

Temperaments and the Call to Holiness

by [Art Bennett](#), [Laraine Bennett](#)

Q: What are the four temperaments?

Art: The four temperaments were originally proposed by Hippocrates — the "father of medical science" — 350 years before the birth of Christ. Hippocrates used them to explain differences in personality, based on the predominant bodily fluid; hence the rather unappealing names: choleric, sanguine, melancholic and phlegmatic.

Even today these same terms are still used to describe temperament, by which we mean the pattern of inclinations or a tendency to react in certain ways that form a recognizable pattern over time.

For example, the choleric tends to react quickly and intensely, and to take action immediately and decisively. The sanguine is your classic "people person"; quick to react, but quick to forget; known for their cheerful optimism.

The melancholic is deeply thoughtful and analytic, slow to respond, skeptical, sensitive and idealistic. The phlegmatic is slow to react, with far less intensity, and is generally calm, cooperative and reserved.

Q: How important is it for Christians to recognize their own personality traits, even as they strive to lose the "old man" and put on Christ?

Laraine: Teresa of Avila wrote in the "Interior Castle" that we should always pursue self-knowledge. In fact, without self-knowledge, we tend to be like the fellow mentioned in Matthew 7:3 with the wooden beam in his eye, who is forever pointing out splinters in others'.

Self-knowledge leads us to true humility, without which we cannot begin to grow in holiness. As Christ pointed out in Luke 14:28-33, who would build a tower without first calculating the cost? What king would go into battle without first taking an inventory of his troops?

Understanding our temperament is like taking a personal inventory of our natural strengths and weaknesses. We need to know what our weaknesses are, so that we can "calculate the cost": what skills should we develop and what virtues should we grow in, so that we can more effectively serve Christ and his Church.

Q: How can knowing your temperament help you grow in your spiritual life?

Laraine: Study of the temperaments has a long and venerable tradition within Catholic spirituality.

Many of the great saints, such as St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Francis de Sales, have written about the temperaments, and great spiritual theologians, such as the late Reverend Adolphe Tanquerey — author of the spiritual classic "The Spiritual Life" — and contemporary theologian, Dominican Father Jordan Aumann, all write about temperament and the spiritual life.

Understanding one's temperament gives us a clue about where to begin in our quest for holiness.

Art: When we understand our temperament, we can identify our own personal tendencies to react in certain ways. The temperaments tell us which strengths to appreciate as gifts from God, and those areas in which we need to prayerfully grow.

For example, if I am a melancholic, I discover that I am tempted to focus on difficulties, and have a tendency to be judgmental. Knowing this, I will endeavor to combat my timidity, build confidence in God and in his instruments, and try not to "sweat the small stuff." I will try to focus less on myself and grow in the virtue of supernatural hope.

A very peaceful and cooperative phlegmatic may find that he does not need to work on the virtue of docility — for he is naturally so — but perhaps should develop the virtues of audacity, fortitude and lack of dependence on human respect.

Q: How does temperament play into marriages and families?

Art: The temperaments are extremely helpful in marital and familial situations. With more than 20 years experience as a marriage therapist, I have seen how understanding temperaments can help us grow in our interpersonal relationships by fostering empathy, mutual appreciation and admiration for the unique gifts of our spouse and children.

This mutual appreciation is vital in fulfilling the critical task of creating the "communion of persons" in our family as John Paul II so eloquently stated in "Familiaris Consortio."

Once we understand our temperament's strengths and weaknesses, we can begin to appreciate our loved ones' special gifts and learn how to encourage them in their weaker spots.

Laraine: I found the most beneficial use of the temperaments in understanding — and motivating — our own children. When parents understand how temperament governs their kids' instinctive reactions, then we become much more capable of dealing with each child individually instead of applying a "once-size-fits-all" parenting style.

As the Pontifical Council for the Family wrote, "Each child is a unique and unrepeatable person and must receive individualized formation." Armed with knowledge of temperamental differences, we can provide this individualized formation.

For example, our phlegmatic child never reacted well to strong challenges. This only discouraged him. Instead, he required gentle, confidence-boosting encouragement all along the way.

Our choleric child, at the other extreme, always loves a challenge or a contest, and her confidence is rarely shaken, even with setbacks.

Our melancholic needed help initiating projects, but perseverance is never an issue; on the other hand, our sanguine can come up with a hundred new ideas, but needs encouragement in follow-through.

But each of them blossom, with individualized motivation and support.

Q: Are people ever tempted to use the temperament paradigm as an excuse for their shortcomings?

Art: Any personal inventory can be used improperly, as an excuse.

For example, a choleric might say, "I'm just naturally argumentative and controlling. Everyone else is going to have to learn to deal with it." Or, "I'm just naturally impulsive. I'm a sanguine!"

What actually happens is that understanding the temperaments becomes a springboard for growth. Knowing our human frailty, Christ told us, "Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect." Christ calls each one of us to holiness and the perfection of charity.

So, too, the temperaments can greatly help us by identifying our natural tendencies — both strengths and weaknesses — and we can then use this knowledge as a jumping off point for growth in virtue.

We also remind our readers that our temperament does not constitute the totality of our person. There is also our character — which can be formed through our upbringing, our education, and our own free choices — and, of course, grace.

Q: Does every Christian's call to imitate Christ mean a loss of individuality? How can we all be Christ-like but different?

Laraine: If we become more Christ-like, will we lose our individuality? What about those peculiarities or quirks that seem to make us uniquely who we are?

It is true that the saints are precisely those individuals who have practiced heroic virtue to the point of becoming Christ-like. As St. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20, "Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me."

St. Ignatius of Loyola was considered to be passionately choleric, yet became so meek and so humble that those who just met him thought he was phlegmatic, And St. Thérèse of Lisieux had been a lively, impulsive and strong-willed child, yet many of the sisters

who lived with her never guessed what heroic struggles lay hidden beneath her gentle, humble mien.

However, the famous axiom of the spiritual life is that grace never destroys nature, but perfects it. Remember the story about St. Francis converting the wolf of Gubbio. As Flannery O'Connor pointed out, even after his conversion, the wolf was still a wolf.

Dominican Father Thomas Dubay wrote, "God takes our humanness seriously." A talkative, lively, sanguine may not need to become a cloistered monk with a vow of silence in order to grow in holiness and the perfection of charity. On the other hand, a sensitive, deeply thoughtful melancholic may very well be drawn quite naturally to contemplative prayer.

Thus, although we will always retain our unique personalities, we should continually strive to grow in holiness and virtue.

In our book we offer tips for spiritual growth, based on the four temperaments.

For example, if you are a very active choleric, you will want to make sure you have set aside time for prayer each morning. If you are a melancholic struggling to overcome despondency, you will want to meditate frequently on God's personal love for you, and for the many blessings he has given you.

Q: How is this book (*The Temperament God Gave You*) different than just another self-help book?

Art: Though we address personal growth, motivation, and problem resolution, this is not a Pelagian "pull yourself up by your boot straps" book.

The purpose of understanding ourselves and others is not merely to achieve self-improvement on the natural level, but — most importantly — to be better able to fulfill God's will as a loving and joyful spouse, parent, friend and disciple.

Understanding temperament not only helps us become more capable of controlling our emotions and moods, it helps us identify the most effective means to grow in virtue and obedience to God's will, which are not typical self-help themes.