

Chicago meets its new archbishop as the 'Pope Francis effect' sets in

by [David Gibson](#)

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(RNS) When Spokane Bishop Blase Cupich got a call 10 days ago with the news that Pope Francis had chosen him to be the next archbishop of Chicago—the pontiff's most important U.S. appointment to date—he was so taken aback that he couldn't speak for a few moments.

"To say that I was surprised doesn't come close to the word I would use," Cupich said Saturday (September 20) at a news conference in Chicago introducing him as the successor to Cardinal Francis George, who is 77 and battling cancer.

Asked by reporters how long it took for the reality of his appointment to sink in, Cupich smiled and said, "It's still sinking in."

A lot of other Catholics are trying to absorb the news as well, just as surprised that Francis picked the 65-year-old Cupich, who had been considered a long shot. They were also pleased, or concerned, that the pope had evidently chosen a bishop who shared his own emphasis on listening to the flock and caring for the poor.

"I think that he"—Francis—"sent a pastor, not a message," Cupich told reporters.

But it was also clear that having a pastorally minded churchman like Cupich (pronounced "SOUP-itch") at the helm represents a major shift not only for Chicago, but for the American church.

In his 17 years as archbishop, George won a reputation as a doctrinal conservative and a feisty culture warrior who pronounced liberal Catholicism "an exhausted project" while decrying the growing secularization of U.S. society and the grave threats posed by policies adopted by the Obama administration.

Cupich, on the other hand, has consistently taken a more moderate tone, seeking dialogue to resolve conflicts and advance the church's mission. Like Francis, he also prefers to focus on promoting the church's social justice teachings rather than waging divisive battles over abortion and same-sex marriage.

Pressed to contrast his approach with that of George, Cupich repeatedly deflected such comparisons and said he would try to be himself.

"Everyone brings their own gifts and talents and experiences," Cupich said.

Yet he also noted that when George was named in 1997 to replace the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who once embodied the hopes of a more progressive church, George joked that of course he would be different from Bernardin because the church does not believe in cloning.

"I think it is reasonable to expect different emphases and approaches" when he formally takes office on November 18, Cupich said.

In fact, while addressing the rapidly growing Latino presence in Chicago—Cupich seemed comfortable speaking in Spanish—he made a strong plea for Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform, an indication of how the tone and priorities may be shifting already.

"Every day we delay is a day too long," he said.

Cupich noted that his move from the Spokane diocese, which includes about 100,000 Catholics in 82 parishes in eastern Washington, to Chicago, a sprawling archdiocese with 2.2 million Catholics in more than 350 parishes, is "an enormous upgrade, so to speak," and he will have a lot to learn and many challenges to face.

But the appointment to such a large and prestigious diocese also immediately makes Cupich a major player in the American church hierarchy.

Cupich is almost certain to get a cardinal's red hat, and his identification with the more progressive wing of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops may signal the beginning of the end of three decades of conservative dominance.

Church sources said that Francis is not familiar with the American hierarchy and had been personally consulting bishops in order to pick someone who would reflect his own style. It appears that to some degree Francis went around the usual

bureaucratic process to do that.

Cupich clearly seems to embrace the comparisons with Francis. As he concluded his opening remarks, he announced that he would bow his head to the crowd just as Francis did when he was elected pope in March 2013, “in hopes that everyone in Chicago will pray for me.”

As he did so, a reporter immediately interrupted the moment with a question, and they kept coming.

For his part, George praised Cupich even as he seemed to be coming to terms with the fact that he would soon be leaving office.

Asked to describe his emotions, George said other retired bishops described that shift as a jarring one. “One moment you’re at the center of everything; the next moment you’re not.”

George also is clearly struggling with treatments that are trying to halt a recurrence of bladder cancer, an illness that appeared to hasten the pope’s decision to find his replacement.