

Schoolyard Fight Among Catholics

Families hold a vigil to protest a decision by the financially strapped archdiocese to close an elementary campus two days before term's end.

By ELIZABETH MEHREN
Times Staff Writer

BRIGHTON, Mass. — Bridget Lannery knew that the Catholic elementary school her two older daughters attended was scheduled to close this month as church officials struggled to make ends meet in the face of massive sex-abuse settlements.

But when the archdiocese locked the doors to Our Lady of the Presentation School two days ahead of schedule — warning families with a phone call the night before and depriving sixth graders their long-awaited graduation ceremony — Lannery boiled over.

"I'm looking for a new religion," said the 37-year-old stay-at-home mother of three. "I'll let you know when I find one."

Like Lannery, many of those who gathered Monday in a tiny park opposite Our Lady of the Presentation School said the abrupt shutdown was only the latest insult in the clerical abuse scandal that erupted in Boston three years ago and rapidly spread across the country.

In the newest act of defiance against church leaders, families and friends associated with the venerable elementary school set up a tent city across from the school, in Oak Square park.

On the fourth day of a round-the-clock vigil — which coincided with four days of blistering heat — Presentation School alumnus Steve Ashcraft said the school closing was yet another example of how church officials have put institutional needs ahead of the concerns of faithful Catholics. Ashcraft said that before the abuse crisis, he would never have dreamed of confronting church authorities.

"But I think we have become empowered," said Ashcraft, 47, who owns a landscaping business. "They always thought they knew better than us. We don't buy that any more."

Boston church officials, strapped for funds after abuse settlements totaling more than \$100 million, announced last year that they would close more than 80 of the 357 Boston-area parishes. Our Lady of the Presentation School was one of several parochial schools also targeted because of dwindling attendance.

After an appeal from parents, Archbishop Sean Patrick O'Malley agreed to delay the closure until this year. Parents and oth-



DEFIANCE: Ravi Rao, 7, sits in Oak Square across from Our Lady of the Presentation School, which was closed two days ahead of schedule by the Boston archdiocese. Families have camped out for days. MICHAEL DWYER Associated Press

ers in this working-class community adjacent to Boston formed a foundation to buy the school property, but O'Malley rebuffed the offer.

The archbishop said he needed the three-story brick building to accommodate church offices housed in buildings that have been sold to pay off the abuse settlements.

Archdiocese spokesman Terrence Donilon said church officials shut the school down two days before the term ended after hearing reports that parents planned to occupy the school. Donilon said the action was taken out of concern for the children's safety.

Eight Boston-area churches that were scheduled to be closed have been occupied by parishioners. At least one of the protests has lasted more than six months. Archdiocese officials feared a similar showdown at the Brighton school.

Parents became angry after they received late-afternoon telephone calls on Wednesday telling them not to bring their children to school the following day because the building would be locked.

Echoing their outrage, Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino arranged for the school's sixth graders to hold their graduation ceremony at historic Faneuil Hall. In a letter to O'Malley, the mayor, a Catholic, called the school's sudden shutdown "reprehensible," "unconscionable" and a "heartbreaking insult."

Many of those holding vigil in Oak Square on Monday expressed similar sentiments.

"I went to this school. My two

sisters went here. My two children went here," said Denise Groen, 39. "I am beyond ballistic about this. There is no reason for this, for them to have done it the way they did."

Groen, a preschool teacher, said she and her 11-year-old daughter were allowed to enter the school over the weekend — accompanied by a priest and a security guard — to remove a collection of live butterflies and several tanks containing tropical fish.

"They made us feel like we were criminals — like what were we going to do? Steal our own stuff?" Groen said.

Fiona O'Brien, 38, said half-jokingly that she was considering becoming an atheist. She said she did not know where her 7-year-old twin daughters would go to school.

"My children will not be going to another archdiocese school, I can tell you that," she said.

O'Brien said she was particularly upset because the school closing affected families who adhered to church teachings despite a crisis that has caused many to rethink their faith.

"The people who send their kids to Catholic schools are the ones who want their kids to be brought up in the church," she said. "This is a slap at all of us."

Ten-year-old Scott McKenna said he was "very angry and very sad" that his school closed before he could officially finish fourth grade.

"This is the only school I ever went to — and we didn't even have time to pack up our stuff," he said.

To pass the time during their

vigil, families staged games and contests — awarding a prize, for example, for the most novel use of a school uniform. The winner: a scarecrow featuring a plaid pleated skirt and matching white blouse.

For the archdiocese, the school protest was yet another embarrassment as Catholic laity in Boston refused to buckle to authority.

In an attempt to end the dispute, O'Malley agreed to a hastily arranged meeting Monday with parents and leaders of the Presentation School Foundation.

Foundation President Kevin Carragee said the archbishop and other church leaders appeared ready to reconsider the group's offer to buy the property. He called the four-hour session "substantive," although no conclusion was reached.

Carragee said one of the conditions from the meeting was that the camp-out had to stop before a decision about the property could be reached.

Lannery, a "cradle Catholic" who was born in Ireland, said even a positive outcome could not repair the tattered credibility of church leaders.

Watching two of her daughters play tag in Oak Square with a dozen other children from their former school, Lannery said she could no longer respect the church leaders she had been raised to revere.

"To think we used to look up to them," Lannery said. "My mother used to give me what-for if I didn't say, 'Hello, Father,' whenever a priest passed. No telling what I would say now."