

## Interview with Art and Laraine Bennett, Authors of "The Temperament God Gave your Spouse"

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*In your recent book "The Temperament God gave your Spouse" you review the four classic temperaments as a way of understanding how people naturally react; could you explain these and tell us how you came to be interested in this age-old concept in the present day?*

We were introduced to the classic four temperaments (originally proposed by Hippocrates) by a priest who shared with us how temperament (the way we naturally tend to react to our environment) influences our spiritual lives; subsequently, we discovered that understanding temperament is not only a great way to get to know ourselves better (and therefore improve ourselves) but also it has a great bearing on our relationships—with God, with our spouse and with our children. Art discovered in his marriage counseling that many couples who came in for counseling were often arguing or fighting about a temperament issue!

*Given that the concept has been around for so long, could you comment on what types of research is currently conducted in the social sciences?*

We found most helpful the landmark study by psychiatrists Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas, the New York Longitudinal Study, which revolutionized the way psychologists and educators viewed the relationship between parents and children, and spouses. (Chess and Thomas identified nine temperament traits, or characteristics, which fell into three clusters or constellations, which they termed the "difficult," the "easy" and the "slow to warm up" child.) Prior to their landmark study, many professionals in the social sciences believed that the infant was a tabula rasa, a blank sheet, which could be totally shaped or misshaped by its parents or environment. Chess and Thomas studied more than 100 infants, from birth through adulthood, and identified temperament traits that were biologically inherent, thus challenging the prevailing behaviorism. Their research not only helped parents and educators, but benefited marriage therapy as well. When we understand that the way our spouse is behaving may be an inherent part of his temperament, and is not something he is doing to consciously annoy us, then we become much more understanding and forgiving. For example, a quiet and rather introverted husband might be embarrassed by his sociable wife's talkative temperament. They might fight over their temperamental differences, each thinking the other was being intentionally oppositional. Once the couple learns that their reactions are not willful provocations, they will not only become more respectful of their partner, but also can take steps to curb their own natural tendencies and learn better ways of communicating. (cf Chess and Thomas, *Temperament in Clinical Practice*, pp 108-11.)

*You mention in your book that the temperaments affect each person's emotionality,*



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*sociability, attention and prevailing moods. What are the implications of this for two people considering marriage and the quality of their relationship once married?*

Our purpose in writing *The Temperament God Gave Your Spouse* was not to identify which temperaments might be more attractive or more compatible. Rather, we wanted to take a look at how understanding temperament differences (and similarities) can help spouses become more mutually supportive and understanding. By understanding our temperament strengths and weaknesses, we are better able to focus on positive ways of communicating. In our book we outline key communication skills that help spouses become more loving. We also offer many real-life examples of marriages that have overcome conflict and grown in mutual understanding.

*So understanding one's spouses temperament can go a long way in diffusing misunderstanding by creating an atmosphere of respect and improving communication. What impact does temperament have on parent's interaction with children?*

Understanding what aspect of a child's behavior is due to his temperament goes a long way toward helping the parent motivate and encourage the child and diffuse potential conflicts. When parents and children have opposite temperaments, they can mistakenly believe that their child is either bad or, in some cases, even pathological. For example, a very serious, detail-oriented melancholic parent might worry that his naturally exuberant, talkative and distractible sanguine child is showing signs of attention deficit disorder (cf Chess and Thomas page 236). Or, a parent who has a very quiet, shy toddler should know that it will not necessarily help his child to become more sociable by throwing him into a large, noisy day care center. In fact, it can have the opposite effect. By learning about our children's temperaments, we will better understand their natural strengths and weaknesses, and how we parents can help them grow in maturity and virtue.

*Part of the Culture of Life mission is to understand the truth about the human person at all stages of life; can you describe how growing in knowledge throughout a marriage of one's own and one's spouses temperament can help the marriage flourish?*

The human person is made in the image and likeness of God. This means we are fundamentally relational, like the Blessed Trinity. "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him" (Gen 2:18). Our spouse is our "suitable partner," the one whom we have chosen for better, for worse. Christ himself gives us the grace we need to live a fruitful and fulfilling marriage. But we can also do our part. By understanding ourselves (and our spouse) better, by curbing our natural reactions and learning healthy ways of communicating, we are actually growing in virtue. The Catechism tells us that "The harmony of the couple and of society depends in part on the way in which the complementarity, needs, and mutual support between the sexes are lived out" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2333). We hope that our book helps couples relish their complementarity and



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# Briefs

learn practical ways of supporting each other and meeting each other's needs. Ultimately, we hope that our book might help couples live a more vibrant, happy marriage.

To order a copy of *The Temperament God Gave Your Spouse*, go to [www.sophiainstitute.com](http://www.sophiainstitute.com)



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