



About 30 members of the Presentation School Foundation mourned the closing of Our Lady of the Presentation School yesterday at Oak Square Common in Brighton. The foundation also celebrated what it hopes will be the birth of a new school at the building. After parents, students, and community leaders protested, Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley agreed to consider allowing the foundation to buy the school building. (Globe Staff Photo / Justine Hunt)

O'Malley intensifies action on closings Eager for new issues, focus

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | June 19, 2005

Sixteen months after he first announced plans to close a large number of parishes in the Archdiocese of Boston, Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley is suddenly a man in a hurry.

The archbishop, known for the slowness of his decision making, has leapt into action in the wake of furious criticism over his decision to lock out pupils from a Brighton parochial school to prevent a possible occupation of the school.

O'Malley and a number of advisers insist that several crowd-pleasing steps he took last week in the wake of the Brighton controversy, many of which appear to be concessions to his critics, were in the works before the debacle surrounding the closing of the Brighton school, Our Lady of the Presentation, and were not a direct response to the intense criticism he received not only from parishioners but also from Catholic politicians.

But the advisers and O'Malley himself say the crisis atmosphere has intensified the archbishop's desire to make the remaining major decisions about the parish closings over the next few weeks so the archbishop can turn his attention to other issues facing the nation's fourth-largest archdiocese. And one key adviser says the recent crisis has marked a new assertion of leadership by the archbishop.

Over the last week, O'Malley agreed to pursue the sale of the Brighton school building, Our Lady of the Presentation, to an Oak Square community group that had been seeking the purchase for a year. He reopened a Weymouth parish, St. Albert the Great, 10 weeks after promising to do so and 10 months after protesters began a vigil at the building. He lifted or altered seven decisions to close parishes after recommendations he do so from his own lay-dominated advisory panel, sent to him as much as four weeks earlier. And he promised to rebuild another Weymouth church, Sacred Heart, which had been destroyed in an accidental fire a week ago.

"I always try to do what I think is best for the church of Boston, and it's not always what's best for Sean O'Malley," the archbishop said in an interview in Chicago, where he was attending the spring meeting of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. "And I think what's best for us now is to try and conclude the tension and a lot of the problems we're facing, so as to be able to focus on the pastoral mission of the church."

O'Malley says he has not abandoned the parish closings process, which he says is necessary to strengthen the archdiocese.

He has already closed 62 of the archdiocese's 357 parishes. He plans to close another 15 over the next three years, citing declining numbers of priests and parishioners and a financial crunch.

He still faces several excruciating decisions, particularly whether to ask police to remove protesters from closed churches that the archdiocese and its lay advisory panel do not believe should be reopened.

But these parishioners appear to be running out of ways to challenge the closings. O'Malley said he expects the Vatican to rule on canonical appeals of his decisions over the next several weeks. And the Meade-Eisner Commission, a panel appointed by O'Malley to review the closings decisions, is hoping to complete its work within the next few weeks. Parishioners at some closed churches have filed suits in civil courts, but those cases challenge the ownership of parish bank accounts and real estate, not O'Malley's right to close the parishes.

O'Malley's advisers say the archbishop needs to make tough decisions soon, because the yearlong controversy over parish closings is damaging an archdiocese already severely weakened by the clergy abuse crisis.

"There's no question that he and a number of other people, including a number of priests, say it is time to bring this to completion," said the Rev. J. Bryan Hehir, president of Catholic Charities. "People may not agree on how you would do that, but they do agree that the faster this comes to a conclusion, the better, because there are hard choices, and all of them are emotionally laden, but you won't lessen the pain or the difficulty of the choices by extending them even further."

Hehir, who is emerging as an important adviser to O'Malley, said the archdiocese needs to shift its focus to the agenda of rebuilding the church, inspired by St. Francis and laid out by O'Malley at his installation two years ago.

"Reconfiguration was always a means to an end and was never an end to itself," Hehir said. "It's about how you put the diocese in place so it can rebuild, in multiple senses of rebuilding, from trust to pastoral care to economic stability to coherent organization."

But Hehir conceded that the controversy over the Presentation school, a low point in O'Malley's tenure in Boston, facilitated a new assertion of leadership by the archbishop, who critics believe has delegated too many key decisions to subordinates.

The archdiocese locked out pupils as young as 3-years-old, in what it said was an effort to prevent a rumored occupation of the school by neighbors angry over the plan to close the school at the end of the school year.

"Obviously, the impact of that week was horrendous, because it tended to reinforce a lot of fears and attitudes and there was anger at a new level," Hehir said. "So the archbishop took a whole series of things in hand, and made choices that he could have made at any time, but there certainly was the catalyst of the week before. This was a moment that you also see in government or in business, when somebody who has got the ultimate authority can move in and say, 'Enough, I'm going to do it this way,' and that's what he did."

In deciding whether to reopen closed parishes, O'Malley has relied heavily on the Meade-Eisner Commission, a panel he appointed to review the contested decisions. Members of the commission insist that they tried to assess closing decisions without regard for whether the closing had led to a vigil. The commission members point out that most of the decisions that they recommended be reversed affected parishes that were not the sites of protests.

The commission successfully recommended changes affecting several parishes occupied by protesters. They include St. Bernard's in West Newton, which O'Malley decided to reevaluate; St. Albert the Great in Weymouth, which O'Malley agreed to reopen; and St. Anselm in Sudbury and Infant Jesus-St. Lawrence in Brookline, which O'Malley decided to reopen as chapels of nearby parishes. The commission, according to members, is divided over whether to reconsider the fate of two other occupied parishes, St. Jeremiah in Framingham and Our Lady of Mount Carmel in East Boston. And the commission appears to have decided that O'Malley was correct in his decision to close three other parishes that are occupied by protesters: St. Therese in Everett, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini in Scituate, and St. James the Great in Wellesley.

The commission is also examining decisions to close several other parishes slated to close over the next few years and at least one, Star of the Sea in Squantum, that has already closed.

"We have to figure out who we are as a church, and I think while you don't want to have a sense as a faith community that you're going to be redoing yourself every minute, all of us as Catholics know we're going to have to think through how we build a church for the 21st century," said Peter Meade, an executive vice president of Blue Cross and Blue Shield who cochairs the commission with Sister Janet Eisner, the president of Emmanuel College.

O'Malley's staff says that future parish closings will take place more slowly than those of the last year -- the next one is not scheduled until December -- and with greater attention to local concerns. But, they say, the closings will still be difficult and in some cases contested, a reflection of the intense emotional connection many Catholics have to their churches.

It is not clear whether the events of last week portend some larger shift in O'Malley's administration. Some chancery officials are expecting a difficult cabinet meeting this week, because the staff is divided between those who believe O'Malley is being flexible and judicious and those who believe he is caving in to critics.

"They had a good week, and when you haven't had any good weeks, a week is a long time," said one O'Malley adviser who asked not to be identified. "There is a sense that the archbishop sees that he can't delegate everything like he's been doing and that he's not happy with some of the decisions that have been made in his name."

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