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THE JOURNEY OF ARCHBISHOP BLASE CUPICH A Father's Devotion Led Blasé to Priesthood

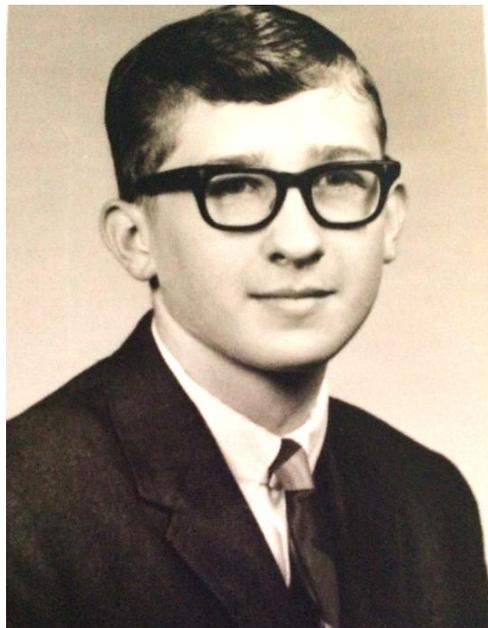
By Manya Brachear Pushman, Chicago Tribune Reporter, November 15, 2014

Edited by the Diocesan Archivist



During his earliest steps toward becoming Chicago's next archbishop, Blasé Cupich wasn't sure religious life was for him. As a boy growing up in Nebraska, he and his siblings listened as their father urged them to consider a vocation in the Catholic Church. But he had figured he was the least likely among them to become a priest. He imagined a career in law and went out with girls.

Blasé Cupich as a Young Man



The odds grew slimmer once his older brother Rich went into the seminary before him. "I thought maybe I was off the hook," he joked during a Tribune interview in Spokane just weeks before moving to Chicago. He grinned, "I thought it was like those coupons. 'One per family.'"

That older brother and a younger brother left the seminary to pursue other careers, while Blasé entered the seminary and stayed on the path to priesthood. Even so, as he studied philosophy and theology, he dated women and entertained the idea of marriage. His superiors offered to send him to Rome to finish his clerical training but even then he told them he wasn't sure he wanted to be a priest. "I told the archbishop, 'I'm not ready to sign on the dotted line,' and he responded, 'Well, we're not ready to ordain you. We think you have a vocation (to serve the church) and it will work out.'"

Archbishop Cupich Succeeds Cardinal George in Chicago

Bishop Cupich, 65, will succeed Cardinal Francis George as leader of the nation's third largest archdiocese. His is the first major appointment in the U.S. by Pope Francis. Cupich and the pope have never met, but Bishop Cupich, a charismatic clergyman and grandson of Croatian immigrants, embodies the themes of the Francis papacy. Colleagues, friends and family say his emphasis on social justice, his openness to change and the background he shares with his flock might explain his elevation. Could he perhaps steer American bishops in a new direction – away from a dogmatic approach to church teaching and toward a more pastoral ministry?

In a series of conversations during his last days in the diocese of Spokane, Bishop Cupich (pronounced SUE-pitch), discussed the upbringing that shaped him, how he will take advantage of his higher profile and where he stands on social issues gnawing at the church.

"The church can challenge society, but society also challenges the church," Cupich said, surrounded by boxes already packed and ready to be shipped to his new home. "That's good. We should be humble enough to be able to accept that."

The Cupich Family

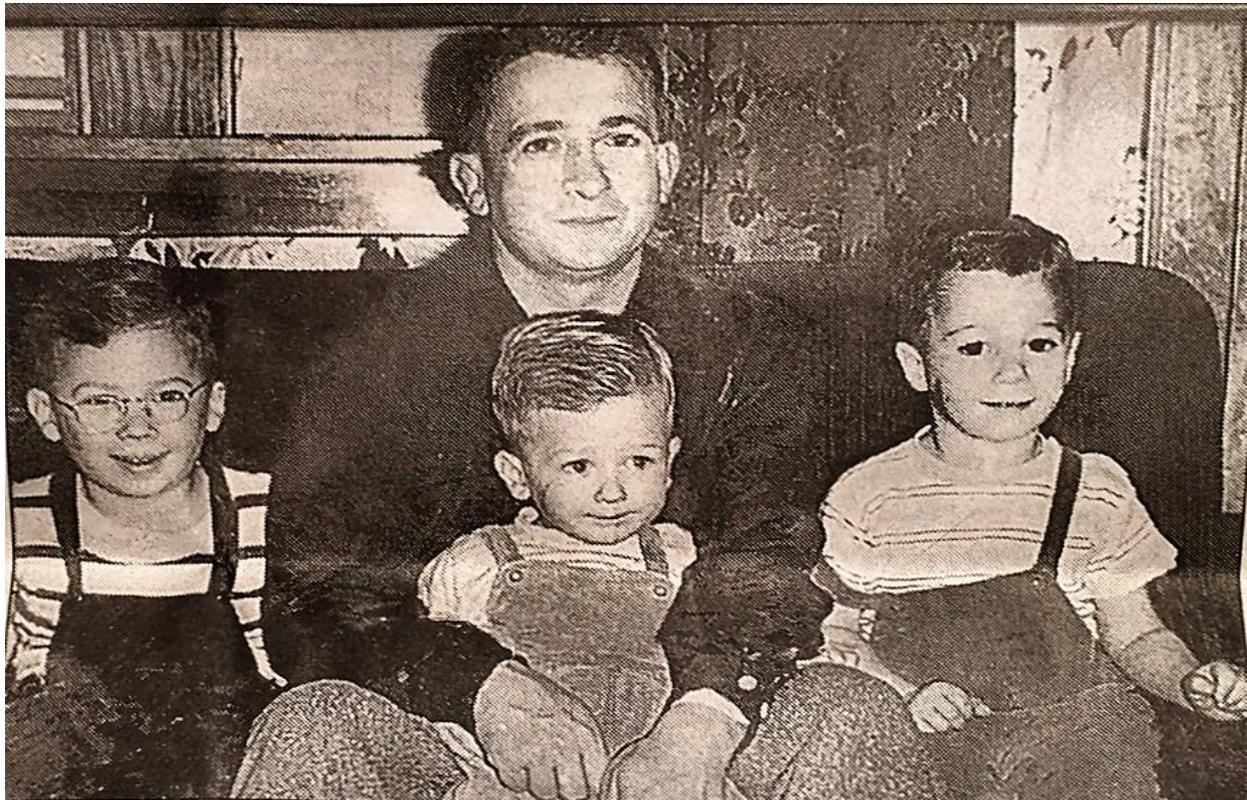
The third of nine children born to Blasé and Mary Cupich, Blasé Joseph Cupich was born in Omaha, Nebraska on March 19, 1949 – the Feast Day of Saint Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary. His parents named him for his now-deceased father and late grandfather, who in his homeland of Croatia pronounced it “Blahj.”

Young Cupich grew up attending south Omaha’s Saints Peter and Paul parish, in a building his grandfather helped finance in the early 1900s by soliciting donations door to door. The future archbishop went to grade school there as well. A new building went up on the same site in 1967.

His father, a U.S. postal worker, spent the mornings delivering mail and the afternoons as the grade school’s part-time janitor, wiping down blackboards, sweeping floors and scrubbing toilets. Blasé and his brothers always stayed to help their father. For additional income, Mr. Cupich also did odd jobs.



Blasé and Mary Cupich



Blasé at age 2, center, with Brothers Robert, Left, and Richard, right, and their father Blasé

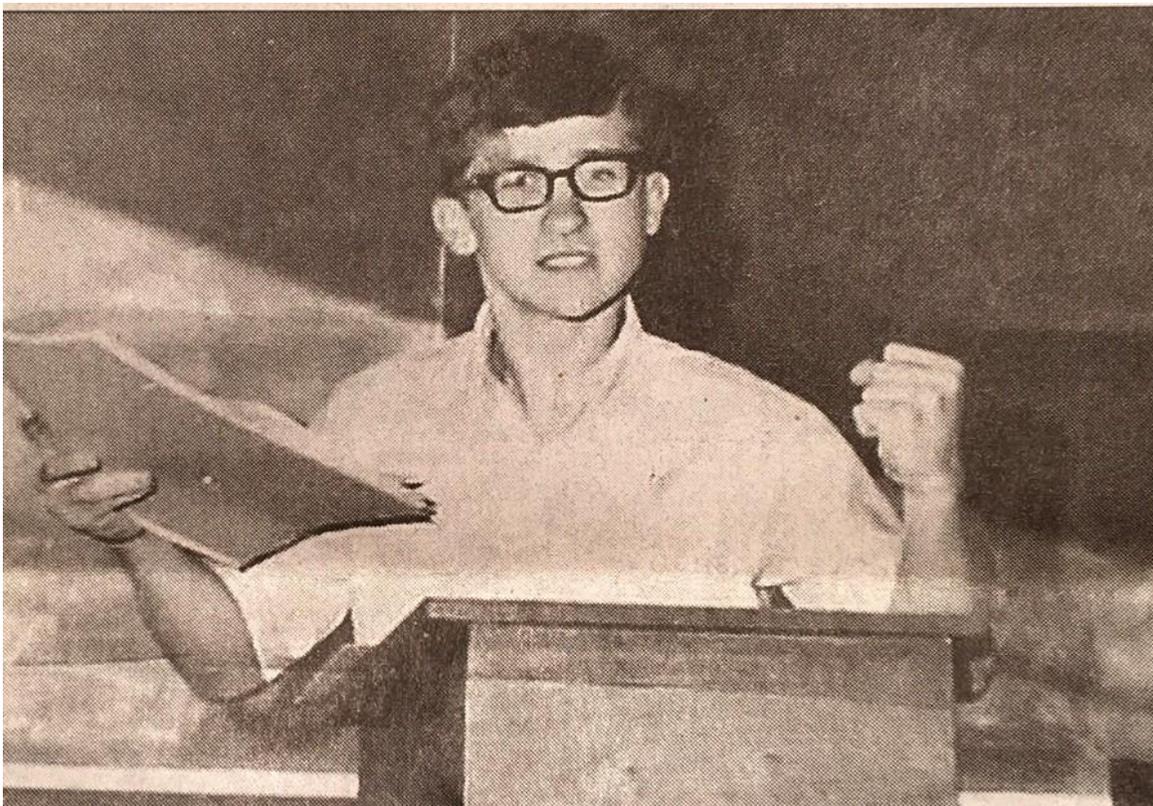
“We’d come home and we’d all have supper together and then many times, maybe three times a week, Dad would go out and pick up other work, like bartending for different parties. Then he’d come home, say around 10 or 11 o’clock, go to bed, get up early again at 5 am and go to work,” Blasé recalled. My parents put food on the table, clothes on our backs and sent us kids to Catholic school – all nine of us.”

The Oldest Boys Were Encouraged to get Jobs

Blaze’s parents also challenged their three oldest sons, starting in junior high, to get jobs, buy their own clothes and pay their own way to Omaha’s Archbishop ‘Ryan High School, especially since they had six other mouths to feed.

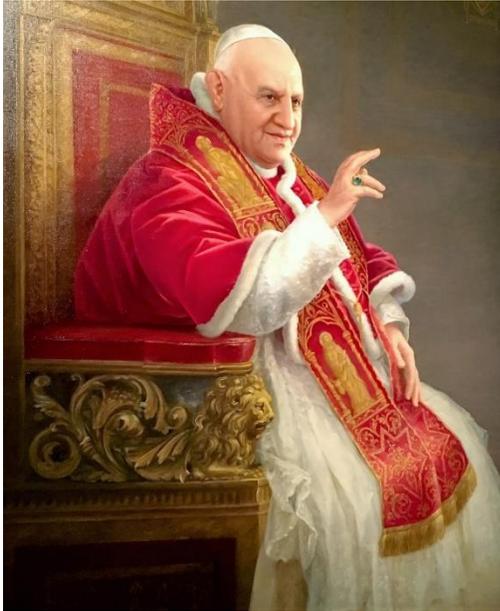
Church was a cornerstone of the Cupich household, “a second family,” Blasé said. The family’s first home, at 36th and X Street, was just five or six blocks from the church. Every week, all the members of the family attended Mass in the parish church. The children also learned Croatian folk dances that they later performed in traditional costumes.

“In my family, my father said this to all of us: ‘Whenever you think about the future, what you’re going to do, don’t take priesthood or religious life off the table; everybody has to consider it.’” But in high school during the mid-1960s, Blasé was more interested in a law career. Public speaking came naturally, and he excelled at his studies. Known for his quick wit and wisecracks, he successfully ran for student council president and defeating a star athlete. And when home coming and prom came along, he went with a date.



Nevertheless, the parish priest at Saints Peter and Paul, Monsignor John Juricek, encouraged Blasé Cupich to give religious life a try.

Blasé Captivated by Pope John XXIII



Through his adolescence, Blasé had been captivated by the popular papacy of Pope John XXIII, the reforms of Second Vatican Council and the inauguration of John F Kennedy, the nation's first Catholic president. "There was a certain pride in people's faith," Cupich said of those years. "It was a very exciting time. We were swimming in Catholicism."

Blasé enrolled at Saint John Vianney Seminary at age 18 and went on to earn his BA degree in philosophy from the College of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota in 1971. He reluctantly accepted the offer to complete his seminary course work in Rome. Soon after arriving in Rome he received bad news from a postcard he received for an aunt when he learned that his father had taken ill.

Doctors diagnosed Mr. Cupich as having Parkinson's disease.

Blasé received his baccalaureate degree in sacred theology from the Pontifical North American College in 1974.

The diagnosis of Parkinson's disease forced the elder Cupich to stop working, but it did not blunt his concern for those less fortunate. He channeled his energy into the local chapter of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, a Catholic charity dedicated to serving the poor.

Blaze's Father Runs for Office

Eventually, Blase's father ran for office, incensed that the county south of Omaha declined to bring Meals on Wheels to the area. He campaigned on the single issue of nutrition for senior citizens. He beat an incumbent county board member by a handful of votes. He served from 1977 to 1988, bringing Meals on Wheels to Sarpy County. He also helped establish the Eastern Nebraska Office on Aging.

Mary Cupich Learns to Drive

Meanwhile, at age 65, Blase's mother, Mary Cupich, learned how to drive. "My folks were very practical," he said. "They were also able to think outside of the box. They were not going to let circumstances paralyze them. They knew sometimes one just had to take some new initiative. I think they passed that on to all of us. If you don't find a way, you make one."

By 1975, a 26-year-old Blasé Cupich had earned an additional degree in theology, a master's from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. That same year, he also returned to Saints Peter and

Paul parish to be ordained a priest. “He wanted the family to be there with him,” said Rich Cupich, recalling his brother’s first Mass.

First Assignment as a Priest

Father Cupich spent his first three years as the associate pastor of a parish in Omaha and a parochial high school instructor. He also served in leadership roles for the Omaha archdiocese and helped men prepare for the priesthood at Creighton University which was run by the Jesuits.

Appointed to the Diplomatic Mission in Washington, DC

In 1981, Father Cupich was appointed secretary to the pope’s diplomatic mission in Washington, DC. While there, he completed a dissertation at Catholic University of America in 1979 and went on to become rector of the Pontifical College Josephinum, a seminary in Columbus, Ohio. After a sabbatical in Rome, he served one more year as an Omaha parish priest.

Father Cupich is Named Bishop



The Young Bishop Cupich greets ailing Pope John Paul II at the Vatican

After that series of high-profile appointments, Father Cupich received the first of three bishop assignments from the Vatican, each from a different pope. In 1998, Pope John Paul II appointed him bishop of Rapid City, SD. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI appointed him bishop of Spokane. In September 2014, Pope Francis named him archbishop of Chicago.

Appointed Archbishop of Chicago



Archbishop Cupich Installed as Ninth Archbishop of Chicago

Bishop Cupich insists he doesn't know why Pope Francis chose him. The two have never met and probably won't, he said, until he travels to Rome in June to receive the pallium, the symbol of his office as archbishop. "He wouldn't recognize me in a lineup of criminals," Bishop Cupich joked. He also contends that he was not given any direction or mandate. When he received the call from the apostolic nuncio, the Vatican's envoy to the United States, the only thing the nuncio wanted to know was whether Bishop Cupich would accept the new post. He did, then went to dinner with friends and didn't breathe a word.

Bishop Cupich's New Challenge in Chicago

"The Pope appoints a bishop to a diocese because he thinks the bishop knows how to do the job and doesn't need a lot of hand-holding," Bishop Cupich said. But he knows the Chicago archbishop serves a constituency much wider than the archdiocese's 2.2 million Catholics of which nearly half are Hispanics. The archbishop must oversee an annual budget of a billion dollars, and pastoral care to Catholic schools, hospitals and social services that touch the lives of many Chicagoans, many of whom are not Catholic.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel welcomes the new Archbishop

In another sign of the church's reach, Mayor Rahm Emanuel has planned a welcome breakfast for Archbishop Cupich. "The Catholic Church is an enormous footprint in Chicago, doing a lot of good," the bishop said "That aspiration is felt by a lot of people – that the church succeeds – because it will be good for society."

For decades, Catholics have looked to Chicago's archbishops as leaders of thought for the American church. Already a prolific writer and frequent contributor to a national Catholic weekly magazine, Bishop Cupich said issues must pass a three-part test before he shares his perspective on them. "Is what I have to say true? Does it have to be said? And do I have to say it?" he said. "I go through those questions for myself. I'm not the spokesman for the bishops; I'm just going to be the archbishop of Chicago. I am going to do it in unity with the other bishops. That's something I can't ignore." He also doesn't want to ignore the needs of the faithful, so first he wants to listen.



Mayor Rahm Emanuel of Chicago Welcomes Archbishop Cupich to Chicago

First Priority, getting to know the People

He will spend his first three Sundays after the installation celebrating Mass in a cross-section of parishes across the city – Saint Agatha in North Lawndale, a predominantly African-American parish; Saint Agnes of Bohemia in Little Village, a primarily Latino congregation, and Saint Hyacinth Basilica in the Avondale neighborhood, a spiritual center for the Polish Catholic community. "I'm going to spend my time getting to know people – parishes, situations, the organizations that we have," he said. "Catholic Charities, our schools, the work that we do in our hospitals, the various outreach programs – to really be an encouragement."

Bishop Cupich's Leadership Style in Spokane

Observers say Bishop Cupich was deeply engaged in Spokane where in ways large and small he showed an ability to navigate the teachings of the church and the needs of an ever-changing flock. When one church moved the kiss of peace to the beginning of Mass, he looked the other way.

He also helped mediate a controversy involving a Gonzaga University's speaking invitation to anti-apartheid activist and retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose support for abortion rights and contraception offended some alumni.

Perhaps the best example of his down-to-earth leadership style was his approach to same-sex marriage in Washington State. In 2012, he wrote a letter reiterating the church's definition of marriage as between a man and a woman, but making it clear that the church's opposition to same sex marriage did not intend to show disrespect. The letter was read aloud by most priests across the diocese. But the Reverend Patrick Baraza, a priest from Kenya who is pastor of Saint Ann parish in Spokane, refused to follow suit out of consideration for his congregation.

More notably, he didn't worry about offending his boss. Father Baraza attributes that to Bishop Cupich's style. He listens to his priests and learns as he goes along. "In a dialogue, people learn from one another," Baraza said. "That's exactly what Bishop Cupich is all about."

Archbishop Cupich's Leadership Style for Chicago

Archbishop Cupich said it doesn't serve the church to condemn people for violating teachings and that persuasion should come after you meet people where they are in their own lives. "It's easy to get lost in the world of ideas," he said, citing Pope Francis. "You can polarize people. You can group people into ideological camps in competing ways. That doesn't get you too far if that's not anchored in reality."

He looks to that Jesuit pope's compassionate approach to ministry as a guide and concedes that he and Francis think a lot alike. "There is a synergy between the way Croats approach life and the way Jesuits do," Archbishop Cupich said. "Croats are very real about situations. We don't gloss over things. If there are issues to deal with, you deal with them."





**The Coat of Arms of
Archbishop Blase Joseph Cupich**

The photos in this article are from the Getty Collection from the website