

Who Makes It And What Is It Like?

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WASHINGTON — For the benefit of readers who have never attended the annual meeting of the American Bishops, it may be useful to say a word about the fat mass of documents, which, taken together, represent the Bishops' "agenda documentation." This contains the texts of reports to be approved (each committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) makes a report, as does each office in the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) — though, of course, every one of them does not necessarily report at every meeting) and of statements to be issued by the conference.

About three weeks before the scheduled date of the meeting, each Bishop and interested members of the press received in the mail a book of about one hundred pages which contained the "agenda documentation," or at least as much of it as was ready in advance. After the meeting got underway, the Bishops received a stack of fifteen or twenty further documents, and these are called "supplementary documentation." These are the reports which were not ready until too late to get into the book and for statements prepared by ad hoc committees set up to deal with "urgent matters" just before the opening of the meeting. For instance, this year the Administrative Board of the NCCB (which sets the agenda) met on Saturday, November 11th, two days before the start of the meeting. It was urged that the Bishops should come out with another statement on Vietnam, now that peace seems to be around the corner. Therefore, a special ad hoc committee was formed on the spot, with Cardinal Krol at its head, to prepare a statement. The first draft of this statement was part of the "supplementary documentation."

There are three ways to get something onto the Bishops' agenda. The first and best way is to be the head of one of the committees of the NCCB, or bureaus of the USCC. That way, you can turn in a report and the Bishops have to think about whatever your report says. There are more than thirty NCCB committees and a similar number of USCC committees, departments, offices, or agencies.

The second way to get something onto the Bishops' agenda is to be a bishop. This allows you to propose what are called *varia* which are recommendations for action submitted by an individual bishop. They are listed in the book and are considered together, usually on the last day of the general meeting period. Bishops must first submit

these *varia* to the administrative board.

If you are not a bishop, you must resort to the third way of getting something onto the agenda. There are two approaches which can be used. On the one hand, you may be able to persuade a friendly bishop to propose an idea of yours as a *varia* item. On the other hand, you can have an interview with the Bishops' Liaison Committee. This committee is supposed to report to the general body of Bishops all the ideas of the groups who have come to talk with them. As a result of hearing this report, a bishop may be inspired to make a motion urging the adoption of something you have proposed. But it is much more likely, of course, that the Liaison Committee will forget to mention you.

These reports which the Bishops have to consider — what are they like? Well, they vary a great deal. Some of them are very brief, and

some run to twenty or thirty pages. Some are just statements of principle or resumes of past activity. Others contain specific proposals which have to be voted on. Sometimes the Bishops' vote amounts to "approval" of the report, and sometimes it does not. When it does, of course, the text of the report ought to be gone over with a fine-tooth comb to remove any false or dubious statements; but it must be said, on the whole, that the Bishops very rarely read with care all of the material placed before them. They are extremely busy men, and all the documents pile up within two or three weeks before the meeting. It is probably safe to say that most bishops hardly look at the agenda documentation until they get on the plane. Your reporter must admit that although he is free of the burdens of running a diocese, and really has nothing to do but try to keep up with ecclesiastical news, nevertheless, even he was unable to read most of the documents for this Bishops' meeting until after the meeting had actually begun. It is hard to see how anyone could cover it all and still study each item deeply enough to propose major revisions.

This is a fact which the bureaucrats are well aware of — and something which, unhappily, the Bishops do not seem to worry about nearly as much as they should.