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Introduction

We have all had the experience of being overcome with emotion. We may have wept over a loved one’s death, been swept away by an uplifting tide of joy, felt shock at an unusual or startling event, or experienced rage that seemed nearly uncontrollable. We may have been suddenly enveloped by bone-chilling dread or fear. And, of course, we have all experienced love—especially love for a spouse, parent, or child.

Less intense emotions also accompany our daily thoughts and activities. Perhaps we were pleasantly surprised upon finding a letter from a friend in the mailbox. We may have been disappointed by a missed opportunity. A feeling of calmness may have settled over us as we entered a church. In fact, it is likely that every action, thought, and decision we have is accompanied by some emotion—whether or not we are consciously aware of it!\(^1\)

The Church has traditionally called emotions like anger, fear, or love the “passions,” from the Latin word *passio* (“to undergo,” “to suffer”), because we undergo a change as we experience them. It almost seems as though we are the passive recipients of emotions, that we can’t help ourselves when we are overcome by fear, anger, anxiety, happiness, sadness, or love. We say, “I fell in love” or “He was engulfed by rage” or “I was overcome with sadness,” as though we had no control over our feelings.

It is quite true that most often our emotions arise in us spontaneously—at times, even unconsciously. We may snipe at someone without even fully realizing that we are angry, or we may feel
inexplicably drawn to someone without realizing why. The imme-
diacy and spontaneity of our emotions are among the ways in
which emotions ensure our survival. For example, the fear that
triggers our jumping out of the way of a speeding car—before we
even have time to think through the best course of action—can
save our life. Sexual desire is likely built into us so that we will
reproduce. An intense feeling of revulsion when we smell a foul
odor is a built-in warning signal. There are also psychic emotional
responses that are beneficial: anger when we see an injustice, for
example, or tender love for a new baby.

Yet even though our emotions seem to arise in us unbidden,
without our directly willing them (and sometimes even against
our will), we are nonetheless capable of managing or regulat-
ing them. For example, a soldier appropriately experiences fear
because he is in danger. But because he is well trained, he main-
tains his post, despite his feelings. Or although a mother might
feel her anger rising when her child interrupts her, she refrains
from unleashing her anger in harsh words. Though feelings of
anger or sadness or desire arise in us spontaneously, we are
free to respond in any number of ways. The Catholic Church
teaches that passions (or emotions) are neither good nor evil in
themselves, but they can become so when the will is engaged;
that is, the way I choose to behave can be considered to be
moral or immoral. If the soldier left his post out of fear or the
mother lashed out with angry and hurtful words, they may be
morally culpable. If the mother stops to think before yelling at
the child who interrupts her, then she is acting rationally. Our
reason should govern our passions. (Catechism of the Catholic
Church [CCC], 1767).
However, reason alone is not always sufficient to change our emotional patterns, especially if they are deeply engrained or the product of past emotional wounds. We may need help from counselors and confessors. When we feel stymied or paralyzed by unwanted or debilitating emotions that may have arisen due to a past trauma, or perhaps simply because of a pattern or habit we have fallen into, we are less free to act in a healthy way, and we are less capable of having fulfilling relationships. We may feel oppressed by our own moods, fears, and anxieties, or we may push people away through our anger and resentment. These are obstacles to happy, healthy, and holy living. We hope this book will offer some insight into the ways that our emotions can help (or hinder) healthy living as well as some new ways of managing them.

*The Emotions God Gave You* is not meant to outline a definitive theory of emotion or to choose sides in a competition of therapies or strategies to deal with our sometimes unruly emotions. Rather, with each chapter we hope to help paint a picture of the richness of the emotional life, each chapter adding a layer of color to the portrait. In the following pages, we will look at how emotions affect us and how our thoughts, attitudes, and behavior can affect our emotions. We’ll also examine the difference between emotion and mood, and explore the consequences of anger and resentment. What are the effects of temperament and our past experiences on our emotional health? Can we trust our feelings? When do our emotions become destructive? How do past emotional wounds affect our present-day emotional balance? What does it mean, practically speaking, for our reason to govern our passions? Finally, we will discuss ways to have a
healthy emotional life, gain self-mastery, and grow in virtue and holiness. After all, God gave us our emotions. He wants us to manage them for our own good—and for his glory!

Art and Laraine Bennett
Chapter 1

What Are Emotions?

It is just as wrong to despise all emotions as to advocate their unrestrained activity.

—Joseph Massman

Why do humans have emotions? Human beings have feelings and emotions because we are physical beings. From medieval times, theologians and now neuroscientists have understood emotions to involve a physiological process (the precise nature of which is hotly debated). For example, anger involves an elevated heart rate. Fear may involve trembling or shortness of breath. Theologians have argued that purely spiritual beings (for example, angels) do not have feelings or emotions. St. Thomas Aquinas further argued that God, being perfect and therefore incapable of suffering, does not have emotions per se. God loves and shows mercy but only insofar as they are acts of the divine will, not as feelings or bodily sensations or in any way indicating a lack in God’s perfection. Furthermore, says St. Thomas, while Scripture refers to God as being angry or wrathful, these emotions are attributed to him metaphorically. Of course, Jesus Christ, in his human nature, did have emotions.

We are not angels or pure spirits, but neither are we purely material beings, as some scientists would like to insist. We are, as St. Paul wrote, body, mind, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). On the most basic level, feelings are basic instincts like pain, hunger, or the need to sleep. These physical feelings are important
for survival, and we need to pay attention to them. But we also experience “psychic feelings” or emotions, such as fear or hatred when I perceive evil, and love and joy when I perceive the good. Feelings or passions are forces that motivate us to pursue the good or avoid evil (CCC, 1763). Our feelings are natural, an important part of being human, and vital in our pursuit of the good. When our emotions are directed toward the good—toward God—they become spiritually beneficial. We experience delight in God’s word, sorrow for sin, compassion for our fellow man, hunger for justice, and joy in his presence—all vitally part of our loving God with all our heart, as we are commanded by Christ (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27).

**The Importance of Emotions**

Emotions are critical, not only for our survival, but also for thriving as human beings. Fear warns us about a threat to our personal safety; love accompanies our intimate relationships. In fact, emotions provide us with important information about our relationships and our environment. As signals to ourselves and others, they help us to monitor our relationships and allow us to reveal our deepest needs to our loved ones. They also motivate us for action.

Our actions, thoughts, and decisions are almost always influenced or accompanied by emotions, even when we are not fully aware of them. They are the “motive forces” of the soul. However, emotions can arise in us due to a conscious decision as well. For example, if I see someone acting rudely toward an elderly person, I might consciously give in to a righteous anger
and speak out. Thus, emotions can arise in us both unconsciously and consciously.

It is not healthy to completely suppress our emotions, nor is it always possible to “control” them (more on this in a later chapter). However, we can (and should) be aware of them, and identify the most prudent way of dealing with them. We are free to choose how we respond to our feelings. In fact, we human beings function best when we act and think reasonably. Do we allow our passions to rule us, or does reason guide us? Do we feed our anger or resentment? Are we steeped in bitterness or envy? Do we wallow in self-pity? Are we incapacitated by fear? Do we judge others based on past resentments or emotional wounds? In short, it is wise to regulate, or manage, our emotions in light of reason.

It takes self-knowledge to recognize when we are acting out of an emotional bias. Having a well-balanced personality and being emotionally mature requires becoming aware of our emotions, knowing whether they are appropriate or inappropriate to the situation, and then responding rationally.

In themselves, our emotions are morally neutral (CCC, 1767). However, what we do with our emotions can be judged to be good or bad. The soldier who acted out of his fear and deserted his post may be considered to have acted wrongly. His fear was not wrong, but his actions were. Deliberately stirring up feelings of hatred for another person, seeking revenge, or dwelling on lustful thoughts is very likely to be sinful. “Passions are morally good when they contribute to a good action, evil in the opposite case” (CCC, 1768). We can understand this better when we consider the object of our emotions. If my desire is directed toward serving God and neighbor, it is good. If my desire is to view pornography, it is sinful.
Because he was true man, Jesus had feelings. He became quite angry with the Pharisees (Mark 3:5) and with the money changers outside the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). Just before Jesus performed the miracle of the loaves and fish to feed the hungry crowd, the gospel tells us that “his heart was moved with pity for them” (Mark 6:34). Jesus cried when Lazarus died (John 11:35), and as he approached Jerusalem prior to his crucifixion, “he saw the city and wept over it” (Luke 19:41). He was in agony and distress in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified—so much so that he sweated blood (Luke 22:44) and said, “My soul is sorrowful even to death” (Matthew 26:38). Jesus experienced the utmost desolation and abandonment on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Christ’s emotions were always perfectly appropriate for the situation. His anger toward the Pharisees was justified, and his sorrow about Lazarus’s death was entirely real, an outpouring of grief and love for his dear friend.

Emotions before and after the Fall

Because of original sin, our emotions are not always appropriate to the situation. They are not always balanced or guided by reason; worse, they can sometimes usurp reason! We may let our emotions get out of hand or make decisions emotionally instead of rationally. We may have a violent temper or suffer from anxiety. We may be subject to mood swings or depression. We may be emotionally overwrought or we may be overly cool and withdrawn.

It wasn’t always this way. In the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve were perfectly balanced. They were in
complete harmony with God, with each other, and with all of creation. God walked with them in the garden, “at the breezy time of the day” (Genesis 3:8). They were intelligent immortal lords of the world.6

Adam and Eve’s relationship with each other was also harmonious. They did not argue; they were not jealous or suspicious, nor did they try to dominate one another. They were perfectly suited to each other—best friends and perfect partners. When the Pharisees asked Jesus why Moses allowed divorce, he told them that it was because of the “hardness of your hearts,” but that “from the beginning it was not so” (Matthew 19:8). Adam’s and Eve’s emotions were in perfect harmony with their minds and wills. In this state of what theologians call “original justice,” our first parents had perfect control over their passions. There were no internal battles over whether to eat that last slice of cake, nor did they ever fly off the handle in a fit of temper.7

But the devil sowed suspicion in their hearts and tempted them with the prospect of being “like gods who know what is good and what is bad” (Genesis 3:5). Adam and Eve turned away from God as their loving Father. When they disobeyed God, they created a rift, not only between them and God, but between each other. Now they were suspicious of each other. Adam blamed Eve, and they both became ashamed. Enmity between men and women entered the world.

The result is that now, not only do we often feel distant from God and misunderstood by other people, but we also no longer possess that harmonious balance within our own psyche. Our intellect is darkened, our wills weakened. Our passions can get out of control. Even though we are baptized, we still experience
the effects of original sin: “I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want” (Romans 7:19).

Our emotions can range from superficial sentimentality to a deep, abiding love for God and true sorrow for sin. Our emotions can move us in compassion toward our neighbor and in holy rejoicing in the Lord. But our emotions can also lead us to sin: lust, envy, and greed. We can also be victims of our moods. We have all had the experience of waking up on top of the world only to come crashing down as our mood changes, like a thundercloud rolling in to sweep the sun out of our life. We don’t want to be as fickle as a weather vane, spinning and turning with every gust of wind. Rather, we would like our actions to be based on principles; we do the right thing, no matter what our mood or how we feel about it.

MANAGING OUR EMOTIONS

How rewarding it can be to manage our emotions—not suppressing or ignoring them! We can seek a healthy balance in our emotional lives, directed ultimately toward God. When we examine ourselves and our own emotional tendencies, we can then take the next step to gain equilibrium and to regulate (and perhaps even transform) our emotions and moods. In fact, “training our emotions to respond to the direction of reason is a most difficult task, and its achievement is called virtue.”

As long as there is no serious handicap (whether physical or psychological) that would require professional guidance, we can gradually improve ourselves and grow in emotional stability and maturity through a deep interior life. As we shed our unhealthy
attachments (more on this in chapter 9), we become more free to love God and our neighbor purely and joyfully. The more we get to know Christ through prayer and the sacraments, the greater our love for him. And the greater our attachment to him, to what is truly good, the less we will find ourselves swayed by unwelcome moods, unhealthy attachments, or violent passions. Christ himself is the healer who will direct our passions, helping us to achieve harmony within our souls. Our hearts will be free to respond with lightness and peace to God’s boundless grace.

When our emotions prompt us toward greater love of God and neighbor, we are growing in holiness. But when our moods are up and down like a roller coaster or our emotions are flying out of control, we can become a cross for our friends and family, and we may fail to respond to God’s will. It is wise to take a personal inventory of our emotional well-being: Do I tend to overreact when someone says a slightly hurtful comment? Am I anxious, moody, or fretful? Do I easily fly off the handle and become angry? Do I continue to dwell on my angry feelings, feeding bitterness and resentment in my soul? Do I give up when my mood changes? Do I indulge myself in my passions or moods? Do I ride a roller coaster of emotions, sometimes cheerful and other times despondent? Am I constantly finding fault? Do I indulge in self-pity? Can I laugh at myself? It is wise to know ourselves—how we tend to react, our prevailing mood, and how our emotions influence us. With this knowledge, we will be better able to make prudent choices and wise decisions and to respond more freely to God’s grace.

Wise spiritual directors, saints, and spiritual writers over the centuries have offered many insights into ways of managing our
emotions so that they work harmoniously in our lives for the purpose of drawing us closer to God. Among these are recognizing our dependence on God, placing ourselves in his presence, praying daily, and receiving the sacraments frequently. But the saints often begin with self-knowledge. Knowing ourselves and our tendencies will allow us to better regulate our reactions and our emotions. Ultimately, this self-knowledge, along with a deep interior life, ongoing conversion, and dependence on God’s mercy, will result in a calm acceptance of ourselves and others as well as genuine joy, trust in God, and true charity. Moodiness, oversensitivity, self-pity, fear, anger, and resentment, constant fault finding or blaming—all these can lead to sins against charity. When we achieve a healthy emotional balance, we will be more capable of responding generously to God’s will and benevolently toward our neighbor.

“He brought me into the wine cellar, he set in order charity in me,” says the bride in the Song of Songs (2:4). After the Fall, our psyche became disordered, and with it, our emotions and impulses. But it is Christ, the bridegroom and the beloved, who will order our souls according to his all-consuming love. The closer we grow to Jesus, the greater our inner harmony will be and the more love and peace will reign in our hearts.

Our hope is that by better understanding our emotions and discovering ways to manage and even transform them, we will gain the emotional equilibrium and healthy balance we need to take charge of our lives, grow closer to Christ, and share in the joy of his love.
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**GOING FURTHER**

1. What emotions do you struggle with? Do unruly emotions cause strife in your family, with your spouse or children, or in your relationship with God? Do you need to feel “in the mood” to pray or to serve others joyfully?

2. St. Paul writes to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always! . . . Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (4:4, 6-7). What is Paul telling us about attaining peace and joy? When you are able to put everything in the hands of God—with thanksgiving—do you experience true peace and joy? Does something keep you from letting go of those feelings of anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, or bitterness?

3. Studies have shown that people who are grateful, forgiving, and generous are happier. (We discuss this in more detail in chapter 6.) How do you think these virtues contribute to your overall mood?

4. Sometimes when we dwell too long on our problems, we feel as though we are going down a rabbit hole with no exit, and we can become anxious or depressed. On the other hand, if we ignore our problems, they are unlikely to improve. What is your tendency? What might be a way to strike a healthy balance in your life?
5. Reflect on a time when you were truly passionate about something or someone. How much more energy and focus did you have? Were you able to overcome obstacles easily? How can you harness that same passion to grow in holiness?