Biographical Note
Francis B. Sayre Jr. (1915-2008) was the Dean of Washington Cathedral from 1951 to 1978 and the chairman of the United States Committee for Refugees from 1958 to 1961. This interview focuses on the role of religion in the 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy’s concern for the refugee crisis on the Middle East, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Committee, among other topics.

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(signed) Francis B. Sayre, Jr.
(Date) Sept 11, 1964

Accepted:
(signed) Warren E. Frank
(date) Sept. 21, 1964
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Mr. Belk: The person to be interviewed on this tape is Francis B. Sayre, Dean of the Washington Cathedral, Washington, D.C. The interviewer is Samuel E. Belk, National Security Council Staff. The date is June 25, 1964; the place, the White House.

Mr. Belk: Dean Sayre, I wonder if we shouldn't open the interview by going back to the beginning of your relationship with President Kennedy during his years in the Senate. Would you be good enough to recount those early encounters, and to discuss some of the issues that brought the two of you together?

Dean Sayre: I think the rather adventitious question that first brought about our meeting was when the Cathedral, of which I have the honor to be the Dean, approached its 50th anniversary. We were at the same time constructing a new tomb for Woodrow Wilson, my grandfather.
This involved the raising of funds to enable the project to proceed, and I took the liberty of calling upon the fairly new Senator from Massachusetts to enlist his help. I'll never forget going into his office and telling him of the project that was afoot, and asking for his assistance among his friends in our effort to raise funds for the Woodrow Wilson tomb in the Washington Cathedral. We talked some time, in a most friendly way. I had come prepared with the draft of a letter that I proposed that Mr. Kennedy might send. He took a look at the letter and said, "Dean, I can write a much better letter than that," and thereupon he did so. The next day he sent out a letter to 2500 of his friends which substantially assisted our enterprise. I felt that this was an admirable action on his part since he was a member of a different faith than our own, and yet he understood the role of the Washington Cathedral in the community, as a community enterprise, and gladly gave his assistance in that way. Well, this is how I first came to know the Senator. It led to many other meetings, during his time as a Senator, and we came to be close friends.

We often found occasion to consult on a number of matters of concern to both of us. One of the questions which kept coming up from time to time was the religious question on which Senator Kennedy was kind enough to seek my advice in a number of ways. I recall, for
example, a statement that he had made in response to some political question that had been asked of him. I am not sure whether it had to do with birth control on this occasion, or some other question. He had made a very forthright statement in which he clearly, and perhaps courageously, said that for him the interests of the country would precede any other consideration in his meeting of such a question. This led to his being attacked in both the Catholic and Protestant press on the ground that God comes before country. The attack had startled Mr. Kennedy a little. He showed me an article that had been printed in the journal, America, on the Catholic side, and I took out of my pocket on the Protestant side an article from Christianity and Crisis. And here he said, "I am being attacked on both sides, and yet I always thought of myself as a good Christian. What is involved here?" And this led to a very interesting theological discussion. In what sense does God precede country? In what sense, in a land of democratic politics, can a man put religious allegiance before his citizenship? Ultimately it involves of course the age-old question of reason and revelation. I felt at that time that Mr. Kennedy was a practical politician, a man deeply rooted in moral principle, in good will, but not trained in the technicalities of theological subtlety. He realized this himself. I am sure he turned to many others; he also sought my
opinion of these questions. He needed to be instructed; he was humble enough to seek that instruction. So we had many such discussions in the course of the years, as different questions came up, as to just what was involved in the religious questions as they related to public policy and decision.

You asked about some of the other issues which brought us together from time to time. One of the major ones, as far as I was concerned, was the problem of refugees -- the problem of the homeless people of the world, made homeless by political movement in their own countries, by wars -- World War, Korean War -- by conflict between Arab and Jew, by all the seething problems of the world which have displaced people from their homes, their jobs, their places of birth. As Chairman of the United States Committee on Refugees, I headed an agency that brought together the interests of many groups in our country -- religious and secular -- who were concerned with America's contribution to this world-girdling problem of human beings in need.

In the course of these years, under President Eisenhower, the World Refugee Year had been proclaimed by the United Nations; the United States had declared its participation in this united effort to make a real dent on the problem, and I had been asked to, in some way, spear-point this work. In the course of that activity, there were more than once
times when our Committee and the other agencies of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and secular variety felt there was legislation needed for special appropriation for America's contribution to this needy problem. Senator Kennedy was one of the people on the Hill to whom I went most regularly because of his deep and sincere concern, his eagerness to be of practical assistance to this humanitarian problem.

Together with Senator Humphrey, Senator Kennedy and his staff assisted in the drafting of such legislation and I often met with him and his assistant, Mike Feldman, on this question. Again this brought us together from time to time.

There were one or two other matters which again gave me the opportunity of observing Senator Kennedy. One was my interest in the minimum wage law. I served as Chairman of a special committee of the Consumers League on this, and I recall an occasion when I testified before a Subcommittee headed by Senator Kennedy on this question. I was gratified at the evident sympathy that the Chairman showed to this particular witness as we discussed this aspect of human need within our own country -- the need of the underpaid workers of our nation. I think that is a brief summary of some of the problems that brought us together in those early days, when he was in Washington.
Mr. Belk: Dean Sayre, as the prospect of Mr. Kennedy's presidential campaign developed, the religious issue had to be faced. I know that the then Senator Kennedy consulted you on this problem and that he actually invited you to form a committee, which you did. I believe you were especially active during the primary in West Virginia.

Dean Sayre: Yes, the discussions that we had previously on the religious question, as I have described them above, led to this new association when Senator Kennedy began to think of the possibility of his running for President. The religious question was, of course, very much in the forefront of his mind and that of the public. You remember that in the primaries, one of the most crucial hurdles that he had to surmount was the primary in the state of West Virginia, which of all our United States, I believe, is the most heavily Protestant in character. I was sick at the time preceding that primary. Mr. Kennedy asked Ted Sorensen to go to the Deanery at the Cathedral and see me about the question involved in a Catholic proposing to run for President, and particularly the impact that this proposition might have in the state of West Virginia, and what, if anything, we could do about it. I felt deeply at the time that a man's religious faith should in no way be counted a qualification for the presidency. I felt that the President of
the United States should be chosen from any or all of our citizens and that no religious test could properly or rightfully be made. We discussed that, Ted Sorensen and I, at great length I remember, and then he particularly asked what we might do about West Virginia and about Protestantism generally, in the nation, in bringing this feeling to their attention and arguing it forcefully.

At that moment we did set about gathering a committee of Protestant leaders of many churches who felt as I did about it. We undertook to do that. We spent a number of hours on the telephone, both Sorensen and myself, and gathered such a committee which then issued a statement to this effect. I have no way of knowing what consequence this had on the state of West Virginia. I believe that it had some. At any rate, as you know, the Senator won that primary there, and this was quite an important factor I am told in his ultimate nomination at the Democratic National Convention.

Mr. Belk: As a Protestant clergyman, Dean Sayre, what was your impression of President Kennedy's attitude toward religion -- whether Catholic, or non-Catholic?

Dean Sayre: Well, perhaps the first thing I would say, as I have indicated above, is that I had the impression he was not well-versed
in the theological descriptions of his own faith or of any faith. I think he was primarily a citizen, active, and humanitarian, concerned more with doing than with the more reflective aspects of the meaning of his religion. This is not in any way to say that his religion was shallow. I found, and I have come to a firm conclusion, it was very profound. But it was humanitarian in its first instinct, as I say, uninstructed technically, but yet very profound in his caring, in his concern. I have a very broad definition of religion. I believe that true religion is caring for what God cares for and that the labels, the subtleties, even the theological aspects, are only secondary in importance. If one accepts such a broad definition of Christianity and religion, I would say that President Kennedy was deeply religious, in the most profound sense. There is no question about it. At the same time, he was enormously respectful of all religions, not only his own, but that of Protestants, of Jews, of Moslems, of any man who claimed some knowledge and relationship with God. I think he showed this at every turn in his life -- his personal relations, and in the way he led our country. One interesting thing to me has been, looking back on it all, how even when he was elected, Protestants generally, I suspect, were still a little bit questioning about him. But in the years that followed, in the months that followed as he led our nation, without prejudice,
without shallowness, with deep respect, I think the Protestants came
to think that he was really their man, if anything. The whole change
in the ethos in the Protestant community toward President Kennedy
was very palpable, very great, easy to observe.

Mr. Belk: Dean Sayre, President Kennedy asked you to give one of
the prayers on Inauguration Day, but you were out of the country.
Would you speak about the circumstances surrounding this?

Dean Sayre: I was deeply honored to receive the suggestion -- I think
through the committee that planned the Inauguration -- that I might
give one of the prayers on that day. Actually, you might be interested
to know that I rather resisted the idea. I rather felt that there really
ought to be only one prayer, given on that day. There is only one God,
and I felt that all of us, Protestants, and Jews and others, would do
nothing else than respect a great prayer given by a Catholic. I thought
that the first Catholic to be President ought to call upon one of his own
faith to give a single prayer, which would be the prayer of us all. I
heard that they were going to extend the number of prayers even from
previous Inaugurations by asking a member of the Orthodox Church
also to give a prayer and I remember saying to the man who approached
me that I thought that this was a mistake. If you added one and made
it four prayers, what would there be to stop in future years adding another, and another, and another, until ultimately we had only chaos instead of prayer. But my advice was not accepted, and they had four prayers.

Unhappily, I was not able to accept the invitation to give the prayer representative of Protestantism, for the reason that I was not in the country on Inauguration Day. I had gone to the Middle East. When Inauguration Day came I happened to be in Jerusalem and I sent President Kennedy a cable in which I expressed my regret at not being with him on the Capitol steps, but told him that I had offered a prayer at the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem instead. When I returned, I remember, he asked me to come to the White House, he thanked me for the cable I had sent him, and then proceeded to tell me how long all four prayers had been on that day. Indeed, as I recall, he said, "longer than all the rest of the proceedings all put together". He was somewhat exercised by that fact.

Mr. Belk: Well now, you were on a mission to the Middle East on Inauguration Day. This mission was also related to the President, was it not?

Dean Sayre: In a sense it was. I had gone to the Middle East, as
Chairman of the United States Committee for Refugees, because of the enormous problem of Arab refugees who had been driven out of Palestine, after the war which had established the state of Israel -- about a million Arab refugees. I had wanted to make a real study of the situation, not only of the human conditions in the various camps and places where the refugees were, but also to talk to the officials responsible in the various countries -- the five Arab countries and Israel, as well -- who might, together or separately, make some contribution to the solution of this apparently insoluble problem. So I had called on Mr. Kennedy, after his election and before his inauguration, to tell him of my proposed journey and to ask him if he had any interest in the problem and in my going there. We had, I remember, quite a long talk about it. He evinced the most lively, and profound, and human interest in this whole matter and was gracious enough to ask if I would report to him whatever I had discovered when I returned. This is what took me to the Middle East at that time. I remember when I did come back, I did see Mr. Kennedy, and here was for me one of the most illumining insights into his character. He received me, unskilled, as I was: not a diplomat by profession. And yet received me with the utmost earnestness, and the keenest interest, to know what conclusions I had reached after
talking with the government officials in Lebanon, in Egypt, and in Syria, and Jordan, and Israel. What did I think of the problem? What did I think the United States ought to do about it? He was just at this stage trying to think the problem out himself. His attention, his listening, his concern, were impressive.

Mr. Belk: Dean Sayre, in reporting to the President, what did you tell him?

Dean Sayre: We were faced in the Middle East, then as we still are at this moment that I am speaking, with what seems like an apparently insoluble problem, an impasse between Israel and the Arabs. I remember expressing the rather difficult opinion that somehow or other it was the moral duty of the United States, a nation which has equal concern for both peoples, not just to sit neutrally between them, assisting both with even hand, but to find some solution; not to just accept the impasse, helping both sides, but affirmatively and actively to adopt a policy which would actually search for a solution. After my report to the President with that opinion, I noted by actions of which I read in the paper that he seemed to have accepted that idea. He did proceed, to my knowledge, to make affirmative efforts to find a positive way of solving this problem, at least a way that would bring
a solution for the human beings who had been involved in it. I must say that I admired the President for the courage of that effort.

Mr. Belk: Dean Sayre, the President also appointed you to serve on his own Committee for Equal Employment Opportunity, a matter about which the President felt strongly. How did the President approach this problem?

Dean Sayre: He took it very seriously. He understood how deeply important were the questions of jobs and fairness in hiring, and fairness in promotion in jobs -- how desperately important this is for its bearing on all kinds of other problems in this nation. As you know, Mr. Belk, one of the first actions that President Kennedy took on his assumption of office, was the combination of two committees which had previously existed -- a committee on Government employment, within the Federal service, and a second committee which had been under the previous Administration concerned with employment in that sector of industry which is under contract with the Federal Government. These two committees were combined into a new committee, and strengthened by the appointment of a number of outstanding individuals. Vice President Johnson was made the chairman, and an Executive Order was issued which really put the
power into the hands of this committee to do the job. It had the power to abrogate any contract which failed to observe stringent provisions of fairness in equal employment. When the committee was formed thus with this power, the President began its work by himself appearing in the Cabinet Room of the White House to talk to us about what this meant to our national life, what it meant to him, and what he would require of every member of that committee, the Cabinet members and all the others. No substitutes at the meetings, he said, would be allowed. He wanted us to come personally and to work at the job — no nonsense about it. We were all moved, we were all deeply impressed, and under Vice President Johnson the committee went to work, to do the best job that it knew how.

Mr. Belk: Finally, Dean Sayre, how do you evaluate him as a man -- his impact on the international scene, on this country, on the youth of this country and elsewhere, etc. It is a broad question, I know, but if you were cast in the role of a critic, of evaluator of the late President, what would you say?

Dean Sayre: That is a big question! I think it is one that all of us have reflected about a good deal, since his death. Perhaps in these months since he died we've found that it's easy enough to tend to gild
a man's character, to idealize it in retrospect. And yet fully
discounting such a propensity, I would rank President Kennedy along
with our greatest presidents -- President Lincoln, President Wilson,
President Roosevelt, others that you could mention. We spoke of
reason and revelation a while back. I think he was a President who
knew what both are, and one of those rare people who know how to
combine them. He was a leader not only of our reason, our mind;
he was a logical man. He was capable of hard, intense, deep thought.
He was a rational man, but at the same time he was a President who
knew how to speak to the emotions of our own people and of other
peoples. There was a religious quality to him, as I've said, not
overt, on the surface, but yet deep rooted in the humanity of man,
and in his sympathy with the humanity of others. So that reason and
revelation, emotion and mind -- call it what you like -- were
combined in this man, and one can tell this by the signs that were
visible all around the world.

He had an enormous impact on the international scene, in at
least as far as I observed it going around the world where homeless
people live and where governments are concerned with problems of
that kind. If one came as a friend of President Kennedy, one
understood what that friendship meant to other people. If one
indicated that the President of the United States was seeking for the solution, others believed that he was seeking for the solution with sense, with logic, and with caring. So I think he had an enormous impact just so far as I could observe it in other parts of the world.

His impression on this country I hardly need to describe, for every person in the country can speak of that as well as I. He had an enormous impact on the religious community, of that I am sure. I have mentioned the fact of how the Protestant leaders, those who would not join my committee back in the West Virginia days, nevertheless, before he died, were all on his side so far as I could tell. For they believed in him.

His impact on the youth of this country is truly remarkable. The alacrity with which they responded to his appeal for the Peace Corps was one sure sign of the idealism that he shared with the young people of this land. I do recall one occasion when we were speaking of that. He was just then projecting the Peace Corps. Sargeant Shriver was preparing the final plans. I asked him if he happened to know Jim Robinson, the marvelous negro Presbyterian minister, who some years before had originated what is called "Operation Crossroads Africa", a creative private project of taking students -- white, black, of Chinese descent, American boys and girls -- to Africa each summer;
college students who would join with a like number of African students to do work projects in many of the countries of the African continent. The President hadn't heard of Jim Robinson but it was characteristic of him that as soon as I told him about Jim, he picked up the phone then and there and called Mr. Shriver. "Do you know Jim Robinson," he asked. "Yes," apparently Mr. Shriver had indicated. "Well, I want you to talk with him. I want to learn more about Operation Crossroads Africa." Ultimately Mr. Robinson was placed on the advisory committee of the Peace Corps. The President was keen and alert -- you offered him a suggestion and he took it then and there. This is why, perhaps, that he had such an impact on the young people of this country.

He was a great President. I shall always think so.

Mr. Belk: Thank you Dean Sayre.

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Mr. Belk: The person interviewed on this tape was Francis B. Sayre, Dean of the Washington Cathedral, Washington, D.C. The interviewer is Samuel E. Belk, National Security Council Staff.

The date is June 25, 1964; the place, the White House.

Interviewee: Francis B. Sayre, Jr.

Interviewer: Samuel E. Belk