

## **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

### **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 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 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."

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. Choleric 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.

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. Choleric will be valuable employees-if not the founder of the business itself. They are self-motivated, task-oriented, quick-thinking, thinking, pragmatic, and energetic. They enjoy their work. They enjoy leading projects and people, but sometimes need to be reminded minded 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.

## 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!

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 tense 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 cholic could just as easily sink into depression.

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 therefore: `Throw the melancholic into the water, and he will learn to swim.'"

On the job, someone whose primary temperament is melancholic cholic 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.

## **THE SANGUINE**

"God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). The creative, fun-loving, high-spirited 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, spiration, 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 friendships. They want to make others happy-or at least get a big laugh! The mercurial sanguine wears his emotions on his sleeve, although though 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 creativity to come up with new ideas, projects, and ventures. Detailed, tailed, 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, ever, 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.

## **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.

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 took time to produce 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 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.