

EILEEN MCNAMARA

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Divorced from reality

By Eileen McNamara, Globe Columnist | January 26, 2005

Say this for the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, it has a well-honed sense of irony. Who but the decision makers on Lake Street would boot children and families out of a church-owned building in order to install canon lawyers whose job it is to dissolve Catholic marriages?

Given a chance to expand the educational role of Our Lady of the Presentation School in a struggling urban neighborhood, Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley has chosen, instead, to set up an annulment shop in the old brick schoolhouse in Oak Square.

Call it the marriage of two scandals: the sexual abuse crisis that has forced the Catholic Church to close parishes and shutter schools and the annulment racket that has made a mockery of the church's opposition to divorce.

It is no wonder that the dozens of neighborhood residents who rallied in Oak Square last night described themselves as mystified by the workings of O'Malley's mind. How could the need of an annulment tribunal for office space be more pressing than the need of local and immigrant families for educational programming?

The coalition of civic groups that calls itself the Oak Square Partnership for Youth and Families is not demanding that the school remain open. It is not denying the right of the archdiocese to dispose of its property as it sees fit. All the people in Oak Square, to say nothing of Mayor Thomas M. Menino and the City Council, are asking is that O'Malley be true to his word that surplus real estate would be used in a way most in keeping with the mission of the Catholic Church.

Peddling faux divorces would not seem to fit that bill.

The archdiocese has spurned the Oak Square Partnership's offer to buy the building at market value when the parochial school closes its doors in June. The partnership's proposal calls for an independent grade school, a preschool, an afterschool program, and adult education classes.

The church says it needs the space to hear requests for annulments. That's no small business in the United States, where three-quarters of the world's annulments are issued.

"We are trying to keep families in a neighborhood where poverty is going up and owner occupancy of housing is going down," said Kevin M. Carragee, chairman of the Presentation School Foundation. "This could bring stability to a place that is a mecca for landlords willing to charge students the kind of rapacious rents that drive out families."

Presentation School looms over Oak Square Common, opposite the YMCA and the fire station and the Faneuil Library. Last evening, all of those buildings were festooned with yellow and blue balloons, giving the event less the feel of a protest rally than a street fair. The wrought-iron fence around the common was draped with banners proclaiming the support of the Brighton Little League and vowing to "Stand Together."

With children engaged in snowball fights and parents singing "Stop in the Name of Love" between sips of hot cider, there was little anger on display. "It is just so astonishing to us that the church would pass up a chance to revitalize this area,"

Carragee said. "We understand they need office space, but where are their priorities? Where is the commitment to the poor and to the immigrants and to the rest of us who live here in Brighton, who have hosted the Chancery all these years? This is the way you treat your neighbor?"

Most galling has been the unwillingness of O'Malley to sit down with them, to listen to the needs of the community. A visit from Bishop Richard G. Lennon to the Presentation School last month gave no hint that the partnership's proposal to buy the building would be rejected so summarily. After all that has happened in Boston in the last few years, Carragee said, "it is hard for us to understand why they will not talk to the people they claim to serve."

Eileen McNamara is a Globe columnist. She can be reached at mcnamara@globe.com.