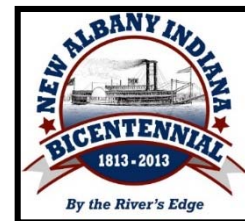


# Cardinal Joseph Ritter

By AMANDA BEAM

NEW ALBANY — *Editor's note: This is part of an ongoing series about the people and events that have shaped the 200-year history of New Albany. Read all installments by clicking on the bicentennial link under the "seasonal content" header at newsandtribune.com*



For a man known for his loving kindness, humility and simple ways, Cardinal Joseph Elmer Ritter sure could stir up some controversy. Crosses were burned at his churches. Injunctions were threatened for his initiatives. Even threats of death accompanied his progressive decisions.

"It took a lot of courage to stand up in those situations, even within the international church and say, 'It's time for change,'" said David Hock, president of the Ritter Birthplace Foundation.

As a boy, Hock met Ritter when he returned to New Albany after receiving his cardinalship. Hock was so excited over the introduction, he and his friend William Lori, now archbishop to the Archdiocese of Baltimore, rode their bikes to Ritter's sister-in-law's home to find out more about the church leader. The woman sat them down, gave them a snack and told the boys stories about her brother-in-law and his childhood.

Believe it or not, during Ritter's formative years in New Albany, few suspected the baker's son would emerge as one of this century's top reformers of the Catholic Church in the United States. To his friends, the future cardinal acted like most any other youngster.

"No one talked of his having any potential genius, but he applied himself to his studies and reading," said Mary Stein in her April 27, 1961, New Albany Tribune column. "He was a boy like the other boys; he liked them, they liked him and his love of fun and sense of humor."

Born on the second floor of a house on Oak Street that now bears his name, Ritter came in to this world July 20, 1892. He attended primary school at St. Mary's in New Albany where he earned the nickname "Apple Pie Ritter," because of his family's bakery that shared space within his home.

Always a thoughtful boy, Ritter began to practice ministering at an early age. His cousin, Mrs. Frank

Peterson, noted in the June 1967 edition of the Indianapolis Star that the young boy would climb upon a ladder and deliver sermons to the neighborhood.

By the time he had reached seventh grade, his path in life had been decided. Ritter entered St. Meinrad Seminary in 1907 and graduated summa cum laude in 1917. On May 30, 1917, he was ordained a priest.

"There was no vision, no voice from Heaven," he said, according to a story attached to the wall at the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace museum. "I simply wanted to be a priest."



A few weeks after graduation, Ritter traveled to Indianapolis for his first assignment at St. Patrick church. Sixteen years later, the then 40-year-old was consecrated Auxiliary Bishop of Indianapolis, making him one of the youngest bishops in the United States to receive the honor. In 1944, the unassuming priest would become the first archbishop of Indianapolis.

Becoming a bishop enabled Ritter to enact certain changes to his diocese. In 1938, the New Albany native began to end racial segregation in all the Catholic schools under his authority, more than 16 years prior to the Supreme Court's landmark decision that led to nationwide desegregation.

According to the texts found at the museum, Ritter advocated that "the cross on top of our schools must mean something" and espoused "the equality of every soul before Almighty God."

Quite a few congregants as well as other church leaders did not agree with Ritter's inclusiveness. The Ku Klux Klan, prominent in Indiana at the time,

burned crosses in front of the SS Peter and Paul Cathedral in protest. Family members of Ritter also reported that the church leader received death threats.

"He was ahead of his time in that the Catholic Church wasn't doing this," Hock said. "He really didn't even have the support of his fellow bishops. And he got a bad reputation out of it because when he went to St. Louis, they were ready for him."

Word, it seemed, traveled even faster than Ritter during his 1946 journey to Missouri, where he became the fourth Archbishop of St. Louis. After assuming the post, he began plans to desegregate the Catholic schools and hospitals in his parishes. According to a book "The Old Cathedral" by Gregory M. Franzura, close to 700 white parishioners from 23 different parishes raised money to fight the plan.

Without a blink, Ritter threatened to excommunicate all those who actively fought to keep black and white students from attending the same institutions. The protesters caved, and soon thereafter the schools and Catholic-owned hospitals were desegregated.

"We've had sermons on the subject, but they've theorized too much," Ritter said in a Sept. 23, 1963, edition of the Courier-Journal. "Now we've got to particularize, to tell the people what's expected of them and how they should be out promoting civil rights."

Throughout his life, Ritter would fight for the liberty of people he believed had been slighted. In a 1960s Associated Press story by Jerry Curry, the writer discussed the Hoosier's position on minority rights. Ritter espoused the belief that the Catholic Church must take steps "to correct the things we've been doing wrong."

Participation in protests was sanctioned by Ritter, and later, the cardinal would take his mission one step further as he allowed for the reallocation of funds from the richer parishes to provide relief for the poorer ones.

"I definitely support civil disobedience for a just cause," Ritter said in the article. "I've taken part in civil rights protests, and, if a priest in the archdiocese wishes to take part in such protests, it is up to him."

During his time in St. Louis, Ritter also continued to advance dialogue and cooperation with other faiths. When a Jewish synagogue tried to build a new

temple but hit several unfairly imposed zoning restrictions, the church leader threw his support behind the organization. Hock said Ritter even offered to buy the land for the synagogue and then sell it to them back at cost, just so the governmental hurdles could be overcome.

In addition, the only cardinal from the state of Indiana allowed in 1964 for an ecumenical marriage to take place between an Episcopalian and a Catholic with priests from both denominations officiating the affair.

Once he was made a cardinal in 1961 by Pope John XXIII, Ritter began to play an even larger role in defining catholic doctrine internationally. Between 1962 and 1965, he was one of 2,500 church leaders to participate in the Second Vatican Council in Rome. Major ecumenical changes took place during these sessions, one of which allowed mass to be given in English instead of Latin. Ritter, at the pope's invitation, oversaw the first public English mass in the U.S. on Aug. 25, 1964.

"That was really, really controversial because we go by tradition, and that had been tradition for 1,500 years," Hock said.

Coming home from the historic council, Ritter wanted to implement several of the more progressive ideas discussed. But time wasn't on his side. After suffering a heart attack, Ritter died in St. Louis on June 10, 1967.

"He was never content to follow the easy path of mediocrity, but courageously launched many and varied programs in the social field with amazing serenity and sureness of purpose; many of these programs were quickly adopted all over the country — in education, integration, and ecumenism," said his friend Monsignor James H. Jansen, pastor of St. Mary's in New Albany, in the June 11, 1967, edition of the Tribune. "Full of ideals, his whole life was stamped with the nobility of truth. The closer you were to him, the more you were forced to appreciate his greatness."

For those wanting to learn more about Cardinal Ritter or to find out operating times for his museum, visit the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation's website at [cardinalritterhouse.org](http://cardinalritterhouse.org).