The Melancholic Temperament and the Catholic Soul

by Father Christian Kappes

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! 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 her 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.

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. 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.

**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.

**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.

**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).

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.
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,” 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 melancholic 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 straights 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. 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 melancholic: 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
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.” 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.

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?” 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.”

But a melancholic must always recall a fundamental truth regarding friendships, whether according to St. Thomas or even noted modern authors. 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) 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, 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. 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 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!”

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.
4. Ibid., pp. 16-19.
5. Ibid., pp. 27-30.
6. Ibid., pp. 35-38.
7. Ibid., pp. 39 et seq.
10. Summa Theologica II, q. 139, a. 1 et seq.
13. See for instance Dietrich von Hildenbrand in his work The Art of Living, in the chapter designated “communion.”
16. No one gives what he does not possess.
17. St. Alphonsus Liguori, The Dignities and Duties of the Priest, St. Louis, Redemporist Fathers 1927, p. 292. Many still commit mortal sin while doing devotions and Rosary daily; not so with mental prayer!

Father Christopher Kappes was ordained in Rome after completing his seminary formation at the North American College. He is a priest of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis.