

On Sanctity and Temperament

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
All Saints', Year A — 5 November 2023

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

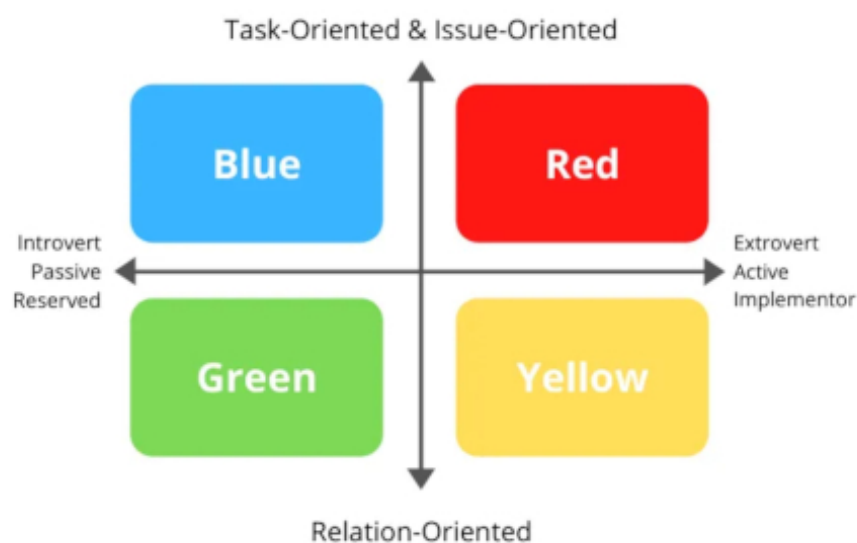
+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I've spoken to you before on All Saints' Day about visiting the death cell of St Maximilian Kolbe at Auschwitz—the Polish Franciscan priest who took the place of a Jewish husband and father marked for death in an act of retribution. Recently in Japan, along with visiting the two atomic bomb sites and museums, we went to Sunday mass at the shrine of the 26 saints of Nagasaki. These were Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries, with some local co-workers, who were crucified by the Shogun in 1597 because he'd begun to fear foreign influence. Among the martyrs were two teenage boys, who like the rest refused to renounce their Christian faith to save their lives.

The heroism of such martyr saints is a great treasure of the Church, and a profound testimony to the confronting, transforming power of Easter faith. Witness accounts in Nagasaki reported the powerful effect of the steadfast martyrs on soldiers, officials, and the crowd. As Jürgen Moltmann would have it, they stood up for the coming truth against the ruling lie.

But for ordinary Christians today such high-temperature sanctity can seem remote from the modest scope of life and work, of home and family and of plain, undemonstrative parish routine. Yet when we hear today's familiar gospel of the beatitudes, we can at least take this away: that sanctity is about being transformed, about coming to think and desire and act in a new way, beyond the standard selfish and fearful profiles that are always and everywhere on display.

I want to explore some options today with this in mind—that although great spiritual heroism may never be demanded of us, nevertheless something smaller-scale but still distinctive is certainly entailed by being Christian, and from those who take this seriously the Church's saints are drawn.



from: Thomas Erickson. *Surrounded by Idiots: The Four Types of Human Behaviour*.
Vermillion, 2019. [First publ. 2014.]

I'm going to talk about some familiar human types or temperaments in light of this conviction. I've recently been reading the Swedish human behaviour expert and business consultant Thomas Erikson, who sets out four very different temperaments that we typically find in the human zoo. His aim is to make us appreciate and welcome these regularly misunderstood and even resented others who are simply different from us. I want to take his four types and reflect on what sanctity might look like in each case. Of course, no such typology is definitive. Erikson makes clear that a bare 5% of people are one type only, while 80% combine two types and the remaining 15% three types. But you'll recognise the four pure versions, as we might call them.

The first two are the extraverted types, and certainly these are the rarest. There are the task-oriented reds: decisive, commanding, direct and no-nonsense. They're the ones who love a challenge, who push themselves and others, and who get big things done, and where would we be without them? The Christian spiritual challenge for this red type is to bring the mastery they crave under the greater mastery of Jesus Christ, so that their drive and initiative is at his service, rather than serving some less worthy goal or ideology of their own. That way control freaks become effective and trusted change agents, arrogant and insensitive bosses learn to listen and to care, and the transforming energy this temperament is blessed with finds its godly expression. I tried to think of a current leader who exemplified the red type at its best and came up with Volodymyr Zelensky.

The other extraverted type is not task-and-outcome driven but instead it's highly relational, vigorously communicative, visionary and always sparking with energy and fun. Erikson calls them the yellows. Where would we be without such animated personalities to enliven things and such fertile imaginations to generate the good ideas we need? But the path to sanctity for yellows involves bringing their imagination under the sway of Christ and the Holy Spirit, where creative imagination is truly released, and moreover where innovation is always directed towards outcomes without just spinning its wheels. And these extraverts will also learn to listen, to respect the slower and steadier types, and hence to become the agents of creative, necessary and godly change.

Speaking of the steadier types, again there are extraverted and introverted versions. Task-oriented like the dominating reds but in this case introverted are those Erikson calls the blues. They're the detail and process types, the careful, patient, slow moving yet highly analytic types—the sort of person you want for your accountant, or for your surgeon. Though you might be frustrated trying to buy a house or a car with them because they'll always want more information before deciding anything and don't seem to worry about never making up their minds. Every enterprise, every community needs these careful and unselfish blues, though their path to sanctity requires learning to trust and to take risks. Otherwise, they can readily fall into a pattern of negativity and inaction, refusing to believe the climate science, for instance, or the clear evidence about masks and vaccines. Just because a lot of people are convinced about these things doesn't mean that they'll be. In Australia's recent referendum, for instance, while a wide range of civil society groups came out in favour of the "Yes!" case—from Churches to trade unions to sports clubs—many with this hesitant temperament refused to decide for lack of sufficient details. Hence the clever marketing line used by the "No!" case, "If you don't know, vote no"—a perfect hook to catch a hesitant and unconvinced blue.

The other steady type, relationship-oriented like the yellows rather than task-oriented like the blues, but introverted like the blues, is the largest group in society, which Erikson calls the greens—and there's absolutely no connection intended here with Green politics. These are the decent, salt-of-the-earth people who live for relationships, for family and community,

who value a peaceful, secure and stress-free life, who hate to speak up let alone voice a potentially unpopular opinion. They typically can't abide open disagreement let alone conflict and unpleasantness. In particular the green tends to be change averse—things are fine as they are, so why change; if it ain't broke, don't fix it. But what if it is broke? This group doesn't like to hear that something may be wrong in their comfortable world—that they might share responsibility for the climate crisis, for instance, or that they might be the beneficiaries of historic racial discrimination, or simply that there are systemic injustices in society. You can't even raise such possibilities in America today without the hard right pushing back.

Now, where would we be without the stable social ballast that this large group provides, steadying society in the face of destabilizing change and threat? But sanctity for these greens requires more than just being nice. This is a group that tends to swallow strong feelings, but their anger can then bubble up under the surface. Passive aggression and backbiting are characteristic temptations in this large cohort, with these vices now out of control in the relative anonymity of social media. And when authoritarian populists like Trump or that ranting maniac Javier Milei in Argentina give this group permission to forget its native reserve and good manners, then explosions happen with results that are plain to see.

This is the group that will have to undergo a significant change of mind if there's to be any serious, root and branch political action on the climate crisis. Because in facing any social challenge, the tendency of this group is to resent and resist uncomfortable debate, which offends and alienates them. These are John Howard's "Quiet Australians", who he wooed with that very telling election slogan "Relaxed and Comfortable". More recently, clever marketers targeted this group at the Referendum with that winning slogan, "Say No to the Voice of Division". This wasn't about overt racism, I don't think, but about rejecting a whole issue that had become too heated and uncomfortable for their tastes.

Yet the path of sanctity for Greens will tend to push them out of their comfort zone. A lot of saints and martyrs were such quiet and unassuming types who nevertheless took what for them would have been unfamiliar and uncomfortable stands when circumstances demanded it.

Friends, the Church is where all these human types are called to live, love and worship together on a collective journey to heaven. All of us are necessary, even though our temperaments sometimes misalign and even grate uncomfortably together. But in our own ways we're each called into this lifelong adventure of Christlikeness, from which the saints emerge. And it's right here for the taking, here in the community of the baptised gathered for the Eucharist. "Beloved, we are God's children now", as 1 John reminds us today. So, all this is reliably happening right here in our midst; the adventure of sanctity isn't a high-falutin abstraction or a remote ideal.

Our Revelations passage today, with its multitude robed in white around the altar, uses explicit Eucharistic imagery to imagine the world transfigured in the light of Jesus Christ and his saints. You and I are part of that, and whether we're red or yellow extraverts, blue or green introverts, task-oriented reds and blues, or people-oriented yellows and greens, or whatever mixture we might be, we all have our place in the Church, in its mission, and in its transforming call to sanctity. There we'll all find our true selves, but for that to happen we'll also be fundamentally challenged.

The Lord be with you.