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HEADLINE: Boston Archdiocese Fears Parents' Protest and Closes Elementary School Early

BYLINE: By **KATIE ZEZIMA**

DATELINE: BOSTON, June 10

BODY:

On Wednesday afternoon, Nancy DeRosa dropped off a batch of pink and yellow frosted vanilla cupcakes to be handed out in kindergarten the next day, her daughter Colleen's 5th birthday.

But Colleen's cupcakes sit, untouched, in her classroom at Our Lady of the Presentation elementary school in Brighton, after the Archdiocese of Boston changed the locks at the school after hearing rumors about a sit-in to protest its plan to close the school permanently.

No one has been allowed in the school, which is watched by guards and the police, since Wednesday. Parents were phoned around 8:30 that night, and told that the last two days of school were canceled and that child care was available at a nearby church.

The cupcakes, along with unfed fish, report cards, awards and children's belongings, remain locked inside. Graduation, the annual awards ceremony and two days' worth of classes, including examinations and goodbye parties for the school, which was scheduled for closing under an archdiocesan plan announced last year, were all called off. About 100 students, from prekindergarten to sixth grade, attended the school.

"All they're concerned about is who is going to take care of the fish," Ms. DeRosa said. "This is not the Catholic Church I know."

Colleen spent her birthday watching the prekindergartners hold their graduation and awards ceremony in a small park in the middle of an intersection near the school. Teachers handed out slices of pizza and merit certificates hurriedly bought at an office supply store.

The lockout has outraged parents and politicians, including Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who allowed the older

students to hold their graduation on Friday morning at Faneuil Hall. Mr. Menino sent a letter to Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley, calling the closing a "heartbreaking insult."

Mr. Menino said in an interview that the closing was a foolhardy decision made by "some people who can't understand that the church is all about compassion and caring."

Most people at the graduation, where every student was given an achievement award and parents videotaped their children through smiles and tears, called the move callous and calculating.

"You're outraged because they don't care about our children," said Nicole Johnson, whose daughter Kyrie, 8, graduated from the third grade. "The prekindergartners had to graduate in the middle of the street."

Archdiocesan officials said the move was made solely out of concern for safety after they had received information that a small group of protesters planned to occupy the school after graduation. At least eight parishes scheduled to close have held around-the-clock vigils since August in hopes of fending off closings.

A spokesman for the archdiocese, Terence Donilon, said Archbishop O'Malley had made a regrettable, but necessary decision.

"What really bothers him most about this thing is the impact it has on kids and parents, and we understand that," Mr. Donilon said. "But our concern is that we have a little bit of history with this through other sites in the archdiocese, and there certainly is a small group out there that injects itself into these kinds of issues. Let's be honest. There's probably a lot of things we would have done differently. But when you're focused on what you think are the inherent risks at hand, you make a decision based on that."

Mr. Donilon said the archdiocese in no way meant to blame parents who did not want the school to close. "Clearly there was no thought process put into the p.r. side of this thing," he added. "It's an incident that happened, and we're just stepping back right now, and we're all pretty much taking a deep breath."

The early closing further infuriated many Roman Catholics who have grappled with the sexual abuse crisis that roiled the archdiocese in 2002. Since then donations have dwindled, morale has lagged, and the archdiocese has been criticized for making top-down decisions that alienate Catholics in the pews.

"This is particularly egregious," said William F. Galvin, the Massachusetts secretary of state and a 1964 graduate of the school. "You think it's the last straw, but suddenly they find a new way to do it."

Fabiano Morales, 10, did not know that the school was closed until his mother dropped him off on Thursday, because the archdiocese has an incorrect phone number for the family. Fabiano started to cry, and his mother, Ligia, had to skip work because she did not know where to take him.

"The politicians have feelings," she said of Mr. Menino's decision to find another site for graduation. "The Catholic Church forgot what feelings are about."

Parents and others have tried to save the school since its closing was announced in May 2004. Our Lady of Presentation was supposed to close the next month, but was allowed to stay open for another year after Mr. Galvin personally promised a \$100,000 line of credit if the school slid into debt in its last year.

Community leaders offered to buy the school for \$2.5million, but Archbishop O'Malley rejected the offer. The archdiocese planned to convert the space into a church court, but is reconsidering its plan.

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GRAPHIC: Photo: Some pupils from Our Lady of Presentation had graduation at Faneuil Hall. Christine Falcone, a first-grade teacher, gave awards under the watch of John Quincy Adams, Frederick Douglass and John Adams. (Photo by David L. Ryan/The Boston Globe)

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