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THE AXE FILES

The Axe Files - Ep. 203: Cardinal Blase Cupich

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[00:00:06] And now from the University of Chicago Institute of Politics and CNN. The AXE Files with your host David Axelrod.

Axelrod: [00:00:17] Since his arrival in Chicago in 2014 Cardinal Blaise Cupich has been a refreshing presence in the community appointed by Pope Francis. He very much shares a style and approach with the Pope including an outspokenness on issues like gun violence immigration on healthcare and climate change and the need for civil discourse in our politics. This has made the cardinal a target within the Church of those who are unhappy with the progressive direction in which the pope is leading. But he seemed undaunted. When I sat down with him in the days before Christmas in Chicago.

Axelrod: [00:01:01] Your Eminence so good to see you especially in this busy season. Happy holidays to you.

Cupich: [00:01:08] Thanks David. I appreciate you inviting me to be a part of this and I really had a very enjoyable time down at the University of Chicago.

Axelrod: [00:01:16] What a great discussion you had there with E.J. Dionne and I learned some things about you and I've learned more since I wanted to. You know when you've got named as the archbishop here this is a very ethnic city and yet I'm sure a lot of people wondered about the name Blaise Cupich. Tell me about that and your your background.

Cupich: [00:01:42] Well in fact it's a Croatian heritage Cupich is all for my grandparents emigrated to the United States some before and some right after World War One and settled in Omaha because of the unskilled labor that was available through the meatpacking industry. And so they all came independently and met over in a little hamlet there in south Omaha which became St. Peter and Paul Parish. My grandparents were founders of that parish which just celebrated 100th anniversary this year.

Axelrod: [00:02:19] And grandfather went and soliciting donations.

Cupich: [00:02:22] Sure he did. He did he he was went door to door and was a young man when he came probably about 16-17 years old. He was born in 1887 on the Feast of St. Blaise which is February 3rd. My father was named Blaise and so I got the name a very humorous way because having been born on the Feast of St. Joseph March 19 all of my grandmothers particularly were clamoring that I'd be named Joseph but my dad had a brother named Joseph and that week he was mad at him. So he said I am not going to name him after my brother I'll name him after me. So that's how I got the name. In spite of my uncle literally.

Axelrod: [00:03:07] And St. Blaise, we should point out, was the patron saint of Dubrovnik.

Cupich: [00:03:11] Right exactly. And there is a blessing of throats. I was just in Dubrovnik in 2016 for the the 1700th anniversary of his of his martyrdom. And they they asked me to come and preach at the at the Mass at Dubrovnik and it was very enjoyable very. There was a sense of the whole community coming together in that city.

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Axelrod: [00:03:39] And you yes you mentioned your family were labourers you grew up in a community that was called Goose Hallow. Why was it called Goose Hallow?

Cupich: [00:03:47] Because that's so. There were a lot of a lot of poultry and geese in that area where they they had a lot of people growing vegetables in their yard and keeping poultry we had ducks and geese. When I was a kid and I think it was because of the fact that there were there were there was that kind of domestic raising of poultry in the area.

Axelrod: [00:04:13] And and it was a way to feed a large family.

Cupich: [00:04:18] Exactly. That's right. All everybody had large families in the neighborhood. I don't think there was a family that had less than six kids.

Axelrod: [00:04:25] You were one of nine.

Cupich: [00:04:26] I was. I was with the third of nine. Yes.

Axelrod: [00:04:28] And your dad was had several different jobs when you were growing up to support that.

Cupich: [00:04:36] Yes. When he came back he came back from the Navy in World War II. At the end of the war nineteen forty five. And then right away and February 46 he and my mother got married and he started out doing all sorts of odd jobs putting in furnaces and so on. Then he took the civil service exam to be a postal carrier and Passed that but he knew that that wasn't enough and so he'd get up at 430 in the morning and go off and carry his route come back have lunch with my mother and then come up to the school where we were and he was a part time janitor. We helped him, the three oldest boys. We'd come home and have supper and then he'd go out in bartend in the evening. So it was one of those sayings in which he knew he had to put food on the table and and we had we thought was a normal family that everybody worked like that.

Axelrod: [00:05:32] How much did these experiences. First of all the immigrant experience of your family and then the sort of the working class experience of your family. How much does that inform your world view?

Cupich: [00:05:46] Well I think it has shaped it in a very demonstrative way. I think first of all I have always valued immigrants because we learned a lot in the neighborhood. Everybody spoke a different language. And yet there was not only a tolerance but a kind of enjoyment of each other's customs and patterns of behavior. So we found immigration and the diversity that it brought as enriching not as threatening. I think the other in terms of the way I looked at my parents is not to be afraid of hard work. Hard work is a good thing when people work hard and work together and then get a lot done. But working together is a part of it too. So we we just grew up in that atmosphere it was the air that we breathe every day that you everybody did their part and everybody had a place at the table. You had both rights and responsibilities that coincided.

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Axelrod: [00:06:42] And on the issue of immigration you've been outspoken on that issue. Why do you think that immigration has taken such a dark turn in terms of the national debate.

Cupich: [00:06:58] There's always been a nativist stream in the political discourse of our of our country. We saw that in the in the 18th and 19th century. So a lot of that Times was even aimed at religious groups whether they're Jews or Catholic.

Axelrod: [00:07:18] So did you feel it when you were.

Cupich: [00:07:20] No I didn't because really we always joked that in south Omaha we're so Catholic we sweat holy water. We just had. We just are imbued with that there. So it really wasn't present at all. An anti Catholic bias I'm always very Catholic even to this day. But just reading history I knew of that. So it doesn't surprise me from that standpoint. But I do think that part of the the real game changer now though is that you have prominent political leaders in position of of of serving in leadership positions who are speaking about and portraying immigrants as thugs, rapists, thieves, people who are here only to harm us. And I think that that has shaped people's view or it can shape people's view. My hope would be that we would in our own experience as immigrant people especially with the church's own experience put a different face on the issue of immigration. I think it's very unfortunate that immigrants are derided with that kind of discourse and description.

Axelrod: [00:08:32] You know you this obviously has been a focus for many in the church and Steve Bannon who advises the president who was his political strategist in the campaign and in the White House said something that got quite a bit of attention. He attacked Cardinal Dolan and said that the church was the church was taking the position it was taking on the immigration issue and in favor of what he called illegal aliens in order to or illegal immigrants because you you needed the bodies you needed to enhance Catholic Catholic followership and that this was essentially a marketing decision.

Cupich: [00:09:23] Yes. In fact he even went so far as to say that we we wanted to increase our collections as a result of that that it was a monetary a financial decision which I think Cardinal Dolan found laughable as I do we budget quite a bit of money every year in order to assist people who are migrating here. People who are trying to enter into our society and and be a part of the American dream. So it really it just goes beyond the smell test altogether as far as I'm concerned. We we help immigrants because we are an immigrant nation and we are an immigrant church. We've always done that. This is nothing new to us this is not a new venture for us. It's who we are and have been from the very beginning of the history of the Catholic Church in this country.

Axelrod: [00:10:21] You say laughable but I suspect you weren't laughing when you saw.

Cupich: [00:10:25] Well yes I think that at a certain point you just have to move on to have serious discussions about the important issues of the day rather than taking the bait all the time on these kinds of things. I think my father always told us as children that a person is as big as the things that bother him. So I'm not going to let this bother me.

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Axelrod: [00:10:46] You are speaking of your father. He became ill and had to and had to retire but he didn't really retire from from service he didn't retire from community life. Tell me about that.

Cupich: [00:11:03] Well at 48-- I was in Rome at the time I was a student a first year student in Rome, he contracted Parkinson's disease. He was a rural carrier so that meant that he really had to retire he could not carry on his job anymore his strength wasn't there he for a while was unable to walk. But then with therapy and the proper medication he regained his strength. And the doctor told him as long as he would exercise and try to keep fit he could live a normal length of life. If he worked at this and took care of himself and of course my mother was a big part of that. Well after a couple of years of being in retirement and my mother not all that thrilled to have him home all the time and he wasn't too thrilled about the honeydew as he was given. He decided to do a lot of volunteer work with an agency a group called St. Vincent de Paul Society. They visit hospitals and they visit people who are shut in their homes to see how they're doing. Well some of the people he visited in their homes were those who were on his rural route. He knew them. He had struck up a relationship with them and he noticed that they weren't getting the proper nutrition and it was in the 70s when the Meals on Wheels program was cresting and he went to the county board and said we we should do this for these people we can we can have access to these grants and they really dismissed him and said we didn't want any federal programs in here. You know it's bureaucracy and you know there have to be some sort of commitment on the part of the county. And so he decided that he would run against the man at his own party and he beat him by just a handful of votes.

Axelrod: [00:12:49] And served for a decade or more.

Cupich: [00:12:52] He served three terms and became the Chair of county board.

Axelrod: [00:12:56] And did you. This was politics that grew out of an issue that grew at a service that grew out of a concern were politics discussed in your in your home when you were growing up.

Cupich: [00:13:07] Not really not in the sense of partisan politics. Issues were things that were important but in terms of I mean Dad was able to work with and respect to people on both sides of the aisle. He was a Democrat. And he had great relationships with people who were Republicans. There was a congressman in the area Glenn Cunningham who served for a long time was a great friend dads and they worked on some things together. Dad got involved in the eastern Nebraska Office on Aging. He cared about that a lot and worked with the elected officials. He just wanted to get things done. He didn't care about the partisan nature of these things and in fact he ran against the guy in his own primary as his own representative in the county. I went door to door to do it. And so it really wasn't. It was always about issues it wasn't about party.

Axelrod: [00:13:57] You you didn't sit down you didn't set off on this path to be where you are today. In fact I gather there was some discussion in the family about someone someone of you at least going into the priesthood. How did it turn out to be you.

Cupich: [00:14:17] Well my my parents always said to us you know when you think about your life don't take off the table serving the church in some way whether that's a teacher or a

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religious or a priest. And it wasn't it wasn't pushed but it was just out there as you know when you think about your life. Think about how you're going to serve. And so I I got into leadership early on in my my high school high school kids a Catholic school coed and I was in student government and then ran for student council president and won. So that was the whole business of leadership was important for me. I found that it wasn't just serving I found I found in discovering myself and other people that I had a potential for leadership. So that's who I was. I was going really gonna go off to law school I had some scholarships in my senior year. But then you know people began to talk to me about you should consider priesthood and I always had that in the back of my head anyway. So I decided to go and I had two brothers who were in the seminary one time. They decided to leave it wasn't for them but for me it was a good fit. And so I stayed with it and it's been good.

Axelrod: [00:15:35] There's sacrifice involved with it as well. It was there was there. What kind of conversation did you have with yourself at that moment when you decided to move forward.

Cupich: [00:15:44] Well it was the whole business first of all of not having your own family being able to in some way channel those aspirations of having family life and children and working and in a relationship with the that was very attractive since I had good modeling of that in my own parents. So I think I had to make a decision. But it was clear to me that the way that I could be of service and use my talents and ability seemed to be calling and I seemed to be called to something beyond my own. Having my own family and I've experienced that I would say as a pastor of a parish people that I am the closest to you are those who were part of the first parish that I was assigned to in Omaha in 1975. I have kept close to them, baptize their children their grandchildren married their grandchildren sometimes and so I have had more than enough experiences in life where that bigger family has been experienced by me.

Axelrod: [00:16:51] You you also pursued a path of education and you went both in Rome and and here. And so you were preparing for something beyond being a parish priest. Is that fair to say.

Cupich: [00:17:11] Yes well it happened this way. I love teaching it. In fact my first assignment the pastor of the parish said if you want to get to know the people in the parish go to the school. So I was in school almost every day and I taught in high school as well. I liked teaching. So then there was a point in time when I was asked to join the staff at the papal delegation in Washington. I was there for really virtually all the 80s. And I decided that I would continue my education part time at Catholic U to see whether or not I would be able to come close to earning my doctorate because I wanted to teach at a higher level. And I was able to do that by 1987. In fact my term of service at the papal delegation ended after five years and the nuncio at that time Cardinal Laghi later Cardinal Laghi asked if I was going to stay and finish and I said Well no the Archbishop wants me to come home. And so he said Well fine then I'm going to write him and tell him I want you to for two more years and you can work here and complete your doctorate. So he wanted me to to finish it. I didn't know this but I think he had in mind that after a few years going back in the diocese he would have me appointed as the rector of the pontifical seminary in Columbus Ohio. So it was more in his mind of that kind of administrative position rather than teaching that he had in mind.

Axelrod: [00:18:34] That that stint that you spent in the nunciature that's that that was significant experience because of the sensitive nature of that work you were the secretary of

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that of the nunciature. Tell me about that and what you learned about the church and how it and how the church runs and relations between the church and our country.

Cupich: [00:19:02] Well I did learn a lot about the working of how governments talk to each other and it was in 1984 that diplomatic relations were established and I was there to deny relations between the Holy See in the White House and I was a part of part of all of that. I had a good mentor and in the nuncio Cardinal Laghi who had a wonderful system of everyday bringing the whole staff in and going through the mail. It was called a Congreso a meeting and he wanted everybody to weigh in and it was a teaching it was almost a seminar about how we should deal with difficult problems. What's the right way of going through the thorny issues that were presented to him. And how would he proceed. So I had seven years of that kind of training of making sure that you bring balance to discussion your firm and yet at the same time you are not competitive. It was schooling on how to approach life as it really is and yet keeping your principles at the same time. It was a great balance and a wonderful educational experience.

Axelrod: [00:20:15] You were. You were named the Bishop of Rapid City in 1998 by Pope John Paul the second and while you were there a couple of issues came up relative to the issue of abortion which is perennially a difficult issue. One was that a number of your bishops came together to suggest that during the 2004 presidential election that Catholics who supported abortion rights should not be allowed to take communion and you didn't agree with that. Why?

Cupich: [00:20:57] Well in fact I don't think majority of bishops agreed with that either because in our document faithful citizenship when we debated about that to include that that was a widely rejected. So I think that I was I was in the plurality on that issue and we all believe that those kinds of issues should not be dealt with at the commuter rail. Those are serious issues. You cannot you cannot in some way prejudge how a person comes to a conclusion without actually sitting down and talking to them about it. I do think that folks who advocate for public policy that threatens the life of the unborn deserve our attention in a special way to have a conversation about. But I think that to go ahead and categorically in a preemptive way say because you vote a certain way that you cannot receive the Eucharist it is against our tradition and the way that we pastorally deal with sensitive issues.

Axelrod: [00:22:00] You know this issue came up again in South Dakota because there was a very sensitive referendum that would have banned abortion in all cases except when the mother's life is in danger. And you you took the position that there should be more public consistent with what you you just said and you said something that was interesting to me which is that there should be agreement that any discussion of abortion in the law must recognize both the suffering of the unborn children and abortion and the suffering of pregnant pregnant women in dire circumstances presumably women who are raped. And tell me that that too was a position that really engendered quite a bit of of of discussion. This issue is so fraught and so difficult. How do you navigate it?

Cupich: [00:22:56] Well I think for us to keep talking about it and put a human face on the whole issue the human face of the woman who many times is abandoned by the father or even her family and she feels very lonely and vulnerable and threatened but also the human face of the child. More and more technology is telling us that the viability of a child after so many weeks is almost guaranteed. And so I think that we have to look at. We have to look at as a human society what are we doing to our own species the human species by casually wanting or

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allowing for the life to be taken. So I just think that discussion has to continue in a way that's not belligerent or a way that is alienating but in this particular law that we were going through there were some people who attacked me because I was for a law that had some provisions for exceptions and I use the argument of John Paul the second. Namely that there can be a gradualism in the development of law if you can protect some, you should go ahead and do it. You shouldn't be so categorical and absolute that when it comes to legislation that you're not going to be in favor of improving the situation and a law that may be imperfect from your standpoint that was why I was criticized in that particular moment.

Axelrod: [00:24:23] We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with Cardinal Cupich.

Axelrod: [00:24:35] We're back with Cardinal Cupich just on this issue. You also when you were in Spokane when you the bishop there you you asked you took a position against demonstrations outside of these abortion clinics and you said decisions about abortion are not usually made in front of clinics that are made at kitchen tables and in living rooms and they frequently have a sister or a daughter relative or friend who may have been pressured or abandoned by the man who fathered the child. That too seems like a very moderate position. These demonstrations have become a focal point sometimes of violence. What was your thinking there?

Cupich: [00:25:24] Well it may have been termed moderate but I also say humane. I'm trying to look at the life of the person who was going through these decisions. But in that particular instance I wasn't against it. The demonstrations are people doing these things. What I did oppose is that a priest would be in the middle of leading this because I wanted our priest to be available pastorally to people who are suffering. And so if people wanted to go and protest that surely was their right to do it. But the second part is that sometimes these people would be protesting in such a way that they would have very graphic images of aborted fetuses. That from my standpoint just alienates people on both sides from being able to have any kind of civil discourse. I just think that it's so inflammatory that it doesn't allow people to sit down and really talk about the issues. So I thought it hurt the pro-life cause to do something like that but I wasn't against people demonstrating that surely is their right as a citizen to do to make their views known that way. But it was those two issues that prompted me to take that action.

Axelrod: [00:26:36] Cardinal you're talking about civil discourse our discourse seems very uncivil these days and these issues have have divided us in ways that are really really profound. How do you how do we as a society overcome that.

Cupich: [00:26:56] Well as I said in a talk that I gave at commemorating the work of Cardinal Bernadin my predecessor at my own university. I think it's much worse than being divided over issues. I think we're at a stage now where people look upon someone who disagrees with them as the enemy. So we we are divided among ourselves as people not just over issues. And that's why it's very dangerous we look upon someone else as a Democrat Republican as the enemy rather than as citizens who are working for the common good. That's a new development I think we have. We're seeing that in our country the real kind of patriotism that should unite us is being is as it is being is wearing thin that fabric is wearing thin in our country. And so I think that it was Aristotle himself who said that democracies depend on friendships. We're losing the ability to have friendships in society.

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Axelrod: [00:28:01] Yeah. You know one of the reasons why I do this podcast is because I find it's harder to hate people when you know them when you know their story when you know what what motivates them. But there is great political currency in weaponizing these very volatile issues so if you are if you are a supporter of abortion rights you're a murderer if you are a supporter of immigration and an advocate for immigrants you're supporting lawlessness and you know your support if you support or speak well of people gay people then you're violating you're on the cusp of all of this. And how how how do you push back on all of that.

Cupich: [00:29:10] Well I do I think you've got to keep your moral center about this and realize that we're all human beings that are struggling through life whether it's gay people or people who have a position about abortion that you disagree with or even the death penalty climate change the Paris Accords. You know we spoke out strongly against the action of that it's it's government withdrawing. So I think that you can't personalize it. But there is something else that you mentioned here that triggered a thought in me that we shouldn't overlook here. There's a lot of money involved in keeping us divided. People are raising money these issues and enhancing their own financial situation as a result I think money in our political system today is one of the root causes of our divisiveness because you're fueling all of that we need real need campaign finance reform I think in order to really get at this problem.

Axelrod: [00:30:07] You know I was sad the other day with Rick Santorum who you know was a presidential candidate former senator from Pennsylvania talked a lot about his faith as informing his view and he was critical of the pope and by extension you for involving yourselves in issues like the Paris climate Paris climate accord is his point being that it's one thing to say that climate change is a challenge that we have to address. But it's another thing to involve yourself in specific policy debates about specific proposals because there may be many ways to attack this problem.

Cupich: [00:30:54] Well I I I couldn't disagree more. I think that I think that this is this is an issue a life issue. People say that the right to life of a child is foundational to our teaching on the respect for human life. And that's true. But if in fact a foundation of a house is such that that house is in an environment where there is the rest of the neighborhoods on fire then it doesn't make any sense to to argue only for the foundation. That's what we're talking about here with regard to the environment and climate control climate change. This is threatening the survivability of this planet and it's going to impact the poorest among us with rising sea levels. People who are living in very desperate situations the aridity that comes with climate change where the rainforests are being depleted all of those issues have to do with survivability of people and of this planet that we are given as our common home as the pope calls it. So I think that they are disagreeing not only with Pope Francis but with scientists by and large around the world who are very clear about the catastrophe that's upon us if we don't address this issue.

Axelrod: [00:32:19] You mentioned money when you were at the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago in that great dialogue with E.J. Dionne. It was the day after the massacre in Texas and you were very very outspoken on that on that issue of guns as you have been throughout and you connected it with with money and the gun lobby with money. You called for a ban on assault weapons. Talk about the gun issue and you obviously have a lot of exposure to it here. Pasturing in in this in this community.

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Cupich: [00:33:00] Yes we see it every day here. I don't know if you saw the story here in Chicago but there is a young man who was 17 years old who came here from Puerto Rico to find work because of the devastation with the with the storms the hurricanes. And his name is Michael and Michael was walking to work to car wash here. He came to live with his grandmother an AK 47 carried by someone opened fire on him shot him 10 times. I visit him at the hospital. He is recovering. He still has a long way to go. But this was this was a random shooting by someone who had a an automatic weapon in their hands to declare war in the middle of a of a town Part of this our city that was otherwise peaceful. There is a lot of money in selling those kinds of guns to people and there's no reason why we need that kind of weaponry. Why not have bazookas or surface to air missiles. I mean if you if you want to say you can have any weapon you want why have any restriction like that. Well it's because of public safety. We're not at war with each other and we shouldn't have weapons said declare war on each other.

Axelrod: [00:34:17] And yet the Congress response the only response that we've seen so far and it hasn't passed the Senate was a bill in the House that would that would broaden the right to carry concealed weapons. Tell me who you spoke that day rather passionately about the power of the gun lobby. Talk the talk about that.

Cupich: [00:34:40] Well I guess you see it. You just mentioned what's going on in the house right now that that's not because each one of these members house or personally motivated for this this is not the burning issue in their heart or the reason that they ran for Congress. There's a lot of money changing hands here with regard to political support that they receive from the gun lobby and ways in which to they. The gun lobby uses rhetoric that makes people afraid. I think the elected officials have to take it. After Sandy Hook how is it that we we really can't deal with this when all those children were killed all those lives were snuffed out. Those parents are crying out in anguish for some sort of five years now. Nothing has happened for some sort of justice system. So I just think that we're really allowing the people who have those resources to back political campaigns to control the agenda. And I think that's why we need campaign finance reform.

Axelrod: [00:35:47] But it's not just the people who have the money it's also the fact that there is a very activated group of voters minority voters put an activated group of voters who for whom this is a voting issue. How do you make it a voting issue for others?

Cupich: [00:36:06] Well I think you know leaders who are in the church and society need to step forward and and continue to do this. We do live in a democracy and these issues have to be debated. But I would say that the members of Congress when they vote for it if they would poll their people by and large not just the ones who voted for them they would not have that kind of support.

Axelrod: [00:36:32] But I think we know actually on some of these issues that you raise there's there's quite a consensus 90 percent of Americans say they want universal background checks for example. I suspect on the issue of automatic weapons you'd get a healthy majority as well.

Cupich: [00:36:48] And it's going to take leaders with some political courage to stand up and say for the good of our country we need to move in a different direction. But I think my voice and the voice of others needs to be out there. That's why I speak out about this because I'm trying to

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prompt not just the people who vote but leaders to really have some political courage in moving this issue forward. It's not happening unfortunately.

Axelrod: [00:37:17] One of the one you talk about us living in a democracy but one of the strains on democracy beyond money is the great polarization of our economy. And you see greater and greater inequality. And and now to test the limits of how far you're willing to go in talking about sort of public events we see a tax bill that's being passed this weekend the analysis suggests that a lot of that money is going to go to corporations and to wealthier Americans. One of the elements of it would remove this mandate for health care and that would mean 13 million people according to analysts 13 million fewer people getting getting health care. What is from from a from a moral perspective. How do you evaluate that

Cupich: [00:38:18] Well budget is a moral document because you if you demonstrate your values are by what you're going to fund every every home has a budget. And so you decide how you're going to spend your resources in a way that's for the common good of that family. It's the same to the nation. So a budget is a moral document it's not neutral. I as I see from what I read you know this the this bill is is fostered or promoted as a way of developing the economy. People are going to have more money at the top and they're going to invest in companies that are going to produce more jobs and so on. I think that's the narrative that's out there. For me it's not so much that the difficulty yes there is some unemployment that we have to deal with and better jobs and wage scales. But it is. The income inequality within our country and the income distribution I don't think that as we look at a bill that does favor folks who are at the high end that you're going to see that taking place here. I think that income inequality is going to continue to gnaw at our country and voters will I think are smart enough to pick that up as time goes on. You know I'm not I'm not going to debate political or economic theories back and forth because I I hear economists on both sides of the of the fence arguing for or against this present legislation. But I will have to see whether or not a bill like this is really going to deal with the basic problem of income inequality in our country. It's not just about jobs. That's that's the key issue that I see. And I think what's at issue in the last election.

Axelrod: [00:40:17] Are you concerned about the impact on health care.

Cupich: [00:40:20] Yes I am. I think that I I'm I'm concerned about it not only for the individual people who are going to lose it as a result but also for our hospital system. We have a lot of Catholic hospitals. There are not for profit. They take the indigent. And until the until the Affordable Care Act there was no reimbursement at all. And so they had to deal with that on their bottom line and put their hospitals at risk. I think it's going to have a great impact on regional small hospitals and rural areas. From my reading and talking to people who are a Catholic Health Association our hospitals are in trouble and if we now pull this many people out of the insurance plans where there is not going to be any funding or reimbursement especially for people who are indigent that's going to some systems will collapse.

Axelrod: [00:41:15] We're going to take another break and we'll be right back with Cardinal Cupich.

Axelrod: [00:41:24] I'd like to ask you about the the politics of the church and.

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Cupich: [00:41:30] Politics and the church?! [laughter] I'm not sure I'd be qualified to navigate my way through all of that.

Axelrod: [00:41:37] I'm hoping that you can explain that to me but obviously you said something that I found really really powerful when you were when you were at the university and that was about adult spirituality that the pope was the pope believed in adult spirituality that there were others who wanted to infantilize people and just tell them what to do. And that was what you define as the central debate within the church. Elaborate on that for me.

Cupich: [00:42:11] Well I I think that this has been growing since the Second Vatican Council where when John the twenty third said he wanted some he wanted to open the windows to let some fresh air in that fresh air was moving the church and the members of the church in a direction that the council documents talked about this about how we each of us have core responsibility for the life of the church life each other and life of the world. And so we have to step up. It's not just the pay pray and obey church where clerics would tell the lay people what to do and then ask people to pay for it and that they would expect radical obedience right away to everything that was said. And it's not in any way to diminish the importance of values and laws and regulations but there is an embrace of those laws or regulations and morals that's much stronger if people can self appropriated that if they can own it themselves. We do that with our children when we raise them. There is only so much a parent can do and raising a teenager. There's a moment in which there has to be a real trust there for that person to grow that young person to grow make their mistakes but also then take what they have learned and make it their own. I think that we're coming out of the teenage years of the life of the church where maybe it wasn't treating people as infants maybe we were treating people like teenagers that we didn't trust and we had to tell what to do all the time and there wasn't that willingness to let them go off into their adult years. We need that kind of leadership in the life of the church. If we really want people to be a part of the future we have to we have to ask them to share their gifts and their talents not just their pocketbooks.

Axelrod: [00:44:10] The issue you you sort of hint at is really the one that Steve Bannon was raising although in the context of immigration and the matter we we talked about earlier but there has been a profound loss of participation in the church a lot of people walking away from the church. Why.

Cupich: [00:44:37] Well I think we're really not. I don't think that we have all the answers to why this. This is a development society that's happened in the last year or so for instance in the last 20 years we've lost probably about 20 percent of the people who regularly come to Mass. It doesn't mean we lost them for good. But they're not as frequent. I think first of all we live in a society today where there are a lot of options on the weekends for people there weren't in the past. We have we have all sorts of things that entertainers sports to other kinds of ways in which we entertain people travel more. Part of it too is when I grew up our it was a family event. Families now are detached from each other in our own family of the nine children only four remain in Omaha. So people are different places. And I think when we see that the the ways in which people find nourishment maybe aren't in those family systems where worship was always included. There might be another way to do that. So what we have to do is to build another way in which people identify with worship as a part of their life not because her family did it or just because they culturally grew up in that environment but that they're making they're making a positive decision themselves to be to really be disciples who are committed to the Gospel. And

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we haven't done a whole lot on that. We need to do more on that. And that's the adult spirituality the pope is talking about.

Axelrod: [00:46:15] How much did the ongoing scandal relative to priests and molestation of young people and so on. How much did that impact on the church.

Cupich: [00:46:33] It had an enormous impact from a number of standpoints. I think first of all it wasn't the fact that there was a cleric who who send in this way that that was bad enough but it was the fact that leadership didn't deal with it in a way that trusted people where they would go to parents and say this was done and this is what we're going to take a day we're going to take care of it and we're going to be very transparent and open about it. Instead it was a matter of not seeing the harm that was done to children looking for a way in which the broader community would be protected from the quote unquote shame and scandal that was there. And it was a whole different environment though. We know from the John Jay report that there was part of society at that time for whether it's police politicians priests people in the law profession or high professions to kind of circle the wagons and not be transparent about these things. Well we're seeing of course all of that falling apart right now with this. These kinds of claims of abuse of sexual harassment and so on. We're just peeling back. I think the the situation the scene here where a lot of people felt that they were protected group who had special privileges. And in some way we're not accountable. So I think what has happened to the church in this regard has been very positive in the sense that we have put light into these situations and maybe send a signal that society as well can't put up with any kind of hidden life. A Double life.

Axelrod: [00:48:28] I mean just cut cut to the chase I mean there was a sense of of institutional cover up. You, bluntly and so that was a blow to to people's sense of connection.

Cupich: [00:48:48] It was. But also it was it was it was it was not just to cover it but it was also a tone deafness of how this abuse harmed children and had an impact on him. I think I think even the world's psychology had no idea endeavor talked about this. So the adult world failed to protect children in the adult world failed to see that these these kinds of crimes have a lasting impact on kids.

Axelrod: [00:49:15] And how do you feel the church is doing now. I mean do you feel comfortable that that there is a new approach and a new policy and that there is transparency and that that wrongdoing would be dealt with forcefully.

Cupich: [00:49:34] Well I can say that that just looking at how many kids how many parents choose our schools send their kids to a religious education programs seems to indicate to me that there is a confidence that their children are going to be safe as are safe in our environments. And that's for good reason. We have background checks and anybody who has any kind of relationship with a child. We have a code of conduct. We do training people. We do training of kids to recognize it and parents. So I think that we have and we also measure ourselves by an outside firm that comes in and audits how or how are we following our procedures. So I think that we have we have gone and gone a long way and there are many things I think that the rest of society could learn from from this very painful moment in our own history. But for me the real into a sea of how we're doing is the fact that parents are bringing their kids to our programs and trusting the church will care for their safety.

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Axelrod: [00:50:32] We talked a little bit about part of the politics of the church. You had an election recently and came up on the wrong side of it. And that was for chairman of the Pro-Life Activities Committee of the bishops. And it was unusual because you were defeated by an archbishop not a cardinal. And a lot of people a lot of people associated that as much with disenchantment among conservative bishops with the pope as as as you. How did you interpret that that vote.

Cupich: [00:51:14] Well as I said at the time unless I have a conversation with the people who voted I really can't say what motivated them. Maybe some felt sorry that I already had too much on my plate and wanted to spare me this.

Axelrod: [00:51:28] I'm sure that was it.

Cupich: [00:51:29] And but I think that I think that you know I ran against the archbishop who was involved in the pro-life committee for a number of years. I have never been. I was asked to run because as a said they needed a cardinal for this. I initially begged off and said You know I really have so much going on but then I did say that I would I would be a part of this. He's a good man who is you know who is dedicated to the protection of human life. He's he is somebody I think that the bishops know from that standpoint and recognize as someone who has been involved. So for me I have always said and in my in my over my many years that I don't ask for anything and I don't refuse anything they want me to run for office. I will do it. And then let the chips fall where they are. So I don't know if you can really attribute this to some sort of rebuke of the pope or even me personally until I have a chance to talk to people about it.

Axelrod: [00:52:37] He Archbishop Nauman was one of those who said that that politicians who who were supporters of abortion rights should be denied communion. He took that position about then Governor Sebelius in his home state of Kansas so this is a this is a real divide between you.

Cupich: [00:53:02] Yes. And I think that as I said earlier the majority of bishops in our country would not favor that because when it was debated to be part of faithful citizenship or document it was rejected. That approach was rejected. So again I think I am with the majority of bishops and I think this is also the position of the Holy See I think would be very difficult to to move in that direction. And I don't see him doing so.

Axelrod: [00:53:36] What about the pope himself and he has had this fair to say galvanic impact around the world. And yet there seems to be quite a bit of resistance to him. What. What. How do you see that evolving and what happens when when he's gone.

Cupich: [00:54:02] Well first of all I think that the opposition to him within the church or outside is loud but not large. So I don't panic about that at all. I think that he has wide approval not only among Catholics and Catholic bishops and the Cardinals. I know I know a good number of the cardinals and I know that he is white. He would he would win hands down. He's he's very well loved. And the rest of the world as well. So I think that he's setting in motion a reform of the church and particularly the way the church operates in a way that makes sense to a lot of people. And he wants to do it as he said in a way that's going to make it permanent. So I I I have no I have no hesitation at all about where we're going in the future. He just turned 81 yesterday on Sunday. He's he's very vigorous. So as I say viva la papa.

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Axelrod: [00:55:05] We're coming up on a deadline in March in which the Congress is being called upon to decide what to do about these so-called DACA kids these children of undocumented immigrants who submitted their names under an executive order from President Obama thinking that they would be protected. But now whose status is uncertain because President Trump ended that executive order. What does that mean to this community and generally to the immigrant community.

Cupich: [00:55:40] Well I think it would be a horrible injustice and not to fix this problem. We have 800000 young people who came here not of their own volition but by their parents. No other country and culture. And now to say that they're going to be deported simply because there is a failure. Resolve to humanely and humanely deal with this issue would be a great tragedy. We're fighting everyday for this and trying to get this on the agenda for the House and the Senate to deal with it has to be fixed. And if it if it's not by March we're going to have thousands of young people every week who are going to be liable for deportation. And the government has the information on them that should not be. We have to rise up and make sure that we do not allow this to happen. This problem should be fixed. And as far as I'm concerned there really is no alternative but to fix it right away.

Axelrod: [00:56:43] The president is a strong personality. You referenced sort of appeals to division and that seems it seemed aimed at him. What kind of moral leadership do think he's provided.

Cupich: [00:56:58] Well I think every president has to look at how they are going to govern in a way that's going to bring people together. I think that's a metric that I usually use when I think about the moral impact of a of a of a leader whether it's of a country or in a state or local government. How are they how are they using their influence to govern in such a way that brings people together. I think that he's hearing criticism from his own party that that's not happening. And my hope would be that the people who are with him in the administration would put that as a priority. How is it not that you're going to win a political battle on a particular issue. But how is the lens through which you govern. Going to first of all said his priority serving the common good and bringing people together. I think that to the degree that that doesn't happen there is a moral failure.

Axelrod: [00:58:01] Cardinal you just returned from recently from a trip to Puerto Rico as an emissary of the pope. What did you see down there.

Cupich: [00:58:12] Well I had the impression as I toured the entire island which I did visiting all of the bishops and the various dioceses that it looked like it was carpet bombed. There wasn't an area that was left unscathed. Houses schools churches. The trees that are so beautifully gracing the island were down power lines talking to people as well where we have at least when I was there half of the island still without electricity and a good third without running water. It looked like really a disaster area that could bring much more suffering if we don't have a quick remedy to these these systemic problems. The people at the same time are very generous and joyful. They're not daunted by this. They're not looking for a handout but a hand up. And I found them to be really engaging and appreciative of the visit that I paid on behalf of the pope.

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Axelrod: [00:59:15] Do you have the sense that enough attention is being paid to the problems down there.

Cupich: [00:59:22] I think that the resources are available. I think the distribution is an issue. I proposed to I think step set would be very helpful The first would be that whatever their game plan is and FEMA and bringing people back up to speed they need to share that widely. I think people are kind of like the city on an airplane on the tarmac not knowing when the plane is going to take off for them. I've experienced that yes. So I think that that kind of game plan where it's even if it has to be adjusted in time I think people are just wondering when are they going to get help. I was in my Guerra's which they told me there that they're the last since they're the furthest away from San Juan to get attention or not ordinarily. And it was clear that they had that feeling about the hurricane relief and so they're taking some initiative on their own part and we're helping them. But the second thing is that I think the communication could be impacted very positively if they used churches and other organizations that have a large footprint in the in the various parts of the island. We can we can get word out to people very quickly and I think they've relied on telecommunications. When people don't have electricity you might as well use smoke signals and drums to get the message out as far as people are concerned. So I think that those two steps could go a long way. But I do think they need to ramp up the aid FEMA by its own mission wasn't prepared for dealing with an island but also dealing with an island that had its own weaknesses in terms of its infrastructure and the bankruptcy.

Axelrod: [01:01:11] You know I don't want to assign malign motives or even neglect but you do have the sense that the the sense that the urgency as it relates to that hurricane was different than say in Houston or in Florida. Why is that.

Cupich: [01:01:35] Well the people feel that you know they they say you know we're American citizens too. And so we should also count that there was a widespread feeling that was expressed by a lot of folks as they were they were abandoned or or left unattended. The reasons for that I don't know. Yes it's true that it's off the mainland and apart from where we are but I would imagine if a hurricane hit Hawaii we would be there with resources there as much American citizens as the people in Hawaii or on the mainland.

Axelrod: [01:02:10] I just want to ask you two other quick things while you're here. We talked about the tax bill that's helpful.

Cupich: [01:02:16] But we also have increased the debt significantly and there is a fear expressed by our Bishops Conference that that is going to be made up in entitlement cuts or some other way that that would affect those who are weakest in society. So the bishops conference has severely criticized this legislation and made a case to the president to take into consideration those concerns before signing the bill.

Axelrod: [01:02:43] Finally Cardinal Law passed away in the last in the last days. How how will history view him and how should the church view him.

Cupich: [01:02:58] Well I think we see in all of the obits that have been issued and statements the time that he served when church leaders neglected to protect children will be I think always at the top of his legacy. He'll be remembered for that. And I think that that's important to recognize that it was a pivotal moment in not only Boston but the United States when all of that

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came and surfaced. In fact I have always felt that that kind of transparency although it's very painful is very much needed. It allows victims to come forward and receive healing. So I've always championed people to have that openness and transparency. At the same time I have to recognize too that he was a man who was motivated to enter the priesthood to help the poor. He worked when he was in Springfield Cape Gerardo and also a member of the Bishops Conference to bring people together on an ecumenical basis. He surely was a very strong force against racism and racial bigotry. He looked for ways to which we could normalize relations with Cuba and lift the embargo. He had I think an approach to international issues that was very refreshing and it was important at this time. So really it is a tragedy that a man who had so many good things to offer suffered from this blind spot as he called it in his later life that brought about tremendous hurt and injury to victims.

Axelrod: [01:04:44] And you you talk about transparency. This was sort of documented in the movie Spotlight and the role the Boston Globe played in really shining a bright light on this speaks to the importance of a free media in a society

Cupich: [01:05:04] It Also speaks I think to the importance of the media to also be true to itself. There was a moment in the movie Spotlight in which they had two admitted the Boston Globe that they passed on this story early on and didn't dig down deep and allow themselves in some way to be compromised in telling this story when in fact they had a lot of the facts. So it's important I think for the media not only to be free but also to be responsible in following these stories as soon as they find out about them.

Axelrod: [01:05:38] Indeed.

Axelrod: [01:05:39] Cardinal good to be with you.

Cupich: [01:05:41] Good to be with you.

Axelrod: [01:05:41] Merry Christmas. Happy Holidays and all good things in the New Year.

Cupich: [01:05:46] David thanks. It's great to be with you.

[01:05:51] Thank you for listening to the X Files Part of the CNN podcast network for more episodes of the X Files visit CNN dot com slash podcast and subscribe on iTunes Stitcher or your favorite app. And for more programming from the University of Chicago Institute of Politics visit politics at U Chicago. Edu.