

Saints and sinners: Surrounded by good company

One of our favorite families is the Murphys. Paul and his wife, Pat, have 13 children. Once when we were there for supper, 21 of us gathered happily around two tables in the kitchen to eat — the 15 in their family and our six.

I was going to say we "crowded" around the kitchen tables, but the word crowded carries an unpleasant connotation. If someone you like is sitting close to you, that's not crowding. As we all know, this can be quite a pleasant experience. Crowding is something else.

Much as I like a lot of room, I would rather occupy a small room with a company of happy people than be in a large room with people I am not particularly fond of.

Karl Lorenz, the German scientist, says, "I strongly doubt whether you can condition man

so that he does not become nervous and neurotic when he is crowded."

Lorenz said it has been his experience that "people who live miles from the nearest neighbors and are not overwhelmed by social contacts show the greatest human kindness."

He tells a story from the days when he lived in Munich.

"We had as house guests," he says, "an American couple who lived in the wilds of Wisconsin. Just as we sat down to supper, the doorbell rang and I, who was overfed with human contacts, said with irritation, 'Who is that now?'"

His guests, said Lorenz, were shocked. "To be less than overjoyed when the doorbell rang was incomprehensible to these people who



george plagenz

● saints & sinners

lived deep in the country. It made me realize how much I had become a victim of overcrowding."

(For myself, I must say that I never visit a farm without feeling that farm-life holds one of the secrets hidden from modern man. The space and great quiet of the farm renews my spirit.)

Though Lorenz is undoubtedly right, it prob-

ably ought to be said that the reason we dislike crowding is that by and large we dislike the people who are crowding us. We don't "love our neighbors as ourselves."

Whether or not that may be true, overcrowding is one of the evils of modern society. In the ghetto, we are told that murder is the most likely cause of death for young men. Many of these killings, some social scientists say, can be laid to overcrowding. There are too many people per square foot on our shrinking planet. It eventually takes its toll on our frayed nerves.

One of the newspapers I worked for was located in a begrimed structure in downtown Cleveland. There was no air-conditioning and the city's dirt blew in through the open windows in the summer. Our arms got black from the soot

on our desks and we stirred our coffee with copy pencils.

But we outgrew the old building and moved into an airy, well-lighted structure of concrete and glass. If we were overcrowded where we were and needed more space, now we had it.

Somehow, a lot of the love which permeated the old place stayed back there to live with the ghosts of those happy years on Ninth Street.

The moral of the story is that good company — not plenty of room — is the secret of happiness.

Once got a card on Father's Day from one of my boys who penned these words, "May good company continue to surround you. Company is thought's best sustenance and stimulus."

The Murphys would understand.

Debate rages over whether to pay homage to Europe's Christian roots

By William J. Kole

Associated Press Writer
VIENNA, Austria — Is Europe a Christian continent?

Unquestionably, the region is steeped in Christianity from the faith's earliest days. The Apostle Paul brought the religion to Europe's shores around A.D. 50. Later, the continent became the center of Roman Catholicism and the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation.

But that was then and this is now. Today's Europe is a multiethnic melting pot of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and other faiths — making the question a ticklish one as churches lobby for a mention of the continent's Christian heritage in a key document on the future of the European Union.

The Convention on the Future of the European Union is being negotiated in

Brussels, Belgium, and is scheduled for completion by 2004, in time for the EU to accept as many as 10 new nations, including a half-dozen from the formerly communist East bloc. Mostly Muslim Turkey is expected to join later.

The convention could become the groundwork for a constitution that would replace the EU's founding treaty, so some Christians see this moment as a rare opportunity to enshrine the continent's religious heritage in the document's preamble.

"It's not an attack on the separation of church and state," said Keith Jenkins, associate general secretary of the Brussels-based Conference of European Churches, which is leading the effort. "It's a recognition of history."

Civil libertarians contend it's simply inappropriate to highlight Christianity in a modern, pluralistic society that some theologians have described as

"post-Christian," even though more than three in four Europeans still consider themselves Christian. Such concerns kept any mention of religion out of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights drafted two years ago.

"The EU must resist pressure to include religion of any kind in its constitutional declarations," Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of Britain's National Secular Society, said in an interview.

"Europe embraces those of many faiths, and of no faith. Promoting any one faith as pre-eminent will inevitably lead sooner or later to resentment."

Exactly what shape a recognition of Christianity would take still isn't clear, but Jenkins said, "No one is suggesting that the preamble to a European constitution should be turned into a theological treatise.

"What's most important is that

there's a discussion about values — that we see Europe in terms of values, not just policies. Churches and religious communities have a role to play in contributing to the broader public debate."

Christians of multiple denominations have rallied behind the cause. The Conference of European Churches has a broad membership that includes many mainstream Protestant faiths and a number of national evangelical associations.

Pope John Paul II has joined the fray, too, during a visit late last month to Bulgaria. He called the message of Christianity "relevant even to those who, in the field of politics, are working to bring about European unification."

"In searching for its own identity, the continent cannot but return to its Christian roots," the pope said.

Back at the Vatican, John Paul

pressed his case further, saying: "The Christian patrimony of civilization, which has contributed so greatly to the defense of the values of democracy, freedom and solidarity among the peoples of Europe, must neither vanish nor be disregarded."

Jenkins, who directs the conference's Church and Society Commission, concedes there's fierce opposition from political leaders in France, which is doggedly committed to church-state separation. Former French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin led his nation's effort to keep religious references out of the rights charter in 2000.

The concept also has been criticized in countries such as Sweden, where years of government support of the state church have soured some citizens on the idea of mixing religion with politics. The Swedes separated church and state just two years ago.

"But Europe's Christian heritage is a historical fact, and it's an important one," Jenkins said. "Peace, justice, reconciliation, solidarity, sustainability: These are values that are shared by many Europeans — values that are found at the heart of the Christian gospel."

Secularists and civil libertarians remain unconvinced. Many fear a reference to Christian heritage could become a pretext to an extension of church influence over EU policies.

"The only way to ensure that all of Europe's citizens feel equally valued is to leave religion out of its pronouncements and to secularize its structure and workings," Porteous Wood said.

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