

Carragee: OLP: Why the struggle continues

By Kevin M. Carragee
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June 10 will be a day of sadness, shame and struggle in Allston-Brighton. On that day, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston will close Our Lady of the Presentation School in Oak Square, ending the 86-year history of this vibrant educational institution. The sadness will be most felt by the teachers, staff, parents and children of Presentation School, but it also will extend to the Allston-Brighton community as a whole.

The shame belongs to the Archdiocese of Boston, given its failure to extend the vital educational and civic role of the school by accepting the proposal of the Presentation School Foundation to establish the Oak Square Campus for Youth and Families at the site. While the closing of Presentation School represents a moment of sadness and shame, it also represents a moment of continued struggle because the future use of the school building has yet to be determined.

The proposals for the future of the Presentation School building are strikingly different. One serves the Allston-Brighton community, responding to its pressing problems. The other serves the narrow interests of an archdiocese still in a deep crisis because of its profound failure to protect children from clergy sexual abuse.

The archdiocese seeks to locate its Metropolitan Tribunal at the Presentation School site. The Tribunal, the ecclesiastical court of the archdiocese, dispenses marriage annulments and investigates archdiocesan penal matters. It is a bitter irony that an archdiocese reeling from its failure to protect children from sexual abuse and molestation now seeks to displace children from a school in order to use the building to dissolve marriages and to have canon lawyers discuss church-related penal matters.

In contrast, the Presentation School Foundation has defined a vision for the building that is consistent with the school's rich history. The foundation seeks to establish a multiservice community center featuring affordable day care, a grammar school, YMCA-administered after-school and summer programs and adult education services. This proposal would serve the needs of children, working parents, immigrants and the poor. The establishment of this center would help stabilize a troubled urban community, a community with rising poverty, declining owner occupancy of housing and an increasing demand for adult education programs because of an expanding population of immigrants.

The foundation's proposal has attracted widespread support, receiving the enthusiastic approval of Mayor Thomas M. Menino and the entire Boston City Council. Many community groups and organizations, including the YMCA, Boston University, WGBH and the Allston-Brighton

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Community Development Corp., have embraced the proposal. It has received editorial endorsements from the Allston-Brighton TAB and the Boston Globe.

This creative and innovative vision needed only one more partner to become a reality: the Archdiocese of Boston. Sadly, the archdiocese failed to seize this opportunity, rejecting the foundation's proposal in early January and setting the stage for a protracted conflict between the archdiocese and the Allston-Brighton community.

In rejecting the foundation's proposal, the archdiocese broke a series of significant vows that it said would guide the reconfiguration process whose broad scope was made necessary by the archdiocese's appalling failure to protect children from pedophile priests.

The archdiocese vowed that its reconfiguration plan would protect vulnerable communities, yet it rejected a plan that would serve the pressing needs of a community where 23 percent of residents live in poverty.

The archdiocese vowed that its reconfiguration plan would protect children. This remains a particularly significant vow because its highest officials, including Cardinal Bernard Law, had failed over many decades to protect children from priests who were sexual predators of the young. Yet it rejected a plan that would serve children by maintaining a grammar school at the site and by establishing urgently needed day care and after-school programs.

The archdiocese vowed that the reuse of church-owned properties would be guided by proposals that were consistent with the social mission of the Roman Catholic Church and that responded to the financial needs of an archdiocese in crisis. Yet it rejected a plan entirely consistent with its social mission and one that offered the archdiocese full-market value for the Presentation School building.

The archdiocese vowed that dialogue, transparency and openness would characterize the reconfiguration process. It repeatedly vowed to work cooperatively with communities in planning future uses of church-owned properties. Yet its actions belie this lofty rhetoric.

The archdiocese never sought a dialogue with this community on the future use of the Presentation School building. At no point did the archdiocese seek the community's reaction to a proposal to locate the Metropolitan Tribunal in Oak Square. Archbishop O'Malley repeatedly has refused to meet with representatives of the Presentation School Foundation; indeed, he has offered not a single word of response to four letters he has received from the foundation. The archdiocese has offered this community diktat, not dialogue.

Since the beginning of this conflict, the Presentation School Foundation has sought to find common ground with the archdiocese. Representatives of the foundation met with Bishop Lennon in early March in an effort to create a solution to this crisis that would serve the interests of the archdiocese, the Allston-Brighton community and the city of Boston. This effort failed because the archdiocese will not consider an alternative location for the Tribunal. Our

good-faith efforts to forge a compromise have been rebuffed, and this community now finds itself in a protracted struggle with the archdiocese.

That struggle will continue on multiple fronts, and it will continue, if necessary, long after the closing of Our Lady of the Presentation School. The city has stated that the archdiocese will need a zoning variance to relocate the Metropolitan Tribunal to the Presentation School building. Along with its allies, this community will oppose this zoning relief. Through the mobilization and efforts of community activists, the Boston Landmarks Commission has designated Presentation Church and Rectory as an architectural conservation district, and the commission has designated the school building as a Boston historical landmark.






The Presentation School Foundation will continue to work with our political allies and neighborhood residents to realize this community's desire to establish a vibrant educational and civic institution in Oak Square.

My involvement in the struggle for the future of the Presentation School has enriched my life because I have met so many people of character and conscience. The parents of children at the school have acted with tremendous dignity and resolve throughout a very trying period. Their neighbors have joined them in their struggle, rallying, for example, in the bitter cold of January and February. As a community, we stand in solidarity, rejecting the arrogance and indifference of the archdiocese, and embracing a plan that will maintain the Presentation School building as an anchor of this community.

The struggle for the future of the Presentation School building continues because the future health of this community depends on it. The struggle continues because an injustice committed by the archdiocese needs to be confronted. The struggle continues because our self-respect demands it. The struggle continues because the needs of working parents, children, immigrants and the poor need to be addressed. The struggle continues because as people of character and conscience, we seek to make this damaged world, this fragile community, a better place.

The struggle will continue until the vision of the Oak Square Campus for Youth and Families becomes a reality.

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