

'A ONE-STOP SHOP FOR EVERYTHING CATHOLIC'

Ziegler family weds old-world skills to modern technology

Story and photos by DAVE CRENSHAW

Brothers Michael and Jerome Ziegler strained as they carried the second station of the cross, framed in Italian marble, from a table to a nearby packing crate. An eight-foot Corpus lay in another wooden crate. On the loading dock behind them were several tons of altars, baptismal and holy water fonts, all made of the same white marble.

"We're just finishing doing a new church in Florida, top to bottom," said Michael Ziegler. "All of this is for St. Sylvester's in Gulf Breeze. We'd like to start installing next week."

The men are part of the third generation of Zieglers to operate a religious supply store – which is how most Tulsa Catholics think of it – in downtown Tulsa. A one-stop shop for everything Catholic may be more accurate.

At the F.C. Ziegler retail store at 1111 S. Detroit Ave. can be found anything from a Belgian-made dupion silk chasuble to a pocket ring rosary.

A door at the back takes a visitor into the 12,000-square-foot warehouse that stocks items for catalog and Internet sales and the company's other four retail outlets in Dallas, Austin, Wichita and Baton Rouge, La. Most items are seasonal, and since it's the beginning of Lent, shelves are stocked with Easter, First Communion and RCIA gifts.

Because spring is coming, there is almost an entire aisle of white summer cassocks. What the Zieglers refer to as "clergywear" is stocked year round. Books and more gifts fill the rest of the warehouse.

Next comes another door, leading to a smaller, 8,000-square-foot warehouse where institutional items are stocked: thousands of candles, from two-inch votives to 14-day altar candles; dozens of Italian-made wood and plastic statues of Joseph; eight different Corpus statues.

Also in stock are eight varieties of communion wine. Dennis Ziegler said many lay people prefer the whites – which are usually sweeter – while many priests prefer a rose, which doesn't stain altar linens as badly as red does.

Communion wafers take up almost an entire wall and come in four varieties.

"Four out of five churches buy whole wheat, 1 3/8-inch," said Dennis Ziegler.

At the rear is the shipping department, where Michael and Jerome Ziegler were moving the stations of the cross. It marks the end of the retail part of F.C. Ziegler, but the beginning of the company's manufacturing and artistic arms.

Here the Zieglers design, manufacture or install everything that makes a building a church.

Jerome is an architect and designer. "We can design an altar, chalice or a custom tabernacle - anything. We work in marble, stone, metal and glass. We try to design to fit the church and to last for at least the next 100 years."

Dennis explained that the computer age and modern technology have

changed the business. Jerome does his design work on a CAD system. The brothers use a high-pressure water cutting machine to make prototype crucifixes out of pressed wood for customer approval before they are carved out of marble.

"We marry a lot of old-world skills to modern technology."

In addition to the "top-to-bottom" church job in Florida, the Zieglers have scheduled projects from Brooklyn, N.Y., Monticello, Ark., and two parishes in Kansas.

The manufacturing facilities are located a short walk across Elgin Avenue from the loading dock.

In the shop is a shopping cart full of nearly finished chalices. They have been shaped but not yet plated or assembled. The company's catalog shows dozens of different styles of chalices, and Dennis said churches may chose a stem of one style and pair it with a cup from another.

"It's a matter of personal preference. We like to give them options."

The Zieglers do restoration work, too.

A barely recognizable tabernacle sits on the floor.

"That's from St. Cecilia in Dallas. They had big fire. When we're finished with this, it will look good as new," said Don Taylor, refinishing department manager.

The Zieglers have a full-service metal working shop, wood shop and plating room. Everywhere are symbols of the Catholic faith in various stages of assembly or disorder.

Today, the plating room is the center of attention. The chalice that the papal nuncio in Washington D.C. requested for Pope Benedict XVI's April visit to the United States is in pieces on a cart.

Jim Ziegler, son of founder F.C. Ziegler and a jeweler, is considering the paper backing that helps hold jeweled medallions in place on the chalice's base. "That will hold moisture and could damage the metal and besides, it's been there since 1938. We need to fix that."

He examined the 24-carat gold plating on the cup and sub-cup and gave his approval.

Jim said that when he started in the business more than 60 years ago, he traveled to the East Coast to sell Ziegler's services to many Catholic churches. The competition was stiff, and no one saw the need to do business with a company from Oklahoma.

But today, though the churches are still there, skilled craftsmen are getting hard to find.

"I'm not sure there are too many places in the U.S. that can do the kind of work we do here," said Dennis.

The finished papal chalice was shipped back to the papal nuncio, which received it Feb. 22. By the end of that day, manufacturing manager Jim Funk learned that the Vatican's D.C. outpost was so impressed that 10 or 12 more items were on their way to Tulsa for refurbishing.



Greg St. Claire forms a holy water bucket on a spinning lathe.



A disassembled chalice after gold plating.



Michael, left, and Jerome Ziegler pack a marble-framed station of the cross for shipment to a Florida church.



At right, corpuses await attachment to a crucifix.



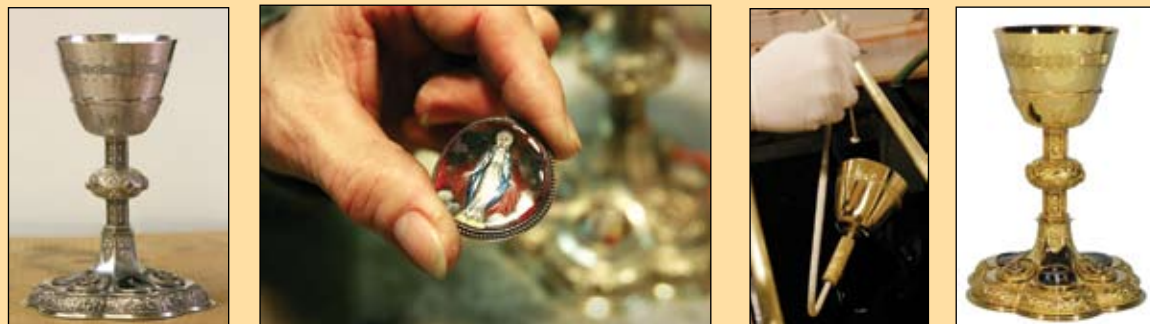
Lam Tran repairs a custom-made monstrance.



Jim Ziegler, left, and Jim Funk, manufacturing manager discuss the next course of action for the papal chalice.



Craftsman Vinh Pham solders a screw-on base to a ewer and basin, used on Holy Thursday for foot washing.



Papal chalice: before & after

From left, gold plating on the chalice, made in 1938, had been worn off over time. Jeweled medallions were removed and cleaned as the chalice was replated with 24-carat gold. The finished product looks as good as new.

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For a history of the F.C. Ziegler Co., go to the site, www.zieglers.com and click on about us

For a list of major projects the Zieglers have done in the Diocese of Tulsa over the last decade, go to www.dicoeseoftulsa.org and click on news stories