

Selfishness Rules the Age

By JOHN DASH

It is Dr. James Hitchcock's contention that the 70s are "The Me Decade."

"Today, selfishness is respectable," and the ultimate arbiter of truth is the self, he laments.

Dr. Hitchcock spoke recently in Rochester as the last speaker in the Magisterium Series for the year. He is the nationally known author of *The Decline and Fall of Radical Catholicism* and is professor of history at St. Louis (Mo.) University.

A chapter from a forthcoming book provided the basis for his talk at Our Lady of Mercy High School Auditorium May 17. The new book, *The Future of Roman Catholicism*, is expected to be published next spring.

Dr. Hitchcock listed a number of signs to bolster his description of the 70s both within and outside of the Church.

"It hasn't been very often in the history of the world that selfishness has been respectable, the way it is at the present time," he said. He notes that the "dominant theme" of the past 15 years has been one of "Liberation." He said that the definition of liberation is taken to be "freeing myself from the oppressiveness of structure."

Such a view, he said, is a "frivolous way of looking at reality, but a very common way of looking at reality in our culture."

He suspects that such a view "is an inevitable by-product of a society which has experienced a long period of unbroken material prosperity."

He said that also within society there has developed "a kind of fatal confusion" between wants and needs. "We tend to use the words interchangeably."

He finds such notions to be a form of infantilism.

He also describes the age as giving rise to the idea that "the very act of self-expression is one of the few sacred things we have left."

It is Dr. Hitchcock's observation that the more "outrageous and false" actions and statements people make, "the more we are invited to admire it," for "courage and honesty."

Dr. Hitchcock links this attitude with dissent in the Church.

Often, he said, dissent is referred to as the "right to dissent."

But, he said, the "right to dissent" has today become the "duty of dissent."

Some, he said, equate dissent with the official teachings of the Church as a sign of their "own personal authenticity."

"If you are merely a believer," he said, one is considered, "not very intelligent, honest, not very courageous. You are kind of mentally and spiritually dead."

He said that among certain theologians who defend Magisterial teachings, those theologians often find themselves on the defensive.

He describes the "spirit of our time" as "the systematic hunting-down of all settled convictions."

This means, he said, that there is a cultural mindset that there aren't any fixed and settled truths and falsehoods.

One sees this, he notes, in the Church, and especially in the reception accorded Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which prohibited artificial contraception.

Dr. Hitchcock further specified the attitude in regard to vows and conscience.

He observed that both religious and marital vows are now thought of as provisional rather than eternal, and conscience as "the faculty in us that tells us to do what we'd like to do anyway," rather than the faculty that warns the individual from actions he wants to do.

"Conscience now seems to work with a remarkable degree of ease," he said.

On the question of divine revelation, it is Dr. Hitchcock's belief that "the notion of divine revelation has been weakened to be understood as human beings meditating on their own religious experience." Some claim, he said, that the Bible is on a par with any other book rising from religious experience.

Other evidence of the "inflated modern ego," he said is the process of "cutting Jesus down to size." Again, he observed that Jesus is today considered "a man like us in whom God is present in a special way."

All of this is evidence, he feels, that modern man is denying his adulthood. In the question of sexual ethics, for instance, he notes that many reject the sexual ethics of the Church and yet return to the Church to encourage it to accept that rejection.

"In every age," he said, "there are distinctive forms the challenge to faith takes." He said the subtlety of the devil's original temptation "You shall be like Gods," is especially evident today. He said man must remember the words of the Gospel, "You have not chosen Me. I have chosen you."

The Magisterium Series is sponsored by a number of local councils of the Knights of Columbus. The proceeds from the lectures go to charity. Taped copies of the lectures are available to the general public by writing to Mrs. Gertrude Newberry, 160 Azalea Rd., Rochester, N.Y. 14620.

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