





Michael Meister/The Arizona Republic

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## Students angry over closure of school protest to bishop

By Karen McCowan  
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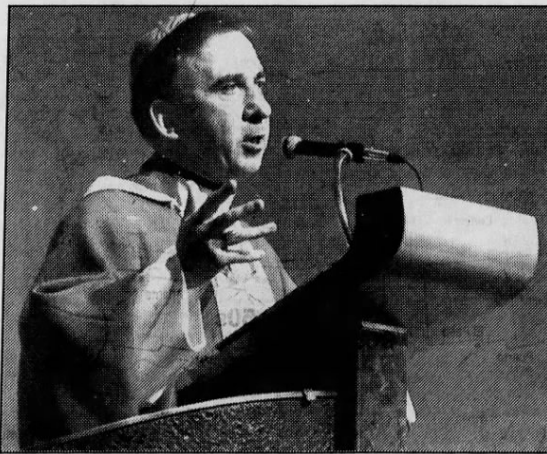
"Keep Gerard alive," dozens of students chanted as Phoenix Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien emerged from the morning service at SS. Simon and Jude Cathedral in west Phoenix.

"I wish we could," O'Brien replied as he passed through a group of students in red-and-gray lettermen jackets, school uniforms and T-shirts.

"You can, it's up to you!" student Ann Marie Ronga shot back as the bishop moved on.

O'Brien announced the closure in a letter Friday to parents of Gerard students, blaming climbing operating costs and declining enrollment. He also promised to discuss the decision with students today at a 10 a.m. assembly at Gerard High and later with parents at a 7:30 p.m. meeting in Thomas More Hall.

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school, at 2252 N. 44th St., from 6 to 8 a.m. Some carried signs reading, "Save our family," and, "Gerard is our home."

Many students said they were protesting not only the closure but the way it was handled by the

Phoenix Diocese.

"Bishop O'Brien gave us his word twice that the school wouldn't close for at least another four or five years," said Bobby Dalton, 16, a junior and three-sport letterman.

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## ALL EDITIONS

B4 The Arizona Republic Wednesday, February 22, 1989

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— STUDENTS, from page B1

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O'Brien acknowledged he made those promises. In a response through diocesan spokeswoman Marge Injasoulian, the bishop said the situation changed in recent weeks.

"Yes, that is true," he was quoted as saying.

"I had honest hopes and beliefs that the school would remain open. Those sentiments were based upon the information I had at that time. It was certainly a different situation than it is now, because of the continuing decline in enrollment and increase in operating costs.

"I think everyone should understand that situations do change. I know this is very painful for everybody."

In his letter to parents, O'Brien said the decision to close Gerard "is final" and was based on the recommendation of a committee commis-

sioned to study Catholic schools in the diocese. He has declined comment on the closure plans until he meets with Gerard students and parents today.

Injasoulian said other area Catholic high schools — Brophy College Preparatory, Xavier, St. Mary's and Bourgade in Phoenix and Seton in Chandler — are expected to remain open.

That was little solace to Gerard students, particularly juniors like Dalton, who said they are worried about finding another high school.

"With sports and stuff, it will be hard to break in elsewhere and learn their ways," said Lee Ferrance, 17, a junior and three-sport letterman.

Students say they expect their classmates to scatter among nearby public schools and other Valley Catholic high schools.

"It's a shame," said sophomore Sonja Andrade, 15.

"This is a good school. What it lacks in size, it makes up in togetherness and closeness. Now they're going to break us up."

Parents said they can understand that there are financial problems because enrollment at Gerard has dwindled from about 650 students in

the early 1970s to about 250 this year. But they say they were led to believe by O'Brien and Gerard administrators that the diocese was committed to keeping the school open.

"My daughter just got the class ring and letter jacket she ordered two months ago — now she's supposed to throw them in a closet?" parent Kathy Spade asked.

"Tell me the bishop didn't know about this last fall when the kids were ordering these things."

Parents feel "lied to and betrayed," said Art Ferrance, Lee's father.

"Gerard is a very liquid asset being used to solve other parish problems," he said.

During his homily Tuesday, O'Brien drew sarcastic laughter from many Gerard students when he noted that the theme of this year's national Catholic Education Week was "Communities with Memories."

In his only reference to the impending closure at Tuesday's Mass, O'Brien said, "There is a school community in our midst that is hurting."

He urged students from other Catholic schools to reach out to and pray for the Gerard students.



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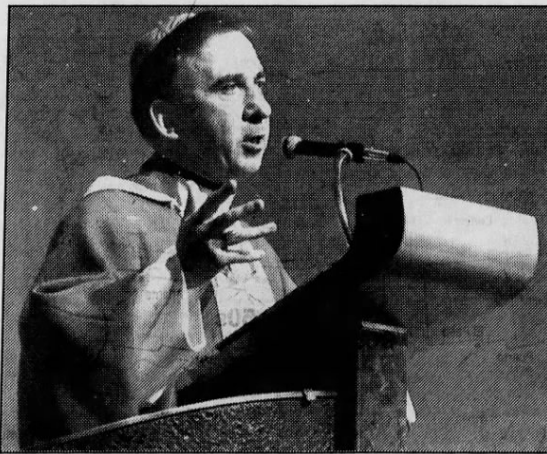
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