### THE CHOLERIC

*“Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win” (1 Cor. 9:24).*

Enthusiasm, energy, intelligence, and a strong will combine to make the choleric temperament a classic go-getter. Whether at home or on the job, the choleric will take charge and get many things accomplished in a short time. The choleric reacts quickly and intensely; decisiveness is his hallmark. In addition, he is extraverted and self-confident, comfortable taking charge of people as well as situations. Opposition is never a stumbling block, but rather, a further incentive to action. Dynamic and direct, the choleric has a keen mind and thinks independently. He will always let you know what he’s thinking.

The choleric’s enthusiasm and energy will attract others to him. He thrives on activity; work invigorates him. He is optimistic and magnanimous; he values success in his endeavors and sets high goals. He is comfortable with power, blossoms in competition, and is confident in his decisions.

Cholerics are eminently rational; they expect to hear good reasons for any argument. Even as children, they will not accept “Because I said so” as sufficient reason for doing something. Cholerics can grasp the big picture and can communicate the vision to others; they are natural organizers and tend to rise to positions of authority. They easily express their ideas to others, but are less willing to listen. They hate to “waste time” on meetings, employee relations, or small details. Many entrepreneurs are cholerics. They tend not to delegate because they believe that they can do it better and faster themselves and because they enjoy their own productivity. A choleric can also be successful as a CEO, a military

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leader, a founder, or in any other profession where his leadership and vision is valued.

There is, of course, a downside to this driven and intense personality. The choleric is quick to judge, to form an opinion, and to charge ahead stubbornly — often without proper reflection and at times without compassion for people in his way. If you have ever brought home something that has to be assembled, and plunged right in without looking at the instructions, you may be a choleric. A choleric thinks that reading directions or studying a map before heading out the door is a waste of time; he can figure it out on the way.

His intelligence, decisiveness, and high productivity make the choleric impatient with — sometimes even contemptuous of — those who are less talented. He can be domineering, obstinate, dictatorial, overly ambitious, and hard-hearted. He is prone to pride and anger. Father Conrad Hock writes, “The choleric prefers to die rather than to humble himself.”<sup>8</sup> Sometimes it can seem as though people are a secondary consideration to the choleric. A choleric who is not trying to grow in virtue can quickly become utilitarian in his approach.

If you are choleric, do not be offended by the fact that many of the infamous dictators of history shared your temperament. Cholerics tend to lead with the strength of an idea, a goal, or sheer enthusiasm, rather than taking the time to mold, convince, or teach the people they are leading. It is equally true that many great saints are of this temperament. St. Paul was once the greatest persecutor of the Christians; after his conversion, he became the most dynamic apostle.

<sup>8</sup> Rev. Conrad Hock, *The Four Temperaments*, rev. ed. (Milwaukee: The Pallotine Fathers, Inc., 1962), 20,

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The choleric may fear intimacy in personal relationships; he is too independent, impatient, and insensitive. He can be rash and imprudent when making decisions, and then deny that he has made an error. He tends to hide his insecurities while blaming others for his own mistakes.

Cholerics will be valuable employees — if not the founder of the business itself. They are self-motivated, task-oriented, quick-thinking, pragmatic, and energetic. They enjoy their work. They enjoy leading projects and people, but sometimes need to be reminded that not everyone works as quickly as they do. Sometimes, in their determination to achieve results, they can roll over their co-workers' feelings to accomplish the task at hand.

A spiritual life marked by strict discipline and obedience is critical for the choleric, to help him overcome his tendencies to pride, anger, and obstinacy. He will need to develop compassion, humility, tenderness, and understanding in dealing with others. But it will be first necessary to convince the choleric that he *needs* the spiritual life, that he can *trust* a spiritual director, that he must humble himself before God and learn the virtue of obedience. He will learn to be more understanding and forgiving of his fellow man and will develop greater humility when he realizes that the natural gifts of his temperament are gifts from God and are not something he personally earned or deserved.



## Which Temperament Is Mine?

### THE MELANCHOLIC

*Blessed are they who hunger and  
thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6).*

The melancholic, more than any other temperament, tends to value the *ideal* — whether it be truth, beauty, or justice, and all that is noble. He can be thoughtful, pious, and compassionate, given to solitude and reflection. It is said that the melancholic so longs for heaven that everything on earth falls short. Sensitive and idealistic, he is deeply concerned about injustice and vice. His idealism combined with compassion for humanity and passion for justice may lead him to a humanitarian vocation. Great writers, poets, artists, and composers have been of this temperament.

Many melancholics have become great saints — founders of religious orders, reformers, great mystics and theologians. The melancholic is principled, consistent, faithful, and persevering. He is orderly, diligent, and attentive to detail. He appreciates the mystery and depth of life.

But that same idealism of melancholics can also cause them to become critical or judgmental of others who don't "measure up." This idealism lends itself to leadership skills, or sometimes causes melancholics to be impractical and intractable, not team players. They are skeptical about what may appear to be simplistic labels and categories — such as the four temperaments.

The melancholic temperament is characterized by a weak or dull initial reaction to stimuli, followed by an increase in intensity over time; the reaction then tends to last a long time. Because of their slowness to react and their tendency to introversion, melancholics base much of their decision-making on ideals. They long for perfection, yet so few people can meet their expectations and their dreams. No wonder they often have their nose in a book!

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Melancholics form relationships very slowly; in fact, they're usually quite content to be left alone. They do not initiate relationships, and it may take a long time for them really to trust. But when they do form a relationship, they will be faithful and true to a fault. Yet if their trust is violated, and they become aware of the betrayal, they can be relentless in unforgiveness.

The melancholic's reflective nature, combined with his goal of reaching perfection, will cause him to note all the difficulties of a new venture or a proposed project, worry about all the possible negative outcomes, and pinpoint errors and injustices. The effect can paralyze the melancholic. When Hamlet uttered his famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, he was expressing a fundamental melancholic disposition. Hamlet was unable to act, due to his intense introspection and its stultifying effect.

The melancholic longs for perfection and, failing to achieve that, may begin to lack self-confidence and become despondent. He sees problems where other temperaments (such as the choleric) see challenges or opportunities. Ironically, however, although small details can stump them, melancholics can often handle the truly big crises with grace and aplomb.

Why do melancholics sweat the small stuff, but not the big stuff? We are not sure what the answer is to this conundrum of the very complex melancholic temperament. One theory is that the melancholic lives his daily life with the expectation that, any minute, the "other shoe will drop."

One melancholic we know always has a list of complaints ready: the kids are misbehaving, the job market looks grim, the in-laws are warring. But when serious illness threatened the family, this melancholic was calm under the pressure and drew upon spiritual strength. Without such a foundation, though, the melancholic could just as easily sink into depression.

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Because of their tendency to reflect on and to weigh every pro and con, melancholics can appear to be irresolute and indecisive. They may spend too much time on planning and preparing, and too little time putting their plans into action. It is sometimes very difficult for them to bring others aboard a project because they don't know how to convey enthusiasm for it — not because they lack that enthusiasm inside themselves. For some reason, melancholics tend to be less physically vigorous than other temperaments. Where a choleric seems to abound in energetic enthusiasm, the melancholic tends to be quieter, weaker, and more prone to small illnesses that sap his will.

Because of their introversion and their tendency to pessimism, melancholics can become excessively self-absorbed. They should fight to achieve self-confidence and to place their trust in God. They need to strive to become attentive and generous to others in need (fighting against the temptation to self-pity.) Self-pity is a trap that can keep the melancholic in a myopic, unproductive lifestyle. Teachers and parents can help their melancholic students and children by encouraging them to exercise regularly and to eat well and to learn to develop confidence, optimism, and enthusiasm.

Sometimes the first step is the most difficult. Because of his acute sense of what can go wrong, a melancholic will often exhibit a notable indecisiveness at the beginning of a project or new stage of life. The melancholic needs to be helped over this hump, perhaps by an understanding teacher or parent or spiritual director who can help give him the confidence he lacks and inspire him with optimism.

As Father Hock puts it, the melancholic has a “strong will coupled with talent and power,” but he can be overly cautious to the point that he has “no courage.” “It has become proverbial

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therefore: ‘Throw the melancholic into the water, and he will learn to swim.’”<sup>9</sup>

On the job, someone whose primary temperament is melancholic will be a great asset in any work requiring precision, detail, consistency, organization, and in-depth analysis. We know several melancholics who are editors, writers, educators, and financial analysts. Some are even your classic “watch dogs,” sniffing out corporate shenanigans. Just don’t ask them to make sales calls! Also, don’t expect them to be the most sensitive people-managers: melancholics can overlook necessary relational, team-building, and motivational aspects of dealing with people.

In his spiritual life, the melancholic should focus on personal intimacy with Christ, because his nature is drawn to the highest of ideals and will never rest until, as St. Augustine said, it rests in the Lord. Furthermore, only through an intimate relationship with Christ will the melancholic learn to temper his overly critical expectations of other people — such trust should be placed in God alone — and to overcome his natural tendency to sadness.

A strong interior life will help the melancholic attain intimacy with God, supernatural joy and peace. A good spiritual director can greatly help the melancholic by helping him set prudential goals, remind him to take care of his health and human needs, and to develop definitive spiritual resolutions. (See chapter 10 for more on the spiritual life.)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 37.

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### THE SANGUINE

*“God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).*

The creative, fun-loving, high-spirited sanguine’s natural tendency to look on the bright side, to enjoy people, and to seek out adventure sometimes results in a label of superficiality and frivolity. But the world is a brighter, more joyful place because of the inspiration, enthusiasm, and fellowship he provides.

A strength of the sanguine is his ability to “live in the present moment”; because he does not dwell on the past, nor spend time worrying about the future, he has a very optimistic, joyful attitude toward life. The sanguine is often adventuresome, enterprising, and creative — and is a source of inspiration to others.

Although quickly and easily aroused to emotion or reaction, the sanguine does not retain the reaction for any length of time. His curiosity is easily piqued and his interest easily aroused; combined with his natural extraversion, this makes the sanguine typically friendly, outgoing, and communicative, always on the lookout for new adventures and new friends. He is very attuned to his five senses, which gives him a good eye for detail and attention to appearance. (This can also be a source of trouble, if he becomes overly drawn to sensible pleasures and external attractions.)

Relationships are extremely important to sanguines; they are warm-hearted, compassionate, generous, and eager to please. They are energized by large groups, and cooperative with and accepting of others. They want to please their parents and teachers.

Sanguines’ eagerness to please is, however, sometimes at odds with their love of the limelight. Our sanguine son has received quite a few detentions (undeserved, he believes) for his attention-getting antics in the classroom. Sanguines love to be the center of attention, and they prefer quantity (not necessarily quality) of

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friendships. They want to make others happy — or at least get a big laugh!

The mercurial sanguine wears his emotions on his sleeve, although these emotions are not long-lived and might be given to rashness, imprudence, and impulsivity. (He is rarely willfully defiant or obstinate.) The sanguine child learns quickly, although he might have difficulty memorizing. Continually discovering some new interest, like butterflies flitting from flower to flower, sanguines can find it difficult to attain great depth in one area of study. It is not that they do not have the intellectual capacity, but rather that their attention is so easily captured by something new.

Weaknesses of the sanguine temperament include the tendency toward superficiality (due to the immediacy of their reactions and their creative imaginations), inconstancy (due to the short duration of their impressions), and sensuality (lacking the perseverance to withstand temptation once their passions are aroused). Because he places such a high value on relationships and pleasing others, a sanguine is often tempted to forsake what he knows is right in order to fit in with the crowd.

It is sometimes said that sanguines “enter the room mouth-first.” Their love of the limelight makes them prone to exaggeration and rash words, and to teasing others. Their tendency to talk before they think often results in having to apologize for hurting someone’s feelings. Making such an apology is not usually difficult for the sanguine, who really wants everyone to love him. Spiritual writers point out that going to Confession is not difficult for the sanguine; whereas the choleric does not want to confess his sins out of pride, and the melancholic finds it extremely painful to reveal his deeply hidden faults.

The sanguine is likely to enjoy an occupation that highlights dealing with people. He will want to use his quick-thinking

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creativity to come up with new ideas, projects, and ventures. Detailed, arduous tasks that require working independently, on the other hand, may be more of a struggle for the enthusiastic, sociable sanguine.

In the spiritual life, the sanguine is less likely to fall prey to a pharisaical legalism because he prioritizes relationships and freedom of expression. But, when poorly formed in the Faith, this tendency can lead to an undisciplined and incoherent set of beliefs based on personal preferences rather than on the truth. If, however, the sanguine develops a close personal relationship with Christ, he can develop faithfulness and obedience to authentic Church teaching. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

When the life-loving, people-pleasing sanguine discovers that Jesus Christ is the true friend of his soul, he embarks on a journey toward spiritual maturity; depth and constancy of personality will result. Such a journey will help him discover who he truly is — and who is the One who is most important to please!

Sanguines should be highly valued members of a family, organization, or religious community: they are self-giving, generous, cooperative, and loving. When motivated by a love for Christ and with attention to spiritual formation, the sanguine will exhibit great energy, sensitivity, and vivacity in spreading the Kingdom and bringing more souls to Christ.

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## THE PHLEGMATIC

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they  
will be called children of God (Matt. 5:9).*

Phlegmatics are reserved, prudent, sensible, reflective, respectful, and dependable. They are not easily insulted or provoked to anger, nor are they given to exuberance or exaggeration in speech. They are loyal and committed, tolerant and supportive. They possess a hidden will of iron that is often overlooked, because they are such agreeable people. They have a knack for diffusing tense situations. Phlegmatics make superb diplomats and military strategists. They also make excellent firefighters, police officers, and military officers; they excel in professions where being calm under pressure is key.

The good news is, if you are of a phlegmatic temperament, you will not have to attend anger-management courses! It takes a lot to rile a phlegmatic. They are known for their easy-going nature. They possess a great deal of common sense and mental balance. They tend to be clear, concise, and thoughtful in speech and writing. They are excellent listeners and have great empathy for others. They are supportive friends, patient with difficult people and situations, and considerate at all times. They are accepting of traditions and rules, and will not “buck the system”; they can handle a bureaucratic system or one that has a clearly delineated hierarchy.

They do not, however, like conflict or confrontation. Our oldest son, a phlegmatic, was recently required to enter a debate contest at school. What would a peaceful, non-confrontational phlegmatic do when his grade depended on arguing with an opponent? The result was almost comical. His opponent began, “I believe the drinking age should be twenty-one, because anyone younger than that would be irresponsible.” Our son replied, “I



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agree with you, but I think the age should be raised to twenty-two. They are even more responsible.” His poor opponent was struck speechless.

On the job, phlegmatics are dependable, punctual, and orderly; they can bring harmony to almost any group. Their introversion, combined with the importance they place on relationships, attracts them to abstract goals such as love, patriotism, religion, and loyalty. They are, however, “reluctant” leaders. They prefer a job with security rather than one that is demanding and high-achieving. Many phlegmatics become teachers: the routine and security of the job appeal to them, and they are well equipped with the patience to deal with kids. Engineering, science, mechanics, and carpentry are also good fields for detail-oriented phlegmatics. In the religious life, it has been suggested that the monks who painstakingly produced the illuminated manuscripts were phlegmatic.

Because of their reserved natures, phlegmatics are sometimes accused of being unassertive, or of lacking enthusiasm and spontaneity. Since they aim to please, and want to avoid conflict at all costs, they may become overly conciliatory. Sometimes they are so conciliatory that it appears they do not even know what their own desires are! Unlike the sanguine, who is characterized by his attraction to things (people, experiences, novelties, and material objects), the phlegmatic is known for avoiding things: conflict among people, or demanding physical labor or mental exertion. The phlegmatic might defer to peer pressure in order to keep the peace or to avoid conflict (and thus, can become overwhelmed), while the sanguine gravitates naturally into the thick of his peer group.

Where the choleric needs to restrain himself, the phlegmatic (whose temperament is diametrically opposed to the choleric’s) needs to *arouse* himself. The choleric is passionate; the phlegmatic is dispassionate. Their detachment may appear to signal a lack of

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interest. A phlegmatic will exhibit this direct, scientific, dispassionate, and realistic approach to his work and his studies. Those who are intellectually gifted can become great scholars and scientists whose analyses are objective, unclouded by the passions of either a sanguine or choleric temperament (likely to jump to conclusions or to pursue their own agenda). Such detachment can be beneficial in scholarly work — allowing phlegmatics to spend countless hours sifting through and analyzing research, for example — but frustrating in a relationship. Once the phlegmatic is aroused, however, to achieve a goal or pursue an ideal, he will be constant and persevering.

In the spiritual life, a phlegmatic may find it much easier to accept doctrines and teachings of the Church, and may not be as inclined (as perhaps a choleric might) to argue with the Magisterium. The dutiful and cooperative phlegmatic may take at face value the teachings of the Church and may need to be encouraged to internalize and personalize his faith. A good relationship with his pastor, youth minister, or even a spiritual director will help encourage the phlegmatic to take an *active* role in the apostolate of the Church. If the phlegmatic does not perceive the vital necessity of his own personal contribution, he may end up simply warming the pews on Sunday and never truly embracing his baptismal commitment to help spread the Kingdom of God.

## Which Temperament Is Mine?



*What if I can't figure out my temperament?*

When giving presentations on the temperaments, we have heard the question: “What if I can't figure out what my temperament is?” Usually, after a little probing, we can weed out factors such as job-related tendencies or wished-for personality characteristics, and ascertain a person's basic, natural temperament. However, there are other factors that may make it truly difficult to identify your own temperament: for example, a lack of self-knowledge, habitual sin, mental illness, or a dysfunctional upbringing. A job that demands that you act in a way different from your natural temperament also may make it more difficult to identify (although people tend not to last long in such jobs).

Traits acquired through long-term application of the will can also make finding your true temperament tricky. For example, when you first meet our friend John, you will immediately notice his outgoing personality, his friendliness, and his big, hearty laugh. You may thus assume he is sanguine. However, when you get to know him, you will discover that he was actually very quiet and shy as a child and simply decided one day that he was going to change. He worked hard to become skillful at social interactions, and to this day it doesn't come easy. Our friend is very productive and happy in his career as an engineer; but to ask that he become, for example, a salesman, might be asking too much.

Habitual sin can also cause you to exhibit characteristics that may not be related to your temperament, but are, instead, the result of sin. For example, a phlegmatic (who is typically quite easy-going and cooperative) may become angry, argumentative, and mean-spirited as a result of a habit of drinking to excess. Or, a sanguine (who is naturally very open and friendly) may become deceitful and secretive if he is trying to hide an adulterous affair.

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Another factor that can cloud a person's temperament is lack of self-knowledge. This can be further complicated when a person is very immature or wants to impress someone else; in such cases, he might mistakenly believe himself — or naively wish — to be of a particular temperament.

Mental illness or psychological damage can also stand in the way of identifying temperament. Now, no one is perfect. Nonetheless, some individuals are more wounded in their human nature than others. People may be afflicted by physical evil, evil arising from sin or moral weakness, diabolical evil, or the pathology arising from mental illness. A severely dysfunctional family of origin can leave deep psychological wounds. Emotional or physical abuse, ignorance, or family members who are mentally ill can cause a young child to grow up internalizing fear and self-hatred — two destructive attitudes that inhibit him from being able to love others, to be trustful and generous, and to love God. Mental illness can severely affect an individual's ability to perceive reality correctly, to make healthy decisions and have healthy relationships, and even to grow spiritually.

Yet God never abandons anyone. He provides all the means necessary for each person's salvation. "I sought whence evil comes, and there was no solution," wrote St. Augustine in his *Confessions*. Yet, through faith we believe that God allows evil only in order to draw from it a greater good. "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20).



### *Spiritual progress may mask temperament*

A final and somewhat different kind of factor is growth in holiness, when a person has grown so close to Christ that he exhibits only few (if any) of the weaknesses of his particular temperament.

## Which Temperament Is Mine?

St. Ignatius of Loyola was considered to be passionately choleric, yet became so meek and so humble that people who just met him thought he was phlegmatic. St. Thérèse of Lisieux had been a lively, impulsive, strong-willed child, yet many of the sisters who lived with her never guessed what heroic struggles lay hidden beneath her gentle, humble mien.<sup>10</sup> St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) had been precocious, temperamental, and introverted as a young child, and as a young woman suffered severe depression. She later became a brilliant philosopher, writer, lecturer, and Carmelite who wrote, “To suffer and to be happy although suffering, to have one’s feet on the earth, to walk on the dirty and rough paths of this earth and yet to be enthroned with Christ at the Father’s right hand, to laugh and cry with the children of this world and ceaselessly sing the praises of God with the choirs of angels — this is the life of the Christian until the morning of eternity breaks forth.”<sup>11</sup> A melancholic saint is one who exhibits such joy in the Cross.

As you progress in the spiritual life, becoming more Christ-like, you, too, may find the characteristic weaknesses of your temperament obscured; and you may through prayer and perseverance develop virtues that are not characteristic. You may come to say, like St. Paul, “Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

<sup>10</sup>“Many of the nuns thought of [St. Thérèse] as a nice little thing — nothing more. Yet her nature was a violent one. Her mother said of her, ‘She flings herself into the most dreadful rages when things don’t go as she wants them’ ”: *The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul*, trans. John Beevers (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 13.

<sup>11</sup>*Love of the Cross*.

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We have highlighted each temperament's typical responses and preferences. Bear in mind that these portraits of the temperaments are not set in stone, nor do they seal a person's fate. However, the tendencies noted above can serve as a useful tool for self-analysis and, ultimately, improvement and self-formation.

In the next chapter, we will look at the choleric, the melancholic, the sanguine and the phlegmatic *spouse*; how the temperaments interact with one another, some land mines to avoid, and some useful tips for promoting healthy, positive, loving communication between spouses, which will in turn build healthier, happier marriages.

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*Temperament Indicator*

## Temperament Indicator

### QUALITIES OF THE FOUR TEMPERAMENTS

#### **Choleric**

Quick to react, intense reaction of long duration; leader; initiator; logical; pragmatic, person of action, forthright; pushes plans through; doesn't display emotions easily, except anger; not given to anxiety; impetuous; eager to express himself; loves debate; can be defensive and prideful; persevering; self-confident; self-reliant; not a follower; driven to achieve goals; private; inclined to retaliation; extraverted; take-charge; argumentative; abhors sentimentality; logical; goal-oriented; decisive; intense; quick-tempered; optimistic; interruptive; needs acknowledgment; wants to be right; a doer; headstrong; competitive; looks for the positive; impatient; productive; makes decisions based on principles/ideas.

#### **Melancholic**

Slow to react, with intense reaction growing over time and of long duration; thoughtful; spiritual; deep; poetic; introverted; overly cautious; perfectionist; thinker; critical; doesn't prioritize well; tends to discouragement and self-pity; worries over possible misfortune; can be a hypochondriac; easily hurt; slow and sometimes indecisive; pessimistic; moody; goal-oriented; detached from environment; few friends; exclusive; likes to be alone; second-guesses; introspective; holds grudges; abhors injustice; is motivated by problems; looks at the down side; idealistic; self-sacrificing; sensitive; makes decisions based on principles/ideas.

#### **Sanguine**

Quick to react; reactions of short duration; relationship-oriented; doesn't hold grudges; life of the party; funny; loves to be with



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people; optimistic; likes groups; talkative; popular; docile; follower; seldom embarrassed; loves variety; attuned to environment; likes clothes; can be faddish; enjoys shopping and eating out; high energy; quick to forgive; welcomes change; frank; talkative; sociable; less interested in follow-through; can be superficial; cordial; makes friends easily; self-assured; carefree; eager; likes to talk in front of groups; enthusiastic; prone to vanity; artistic and creative; spontaneous; sometimes forgetful; process-oriented; restless; makes decisions based on relationships/feelings; needs help in persevering; social butterfly.

### **Phlegmatic**

Slow to react; doesn't react intensely; reactions of short duration; quiet; diplomatic; peaceful; makes decisions based on relationships/feelings; sensitive to others; dependable; procedural; dispassionate; dry wit; follower; introverted; calm under pressure; dutiful; likes structure; requires motivating; hates conflict; enjoys peace and quiet; well-liked by most everyone; peacemaker; reserved; homebody; constant; polite; prefers routine; process-oriented; patient; tolerant; not easily provoked, but feelings can be easily hurt; well-behaved; respectful; would rather please others than do what he wants; orderly; can be sluggish or indifferent, unmotivated; low-key.



## *Biographical Note*

Art Bennett is a licensed marriage and family therapist and director of the Alpha Omega Clinic and Consultation Centers, Catholic mental health clinics currently established in Maryland and Virginia. He is also the host and co-producer of *Healthy Minds/Healthy Souls*, a Catholic radio show in the Washington, D.C., area. He has more than twenty years' experience in the mental-health field and is a frequent speaker on marriage and family issues. He writes a monthly column for the *National Catholic Register*, on the topic of families and work.

Laraine Bennett has a master's degree in philosophy and is a freelance writer with articles published in *Faith & Family*, *Nazareth Journal*, *the New Oxford Review*, and the *National Catholic Register*.

Currently residing in Northern Virginia, the Bennetts have been married for twenty-eight years and have four children — one of each temperament type!