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Tania Tetlow, president of Fordham University, meets families from New students during Move In Day at the Bronx campus, Sunday, Aug. 25, 2024, in New York. (AP/Kena Betancur)

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Tania Tetlow has earned a reputation as a trailblazer. She became the first woman and first layperson to serve as president of two Jesuit schools — first at Loyola University New Orleans and now at Fordham University in New York City.

Fordham had previously been led by [Catholic priests](#) — all male, of course — since its founding in 1841.

Tetlow has thrived in these barrier-breaking roles — even becoming the first Fordham president to [sing the national anthem](#) at Yankee Stadium. But she is acutely aware of the challenges facing her — and other college presidents — as they grapple with tight budgets, political attacks on higher education, and [divisions within their student bodies](#) arising from the Israel-Hamas war.

What's the toughest challenge, as she heads into her third academic year at Fordham?

"How much there is to juggle," she replied in an interview.

"These are enormously complicated institutions with so many different constituencies," she said. "How do you navigate the latest controversy while still moving the university forward?"

Already, she has weathered criticism from some students for increasing the cost of tuition by more than 10% over the past two years. Tuition, plus fees, will cost nearly \$63,000 for full-time undergraduates for 2024-25; room and board could add roughly \$18,000 to \$26,000 more.

"Bridging the gap between what they can afford to pay and the excellence they deserve is getting harder and harder," Tetlow said. "It's important to understand those goals are in tension with each other."

Even more challenging for Tetlow, in many respects, has been calibrating her responses to [the Israel-Hamas war](#) — a sensitive issue at a predominantly Catholic school where about 2.5% of the roughly 10,000 undergraduate students are Jewish and 5% are Muslim.

Last year, three days after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack in which about 1,200 Israelis were killed and 250 taken hostage, Tetlow issued a [statement](#) expressing horror at

“the murder and kidnapping of innocents, from elderly Holocaust survivors to children, and the resulting war.”

“For many of our Jewish students, colleagues, and alumni, this is yet another brutal reminder of their vulnerability, of rising antisemitism in the U.S. and around the world,” she said. “Many of our Muslim students, colleagues, and alumni also face the fear of collective blame and reprisals, worried about violence and discrimination.”

The president of Fordham’s Muslim Students Association, Hajer Merarda, told the university’s student-run newspaper she was outraged by the statement. She was quoted in The Fordham Ram as criticizing Tetlow's “biased, one-sided rhetoric” and the omission of the words “Palestine” and “Palestinians.”

In a subsequent [statement on Nov. 7](#) and a February interview with student journalists, Tetlow sought to convey empathy and support for students across the ideological spectrum who had been adversely affected by the war.

“I am so eager to console the students who are in a great deal of pain,” she told the journalists. “I find myself in the embarrassing situation of revealing to them I have less power than they imagine that I do.”

Tensions remained high throughout the academic year.

On May 1, pro-Palestinian protesters organized an encampment in the main lobby at Fordham’s Lincoln Center campus in Manhattan. (Its main campus is in the Bronx.) The university summoned police, who arrested 15 protesters who defied orders to leave.

“This was only about the physical protection of the campus,” Tetlow said afterward. “Fordham students have a right to feel safe and to finish their exams. Period.”

Ahead of this week's start of the new academic year, Tetlow reflected on the past year’s challenges.

“Our job is not to wade into every controversial issue,” she said. “What we do is to console our community.”

Amid the Israel-Hamas conflict, Tetlow said, this task “has been ridiculously fraught, because to console either side is to provoke the other side.”

“I have tried very hard. I’ve often stumbled along the way. It’s so hard to find the right words.”

Nonetheless, Tetlow weathered the past year more buoyantly than many of her peers, including [three women who resigned](#) as presidents of Harvard, Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania in the wake of controversy over their handling of pro-Palestinian protests on campus.

Tetlow didn’t rule out the possibility that sexism was among the factors that fueled criticism of these women in Ivy League leadership jobs. It’s an issue she knows well after breaking gender barriers at Loyola New Orleans and Fordham.

“I of course have dealt with those obstacles,” she said. “Being clear-eyed about the fact that they exist helps you overcome them.”

At Fordham, she added, “For every person for whom this represents jarring change, there are a dozen more who are thrilled.”

Asked about the Catholic Church’s entrenched refusal to ordain women as priests, Tetlow gave a nuanced answer.

“For centuries, women religious have been running schools and hospitals, proving there’s nothing women couldn’t do,” she said. “Yet the hierarchy still excludes half of humanity.”

Tetlow added that she was taught by her mother, a biblical scholar, that Jesus “clearly went out of his way to engage with women.”

“The religious lessons are there,” Tetlow said. “I hope the church will continue to do better in listening to them.”

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Tetlow also has made clear she differs with official Catholic teaching on LGBTQ+ issues. Its doctrine rejects same-sex marriage and condemns any sexual relations between gay or lesbian partners as “intrinsically disordered.”

Last year, she gave the keynote address at the annual conference of Outreach, a Jesuit-supported initiative aimed at encouraging the acceptance of LGBTQ+

Catholics by the church.

“I am here to tell you that you are loved, bathed in the overwhelming love and acceptance of God,” Tetlow told the audience at a Catholic church across the street from Fordham’s Manhattan campus.

The Rev. James Martin, the Jesuit priest who founded Outreach in 2022, said Tetlow was “the perfect person” to lead off the conference.

“She spoke movingly about her sister, who is gay, and her efforts to welcome LGBTQ students, faculty and staff on campus,” Martin said via email.

Tetlow, assessing national developments, observes that higher education “is becoming a political football.”

“It’s so much easier to tear down an institution than to build one,” she said.

In such a climate, she is grateful to be where she is.

“What I’m proud of is helping Fordham double down on who we are — a Jesuit institution in New York, determined to find out how we can have an impact on a really broken world.”

“The advantage we have at this moment in a religious university is the ability to unabashedly talk about values and faith,” she added. “That’s harder at secular institutions, because they have to worry about offending people.”

Tetlow's [ties to Fordham](#) go back a long way. Her parents met there when they were graduate students; her father was a priest at the time but left the priesthood in order to get married.

Tetlow grew up mostly in New Orleans, attending Tulane University before going to Harvard Law School. She returned to Louisiana, working in private legal practice before spending five years as a federal prosecutor.

Over the summer, Tetlow said, she and her Fordham colleagues have been planning the launch of what they call “Project Grace” — aimed at engaging students who are “rightfully very upset” about issues ranging from climate change to political polarization to the ongoing Middle East tensions.

"It's a teachable moment. ... How to channel their passions in productive ways when horrible things are happening," Tetlow said.