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The Boston Herald

June 16, 2005 Thursday
ALL EDITIONS

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 010

LENGTH: 633 words

HEADLINE: Archdiocese aghast to find flock doesn't act like sheep

BYLINE: By Margery Eagan

BODY:

In battle with the Archdiocese of Boston, the meek do not inherit the earth. They get rolled.

That's the lesson of the reopened St. Albert the Great in Weymouth where parishioners, when the archdiocese tried to close their church, just refused to leave. By the dozens. For 10 months.

It's the lesson of the tent city set up outside the closed - but now maybe not - Our Lady of the Presentation School, Brighton. Weeping children and CCD teachers made banners that read ``O'Malleyville" and signs that said, ``Arrogant, ridiculous, cheating, heartless, obnoxious, enraging, exasperating."

All this ran on Channels 4, 5, 7, 25, 38, 56, New England Cable News and all over radio. Mayor Menino said he was ``disgusted."

``The only thing the church knows how to do these days is hurt people," said state Rep. Michael Moran.

``A pack of thieves," said City Councilor Jerry McDermott.

Suddenly, after dilly-dallying since March 31 (when he first said he'd reopen St. Albert) Archbishop O'Malley actually gets around to doing it on Monday. That's the same day he met, after months of refusals, with Presentation parents to discuss selling them the school.

Here's today's news quiz. Is this a.) a coincidence; b.) a miracle, or c.) buckling to overwhelming outrage and massive media humiliation?

News quiz part II: What do losers in battles with the Catholic hierarchy typically have in common? a.) Respect, silence and too much patience. (Think mealy-mouthed Voice of the Faithful.)

When progress is made, it's typically because of relentlessness (think abuse lawyers Garabedian and MacLeish) or public suspicion of financial wrong-doing (think the archdiocese's current song-and-dance about what happened to priestly pension funds. Whoops!).

Add lawsuits and hardball and you've got the necessary ingredients for whatever inheriting of the earth goes on around here.

Steve Krueger, ex-Voice of the Faithful man, thinks the Presentation fiasco `` has brought about a sea change in perspective" that even the abuse scandal didn't.

`` We've never seen this kind of response," said state Sen. Marian Walsh (D-W. Roxbury), who should know. At the height of the abuse scandal she filed legislation, now law, to criminalize putting children at risk of sexual abuse. She had to fight for 12 co-sponsors.

Now she's filed legislation removing the church's charitable filing exemption. That means that, like the Little League or United Way, the archdiocese would have to detail how it spends its money. `` I have 40 co-sponsors," Walsh said. `` I didn't even push."

Says Colin Riley, St. Albert's parishioner, `` (The archdiocese) says it'll release all the finances next year. Next week is too late."

Says Peter Borre, who works with closed parishes, `` This is not complicated. Just open the books!"

`` We have zero trust," said Richard Acerra from the open, but not quite, St. Bernard's in Newton. That's where a weekly bulletin item actually warned parishioners that contributing to the group fighting St. Bernard's closing might get them an IRS audit.

I could go on. Suffice to say the most faithful of the faithful are weary of O'Malley, Lennon, et al.

Jerry McDermott is one of 10 siblings to go through Presentation. His mother, almost 80, is a devout Catholic. One sister's a nun, one brother's a priest. Yesterday, McDermott said he hopes somebody investigates the church for possible violations of public charity laws. He also said it's time for Catholic laity `` to fight fire with fire. If everyone is quiet and goes away with a whimper it makes it easy" for the archdiocese.

`` A group of lay people has to lead the charge every Saturday and Sunday. ` Don't put anything in the (collection) box.' The first week they'll be on the phone to Rome. ` What do we do?' The second week, Rome'll transfer them out."

Any volunteers?

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