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Cardinal Ritter birthplace receives blessing in New Albany

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Cardinal Joseph Ritter would not recognize the house where he was born if he were to walk past it today. But he would be inspired by the many who have worked so hard to restore the structure. Tuesday afternoon, Ritter's birthplace, at 1218 E. Oak St. in New Albany, received a formal blessing from Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein of the Indianapolis Archdiocese.

The blessing follows a busy month in which a community room has been added to the house thanks to a \$200,000 grant from the Horseshoe Foundation of Floyd County. Now, almost a decade after the idea to save the home first surfaced, the end is drawing closer. "His favorite saying was 'Play hard, work hard and don't worry' and some of us on the committee have done just that," said committee member Letty Walter. "He was such a visionary and ahead of his time."

Ritter, who was born in the house in 1892, is the only Roman Catholic Cardinal from Indiana. While he served as Archbishop of Indianapolis, he called for racial integration of Catholic high schools in 1937. He did the same in St. Louis in 1947. He was elevated to Cardinal in 1961. "Not many communities can boast of having a cardinal of the Catholic Church," said Floyd County Historian David Barksdale.

Once the home is complete, it will house a non-profit group as well as provide community services to the neighborhood. Walter said she would like to see a dental clinic in the facility which would benefit low-income families. The middle part of the home, which connects the front to the new rear section, will be a museum dedicated to Ritter.

"I'm astonished," said Archbishop Buechlein as he stood in the new section. "The last time I was by here was two years ago and it looked nothing like it looks today."

"Cardinal Ritter was such a courageous man. He supported religious liberty for all." David Hock, president of the Ritter Foundation Board, said about \$450,000 has been spent to refurbish the house, and he said donated services and supplies are included in that total. For example, Michell Timperman and Ritz Architects have donated \$50,000 in services since the project began.

Hock said construction on the new section will stop once the walls are enclosed. Both interiors will need to be finished and a new roof added, which will use another \$150,000 he said. He said donations and grants will be used to reach that plateau.

The house, and the effort, have the support of the entire community, according to New Albany Deputy Mayor Carl Malysz. "I think this is wonderful," Malysz said. "This is a top-notch investment in this neighborhood." Walter said the S. Ellen Jones Park will soon be renamed Ritter Park to honor Indiana's only Catholic Cardinal and to draw attention to the home.

SO YOU KNOW

- Joseph E. Ritter was born in New Albany in 1892, at 1218 E. Oak St. He served as Archbishop of Indianapolis and St. Louis before being elevated to Cardinal in 1961. He died in 1967 and is buried in St. Louis.