

Legatus

JUNE 2015



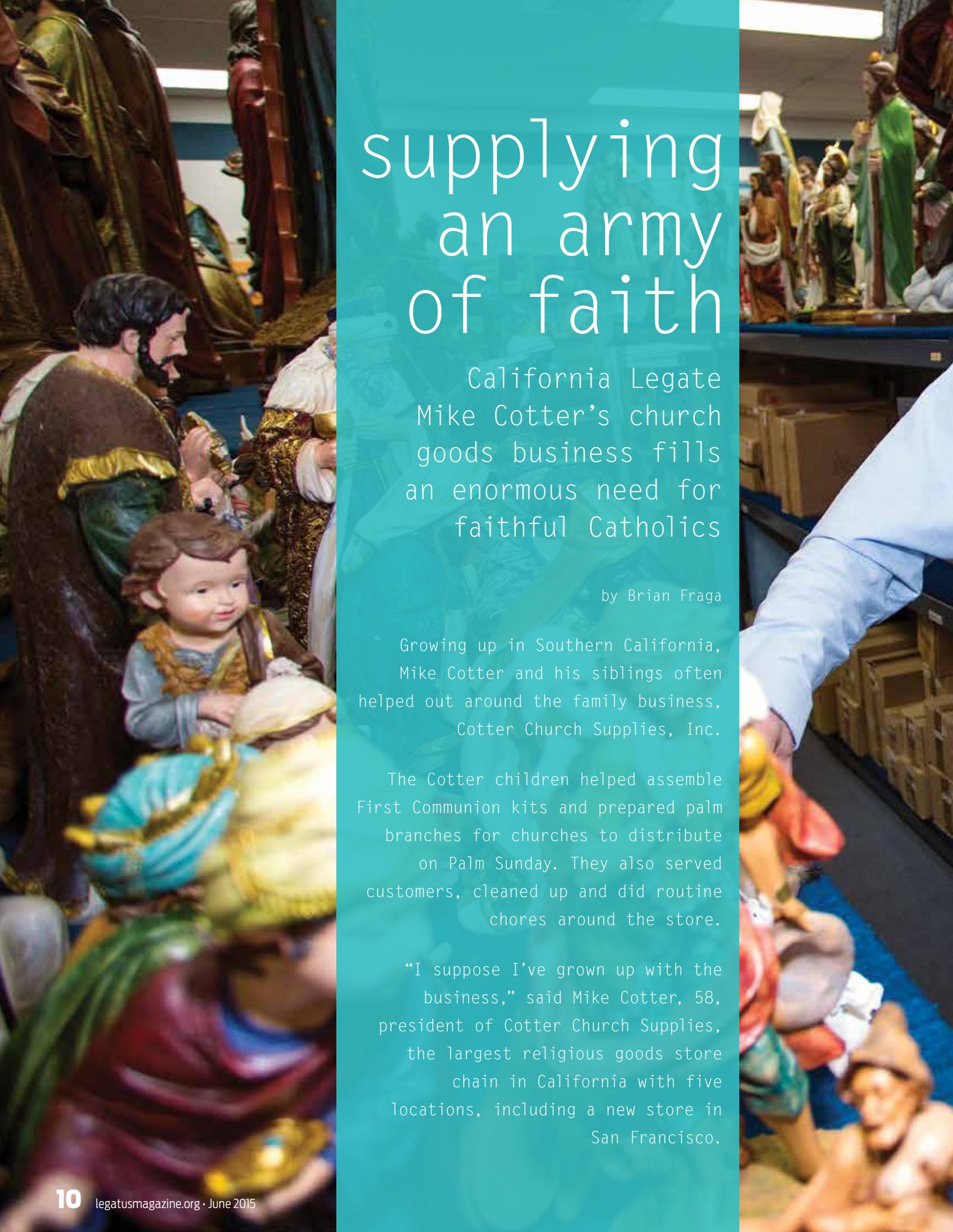
SUPPLYING AN ARMY

California Legates' church supply stores fill a great need

Families of Character

Legates' ministry helps shape Catholic families

Awaiting Pope Francis: His first U.S. visit



supplying an army of faith

California Legate
Mike Cotter's church
goods business fills
an enormous need for
faithful Catholics

by Brian Fraga

Growing up in Southern California, Mike Cotter and his siblings often helped out around the family business, Cotter Church Supplies, Inc.

The Cotter children helped assemble First Communion kits and prepared palm branches for churches to distribute on Palm Sunday. They also served customers, cleaned up and did routine chores around the store.

"I suppose I've grown up with the business," said Mike Cotter, 58, president of Cotter Church Supplies, the largest religious goods store chain in California with five locations, including a new store in San Francisco.



Mike and Colleen Cotter pose at the headquarters of Cotter Church Supplies, the company Mike's father founded in 1948 (Challenge Roddie photo)

Family business

Simply known as “Cotters” to most customers, the stores sell thousands of Catholic-related items, including hundreds of different kinds of rosaries, Italian-made saint statues, books, prayer cards, artwork, chalices, church furniture, altar linens and vestments.

“We sell to customers who come into the store. We sell on the phone. We go out and make sales calls to churches. Sometimes we make trips to Northern and Central California to visit customers,” said Mike, a member of Legatus’ South Bay of Los Angeles Chapter.

Mike said Legatus, which he and his wife Colleen joined in 2010, helps keep him focused on the religious dimension of his business.

“Legatus reminds me, ‘Hey, this is not just an ordinary business,’” he explained. “The danger working in a business like ours is becoming numb to our faith since we are exposed to it every day.”

Mike and his two brothers, Patrick and Tim, are equal partners in the business their father, Ted Cotter, started when he immigrated to Los Angeles from Ireland in 1948. Ted Cotter opened his first store in a rented room in a Long Beach house.

“My dad was single and looking for something to do,” Mike explained. “At the time, my dad’s brother, who was a priest, was at the cathedral and gave him the idea to start a religious goods store.

“Every time my dad would pass by the front door of a church, he would make the sign of the cross. That was a habit he developed in Ireland,” he said, adding that his father actually had two brothers who were priests. Mike’s late mother also had two brothers who were Franciscan priests in the Midwest.

“My parents were very well suited to go into this sort of endeavor,” he said.

Throughout the 1950s, Ted Cotter expanded the business and twice moved to larger locations in Long Beach. As Southern California’s population boomed in the 1950s and ’60s, Cotter Church Supplies grew into a thriving enterprise.

“Los Angeles was growing fairly quickly at that time,” Mike said. “My father was able to benefit by the new churches that were being built and the growing population in the area. He ramped up his business and got into catalogue sales a little bit more. He did several different things to become the largest religious goods dealer in the area.”

Business as a ministry

Cotters went through a difficult time after the Second Vatican Council in the late 1960s. Fewer Catholics were purchasing devotional items, and many of them stopped buying missals when priests started celebrating the Mass in English. Sales to churches also dropped as many of them removed communion rails, saint statues and other traditional items. A nearby competitor in Los Angeles, C.F. Horan & Co., went bankrupt.

“This business is quite static; it doesn’t change a lot,” Mike said. “A lot of the product is the same thing many years over and over. That’s why the Vatican II upheaval was such a shock. It was a change many people weren’t prepared for.”

Still, the Cotters’ business recovered and resumed its growth. They even took over the former C.F. Horan building in Los Angeles while retaining the Long Beach store.

Mike joined the company in 1982 shortly after finishing graduate school. Brothers Tim and Patrick also joined the business and began to modernize its operations. In 1988, they remodeled the main office in LA and installed computer systems to run the daily operation. Catalogue sales expanded the business’ sales territory beyond Southern California while the Internet provided new sales opportunities.

“The introduction of the Internet has had a major impact,” said Mike. “A lot of the product we sell isn’t the easiest to find. You just can’t walk into any shop and find a rosary.”

Mike’s brother Tim, 62, specializes in the accounting and IT operations, while Patrick, 53, helps handle sales and marketing. Tim said the daily practical transactions have helped him gain insights into how other Catholics approach the faith.

“When chalices are brought in for refinishing, I can see how much care and respect has been given them,” he said.

Patrick said that while growing up, he and his siblings were always expected to be on good behavior since many priests and others knew they were from the “church supply place.”

“Being a Cotter, everybody knew who you were,” explained Patrick, who says the family business is a genuine ministry.



“Dealing with the customers and the priests is very fulfilling ... and it does strengthen my faith”
Patrick Cotter





Mike, Tim and Patrick Cotter pose in front of prints they sell at their Los Angeles headquarters (Challenge Roddie photo)

Learn more: cotters.com

“It is a business, but dealing with the customers and the priests is just very fulfilling as well – and it does strengthen my faith,” Patrick said. “It makes running the business easier if you treat it like a ministry. I love coming to work every day.”

Filling a need

Mike said the business also reminds him that there is a “whole army of people” – catechists, secretaries, volunteers and lay ministers, among others – that keeps the Church functioning. And, he says, the items customers purchase have shown him the diverse ways that Catholics approach the spiritual life.

“A lot of people are focused on the cerebral types of things and they look for inspiration from books,” he said. “Others have a little different approach to their religion and they get inspiration from religious articles, statues, that type of thing. It’s interesting to see how our Church is flexible enough to allow people to experience their religion on different planes. You realize one is not better than the other.”

Mike says his involvement with Legatus has also exposed him to sophisticated discussions about the Catholic faith and fellowship with like-minded business leaders.

“Being able to go out and have an evening where you talk about the faith, not in a standard church setting, but in a setting where we can really stretch our understanding of our faith and be stimulated by conversation and really worthwhile lectures; it’s really been tremendous and something we enjoy going to,” said Mike, who has been married to Colleen for 20 years. They have two children, ages 17 and 19.

“They’re a very devout family,” said Monsignor David A. Sork, who is Mike’s pastor at St. John Fisher Church in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif. Monsignor Sork, who is also the chaplain of Legatus’ South Bay of Los Angeles Chapter, said Cotter played an important role as a member of the parish committee for arts and environment in building the parish church.

Mike Cotter said he and his brothers, who also have children in high school and college, are not sure whether the next generation will step in to continue running the family business, which he said has been a blessing to operate.

“It’s kept us employed. It’s been a pleasant place to work,” Mike said, “and I hope it’s been a benefit to the Church all these years.” **LM**

BRIAN FRAGA is Legatus magazine’s editorial assistant.