

Both right, left have their 'agendas'

The word "agenda" is a list of things that "need to be done." As such, it is neutral in meaning. Taken positively it refers to an individual or a group who are well-organized — people who know what "needs to be done" and have made the effort to list the steps that need to be taken if goals are to be achieved.

The dismissive remark, "Well, what would you expect them to say? They have an agenda," is a negative connotation that has come into play during the current sexual-abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church.

A few commentators, who probably regard themselves as perfect centrists beholden to no church group or movement, have suggested that it is counterproductive for the left and the right to "exploit" this crisis by pressing their own "agendas."

They scold "the left" for making the case for a married clergy, women priests and popular election of bishops, and "the right" for its campaign to keep gays out of seminaries and the priesthood, and to enforce fidelity to church teachings about sexuality and reproduction.

They say that the church cannot effectively address this crisis if it gets sidetracked by disputes over these various "agenda" items. The task before us is to resolve the present crisis, to see to it that children and young people are protected, and to re-establish healthy relationships between bishops and priests, and between hierarchy and laity. This is



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

the time to put aside selfish interests (read: "agendas").

In his address at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' meeting in Washington, D.C., Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the USCCB, mounted a similar warning:

"Sadly, even among the baptized, there are those at extremes within the church who have chosen to exploit the vulnerability of the bishops in this moment to advance *their own agendas*. One cannot fail to hear in the distance — and sometimes very nearby — the call of the false prophet, 'let us strike the shepherd and scatter the flock.' We bishops need to recognize this call and to name it clearly for what it is."

The problem is that Bishop Gregory did not "name it clearly for what it is." He did not identify the "extremists" nor their "agendas."

Was he warning the bishops against conservative Catholics who blame the crisis on homosexuals and urge that gays not be admitted to seminaries or the priesthood? If so, some of those extremists were sitting in the audience.

Are the "false prophets" those who favor optional celibacy for priests, a greater role for women in the church and a change in the process by which bishops are appointed? Again, some of his fellow bishops favor these reforms.

But what's wrong with having an agenda? An agenda, is nothing more than a list of things that a group of people thinks "need to be done" — whether in politics, business, academia, the professions or even the church.

One may disagree with the content of a particular agenda, but why should its very existence be dismissed so summarily — as "extremist," in fact?

Does anyone seriously believe that the church can extricate itself from the present crisis and avoid similar crises in the future without making any systemic or structural changes at all? Is it only a matter of fidelity and obedience, and nothing more?

If a fire department were having difficulty putting out fires in a timely fashion, would it be "extremist" for citizens to demand a review of operations, including the training of firefighters, the system of promotions within the department and the state of its fire-fighting equipment?

Or would such concerns be manifestations of "false prophecy"?

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Private confession 'redemptive'

To the editor:

Frequent Private Confession fine-tunes the conscience so that one sees sin as sin, and the necessity to try to avoid it. It helps us rise above the standards of the world and save our souls. It offers opportunities for spiritual guidance that we desperately need in this age of uncertainty and moral confusion.

Frequent Private Confession forces us to see ourselves as we really are. Its grace strengthens us for the constant battle between good and evil that each of us faces daily. Private Confession also works as a deterrent. There used to be a saying, "If you can't confess it, don't do it," and that imperfect motive saved the virtue of a lot of us.

General Absolution causes us to become dangerously complacent, offering little motivation to give up sin or turn our lives around. Its twice a year cycle implies we don't need to think seriously about sin very often. In General Absolution a person who is in mortal sin with no resolve to change is not forgiven, but he doesn't know it. In Private Confession he is told the truth. He is offered prayer, support, and advice on how to strive for true contrition, but absolution can only come when he earns it.

Sin is never so clearly sin as it is when one has humbly said the words aloud to a priest. There is something so redeeming

about that audible act of humility that strengthens the character and resolve of a soul, and sets one up for success in combating evil and cultivating virtue.

Since General Absolution appears to be greatly curtailed, try Private Confession and try it often. Urge your priests to offer it frequently, even before and after Mass. Hopefully priests will begin persistently encouraging us to receive this form of Christ's Sacrament of love and mercy.

Janet Schwenkler
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St. Campion seen anew

To the editor:

Using the life and canonization of St. Edmund Campion as a contrasting example, Father McBrien wonders Nov. 28 why three nuns, a lay missionary, and an archbishop murdered 23 years ago have been overlooked for canonization. If their cases follow the pattern of Campion's, Father McBrien will be wondering for quite awhile. Campion was executed for treason in 1581 and canonized in 1970. For those interested in a summary of Campion's life, as well as a perspective on Campion's Brag and the Ten Reasons, divergent from that expressed by Father McBrien, see www.ever-reader.com/allusio3.htm.

Robert E. Drury
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Study history of ossuary

To the editor:

I'd like to comment upon the article "Mystery surrounds artifact's history" (Oct. 31). It's true that without archaeological context, the ossuary remains enigmatic yet unproven. However, it's been examined in detail by some well-respected people in the field, and nothing has emerged that would put its origins outside the first century. Coupled with the specific relationships between the

names, given at the time of his death. The art of the ossuary is a wonder in itself. James is as "Jam" our Lord. Not "a" Lord, nor brethren. er "of" o was. Pro relationships