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Church closing process continues to haunt Boston archbishop

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For almost a year now, Boston Archbishop Sean O'Malley has been dogged by groups of tenacious parishioners who have refused to leave their churches, even after they have been officially closed by the archdiocese.

So when an advisory group O'Malley appointed to review the closings announced a flurry of reversals and compromises, many parishioners who have staged 24-hour sit-ins at their churches were pleased.

But in the churches that have received no reprieve, parishioners appear more determined than ever. As his advisory group winds down its work this week, O'Malley faces a difficult decision: does he let parishioners continue to occupy closed churches indefinitely or does he use a more forceful method to try to remove them?

O'Malley's spokesman, Terry Donilon, won't discuss whether O'Malley will consider sending in local police or seeking court orders to force parishioners out of the six closed churches that remain occupied.

"He's going to continue to pray that these will end in a peaceful and prayerful way," said Donilon.

Last year, O'Malley announced plans to close approximately 83 of the archdiocese's 357 parishes because of a shortage of priests, deteriorating church buildings, and dwindling donations, caused partly by the clergy sex abuse scandal that exploded in Boston in 2002.

But in August, a group of parishioners at St. Albert the Great parish in Weymouth refused to leave their church. They stayed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for months, arguing that they had a thriving parish that should not be shut down.

Emboldened by the vigil, parishioners at seven other churches followed suit. O'Malley appointed a special advisory group, made up mainly of lay people, to review the church closing decisions. The commission has recommended 18 changes in the original reconfiguration. Nine of those 18 parishes are to remain open or to reopen, either as full parishes or as chapels. Several others have had their closing dates extended, while others have been told they will be merged into other parishes.

While the parishioners at St. Albert's won a complete reversal - it officially reopened earlier this month - O'Malley has reaffirmed his decision to close other churches, leaving some parishioners bitter and vowing to continue their vigils.

"The decisions to reconsider were good news for some, but they had the effect of galvanizing some of the others who are saying, 'What about us?'" said Peter Borre, co-chairman of the Council of Parishes, a group formed to help parishes slated for closure.

At St. James the Great in Wellesley, parishioners have been told that they will remain closed. But they are not giving up their vigil, which has been going on for eight months now.

Parishioner Suzanne Hurley does not expect O'Malley will let the occupation go on forever.

"I think realistically we have to understand that at some point they will have to take some

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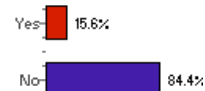
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action," she said.

Parishioners at St. James and five other churches with ongoing vigils are hopeful that the Vatican will overturn O'Malley's closure decisions. The Vatican's response on those appeals is expected within the next month.

Even the most angry parishioners expect O'Malley will tread carefully before risking a confrontation with them. Earlier this month, O'Malley suffered a public relations disaster after the archdiocese abruptly closed Our Lady of Presentation School two days ahead of schedule, locking children out of school before their graduation. A few days later, the archdiocese worked out a compromise to move toward selling the building to a community group.

At Our Lady of Mount Carmel in East Boston, started a century ago by Italian immigrants, parishioners are vowing to continue a 24-hour vigil that began in October, even though the archdiocese has offered them the chance to reopen as a chapel.

The archdiocese has said it would send a priest to say a Sunday Mass in Italian at 7:30 a.m. or 1 p.m., but parishioners have rejected that offer, saying few people would go to a Mass at those times.

"To have the money that we need for the church to be financially viable, we need a key Mass, where people will come - anywhere between nine and 12," said parishioner Gina Scalcione, who has been going to the church since her family emigrated from Italy 50 years ago.

"When you go to Mass Sunday morning, you save your afternoon for your family gathering. Italians have been doing this for more than 100 years here," she said. "I don't think you're going to change them."

O'Malley has repeatedly said that the parish closings are necessary for the long-term viability of the archdiocese. The archdiocese plans to sell some of the church properties to raise money for the remaining parishes.

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