



The Melancholic Temperament and the Catholic Soul

by Father Christian Kappes

Melancholy by Durer

In the vacuous world of post-conciliar theology and philosophy, perhaps among the worst losses to the Church has been her tradition concerning a Christian psychology of the soul. Absent a Christian approach to psychology, the passions threaten to overwhelm us and consequently holiness becomes more and more an anomaly.

The moral life is the free life of the soul. The free choices we make over time create habits of behavior, or new “modes of being.” These habits that are moral (free acts) are either virtuous or vicious (pertaining to vice). Modes of being, or habitual activities of the soul, are learned. Vices and virtues are learned habits through our experience of the world and particularly from the persons with whom we interact; as the scholastic axiom states: *nihil in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu!*¹ As such the confessor, spiritual director, and counselor must take into account the sense experience and memories of a particular soul when giving counsel and direction.

Another means of being able to more aptly assist a wayfaring soul is to understand her² temperament. By means of understanding the temperamental tendencies

of any given soul, anyone from a priest to a layman can charitably assist another to learn new modes of being, or habitual activities, that contribute to that soul’s welfare and even her temporal and eternal happiness.

Not all souls are the same. The reason such a vast array of legitimate spirituality and approaches to the interior and moral life exist in the tradition of the Church is that the Church has a dynamic understanding of the temperaments that lie potentially within each individual person. The saints and theologians of the past were always aware of the fact that one man’s salvation may be another’s damnation due to temperamental differences among persons when reacting to phenomena.

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Within the spiritual tradition of the Church, souls can be generally classified according to temperaments (modes of being) that variously dispose their reaction to everyday life and experiences.³ The ability to apply these classifications to most

souls permits them to receive direction and assistance in their journey toward moral perfection. It is important to remind the reader that the Catholic vision of morality is not a commandment-based morality. Our lives are not virtuous by outlining rules and rigorously keeping them.

Catholic morality seeks the excellence of the person by means of exercising virtues (good habits) in order to embrace one's calling to perfection and holiness, especially as attained through charity. A minimalist goal of refraining from mortal sin will have disastrous consequences in the Catholic moral life, especially Catholic family life. The baptized are summoned by God to holiness, which is a creative activity of the soul, since she embraces freedom in order to accomplish that which is good.

Understanding the different temperaments assists a confessor in determining what is best for any given soul in order to overcome sin and act virtuously. There are generally four temperaments that may manifest themselves in a "pure" or "mixed" way in any given soul. The following is a brief summary of these temperaments or modes of being:

Choleric: quickly and vehemently excitable, even of a long duration. The choleric personality also often possesses the following traits: a keen intellect, strong will, strong passions, domineering, prideful, self-confident, stubborn and opinionated.⁴

Sanguine: quickly and vehemently excitable, but of a short duration; also distinguished by: superficiality and instability (lacks consistency/tenacity), externally oriented (as opposed to an inward meditation) but optimistic, vain, flirtatious, cheerful, etc.⁵

Melancholic: marked by initially weak reactions yet possesses internal depth. Through repetition of the same experience the reaction eventually becomes vehement and overpowering. Also: a melancholic is reflective, passive, serious and often reserved, irresolute and often despairing or at least rather despondent, with a tendency toward pessimism, especially about self.⁶

Phlegmatic: his mind is only weakly touched by impressions (stimuli) and reactions are superficial or non-existent. Any reactions fade quickly. Also: disinterested, aloof, undemanding, little ambition but little piety, tending toward inactivity and ease but generally not overcome by

passions (emotions).⁷

In this article, I shall be focusing on the melancholic soul. More often than not, among traditional Catholics, there tend to be higher numbers of pure melancholics. My own pastoral experience would indicate that more women exhibit melancholic temperaments than men in this environment. Some have an admixture of melancholic-sanguine or sanguine-melancholic, but generally there are many prone toward features of the melancholic understanding of self.



The Charity by Bartolomeo Schedoni

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The Characteristics of the Melancholic Soul

The melancholic engages the world often in this summary fashion: "If I were different, things would be better!" The melancholic soul often finds herself in a strange but fantastic concept of her own power. This soul's mythical belief in "self control" needs to be overcome by her will in order to achieve holiness. For example, the fantasy of the melancholic often fuels the notion that by changing sufficiently (i.e. being good enough, or loving enough) she can change her external environment. The deception here is a false sense of power. A melancholic needs to accept the fact that in itself her behavior will not change other souls or other external phenomena that affect her. It is a melancholic's self-deception that by doing enough things perfectly, she will one day be appreciated and truly acceptable by others or by God.

This perception wreaks havoc on the melancholic's spiritual life. Furthermore, the melancholic is extremely sensitive and keenly perceives other people's emotions, especially others' anger and negativity. They usually deal with other people's exaggerated expectations, critiques, or demands with the internal response: "I'm bad; I'm the

problem; I need to try harder." "I'm sorry – it's my fault" should be a sign hung around the neck of the melancholic soul; for her the only road to acceptance and relatedness is to be the scapegoat of Leviticus! This disposition of the melancholic makes her prone toward absorbing negative emotions until eventually she explodes into an uncontrolled passionate outburst (usually anger). Besides having

unreal expectations of one's effect on others and the world by being "good enough," the melancholic also tends to be hard on herself. Often obsessing about the evil done and the mistakes made (combined with the characteristic of being crushed by rejection), she is tempted to sacrifice principles or knowledge in order to avoid being rejected or to achieve "acceptance."

In general the melancholic can be termed as "dependent,"⁸ or someone who has never really learned to be her own person. The sense of self-agency ("I can do this by myself" or "my understanding is correct") and thus being free is hampered by the incessant need to please and attach to others in order to receive affection or acceptance. How do we break this cycle? What is the way in which the melancholic is able to become "free" in the sense of exercising the will toward the good independently of strong feelings and attachments in this life? Thus we come upon the spirituality of the melancholic soul!

The Spiritual Life of the Melancholic Soul

Those dear melancholics' fundamental struggle is with an interior sense of goodness. They cannot predicate words like: good, beautiful, special and excellent toward themselves!

In short, they have little capacity to love themselves. Now a typical concern for a traditionalist, in the face of this world of pop spirituality, is whether or not "loving the self" is some horrible form of New Age psychosis. Yet

we must remember our Lord's very concise words: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Oh melancholic soul, how empty this rings for thee! Because she does not have an appropriate love of the "thyself," she cannot correctly or appropriately exercise charity toward others. For example, if I (a melancholic) emotionally experience and intellectually accept real "badness" within me, then I shall often do for others merely because I have the hope that by doing and pleasing them enough they will give me a sense of being "good," or "acceptable." This is much different than drawing from the beauty within me in order to impart a sense of communion or benevolence toward another person.

The spiritual remedy that I recommend for the melan-

cholic temperament is the works of St. Francis de Sales. *The Imitation of Christ* and the works of St. Alphonsus Liguori are the weapons the choleric wields against the false and prideful self, but for the melancholic this is a disastrous spiritual focus! The melancholic will naturally concentrate on the passages that talk about the defect of the self, pride, and corruption. In order to obtain holiness the choleric needs to annihilate the false-prideful self through just such means, but this does not ring true for the melancholic. The melancholic needs to experience tenderness and love of her soul created and cherished by God. Thus the melancholic must refrain from literature that exacerbates despair and a sense of guilt that already

(for the melancholic) penetrates to the bone. The *Introduction to the Devout Life* by St. Francis de Sales is the melancholic's lighthouse when sailing between the spiritual straits of Scylla and Charybdis. For example, in the fifth part of his book, in the sections known as "Reflections," Francis de Sales concentrates on the goodness of the soul, the excellence of the virtuous, the Love of God for us, etc.⁹ These are the meditations for the melancholic.

At the beginning, some of the meditations on Hell, etc. may be of little benefit for the

pure melancholic, since she needs to launch out to love the soul made in God's image and likeness, since she often already finds herself in the mire of self-doubt and even self-hatred. In meditation, certain themes should be dominant for the melan-

cholic: the Redemption, the Love of God and God's Love of man, the beauty of the soul and the mercy of God. For example, it is easy for the melancholic to believe that Our Lord came to redeem the human race, and she sees that her soul happens to be a member of that race and therefore will somehow be redeemed. This is an inappropriate mode of understanding; rather she must concentrate on the fact that even if she were the only soul in existence, even if ugly in her own eyes, the tender Lord would have come just for her, and would have suffered all and died out of His unconditional compassion for His individual creature so hungry to be the beloved of someone, to impart a sense of wholeness or to end her solitude. The melancholic soul



The Discourse by Lawrence Alma-Tadema

Thus friendships are necessary, with rare exceptions, to progress in the spiritual life. In fact, St. Thomas went so far as to say: "We must investigate friendship as a state necessary for all."

will fight these types of affections toward God since temperamentally she does not want to accept her innate goodness and beauty, even after having been elevated in baptism and made a partaker in being with Christ most intimately through the reception of Holy Communion.

By far the most important virtue that the melancholic needs to practice is fortitude, along with its ally perseverance. The melancholic is one who shuns conflict and does not challenge others to virtue or humility. Her negative self-perception makes her willing to tolerate evil or remain silent in its face, and this often invites herself or others to be denigrated. The melancholic must draw on her sense of being good and beautiful in the sight of God in order to have the strength to challenge the impious or vicious, or even the ignorant sinner. The melancholic has the hardest time correcting another – especially the choleric.

When melancholics marry, for instance, their spouse tends to be choleric. The danger of the melancholic is to give into the choleric fantasy that it is always someone else's fault. The choleric is not disposed toward humility, tenderness, meekness or sometimes even kindness. These virtues are essential for the choleric to practice. Unless the choleric is alerted to this and challenged by another, she often cannot progress. The melancholic, whether with friends or family, must challenge choleric souls to accountability through fortitude. This also provides the melancholic with a sense of self-agency.

St. Thomas speaks of fortitude in these terms: "Fortitude denotes a certain firmness of mind...and this firmness of mind is required in both doing good and in enduring evil, especially with regards to goods or evils that are difficult."¹⁰ The poor melancholic must persevere even if she experiences rejection, isolation or even violence. No one will ever regret virtuous and faithful actions, but everyone is harmed by the cowardly choices in life. It is essential for the melancholic, when making challenging choices (which she instinctively abhors because they may bring "rejection"), not to concentrate on it being a good choice for herself, for she often sees her own self worth as not meriting a defense. Instead it is best that she remember that it is objectively the loving and supportive thing to do for her spouse, child or friend.



Dear Bird by Bouguereau

*The life of the Christian
should be one of innocent joy,
not sorrow!*

The melancholic needs to cultivate authentic friendships to support her and encourage her to have a sense of goodness that orients her to strive for virtue. For as Aristotle said (and a sentiment with which St. Thomas agreed): "Without friendship, who would want to live?"¹¹ Thus friendships are necessary, with rare exceptions, to progress in the spiritual life. In fact, St. Thomas went so far as to say: "We must investigate friendship as a state necessary for all."¹²

But a melancholic must always recall a fundamental truth regarding friendships, whether according to St. Thomas or even noted modern authors.¹³ Real "being with" or communing takes place between two souls seeking the good of one another, not through attempting to make the melancholic merely an attachment to the disagreeing party's ego!

Lastly, the virtue of "eutrapelia" (good-play)¹⁴ must be practiced daily

or at least several times a week by the melancholic. The melancholic needs to choose a simple pleasure that is active (walking, sewing, reading, drawing, singing, playing a musical instrument, and the like) that gives her a sense of goodness, accomplishment and pleasure. This experience allows her to draw from her discovered goodness in order to be available for others. Without this use of eutrapelia her life will be unbalanced and her melancholic anguish will not only dominate her but will bring sadness and a sense of melancholy to others around her. The life of the Christian should be one of innocent joy, not sorrow!

The Prayer Life of the Melancholic Soul

In order to practice the virtues, the melancholic requires prayer. This is not so difficult for the melancholic in at least one aspect: she tends to be very reflective and focused on the internal. However, meditation is absolutely necessary for the melancholic. St. Theresa tells us that at least half an hour a day is the minimum for any soul to receive enough light to be saved, much less to advance in virtue.¹⁵ Thus without a gradual increase of daily reflective meditation, the melancholic will not be able to carry the burdens fortitude imposes. I would suggest the following: realize that prayer needs to become habitual. Every day at a particular time I go to a place where my senses are not

highly engaged (little or no noise, movement, etc.). Whatever sacrifices I have to make for that time every day is supremely important; only the most necessary things are able to stand in my way. For if I have no interior life, I have little to give to anyone else. The old axiom rings true here: *nemo dat quod non habet!*¹⁶

St. Francis de Sales gives a very good method for meditation. In conversation I attempt to share all my emotions (especially hidden anger and despair) with God since He desires to console or listen to me in my grief, or to rejoice with me in my successes and happiness. I also use my intellect to think and speak about particular topics from a book upon which I meditate (e.g., the Gospels). However, I must both release and launch my thoughts and affections to God in the very moment that they come to me. This will grant me solace or at least relief. Souls may be tried for some time with “dryness” or a lack of emotion in prayer, but this should not be alarming.

In short, without prayer and meditation as a priority (even above the Rosary),¹⁷ the melancholic will not be able to advance along the way of internal peace, or to progress upon the road of



The Virgin in Prayer by Sassoferrato

virtue.

Lastly, the melancholic must always err on the side of mercy toward herself regarding sin. If she is often easily burdened by deep guilt and a sense of being bad, these will prevent her from advancing in the spiritual life. St. Alphonsus wisely asserts that when a soul falls into sins or imperfections, she needs not to dwell on herself or become angry with herself. She needs instead to begin immediately to recommend herself to God.¹⁸ For example, I utter a critical word about someone for the sake of demeaning him. When guilt seizes me I immediately look to heaven and say, “Lord, see what happens when I rely on my own strength? Draw me

closer to you and love me more so that I might love you more!”

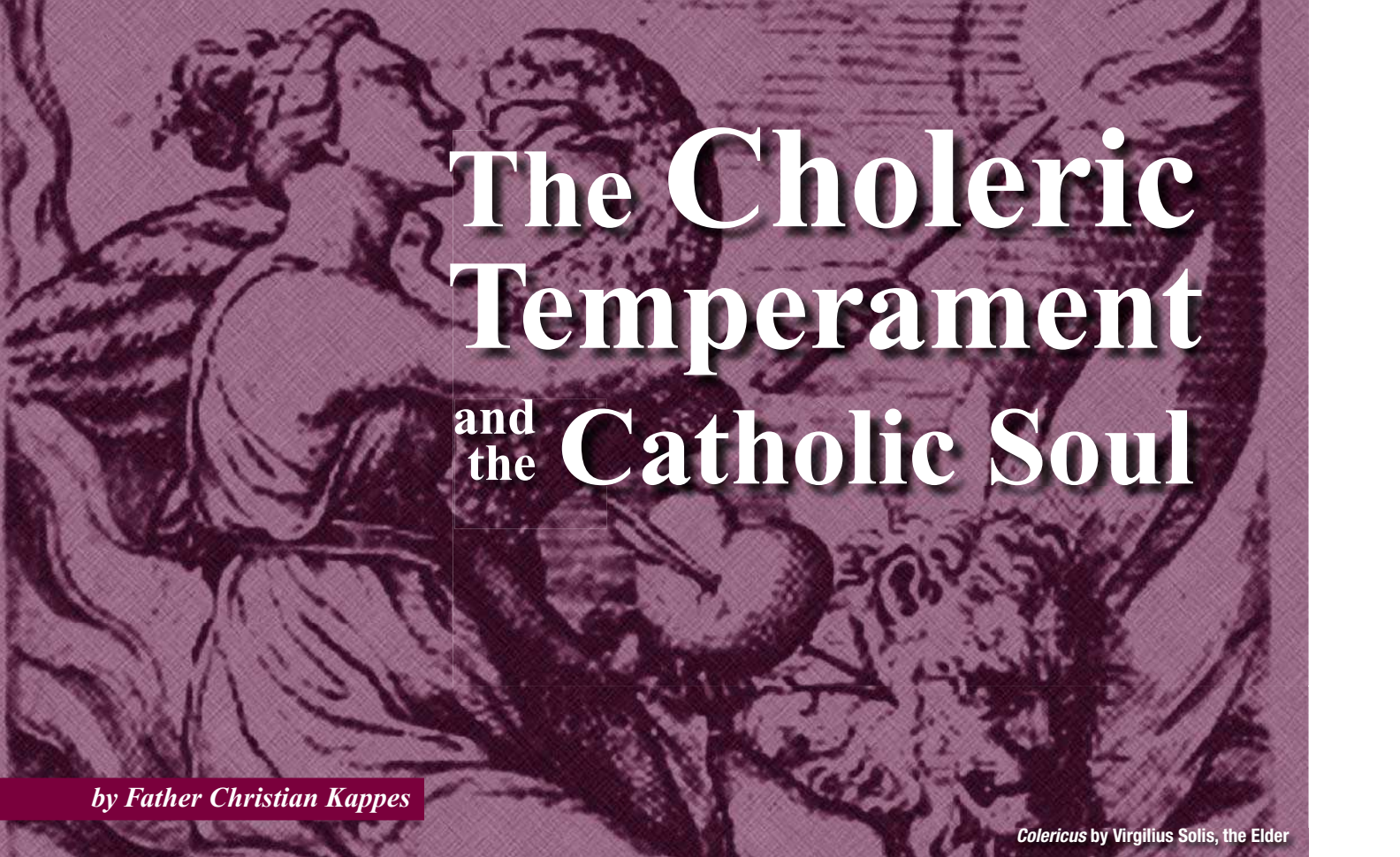
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In summary, these suggestions and observations touch on only some aspects of this particular temperament. We hope to discuss further the temperaments in the future in order that the Catholic soul might gain insight into how to properly and successfully overcome her tendencies that hold her back from advancing toward love of the good God. ✠

Notes

1. Nothing in the mind which is not first in the (bodily) senses.
2. In the Christian tradition the soul is feminine. In relation to God, the souls of both men and women are feminine; in that they are passive and receptive. Men and women are entirely equal and “like” on the level of the soul as well.
3. Conrad Hock, *The 4 Temperaments*, The Pallottine Fathers, Inc.(4th edition), Milwaukee 2002, p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-19.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-30.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-38.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 39 et seq.
8. For modern psychological view of the melancholic see: Nancy McWilliams, *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis*, Guilford Press, New York 1994, pp. 227-241.
9. Francis de Sales, *Philothea or Introduction to the Devout Life*, TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., Rockford, IL 1994, pp. 306-318.
10. *Summa Theologica* II, q. 139, a. 1 et seq.
11. Aristotle, *The Nichomachean ethics*, Dumb Ox Books (Litzinger edition), U.S.A. 1994, p. 475.
12. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics*, Dumb Ox Books, U.S.A. 1994, p. 477.
13. See for instance Dietrich von Hildenbrand in his work *The Art of Living*, in the chapter designated “communion.”
14. *Summa Theologica* II, q., a. 2, a. 3.
15. St. Alphonsus Liguori, *The Dignities and Duties of the Priest*, St. Louis, Redemptorist Fathers 1927, p. 292.
16. No one gives what he does not possess.
17. St. Alphonsus Liguori, *The Dignities and Duties of the Priest*, St. Louis, Redemptorist Fathers 1927, p. 292. Many still commit mortal sin while doing devotions and Rosary daily; not so with mental prayer!
18. St. Alphonsus Liguori, *The Dignities and Duties of the Priest*, St. Louis, Redemptorist Fathers 1927, pp. 318-319.

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Cholericus by Virgilius Solis, the Elder

In my previous article, I spent significant time describing the individual characteristics that define each temperament. From there I discussed the life and spirituality of the melancholic temperament. In this installment, I will discuss the choleric temperament, which is perhaps the most “attractive” of the temperaments: since this is in fact what the choleric has a tendency to do, “attracting” others to him or her.

Characteristics of the Choleric Temperament

The choleric engages the world in this summary fashion: “If only these people (or this situation) were different, I’d finally be satisfied/happy.” The choleric, too, has a strange fantasy of controlling all reality that exists outside of the self in order not to address deep internal struggles with sin or imperfections. The tendency on the part of the choleric is to be consistently and almost exclusively oriented to the world outside of the soul. What is wrong with the Church, society, my spouse, children, etc., is of the utmost import.

The choleric is a fixer and repairer, or at least a critic of all things external to the self. The deception on the part of the choleric is to believe that control of the environment outside the body and the soul is the means to make the world a better place, and even to achieve holiness. Action is translated into holiness: doing vs. being. The choleric has grave struggles with power and control of both people and reality in general. The choleric needs to learn passivity before the Divine will, and to develop an authentic regard and esteem for others.

Choleric internal logic finds thousands of rationalizations why one is not to humble oneself. It manages to explain away the need to apologize or admit personal failure or being incorrect. If an admission is made it is always accompanied by extenuating circumstances or a reason to minimize its negative impact on others.

If the choleric is still pressed to admit his error or sin, he plays the victim. By this I mean that he first usually attempts to put the problem on the other: “You’re at fault, inadequate, deficient, etc.” If this subterfuge

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fails and he must take responsibility, he might accept it only with a series of rationalizations. The result is often a convoluted apology meant to minimize the evil, not to humble the self.

The last resort, if this doesn't work, is the pathetic: "I'm really the victim here, not you!" The choleric goes on tirades about how it was a hard day at work or home, that he or she shoulders everyone's burdens, and various other distractive techniques to avoid responsibility for his own actions.

In marriage the choleric is one who has little regard for the passions of others (husband, wife, or children). Their emotions are dismissed, ignored or minimized. This is a way to prevent inconveniencing the self in order to will the true good for the other. Since the choleric always has the answer, he presumes to know what is good for the other instantaneously and avoids listening, counsel or the exchange of ideas.

The choleric struggles with being inconvenienced and is very demanding of others. Always, of course, there are so many choleric reasons why this is "just" or "correct." Pride sails the vessel of the choleric. The choleric seems to embrace Nietzsche's "will to power" with natural ease. I am writing here for the choleric, who may now be noticing resistant bones in the body saying, "That's not me. I'm not a monster. This is a silly caricature." It wouldn't be surprising if there is the temptation to go to his melancholic spouse or child in order to get a coached response that indeed this description does not apply to him. Well, dear choleric, it is true that I've started off harshly with you, but you do realize that this is what you need, to look internally and see in name and number your own defects and then to be able to verbalize them specifically both to God and to your neighbor whom you offend.

How does the choleric break this cycle of pride and self-interest? After all, many great saints were choleric! How does the choleric become free from his dominant passions, the *libido dominandi* of Augustine's thought? The fundamental struggle is with the choleric's view of himself as being inadequate. This means a deep and secret sense of being worthless or powerless. "If I don't pretend

to be always right, always have the answer, always have the power, then others will reject or hurt me!" The choleric soul cannot predicate of herself beautiful words like meek, gentle, humble and tender. These virtues appear effeminate and passé to such a one in our current age, in which we need *fortitude* and *might* to win against evil.

With the phrase "love thy neighbor as thyself," the choleric needs to concentrate on the word "neighbor." The choleric soul imagines herself always having everyone's best interest in mind without actually asking him. Or if she

asks, it is always with the slant toward her preference. Identifying and then manipulating another's weak points, or performing some seemingly generous act so as to make the person feel beholden to the choleric, masquerades as charity. But in reality the motivation is pride. Instead the choleric must begin to ask himself: "What is this person telling me is good for him?"

Now, for you choleric, immediate reaction to this requirement is one of suspicion. This is especially a problem among traditional Catholics, who are vitally concerned with possessing "the bulwark of truth." This worthy aspiration can often produce very negative effects in the choleric: i.e., creating an aura of certainty that encourages the assumption that his judgment is *always* superior to others' opinions, even in non-doctrinal matters.

When a request is made of a choleric, his *modus operandi* must always first and foremost ask, "Do I have a negative reaction against the request because of my temperament? That is, do I not want to do it because it is not within my own will, ease or convenience?"

If these are answered, the choleric can begin to understand the legitimate physical, mental and spiritual needs of the other.

Spiritual Life

I recommend *The Imitation of Christ*, and the ascetical works of Saint Alphonsus Liguori, for the choleric soul. She needs to hear and acknowledge her defects and pride as *personal sins* to be attributed to her own volition. The devil is usually the scapegoat for the choleric. Abba observes in the *Sayings of the Fathers of the Desert* that



Saint Jerome by Federico Fiori Barocci

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a person with the temperament of the choleric is one absorbed with self-will. As such the saint was convinced that the demons left the choleric alone for the most part; since the choleric was so obsessed with his own opinion, will and righteousness, the demons never bothered to tempt him.

This is the distressing truth for the choleric: most sin originates from personal self-will. Once the choleric begins to receive illumination by two means (meditation, and examination of conscience) he will begin to glimpse the latent melancholic part of his temperament. In other words, once the choleric can take on the personal identity and responsibility for dispensing suffering and pain to both our Lord and to other individual persons around him (especially family members), then a profound sadness and loneliness may overcome him. A deep sense of how defective he is tempts him to believe that if anyone really knew him (since the choleric soul is always hiding behind a wall of confidence) another would reject him.

This is the moment of grace. Once one embraces his powerlessness in the face of his defects, then Christ can come into the soul or our Lady can offer us succor. We must experience our “smallness” in prayer and ask our Divine Lord to be with us and accept and care for us particularly at these deep moments of pain when we see just how unworthy we are

with our own eyes. Then Our Lord lifts us up in our humility and consoles us in our pain. We launch out toward Divine love when we begin seeing ourselves as pathetic, not excellent observants of the Law.



The Pharisee and Tax Collector by Julius Schnoor von Carolsfeld

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Required Virtues

By far the most important virtue for the choleric is humility. He needs in little ways to begin humbling himself – e.g., when he makes a verbal or spelling error to acknowledge it and note that his sense of self is not destroyed afterwards. He further must begin to allow himself to “be wrong.” To be corrected or contradicted is intolerable and anger always ensues. Thus the choleric does well to resolve to apologize for wrongs done every day. If it is too much to ask initially, he makes a morning resolution to avoid getting the last word so many times a day

(maybe only one time is possible initially), or he resolves to be the first to apologize after an argument. Particularly humbling is allowing another’s criticism of him to be validated: “Yes, you are right; I was selfish and insensitive. I will try to change my behavior.” It will feel like a ton of bricks has fallen on the choleric when it comes time to recognize that he is actually responsible for moral imperfection. The soul will rail against it with a thousand reasons why it is not necessary or prudent to confess to God or to neighbor, but, my dear friend, it is the only path to sanctity and even salvation.

The choleric should locate reading material about the virtues of humility, meekness, gentleness and kindness. For these he should look to Saint Thomas (or in a little work entitled *My Daily Life*, which is a summa of the

Summa). The lives of the saints might move his pride at least to begin to walk the road of humility simply out of a desire for glory and honor. Fine. God will eventually purify motives. But it is important to make the first step. Without it the choleric will always suffer from a deep loneliness and a sense of separation from others since he walls off everyone – including our Divine Lord and His most affectionate Mother. When the choleric soul struggles with anger (which is quite often) she needs not to find people to criticize and demean. She ought not look for something in the external environment upon which to cast wrath. Instead she must soothe her soul by the virtue of good play.

Eutrapelia is a necessary recourse for the choleric when the soul senses her own irritation is coming. Whether painting, riding a bike, hitting a punching bag (for the more aggressive), or reading a pleasant and delightful book, the choleric must immediately *withdraw* and not engage, instead soothing the passions that are yearning to strike at someone irrationally. As Seneca says: *maximum remedium irae, mora*. (The greatest remedy for wrath is delay.) If the choleric does not practice some form of recreation everyone in the family will suffer. The true choleric can often despise play as a waste of time.

Prayer Life

The choleric soul needs to prioritize prayer. Once she does this, she will find herself surprisingly disposed to sanctity. Meditation is absolutely essential. The choleric's strength does not lie in self-knowledge and therefore is often blind to the negative effects his temperament has on others (the blindness often being assisted by excessive busyness regarding the state of the Church and nation, society, family, etc.). Saint Teresa of Avila insists that at least a half hour of meditation each day is a minimum for the Catholic soul seeking salvation. This is certainly the minimum for the choleric, and he would do well to eventually

make it a full hour each day. He needs to begin in stages and gradually acquire over time the habit of spending five minutes, then ten, etc. The choleric person needs to have sufferings and complaints about life addressed to Christ and then to receive Our Lord's consolation in prayer. He must learn, like Saint Alphonsus, to become affective in his life. He must open up the door of the passions and emotions by launching them outward toward Christ and His Mother. This will not be easy. At the end of these discussions on temperaments I shall provide a brief and effective method of meditation. The method of meditation as suggested in the previous article (on the melancholic temperament) will be sufficient for the choleric to begin.

In summary, I would just like to recall the end for which these articles are being written – namely, the holiness of the reader. If we have not resources to begin to separate the wheat from the chaff in our lives of habit, then we are bound to repeat the same vicious and pagan modes of life that many have experienced from their own upbringings and friendships. It is essential to begin relying on the perennial faith and spirituality of the Church to re-orient our lives. To the choleric, I simply wish to remind you that it is the goal of your own holiness and particularly your salvation that so necessitates the challenge ahead of you as delineated in this essay. The choleric believes to know the self, but knows only the self that is presented to others to be honored.

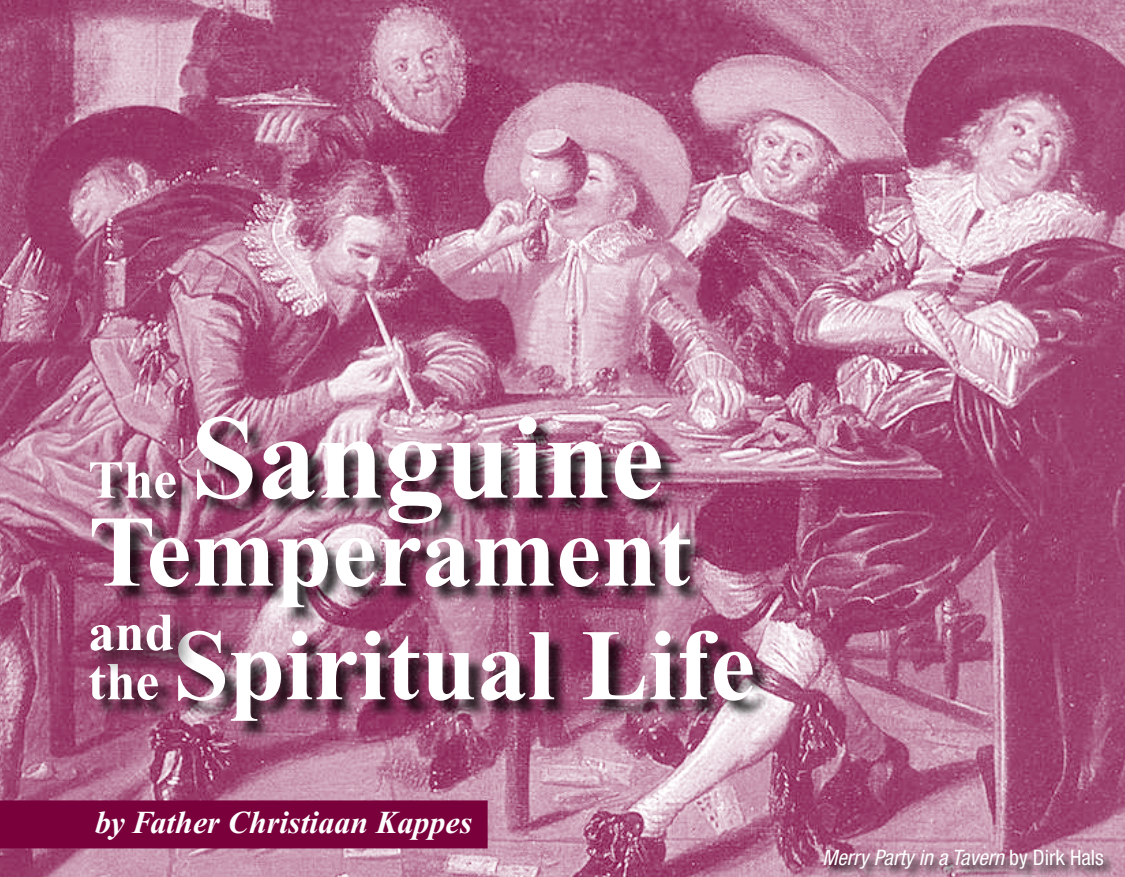
By means of these virtues and methods he can truly begin to know the self as small and powerless, but beloved by God – Who came to die on an infamous gibbet even for the choleric soul. ✠



The Magdalene Reading by Rogier van der Weyden

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Merry Party in a Tavern by Dirk Hals

The Sanguine Temperament and the Spiritual Life

by Father Christiaan Kappes

Although the choleric soul concentrates herself on finding the defects in the external world that play to her own sense of perfection, the sanguine is too lighthearted to concentrate on evils or unpleasant things, as these things tend to bring on melancholy or conflict and so disgust the sanguine's temperamental superficiality and fun-loving ways. The sanguine always possesses a quick solution to problems that do not require of her much concentration lest she become lost in contradictions. Anything that becomes immediate or pressing is considered a distraction requiring of the

sanguine soul far too much effort.

Intrinsic to the sanguine's self-deception is her insistence that her world can be freed of conflict by means of short and timely interventions – and then it's off to experience something new! Action is made the equivalent of holiness. This preference for "doing" over "being" is not unlike the choleric, but it is without the seriousness and intent of the latter. The sanguine naturally struggles to do whatever is necessary to avoid unpleasant things, conflict, and especially any solution that requires deliberateness.

The sanguine has an internal hierarchy of reasons to justify why she's so busy and why there is no time for concentrated attentiveness to everyday internal contradictions. Her rationale usually involves the "need" to spend herself for the sake of others. She readily will acknowledge the trifling nature of superficial conversation and the vanities of pure activism and performing incessant action without a real end (goal). Yet if

pressed by any serious contact and challenge, avoidance is immediately sought by immediate frantic scurrying – especially in the presence of any person or experience that will remind her of her internal deficits. Faults are generally admitted in order not to have to deal with listening to their content. Defects are agreed upon, but the sanguine is puzzled as to why another does not simply move along to a

In the previous two articles I outlined the life and spirituality of the melancholic and choleric temperaments. In this portion I hope to cover the sanguine temperamental soul. This one is perhaps the most entertaining of the temperaments, for it is the sanguine tendency to seek out the affections and pleasantries of the external environment around her. I earlier explained that each temperament encompasses a general disposition of reacting to internal or external phenomena.¹ In Thomistic terms, we can consider each of these four "modes of being" as existing to a greater or lesser degree in each man.² However, each temperament is considered to exist virtually in man,³ and so the perfectly actual man would have a perfect balance of the temperaments.⁴

Characteristics

The sanguine soul has her peculiar fantasy of engaging all external reality that exists outside of the self in order to fill herself with "things" or experiences in the quest to achieve wholeness, yet she is loath to address deep internal struggles with sin or imperfections. The tendency on the part of the sanguine is to be consistently and almost exclusively oriented to the world outside of the soul, much like the choleric in this regard.

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different subject once the admission “I’m sorry” has been made. The concept of satisfaction is foreign to the sanguine temperament. The sanguine, so overwhelmed with activity, is a victim of forgetfulness and filled with promises to get the reaction of acceptance and pleasure from others. No matter that she seldom follows through on what has been promised or agreed upon: she’s too “flighty” or “friendly” to be held in contempt, but is not to be trusted with important tasks and work requiring completion.

In marriage the sanguine has but a superficial regard for the passionate life of others (husband, wife, or children). She takes initial interest in the emotions or accomplishments of others but is unable to truly appreciate the good in the other. Either there is a feigned and overly excited exaggeration in her words or emotional state in an attempt to empathize with the other or she resorts to the well-worn path of acquiring distractions. Would that she could will the good of the other, but she is overloaded with thought and perpetual interior noise in her soul. Her internal demand for quick dispositions makes her feel that she must have a rapid answer to every question and so presumes to give a quick response, rather than using the intellect and will to weigh and judge wisely and consistently. Unfortunately, in seeking counsel she is only too immediately swayed by the last point of view heard or the most powerfully presented theory – not so much by the logic or prudence of the premise, but by the manifest, powerful character of the speaker.

The sanguine suffers being inconvenienced by steady work and perseverance. In order to fight off guilt for things left undone or perhaps a sense of shame in seeing that others notice her inability to make good on her word, she attempts to please them superficially or entertain them. Pride is the wind that drives the sail of the choleric. But the sanguine’s sail is so fragile as to be pulled about by every cross-wind. The Fathers of the desert had a saying for the personality that is always tempted to talk and socialize to distract from the real and the profound: “When you are hungry eat, when you are thirsty drink, when tired sleep, only do not leave your cell!”²⁵ This was advice to the brothers always pretending that charity would have them visit the brethren, visit those in need, or having “holy” conversation. Their job, rather, was to sit in quiet and to meditate in solitude upon their sins and the need for the mercy of God. The hope was that profound weeping would overcome them and that they would launch their compunction of heart towards God alone.

The fundamental struggle is with distraction by means of things external to the self in order to avoid interior conversation and to confront deep internal emptiness. By this means a sanguine hides a deep and secret sense of not knowing her real identity in Christ. She protests loudly that she knows herself very well, which is the first sign of

self-deception. The sanguine cannot contemplate essences of things. Who am I? What am I? How am I in the sight of God? She must learn gradually to prolong her meditations and begin to interiorize against every distasteful sentiment that screams at her: “But there is so much to do, so many needy, so much work.”

With the phrase “Love thy neighbor as thyself” the sanguine needs to concentrate on the word “essence of neighbor, of self and of love.” By temperament, charity for her must always be active, not passive. It is not attained by allowing another to be calm and silent, but in ceaseless conversation and activity. The sanguine must begin to accept Providence by faith, that she need not have her finger in something in order for it to be sweet. She need not be part of everything, she simply isn’t that necessary to God. By being rigid about prioritizing what is most important in the spiritual and moral life, she can absolutely shun everything that is not on that list as a demonic temptation.

Spiritual Approach

I recommend that the sanguine begin to familiarize herself with the short, pithy sayings of the Psalms and the Books of Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach, that provide substance that is not so weighty as to permit the mind to wander into immediate distraction. Furthermore, the sayings of the Desert Fathers or short lives of saints are helpful in being able to remember the material due to their brevity and pithiness. At the same time, because of her weakness for immediate and gratifying pleasures, short, pithy sayings and stories will speak to her temperament. Lengthy biographies and tomes on the spiritual life are often lost in distractions and overwhelming spiritual lethargy.

To practice compunction of heart the sanguine must have absolute silence. She must close the blinds and turn off any noisy instruments. Better to pray in the dark and in a comfortable position. She should have a crucifix or tender image of our Lord or Lady nearby to which she can constantly refer when the mind or eyes wander.

Dear Sanguine, be prepared for your martyrdom in suffering distractions in prayer. As has been mentioned, St. Theresa of Ávila taught as a holy Doctor of souls that one needs a minimum of one-half hour of meditation per day. This is the torture stake of the sanguine. First begin with five minutes and only after obtaining the consistent habit go to ten, twenty, etc. There is no timeline. Do not increase your time until you are moved by an interior light to do so (preferably confirmed through a director or confessor: sanguines can even become distracted by innumerable “interior lights” they often think, in their delusion, they possess) or only after having had the habit of prayer inhere in your soul as something inveterate and necessary to your daily affairs. St. Alphonsus is quite explicit that one-half hour meditation per day in which all one does is

fight off distractions and intrusive thoughts is of greater merit than hours of prayer with consolations. The sanguine must begin to trust in the objective value of such meditation, even if she feels no worth or consolation in it.

Necessary Virtues

By far the most important virtue for the sanguine soul is perseverance. Even if it is necessary to be extreme, she needs to make a list, better written down, of the priorities toward God, spouse and children, or work in her daily schedule. The list must prioritize what is to be done first and always and then what is of lesser importance and to be addressed only when there is extra time. Dom Chautard in *Soul of the Apostolate* most wisely suggests that a soul give herself ample and extra time in scheduling strictly required tasks and duties. This will remove the magnet of contrived immediacy and frantic habit. Further, she must be absolutely militant in refusing to take on any new projects and invitations until the list of priorities is habitually fulfilled with precision and fidelity. Only then may she add – one at a time – to her essential “to do” list, and only if she is able to incorporate them into her daily routine. Secondly, patience is needed. A constant internal prayer must be: “Help me make a new beginning at every moment.” The goal is heaven, thus a new beginning in her duties and picking up her daily schedule is worthwhile every moment and after every fall. *Eutrapelia* (the virtue of having fun) is too easily achieved by the sanguine. In fact, often the unhelpful fantasy that everything be play is entertained. Exaggeration and hyperbole is the norm of the sanguine. Thus good play must be restricted to certain times and only after obligations are finished. The good play must be specified and categorized. Even in good play the sanguine must concentrate on a few truly beneficial pastimes or hobbies that provide authentic recreation (as in re-creation), lest they end up creating frustration or internal disturbance.

The Prayer Life of the Sanguine Soul

Within the sanguine soul, silence and prayer of the heart must have priority over recited prayer in order to increase concentration. Once she regularly makes this choice, she has the means to achieve sanctity – but only slowly. Meditation is absolutely essential. The sanguine must learn to walk within a different world of prayer. She must close off the outside, seemingly making herself “selfish.” Otherwise she will succumb to the notion that she is vital to others in “need” or to tasks requiring her attention alone.

The sanguine will be tempted in prayer to resist admitting

to God that she possesses negative emotions (such as anger, deep sadness or despair) that can be displayed toward Him, herself or another. “No. I cannot feel that way. I am supposed to be happy, joyful, etc.” Yet the Lord can neither be needed truly in her constantly feigned joy and delight, nor in pretended tranquility of soul. The extreme sanguine betrays, by her constant activity, that there is an underlying inconsistency and undiscovered need to be at peace in the midst of internal turmoil. If in the midst of prayer there arises a sense of fear that God is neither present, listening nor interested, then an act of faith must be made in the heart: “Lord, I do not feel your presence; I fear that you are not listening...but I know by Faith that you are here, and that you love me.”

The sanguine will see progress only by a *gradual* calming of her temperament and a tendency less and less to exaggerate reactions and to be instantaneous in responses. Little by little her increased quiet may lead to a manifesta-

tion of a deep melancholia. “I feel like doing nothing, I feel like anything I do is worthless.” This sense needs to be offered to Our Lord on the Cross so that she may see His willingness to carry it for her, thus achieving the realization that she is not alone, that He is near. In this struggle, the sanguine must begin to petition Our Lord and His Mother for consolation in midst of almost inevitable temptations to inordinate

anger. The will rages against the necessary prescriptive spiritual medicine.

Thus ends this brief treatment of the sanguine temperament. I hope to treat the last and most mysterious, the phlegmatic temperament, in the next article. ✕

Notes

1. Conrad Hock, *The Four Temperaments*, 4th ed. (Milwaukee: The Pallotine Fathers and Bothers, Inc., 2002), p. 7.
2. *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 4, art. 3 and Q. 5, art. 2.
3. That is to say that by virtue of man’s essence the inhering qualities of the temperaments belong to the perfection of man, while in the fallen nature the temperaments are out of balance in man. Thus ‘temperamentology’ agrees with the suggested findings of modern experimental psychology, whereby a person’s character development is strongly influenced by genetic factors. That is to say that one’s pre-disposition toward a particular temperament is ‘inborn’ and not merely learned, thus harmonizing the categories of the temperaments with modern psychology in the sense that *nature* and *nurture* are the two greatest components in forming the personality of man on the natural level (that is genetic inheritance and environmental conditions in the same subject).
4. I have sought to begin with more technical language in this introduction to satisfy philosophical queries following the first series of articles. Of course the perfect balance of temperament is found in Christ *par excellence* and our Lady as well.
5. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 2nd ed. (Cistercian Publications, 1984).

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Mignon Pensive by Bouguereau

hinders the appreciation of the good found in her own soul), the phlegmatic is often too much distracted by internal ideas and fantasy to concentrate on any personal vices, as these tend to be of little interest and so do not speak to her typical temperamental seriousness and pensiveness. The melancholic always broods over solutions to problems and is haunted from beginning to end with self-doubt as to the ability to resolve them. The phlegmatic, on the other hand, often has an acute appreciative sense of her ideas and grieves over the lack of approval and affirmation of others.

The choleric possesses the natural tendency to dominate the conversation with the phlegmatic and therefore offers little consolation when the latter shares her internal world and will generally shift the focus to the choleric's subject of interest.

The sanguine often gives the phlegmatic disappointment in her inability to appreciate the depth and seriousness of the latter's thought or subtle emotions.

The melancholic tends not to appreciate the frequently abstract nature of the phlegmatic's thoughts and ideas, but is disposed toward being whisked away by the phlegmatic's sharing a personal thought or feeling which, in turn, can lead to a hunger for an emotional and passionate connection. This often leads to disaster because the melancholic's intensity fails to consider the respectful emotional distance that is characteristic of and demanded by the phlegmatic.

The phlegmatic can easily become immersed in the resolution of a problem or conflict, so much so that she can be perceived as lazy. The reality, however, is that she is immobilized by the complexity (real or imagined) of her situation. The phlegmatic, however, is often deceived by the tendency to disengage from the external environment in order to find peace. We are not addressing here the importance of contemplation; the issue, rather, is the phlegmatic's disposition toward being so distracted by her interior fantasy and dream world as to commit sins of omission. It is what this soul fails to do that puts her eternal salvation at risk. Abstract thought and dreams are hardly the way to holiness. Needing to choose "to do" rather than "to dream" is the unique cross of the phlegmatic.

Phlegmatics are prone toward two reactions to obligation and inconvenience. First, provided that their internal world of disengagement and distraction is not threatened, they will

The great mystery of the phlegmatic temperament will be addressed in this final installment of the series. The word "mysterious" may be applied to this temperament because the phlegmatic generally tends to be extremely reserved about the interior life of her soul. The phlegmatic is not attuned to external stimuli and phenomena that seem so naturally compelling to others. Perhaps this is the reason that Conrad Hock's brief but classic treatment of the temperaments is able to offer but a passing discussion of the observable characteristics and tendencies of the phlegmatic.

Characteristics

The phlegmatic engages the world in summary fashion: "Bah, who could bother! Yes, the world outside of me might be nice to engage, but at least it's safe and cozy on my little internal island."

The phlegmatic soul is often misperceived as lazy, but this can be too much of a generalization. Immobility does not necessarily mean laziness. The internal intellectual and fantasy world of the phlegmatic is often times simply more attractive and less disappointing than engaging the fallen external world, which is intrusive and at times merciless. The tendency on the part of the phlegmatic is to be consistently and almost exclusively oriented to the world "within," much like the melancholic soul. Although the melancholic tends to locate within herself a great many defects of the world (which

fulfill whatever obligations are required in order to avoid unpleasanties that involve only further human interaction and conflict. Second, all external reality being either exhausting or overwhelming, she is nearly paralyzed by her disgust at the inconvenience required by the effort to accomplish the task at hand (earning the well-deserved appellation of “lazy”). She needs above all to embrace the distaste of human interaction, and place strict limits on retreating into her dream world of fantasizing so that she may assist and console others, especially in family life, despite her sense of discomfort and awkwardness in human interaction. As an astute priest friend of mine said once to an inveterate phlegmatic: “Your only way to holiness is to constantly make acts of the will to choose whatever is inconvenient and uncomfortable to do.”

As mentioned, the phlegmatic has an incessant internal fantasy life of accomplishing things or desires for particular ends, but seems paralyzed to effect them because the effort would require “distracting” contact with an environment foreign to her internal world.

Another difficulty is the hypersensitivity of the phlegmatic; because she is keenly astute and pensive she usually suffers from one of several experiences: First, being incredibly perceptive concerning the moral frailty of men, she constantly abides with the temptation to avoid others in order to evade exposure to risky human relationships. Second, seeking to avoid any experience of the mixed and morally false motives and manipulative fallen nature of man, the phlegmatic finds it safer to remain in the world of the mind rather than to engage the often cruel environment external to it. Third, since the phlegmatic fears revealing her true self, others sense her reserve and often respond superficially – which only confirms and exacerbates the phlegmatic’s attitude: “Bad outside world, good inside world.”

In marriage, the great challenge for the phlegmatic is to exercise solicitude toward her spouse’s moral and temporal good – such as correcting any excesses with children (be it spoiling or being too strict with them) or making decisions which are “most virtuous” or “best” regardless of the opposition and difficulty one may encounter. The phlegmatic parent must make the effort to praise goodness and excellence in a child as soon as possible after such behavior is displayed – for even the Creator deigned to extol His creation by calling it good, and He readily showed His exuberant love for Our Lord by saying of Him, “This is my beloved son.” A scholastic axiom states: “By knowing others, one knows oneself.” A child will experience the goodness of creation (necessary for proper development)

by hearing words of compliment and encouragement from the heart of the parent. The phlegmatic is apt to recognize and agree with this truth – and may even think that he has done such, but in fact she has said it only to herself within her own mind. Abba Poemen said: “Teach your mouth to say that which you have in your heart.”

The effects of mental industriousness, the virtue of the phlegmatic, must be transferred from the mind into practical action. Further, in spite of the tendency “to take the back seat” in the vehicle of human interaction, the phlegmatic must force herself to fulfill the leadership role that is proper to her office or position (priest, parent, boss). In daily life, this often translates into engaging conflict and other unpleasant situations when necessary and exerting the effort to say what is perceived as true, good and beautiful despite the inconvenience to self.

The phlegmatic soul’s disposition toward wallowing in internal distraction is often nothing more than a convenient way to avoid recognizing her hunger for true Christian friendship. Although the phlegmatic soul would seem to be ideally suited for a semi-eremitical and solitary life, she finds friendship with God often as elusive as that with men. The essences of things are often contemplated in the abstract, but the nature a genuine relationship often experientially escapes the phlegmatic. In her meditations, it is most appropriate for her to permit affections, deep longings (especially for intimate friendship) and emotions to be expressed to God – instead of incarcerating ideas and concepts which normally would stoke virtuous passions oriented toward union with our Lord.

With the phrase: “Love thy neighbor as thyself;” the phlegmatic needs to concentrate on the word “neighbor.”

Regardless of the sacrifice entailed, charity necessitates for this temperament activity, not passivity. Departing the self-absorption that is this soul’s chief negative characteristic, she must begin to attempt real zeal for the salvation and good of one’s neighbor. This is often done by making oneself available, instead of hiding through mental distraction.

Spiritual Necessities

Recommended are the more passionate and less intellectual and ideational works. The phlegmatic intellectual would tend by temperament to use a book that employs meditations on themes of the *Summa Theologia* or abstract themes like the *Cloud of Unknowing*. If she does not already have a regular and prolonged life of meditation, however, the phlegmatic soul should read works dealing with The Passion

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and Death of Jesus Christ, Visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and on themes like the True Devotion to Mary. These are affective works that are meant to enlarge the “heart,” not exclusively the mind, and will aid in developing a desire for intimate love and affection for Our Lord and Our Lady. This also means that one will of necessity be more and more drawn to relate this love through temporal action involving the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Further, the lives of saints (primarily of holy men and women in active apostolates), should inspire a desire for action within the phlegmatic soul. Accidie (sloth, torpor) can be a horrible enemy to the phlegmatic, and Saint Alphonsus recommends making frequent ejaculations such as, “Let me rather die now than give up my time to love thee (my neighbor) in my meditation (good work) here and now.”

Particular Necessary Virtues

By far the most important virtue for the phlegmatic soul is industry. Even if it is necessary to take what may seem to be extreme measures, she needs to engage in some active work. Even the monks of the desert refused a life monopolized by private contemplation, but always visited the sick and engaged in other physical labor outside their structured prayer time. The phlegmatic must also be disciplined about his or her mental distractions and fantasy life. Meditation is different from dreams, and obsessive reading is different from spiritual reading and academic pursuits appropriate to one’s state of life. The priest must engage in those distasteful works of correcting sinners, visiting the sick and hearing confessions of difficult persons – regardless of the time and travel required. If a parent, it means time spent in play with one’s children and time spent instructing, encouraging and praising them.

Eutrapelia is too easily entered into by the phlegmatic in the arena of reading, writing and thinking – or for the world-liner: television, radio and music. Activities like sport (even if only light), good conversation and appropriate social engagements according to one’s state of life, will often be able to lift from the phlegmatic her feeling of isolation and disconnectedness. In fact the concept of “fun” is not an easy one to integrate into the phlegmatic’s life.

The Required Prayer

The phlegmatic soul needs to prioritize the achievement of a balance between the contemplative and active life; even Carthusian priests need to work at a trade in their solitude. Once she does this, she will be a saint rather easily. This is because the passionate life of the phlegmatic is, not seldom, very weak. Apart from the life of the solitary religious, one cannot morally allow the world to pass her by without contributing meritorious external works. The phlegmatic has no obligation to force the

self toward loquacity. However, the Christian concept of apathy does not include allowing one’s neighbor to suffer, or lose his soul, when one has an obligation by office or charity to engage and attempt to be an instrument of grace or conversion.

Again, abstract thought and concentration are natural to the average phlegmatic. The challenge is in connecting one’s passionate life with the objects of contemplation. Not merely to think about the Passion of Christ, but to enter into it with an image, or to express with tears one’s sinfulness or one’s participation in the crucifixion through sin, are key meditations. To seek the sense of Divine Love within one’s breast or to search after a deep feeling of sadness for sin, or hatred for evil are all

passionate responses that the phlegmatic would do well to cultivate. Finally, the phlegmatic soul also must make firm resolutions in meditation. When the inspiration comes to do some good work, or stand up for a belittled soul under her care or observation, she must, if necessary, do what may seem as violence to herself in order to fulfill what has been inspired. The will must be trained to overcome, by means of timely executed resolutions, the tendency to trap good intentions and holy desires within the framework of the mental world of what “could” be. The external world must be engaged and sanctified by the phlegmatic, permitting herself to be an active instrument of divine grace.

Thus concludes this admittedly brief treatment of the four temperaments. My goal has been to present the particular challenges to any given temperament and the spiritual strategies necessary to battle against the respective temperamental exaggerations and deficiencies. I have not endeavored to coddle the sanguine’s desire for compliment, the choleric’s for honor, the melancholic’s for self-deprecation, and the phlegmatic’s for isolated sanctity. Thus many, while not enjoying hearing about their weaknesses, will begin the process of daily meditation for one-half hour, and (one hopes) eventually much more, and thus will be able to apply the necessary salve to whatever tendencies require correction. If this is done, the required remedies will dawn with greater clarity and the need for them will be felt more incessantly. If priests are not spending at least one hour in meditation a day, and the layman one-half hour, I would be very dubious of the possibility to achieve insights either into himself or the souls of others. This is merely a contemporary attempt to encapsulate the teaching of the Doctors of the Church within the context of an extremely short discourse on each respective temperament. ✠

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