

Many left puzzled, angry at timing of church move

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Little children crying, locked out of their own school by the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston two days before graduation. Police officers and security guards hovering over a makeshift ceremony in the square across the street. Parents standing in the pouring rain condemning the church leaders and demanding answers.

Images of a Catholic Church that seemed callous to the human impact of its decisions were broadcast across the state yesterday, after the archdiocese abruptly changed the locks on Our Lady of the Presentation School in Brighton Wednesday and canceled graduation ceremonies for children as young as 3. Church officials said the lockout was necessary to stop a rumored occupation of the school, scheduled to be closed permanently today.

But elected officials stood aghast, and public relations specialists could not fathom the reasoning of church officials in a city where the Catholic Church has been a dominant institution for more than a century, at a time when it is struggling to rehabilitate its image in the aftermath of the clergy sex-abuse scandal.

"We're not talking about Al Qaeda here," said George K. Regan Jr., president of the Regan Communications Group, a public relations firm. "We're talking about nursery school kids."

Terrence C. Donilon, spokesman for the archdiocese, said: "We certainly discussed public relations, but Archbishop O'Malley made his decision not on the basis of PR, but for the safety of children. He understood that this was not going to be well received."

State Senator Michael W. Morrissey of Quincy, who is Catholic, said, "All I can say is, they have a way of snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory."

He predicted the move would exacerbate tension between the church and parishioners who are holding vigils to prevent their churches from being closed.

Susan Tracy, a former state representative and now a political consultant with the Strategy Group, can still remember going out for doughnuts to celebrate her graduation from kindergarten at Our Lady of the Presentation. She said church leaders might have weathered this storm better if they had a store of good will on their side.

Most damaging, she said, is that the parents who have appeared in the news over the last day could not be dismissed as rabble-rousers or people with an ax to grind against the church.

"These are good people, people who don't have deep anger toward the church easily," she said. "For the church to get them to a place where I see them angry and the kids crying -- that's the future of the church, that's the base. I think it deeply hurts the church on the heels of everything else, and I don't think there's anything they can do to right this wrong."

Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who is Catholic, said he did not know how the church could make amends.

"Some of the people I've talked to who have been trying to help work with the archdiocese said this is a huge step backward," he said. "We were making progress, and where's the credibility now? Where's the credibility in the decision-making process? Why don't we have a say in what's going on? It's our church."

Councilor Jerry P. McDermott, who represents Brighton and was a lifelong member of the Our Lady of Presentation and a graduate of its school, said parishioners had endured years of hurt at the hands of church leaders. Four priests accused of sexually abusing children had been assigned to the church over the years, he said.

Despite the grief many parishioners felt over the closing of the parish last year, people accepted it without trying to occupy the church. Then the archdiocese refused a request by parents to buy back the school building and turn it into an independent Catholic school, insisting that it needed the office space for the Metropolitan Tribunal, a church court.

"Here's a particular parish that's been victimized but stayed faithful through it all, and this is the treatment that we're receiving," he said.

Secretary of State William F. Galvin, who graduated from Our Lady of the Presentation 41 years ago, said the archdiocese could have easily called him or any of a number of mediators in the community to help head off a possible protest.

He said the principal of the school, Sister Mary Duke, begged the archdiocese to consider locking the doors after the ceremony.

"From a public relations point of view . . . it's not likely a rally would get much attention at 4:30 in the afternoon on a Friday in June when the temperature is 90 degrees," he said. "This whole sad, sordid episode is getting a lot more attention. They've reinforced every stereotypical bad opinion people have about them."