

Jean Marie Ford, RSCJ
1926 - 2012

Jean Ford was born in Boston on May 19, 1926, one of three daughters of John J. Ford and Mary C. Hageman. She was baptized on June 6 and raised in Brookline, Massachusetts. Jean attended Newton Country Day School of the Sacred Heart for primary and secondary school. She graduated from Manhattanville in 1948 with a major in History and a minor in Philosophy. She later said of her education at Manhattanville that “proximity to problems of interracial justice, and involvement in social and political issues, left a mark on me... I learned through what was then called ‘Catholic Action’ that my life was not for me to live for myself. Those years taught me concern for the world we live in.”

Her conviction that she did not live for herself alone may have stirred thoughts of a religious vocation in Jean. She entered the Society of the Sacred Heart at Kenwood on September 7, 1948 and was received by R. M. Bodkin. Marie-Louise Schroen was Jean’s Mistress of Novices. She received the habit on March 1, 1949 and made her first vows on March 5, 1951. After several months of filling in what was needed at Overbrook, she returned to Kenwood 1951-1952 for the black juniorate. There she began an M.A. in History from Manhattanville that would be completed in 1953 with a thesis on “Locke’s Influence on the American Revolution.” Meanwhile, while completing her studies she was Third Academic class mistress at Newton Academy 1952-1955 and Eighth Grade teacher at Eden Hall 1955-1956.

That year she went to probation at Via Nomentana, Rome, under the direction of R. M. Zurstrassen and made her final profession on July 31, 1956. Returning to the U.S., she taught Eighth and Ninth Grades and was Middle School Surveillante at Newton Academy, 1956-1958. From 1958-1965 she was Mistress of Studies and of the Fourth Academic at Elmhurst in Providence, Rhode Island.

In 1960-1962 Jean took several summer courses in Theology at Providence College, which prepared her well for her role with the new aspirants who would reside with her at Stone Ridge for study at Catholic University in the newly created program of *Formation Doctrinale*. As both local and vicariate Mistress of Studies Jean was in charge of the studies of these aspirants at Stone Ridge 1965-1966. For the aspirants these were heady post-conciliar days. Reading lists – including Rahner, Schillebeeckx, Teilhard de Chardin, Raimundo Pannikar and Harvey Cox – challenged assumptions about the authority of the Bible and about doctrines like original sin and creation. With few boundaries, the aspirants brought those challenging insights to Stone Ridge religion classes and to evening recreation. Most of the community wondered if *formation doctrinale* had been such a good idea; Jean knew it was not just a good idea but essential that the aspirants receive a strong theological grounding, so she defended them vigorously when necessary, but she also taught the necessity of prudence in judging when and where and how to introduce and explore their newfound insights.

Jean was soon drawn from direct involvement in the school to a series of leadership positions. She became superior at Newton Academy, 1966-1970, followed by a move down the street to 860 Beacon Street as Director of Formation 1970-1972. In 1972 she was named Provincial of the Washington Province and took up residence at the provincial house on Commonwealth Avenue, Newton. These were turbulent years in religious life and Jean, though a young superior, had the wisdom and freedom to guide others through these years of nearly continuous experimentation and change. Perhaps it was her experience at the Chapter of 1967 which prepared her for the years which followed. During the Chapter she wrote of her inner struggle to understand what was really happening: “Often, pacing the roof at Via Nomentana, I tried to come to grips with what was going on inside me. I knew religious life was going to change but had no idea how. I knew, however, that I wanted to be part of the change.”

As a young superior Jean navigated the ‘60’s and ‘70’s with a wisdom and freedom unmatched by superiors twice her age. Everything was in flux: cloister was greatly modified, silence was a choice, small communities formed in less institutional settings, new ways of prayer were explored and, by fits and starts, communities tried to share their history and their hopes with one another. About none of this

were they of one mind, but Jean had a way of holding everyone together as this new terrain was being explored.

An enormous challenge of those days was the closing of some Network schools across the country – decisions reached with professional consultants not because school A or B was not solvent but because the Society was advised to consolidate personnel in fewer schools. (Clearly the notion that RSCJ and lay colleagues hold the mission in common had not yet been embraced.) Much anger was stirred up among parents, students and alumnae who cherished their schools and who had invested in their flourishing. On one occasion Jean addressed one such angry crowd. Several women were making so much noise with their charm bracelets that she could barely be heard. With dignity she absorbed their anger as she presented the Society's explanation and apologized for an abrupt and unilateral decision. Not a few were impressed by her peaceful and defenseless presence, born of her deep faith.

God was Jean's center. It was as simple as that. She didn't talk much about herself or her inner world – she was, after all, a Bostonian! – but she lived her life in such a way that gave witness to her grounding in God. Her words and her deeds matched. She was a woman of integrity and principle who, at the same time, allowed people to come to their own truth on their own.

When her term as Provincial ended in 1978, Jean moved to the Upstairs Community at Newton Academy and, soon after, was named to the International Commission on the Constitutions in preparation for the General Chapter of 1982. This proved to be one of her major legacies. Together with Bernadette des Francs (France), Sumiko Iba (Japan), Mariantonia Blanes (Spain), and Margarita Hurtado (Chile) Jean was named to the commission by Concepción Camacho. All five women were known personally and trusted by Concha; four of them had just stepped down from provincial office.

The commission met for months at a time, initially searching for the essential thinking of Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat and a way to communicate it in light of the post-conciliar realities of church and society. Their meetings were described once by Iba: "Work in solitude shared in the late day, learning to fight freely and to reconcile just as heartily."

The Constitutions Commission produced a first draft in 1980. After reflection and discussion all over the Society and after a synthesis of responses was prepared, the committee completed a second draft in March of 1982, just in time to send it to Chapter delegates and to communities in preparation for the 1982 Chapter. A mark of the greatness of these women on the Constitutions Commission was the freedom with which they saw their draft completely reworked once the chapter began. Jean, for one, was satisfied that it had served its purpose in stimulating the chapter conversations which led to the final approval and adoption of the Constitutions of 1982.

Meanwhile, when the Constitutions Commission was not meeting in Rome and Jean had time, she also worked at Casa del Sol in Boston. From 1980-1982, still on the Constitutions Commission, she resided at Carrollton School in Miami with work on curriculum development.

With the formation of the single United States Province in September, 1982, Jean was asked once again to serve in provincial government. She was a member of this first United States Provincial Team until 1988. She was then named by Helen McLaughlin to the Central Team and lived for the next six years at the Motherhouse, first Via Adolfo Gandiglio, then Via Tarquinio Vipera in Rome. For Jean, the Society's internationality was both a great gift and a great challenge – overcome only with simplicity and largeness of heart. "Whatever the differences of culture, of history, of continent, of country, of provinces," she once wrote, "we are indeed called to a common vision of communicating the love of the Heart of Christ so that all will find true growth as persons in him and be reconciled with one another."

and as member of the Central Team in 1994

Jean participated in four general chapters, as delegate in 1967 and 1970, as provincial in 1976, and as constitutional expert in 1982. She wrote that “these experiences have shown me the incredible unity in the Society. Our pluriformity has only enriched and strengthened it.”

Is it any wonder Jean enjoyed the life she found at Sprout Creek Farm when she left Society leadership after nearly thirty years? Well actually, yes, it is! Her choice of going to the farm in 1994 confounded everyone who knew her. For one thing she didn't like plants, indoors or out; for another, she didn't like animals, though she made an exception for Lewis the cat and for the sheep, sixty of whom she even fed for a time. The truth is, Jean wanted to disappear. As far as she was concerned, she had gone to her last meeting, served on her last committee, drafted her last document. This city girl described her ministry on the farm as “office work and a little bit of everything,” and, for the next fifteen years, that “everything” included the role of “Mother Welcome” to strangers and friends alike and the processing of camp applications with special attention to each child and each family.

Jean was also a voracious reader. A historian by training, she gravitated to non-fiction. She followed current events and politics and was always willing to share her opinions and convictions, sometimes quite vigorously. Her extensive reading and her interest in current events made her a whiz at the *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle which, for years, she photocopied in the morning and finished by the end of the day. Happily, by the time pop culture clues made the puzzle confounding, Jean had already picked up a different kind of puzzle, contentedly playing games like ‘free cell’ on the office computer.

After fifteen years at Sprout Creek Farm, a series of health challenges brought Jean to Abba House in 2009. She was truly happy at Abba, a retirement option on the east coast that she herself had helped to encourage as a member of the Kenwood Board. Her reading and her intellectual curiosity continued unabated. She was also aware of her impending death and she was quite deliberate about attending to unfinished business, especially in some of her relationships. To her last breath she was a woman of integrity and freedom.

Jean Ford died on March 16, 2012. She was the kind of Religious of the Sacred Heart that many RSCJ want to be like. She was a free woman – simple, thoughtful, generous, bright, trusting, forgiving, totally without guile – a great woman in a completely unassuming way.

Requiescat in pace.

