

Odd couple combo of bishops strikes blow for transparency

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 18, 2009 NCR Today

In what some wits might be tempted to call a minor miracle, this morning's session of the U.S. bishops' meeting in San Antonio produced a small blow for transparency, engineered by an unlikely pair of prelates.

Today's agenda called for the bishops to vote on several proposed new translations of liturgical texts, and under the rules of the conference a two-thirds vote of all bishops of the Latin Rite is required for approval. After brief floor debate, the vote on the first text ended up falling short, and so Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, president of the USCCB, announced that the measure would have to be settled by mail-ballots from bishops not present in San Antonio.

In keeping with the conference's long-standing practice, George did not announce the results of the inconclusive vote.

At that stage, Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Nebraska, widely seen as one of the most conservative voices in the conference, rose to complain. He argued it's "silly" that the results of an inconclusive vote are known by the USCCB staff, since they have to compile the results, but not shared with the bishops themselves.

Monsignor David Malloy, secretary general of the conference, replied that keeping the results confidential is designed to "protect the integrity of the electoral process." He said that were the vote counts revealed, it could prompt "lobbying on one side or the other."

Not long afterwards, Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, usually seen as a stalwart of the bishops' moderate-to-liberal wing, took the floor to say, "I think Bishop Bruskewitz has a point."

The comment drew a wry laugh from many bishops, since Bruskewitz and Pilarczyk don't generally find themselves on the same side of floor debates.

In the end, Pilarczyk made a motion to change the conference's practice and to reveal the results of inconclusive debates. Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit opposed it, arguing that it's a bad idea "to make policy on the fly."

Despite that, the measure passed, and from that point on George announced the results even of inconclusive votes. (For the record, the proposed texts fell just short of the required 163 votes in favor, making it probable that they will eventually be approved once the mail ballots are in.)