

# HOW WOMEN CAME TO FORDHAM

## *The Life and Death of Thomas More College*

By Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.

*"If coeducation exists at present...effective means should be taken...with a view to eliminating women from all such schools as soon as can possibly be done..."*

So wrote Fr. General W. Ledochowski, May 1, 1942, from Rome to Fr. Zacheus Maher, his assistant visiting the American Society during World War II. Fr. Maher enclosed the General's letter in a 38-page *memoriale* on a series of practical disciplinary issues he had observed during his visit: smoking, excessive use of radios, women's photos in yearbooks, the number of school dances, pictures of young Jesuits without Roman collars. The document was an attempted shield against "the spirit of the age," one aspect of which seems to have been the slow crumbling of the wall between men and women in Jesuit education.

Within twenty years, a combination of forces, including outside pressure, gave the wall a final push. At Fordham a major self-study plus the 1963 Middle States evaluation urged Fordham to start "thinking like a true university rather than a federation of schools," to start a new coeducational college, and not allow Fordham College to "become an enclave."

Fordham president Vincent O'Keefe's first plan was to establish the self-study's "new" co-ed college named for Edmund Campion; but Fordham College Jesuits, with a dedication to the status quo common in any faculty, dug in their heels. At the time only one fourth of the traditionally male Catholic Colleges had admitted women at all. So Joseph R. Frese, S.J., O'Keefe's successor as academic vice president, proposed a high-standards women's college named for St. Thomas More, Martyr-hero of Robert Bolt's popular play *A Man for All Seasons* and an advocate for women's education.

Behind the scenes, opponents of Thomas More joked that it was the "3-D school" of "Dames, Dopes, and Dollars." But the Fordham PR office and admissions strategy put the new school's best face forward. "First Thomas More Coed Accepted," the *Ram* announced (November 13, 1963). She was an "attractive blond" selected to project the image of

success for the first two hundred women, then called coeds, who would transform the campus the following fall. In the prefeminist vocabulary of the era, the "first girl," Joan Ann Poroski, was a "five-foot, eight-inch beauty," with green eyes, from Maria Regina High School in Hartsdale, where she scored in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile in the National Merit exam and won prizes at the science fair. She played the piano, sang, wrote short stories, and when she heard that the Fordham mascot, a ram named Rameses XIX, had died, she wanted to donate a new one until she heard that a live ram cost \$2000.

The admissions director had a clear idea of what she wanted. No nuns. They would "put a damper" on things and make the campus look like a convent. She would accept married women and allow girls to marry while students, but she was "absolutely opposed to working mothers." Beauty would not be a factor in admissions, but those interviewed so far were "exceptionally good looking," and "neatness, poise and personality" would definitely count.

There would be no mixed classes. Presumably this was because women needed a different, more supportive atmosphere, because they wanted to establish a separate identity, and because, for other reasons, the administration wanted to keep men and women apart.

With the first dean, noted scholar Fr. John Donohue, S.J., and assistant dean Yale PhD Patricia Plante appointed and the first class recruited, a new Jesuit torpedo almost sank the whole ship.

The New York provincial, John McGinty, S.J., called O'Keefe and told him he had gone too far, exceeded the limited permissions granted with Thomas More's initial approval. O'Keefe sensed immediately that anti-Thomas More Jesuits had "gotten to him," made an end run, and convinced the provincial to kill the school. He was right, McGinty told him to call the whole thing off. O'Keefe's reply

*Raymond A. Schroth, S.J., is editor of Conversations and author of Fordham: A History and Memoir (Loyola Press).*



Members of the Thomas More student government. 1970 Fordham University yearbook.

was blunt: kill Thomas More and you'll have to find a new president for Fordham.

By the mid-1960s women were a growing part of the general "60s" revolution on the campus: picketing against segregation, the Peace Corps, the summer Mexico Project building houses for the poor, the "hootenanny Mass," which added Negro spirituals to the liturgy. And there was love. The women-only classroom policy broke down. When Susan Barrera was assigned to an all-male history class she retreated to the back of the room to be as invisible as she could. But John Fay, because there weren't enough seats, had to stand against the wall behind her. He looked over her shoulder, read her name on her

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notebook, and called her up. Susan had heard that some Jesuits didn't want women there, and the grumpy Fr. William

Grimaldi, S.J., a classics professor in charge of their honors program, told her that he was one of them. Yet she saw him as a "softy" beneath the gruff exterior, and he later confessed to her that the arrival of women was the best thing that ever happened to Fordham.

In general the Thomas More women developed a strong bond among themselves, forging a distinct identity that endured for years. Of course there were some complaints. There weren't enough ladies rooms, and women weren't allowed in the swimming

pool because the boys in those days swam nude. In February 1965 the girls offended the Fordham boys by sponsoring a mixer with Manhattan College. Fordham boys griped that 75 percent of the TMC girls were from local Catholic high schools and went home to their parents every day. Nor, according to the male cheerleaders, did "Ramelettes" have what it took to really whip up spirit at the football game.

When the administration decided in 1972 that Thomas More had served its purpose and sought to merge it with Fordham College, its loyal alumnae fought hard. They argued that the needs of women were different enough to require separate structures, that Thomas More's higher standards, made possible by their selectivity,

would be watered down, and that in extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities women would be swallowed up in a male world.

At the November 28, 1972, meeting of the Rose Hill Campus Council, then president James C. Finlay, S.J. argued that the budget couldn't handle separate schools and that the separate college still caused confusion as to whether Fordham was truly coeducational. Furthermore, according to a survey, the women were no longer attached to Thomas More's separate identity.

The "first coed," Joan Ann Pososki, left at the end of her first year. Dean Patricia Plante left in 1968 and married a Jesuit. Susan Barrera married John Fay the year after graduation.

In its ten years Thomas More had radically transformed Fordham College by forcing Fordham men—faculty and students—to rethink the role of women in Catholic education and in their own lives.

No one foresaw that within twenty years the old glee club would be blended into a male-female chorus, that women's sports would have parity with men, that women would be playing rugby, that the *Ram* masthead would list twenty-two women and six men, and that at Fordham women would outnumber men 60 to 40 percent. And in a way Frs. Ledochowski and Maher may or may not have foreseen, Jesuits, who most of their lives had lived in an all-male world, would have a chance to develop more lasting friendships with women—faculty and students alike. ■