

With Francis at the Vatican (1928 & 1946)

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During the winter of 1928, Jamestown, New York, attorney Robert H. Jackson and his wife Irene crossed the Atlantic with their close friends John and Maude Blair of Warren, Pennsylvania.

The Jacksons and the Blairs sailed from New York City on the French Line steamer the *France*.¹ Six days later they landed in Vigo on the western coast of Spain. They next saw Casablanca, Morocco (which fourteen years later became the subject of a romantic film drama) and, on a side trip by bus, Rabat. From Casablanca they sailed to Gibraltar. They later made stops in Algiers and in Monte Carlo, Monaco. From Monte Carlo they traveled by land to Italy, spending time in Genoa, Rome and Naples. The Jacksons then reboarded the *S.S. France* and sailed back to the United States while the Blairs returned to Spain and also visited Paris before concluding their holiday.

One highlight of this trip began with a chance meeting. On one of their days in Gibraltar, the Jacksons left the anchored *France* for shore ahead of the Blairs. Indeed, the Blairs were running so late that morning that the last tender was about to cast off when its lone passenger, a man in clerical garb, spotted the Blairs waving and got the boatman to wait for them.²

Aboard the tender, John Blair, climbing across rows of empty seats, thanked the cleric for his help while joking that his large, black, oil-cloth

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¹ See generally *Outgoing Passenger and Mail Steamships*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 6, 1928, at 25 (listing the *France* as "sail[ing] shortly after midnight[from a pier at] W. 15 St. [to] Spain and Gibraltar, Morocco and Italy" on February 7, 1928).

² This paragraph and many of the narrative details throughout this essay are based on MAUDE HALL BLAIR, *A WORLD OF TRAVEL AND FUN* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Co., 1956).

shopping bag looked like a bootlegger's gear. The man, a fellow American, was amused. He introduced himself as "Frank." He said he was a priest connected with the Vatican in Rome. He invited the Blairs to come with him to Gibraltar's markets, shops and stalls to see how he filled the bag. He explained that he was going to buy duty-free gifts for family members whom he soon would be visiting in the U.S.—it really was a shopping bag.

In Gibraltar and then back on the *France*, the Blairs and also the Jacksons got acquainted with Father Frank. Before the couples disembarked in Monaco to begin their land tour of Italy, Frank invited them to spend time with him in Rome. Indeed, he offered to arrange for and to escort them—the Blairs, who were Catholic, and the Jacksons, who were not—to an audience with the Pope.

In Rome, Father Frank met the Blairs and the Jacksons at the train station. To their surprise, he was wearing a Monsignor's robes. On the ship he had not mentioned his rank. From his very friendly, plain style, they had taken him to be a regular priest.

Monsignor Frank helped the Blairs and the Jacksons with their luggage. He drove them to their hotel. Over lunch, he briefed them on the protocol of meeting with the Pope. Frank instructed the men to wear full evening attire and the women to wear black gowns with long sleeves and high necks, and to cover their heads with black mantillas.

The next morning, Monsignor Frank met the Blairs and the Jacksons at the Vatican's bronze gates. He led them into public and semi-public audience rooms, explaining all of the sights. In a large waiting room, they joined many foreign ambassadors to the Vatican and their guests. They then were ushered into a private sitting room.

After a papal secretary announced their arrival, Pope Pius XI entered the room. He wore white robes. As Maude Blair later described it, he "illuminated" the room "with a spiritual grace given only to one who lives a life for God alone; and from his dark and deep-set eyes emanated a pervading benevolence that warmed the hearts of all of us..."³

The Blairs and the Jacksons kissed the Pope's ring and received his blessing. He then, smiling to put all at ease, began to speak with them in

³ *Id.* at 29-30.

English. Displaying detailed knowledge of the U.S., the Pope spoke of their home states, Pennsylvania and New York. They learned that he had, as Father Achille Ratti (i.e., before his 1922 election as Pope), traveled extensively in the U.S.

In subsequent years, Robert Jackson maintained occasional contact with Frank. In early May 1945, for example, just days after President Truman appointed Jackson to serve as U.S. chief of counsel for the prosecution of Nazi war criminals, he wrote to Frank, then stationed in New York, requesting a meeting.

They met the next month at Frank's Manhattan office. They discussed many topics, including Nazism, Catholic attitudes toward Germans and Russians, Jackson's plans for international prosecution of war criminals, relevant Catholic moral principles, and Catholic personnel in Europe who could provide assistance to Jackson. Frank gave Jackson a card to ensure that, if he traveled to Rome, he could have a private audience with the Pope. (Jackson did not yet know this Pope. Pope Pius XI, who Frank had taken the Jacksons and the Blairs to meet in 1928, had died in 1939 and been succeeded by Pope Pius XII.)

During the course of Jackson's ensuing "Nuremberg" year, he did visit Rome a number of times. He had cordial, productive meetings with the Pope and received the Vatican's assistance with the prosecutions.

In February 1946, during the Nuremberg trial, Justice Jackson made a special trip from Nuremberg to Rome to attend the Vatican ceremony at which Pope Pius XII consecrated new cardinals.

Jackson was there at the invitation of his friend Frank. He had become, in 1939, the Archbishop of New York. In February 1946, he became Francis Cardinal Spellman.⁴

⁴ The following page is an image of a carbon copy (unsigned) of Justice Jackson's May 5, 1945, letter to then Archbishop Spellman.

May 5, 1945.

Most Reverend Francis J. Spellman,
St. Patrick's Cathedral,
New York, New York.

Your Excellency:

It is a long time since you and I dined on the S.S. France in 1928 with our friends, the Blairs, of Warren, Pennsylvania as host and hostess, and much has happened to both of us since. I now want to arrange to talk with you if you would be good enough to give me an interview on a subject which is of great concern to me and, I assume, must be to you.

I have been assigned to represent the United States in the trial of war criminals. We know that one of the principal steps in the preparation for the war and for world domination was to destroy all religious and moral values and sense of responsibility. I am afraid that the damage they did in this respect is really more significant than the physical damage and perhaps harder to repair. One of the things that I would hope to accomplish by the trial of war criminals is to restore some emphasis on the moral and spiritual values which have so long been ignored and which really underlie any worthwhile effort in the administration of justice.

I know that the representatives of the Catholic Church suffered greatly at the hands of these people. There must be available a considerable amount of information as to the Nazi drive on the Church as there is about their drive on the Jews, the Protestants and, in fact, all of the groups who had such moral convictions as might interfere with the ruthless prosecution of war.

With this in mind, I am anxious to discuss with you what should be included in our program and what cooperation I might get and from what quarters. I shall be in New York within a couple of weeks and if it is agreeable to you, I should like to call your secretary for an appointment. I assume Father Shea is still acting as your secretary and I should like to be remembered to him.

With high regards and good wishes,

Sincerely yours,