



Background

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prepared by

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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Development and Approval of Documents

Introduction

A document on the agenda of the plenary assembly of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops typically has been through a lengthy consultation process.

The Conference is organized around an extensive committee structure. Most documents originate in one of the various committees whose members are bishops and which often have lay consultants. Once a committee has been authorized to proceed—generally by the Administrative Committee—research and drafting at the staff level may begin. A committee will review, revise, and often rewrite a document a number of times before it votes to transmit it to the Administrative Committee for further action.

The USCCB's Administrative Committee is the board of trustees of the civil corporation. It is charged with carrying on the work of the Conference between plenary assemblies, preparing the agenda for these meetings, and overseeing the work of the Conference's General Secretariat. Its membership is comprised of the Conference officers, the elected chairmen of the standing committees, one representative of each of the 13 USCCB regions, the chairman of the board of directors of Catholic Relief Services, and the immediate past president in the first year following his term.

The Administrative Committee meets in March, September, and immediately prior to the November plenary assembly. The items on its March and September agendas are reviewed and discussed by the lay, clergy, and religious members of the bishops' National Advisory Council (NAC) who make formal, and often specific, recommendations to the Administrative Committee.

Following its own deliberations, and taking into account the recommendations of the NAC, the Administrative Committee may choose from several actions with regard to a draft document before it may remand the document to committee for further

development and revision; it may authorize its publication as a document issued by the originating committee; it may issue the document in its own name. If the document is sufficiently substantive or if canon law requires action by the full membership, however, the Administrative Committee will place it on the agenda for the next plenary assembly.

Plenary Assemblies

Canon law and the USCCB statutes require that a plenary assembly be held at least once a year.¹ For many years, the Conference has met twice annually - in November in Baltimore and in June in alternating host cities around the country.

Meetings open with prayer and the normal business attendant to a meeting of this sort, approval of the agenda, approval of the minutes, and so forth. These are followed by a "preliminary presentation of action items." At this time, the chairmen of relevant committees briefly introduce the items the bishops will debate and vote on during the meeting. A chairman typically will present a synopsis of the document and announce the deadline for receiving amendments. There is little or no discussion of the items at this introductory stage.

Plenary assemblies are conducted, for the most part, in open session, with staff, media and invited observers welcome in the meeting room. An executive session is always scheduled, however, which only the bishops are allowed to attend. *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* govern the assembly's proceedings.

Amendments

Documents presented for action by the bishops are always subject to amendment. Under normal circumstances, draft documentation will be sent to the bishops at least 30 days prior to a plenary assembly. Bishops are then free to submit amendments to the chairman of the appropriate committee. Similarly, at the time he makes his preliminary presentation, the committee chairman will announce a deadline for submitting amendments, usually by the close of business of the day prior to the scheduled vote.

The committee of jurisdiction then meets to dispose of the amendments. Its recommendations are subsequently presented to the full membership for final action: the bishops are asked to accept *en bloc* amendments accepted by the committee and then reject *en bloc* amendments rejected by the committee. Any bishop is free to ask for separate consideration of any amendment.

Votes

All active members of the Conference-that is active diocesan or eparchial bishops, coadjutors, or auxiliaries in the United States or the U.S. Virgin Islands, or those equivalent to diocesan bishops according to canon law²-have a deliberative vote at plenary assemblies in most circumstances. Retired bishops do not have a vote, but

are invited to speak to matters before the Conference. There are two circumstances in which not all bishops may vote. In matters which affect only the Latin Catholic Church, Eastern Catholic Bishops have a consultative voice but not a vote.³ Likewise, only diocesan or eparchial bishops-not auxiliaries or coadjutors-are allowed to vote on financial matters.⁴

"Conference matters shall normally be decided by voice vote,"⁵ with a simple majority of those present and voting the typical threshold for approval. In some specified instances, a two-thirds majority is necessary for approval.⁶

Article XIII of the USCCB Statutes clearly states that "decisions of the Conference are normally devoid of juridical binding force." It recommends, however, that "as an expression of collegial responsibility" such decisions should be observed when passed by a majority of the membership.

Exceptions to Article XIII include "cases where universal law has so prescribed, or by special mandate of the Holy See, either on its own initiative or at the request of the Conference ... " In those cases, the Conference can issue general decrees which are binding only when they are approved by two-thirds vote of the Conference's membership and granted *recognitio*--or confirmation-by the Holy See.'

Until the November 2001 plenary assembly, votes were conducted by secret paper ballot, which were tallied by "tellers" and reported by the president of the Conference in open session. Votes remain secret but are now conducted by electronic voting machine under most circumstances.

NOTES

Canon 453 of the *Code of Canon Law* and Article V of the USCCB statutes.
USCCB Statutes, Article II. USCCB
Statutes, Article IV. USCCB
Statutes, Article XVI. USCCB
Bylaws, Chapter III, No. 3. USCCB
Bylaws, Chapter M, No. 2. USCCB
Statutes, Article XIV.