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Cardinal Ritter center is blessed in New Albany

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Nearly 100 people gathered yesterday under the rafters of what will be a multipurpose room as Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein blessed the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Community Center in New Albany.

Buechlein, head of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Indianapolis, which includes New Albany, praised Ritter as "a courageous man" who was an early supporter of racial integration and religious freedom.

"A monument like this is not something Cardinal Ritter would have asked for," Buechlein said. But he noted that the project -- which includes the community center adjoining the family home and bakery where Ritter grew up -- should help the church spread its teachings in Southern Indiana.

Joseph Elmer Ritter, who was born in 1892, grew up in the dwelling at 1218 E. Oak St. He was ordained in 1917 after graduating from St. Meinrad college and seminary. He became bishop of Indianapolis in 1934 and called for integration of Catholic high schools in the city in 1937.

A historical marker next to the Cardinal Ritter house says in part, "In the 1930s, he championed the rights of African Americans in Indiana."

He became the first archbishop of Indianapolis in 1944. In 1946 he was named Archbishop of St. Louis, where he desegregated five Catholic high schools. He was made a cardinal by Pope John XXIII in 1961.

Ritter died in 1967.

The part of the house that was the residence and bakery is still incompletely restored. When finished, its rooms are intended for use by nonprofit organizations, said H. David Hock, head of the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation, which has been coordinating the renovation for the past two years. A museum is also planned.

The building, which was run down and had been converted into several apartments, was purchased by the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana in 2002 and eventually was transferred to the foundation.

Before yesterday's ceremony, members of Ritter's family -- including niece Virginia Ritter Lipps of New Albany -- toured the two floors of the original residence with Buechlein.

They paused by the first- and second-floor fireplaces to listen to stories told by relatives about the family and the bakery when two loaves of bread cost 5 cents.

Hock said later that about \$450,000 has been spent on restoring the building so far, including a \$200,000 grant last year from the Caesars Foundation of Floyd County. To finish the project will cost \$150,000 or so, he estimated.

Contributions can be submitted at the Cardinal Ritter Foundation Web site,
<http://www.cardinalritterhouse.org/>.

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