

How Cardinal Ritter's firm hand led St. Louis Catholic schools to integrate in 1947

- By Tim O'Neil St. Louis Post-Dispatch
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White Catholics who opposed Archbishop Joseph E. Ritter's instructions to integrate Catholic schools leave a meeting attended by 700 at the St. Louis House, 2345 Lafayette Avenue, on the evening of Sept. 21, 1947. It was the third such large gathering of angry parents, who threatened to remove their children from schools and planned a lawsuit to block Ritter. At the time, segregation of schools was Missouri law. But the morning of the big meeting — a Sunday — Ritter had all priests read a letter during all Masses. It threatened excommunication to anyone to took part in such a lawsuit. The letter threw the meeting into turmoil, and the new segregationist organization, the Catholic Parents Association, disbanded two weeks later. Photo by Buell White of the Post-Dispatch

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ST. LOUIS • On Sept. 5, 1947, St. Louis Archbishop Joseph E. Ritter quietly instructed Catholic schools to admit Black children. Protests erupted as classes began in September.

About 500 angry white parents gathered in Capstick Hall, 5815 Easton Avenue (now Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard), on Sept. 9 to oppose Ritter's decision. Said meeting co-chairman William T. Rone, "We do not want Negro children alongside our children in the schools."

Ritter refused to meet their leaders. His spokesman said, "He is the father of the whole flock and must care for all, regardless of race."

In a follow-up meeting, 700 parents resolved to take Ritter to court. They scheduled a bigger rally for the evening of Sunday, Sept. 21.

That morning, John P. Barrett, a painting contractor and chairman of the new Catholic Parents Association, attended Mass at St. Edward's Church, Clara and Maffitt avenues. The priest read a letter from Ritter to all parishes, warning that participants in any such suit will face "the serious penalty of excommunication." It would bar them from church practice.

The meeting that night drew 700 to the St. Louis House, 2345 Lafayette Avenue, but Ritter's letter threw it into turmoil. "I don't want to do anything that would jeopardize my religion," said Barrett, who already had pulled his children from St. Edward's School.

St. Louis University integrated in 1944, but area Catholic high schools and grade schools remained segregated — as were the public schools.

St. Louis' Black population had almost doubled since 1930, and many Black families wanted out of the crowded slums near downtown. Most were Protestants, but black Catholics had been part of St. Louis since colonial days. In 1946, when Ritter was appointed archbishop, their children went to a few inner-city parochial grade schools and St. Joseph's High School, 4132 Page Avenue.

The Catholic Parents Association offered \$25 as a "gesture of friendliness" to St. Malachy's, a black parish west of Union Station. The pastor wouldn't take it.

Organized opposition collapsed two weeks later at another emotional meeting, where Barrett was booed while obtaining a vote to disband. That year, Black children enrolled in previously all-white Catholic schools, including St. Edward's.

St. Joseph's High closed in 1951. Public schools were integrated three years later, after a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision. Barrett was a Missouri state senator from 1954 to 1965 and died in 2000.

Ritter died in 1967. A decade later, the archdiocese created Cardinal Ritter College Prep on the North Side, and moved it to a new campus in midtown in 2003.

Catholic school integration



Parents began protesting in September 1947 when St. Louis Archbishop Joseph Ritter ordered the integration of Catholic schools. This photo shows parents at a meeting on Sept. 21, 1947 in St. Louis. Post-Dispatch photo.

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The steeple of old St. Malachy's Church, 2904 Clark Avenue, tumbles on Dec. 7, 1959, during the massive demolition of the Mill Creek Valley area west of downtown. St. Malachy's served black Catholics in the decades before its closing and, for a time, had a school. In September 1947, when the short-lived Catholic Parents Association was protesting integration of area Catholic schools, the organization offered a \$25 donation to St. Malachy's "as a gesture of friendliness to the Catholic negro." The pastor of St. Malachy's refused the money. (Renyold Ferguson/Post-Dispatch staff photographer)



St. Louis Archbishop Joseph E. Ritter relaxing in his study on Oct. 8, 1946, the day of his installation at the St. Louis Cathedral, 4431 Lindell Boulevard. Ritter, a native of New Albany, Ind., had been bishop and archbishop of Indianapolis for 12 years when he became archbishop of St. Louis at age 54. He had integrated the Catholic schools in Indianapolis several years before, and met little opposition there. In summer 1947, he instructed St. Louis-area Catholic schools to admit black students. Until then, black Catholic children had gone to a few parochial grade schools on the edge of downtown and to St. Joseph's High school, 4123 Page Avenue. When schools opened in September, several hundred angry white parents held public meetings and announced plans to oppose Ritter in court. On the morning of Sunday, Sept. 21, 1947, parish priests read an open letter from Ritter during all Masses. He wrote that opponents of integration were being "gravely misled" and threatened excommunication to anyone who took part in such a lawsuit. (Post-Dispatch)

staff photographer



John P. Barrett, a painting contractor and, briefly, leader of the Catholic Parents Association. Barrett, of 5717 Labadie Avenue, was a member of St. Edward's Church, Clara and Maffitt avenues, where he heard Archbishop Joseph E. Ritter's open letter on the morning of Sept. 21, 1947. "I don't want to do anything that would jeopardize my religion," he said later that night. He already had removed his two children from St. Edward's School, which had accepted a few black students. Two weeks later, Barrett was shouted down during another meeting at the St. Louis House, where he called for a motion to disband the association. But a majority agreed, dissolving the Catholic Parents Association. Barrett ran unsuccessfully for St. Louis School Board, but in 1954 won a special election as a Democrat to the Missouri Senate, where he served until 1965. This photograph was taken for his 1958 re-election

campaign. He later served as St. Louis jury commissioner and died in 2000. (David Gulick/Post-Dispatch)
staff photographer



One of the scenes outside the St. Louis Cathedral, 4431 Lindell Boulevard, on Oct. 8, 1946, the day of Archbishop Joseph E. Ritter's installation. Among those kneeling in prayer on the front steps are three young black women. When Ritter was installed, blacks could attend only a few of the area Catholic schools. Ritter would change that the following summer, and mince no words when opposition erupted among white parents. (Arthur Witman/Post-Dispatch)
staff photographer