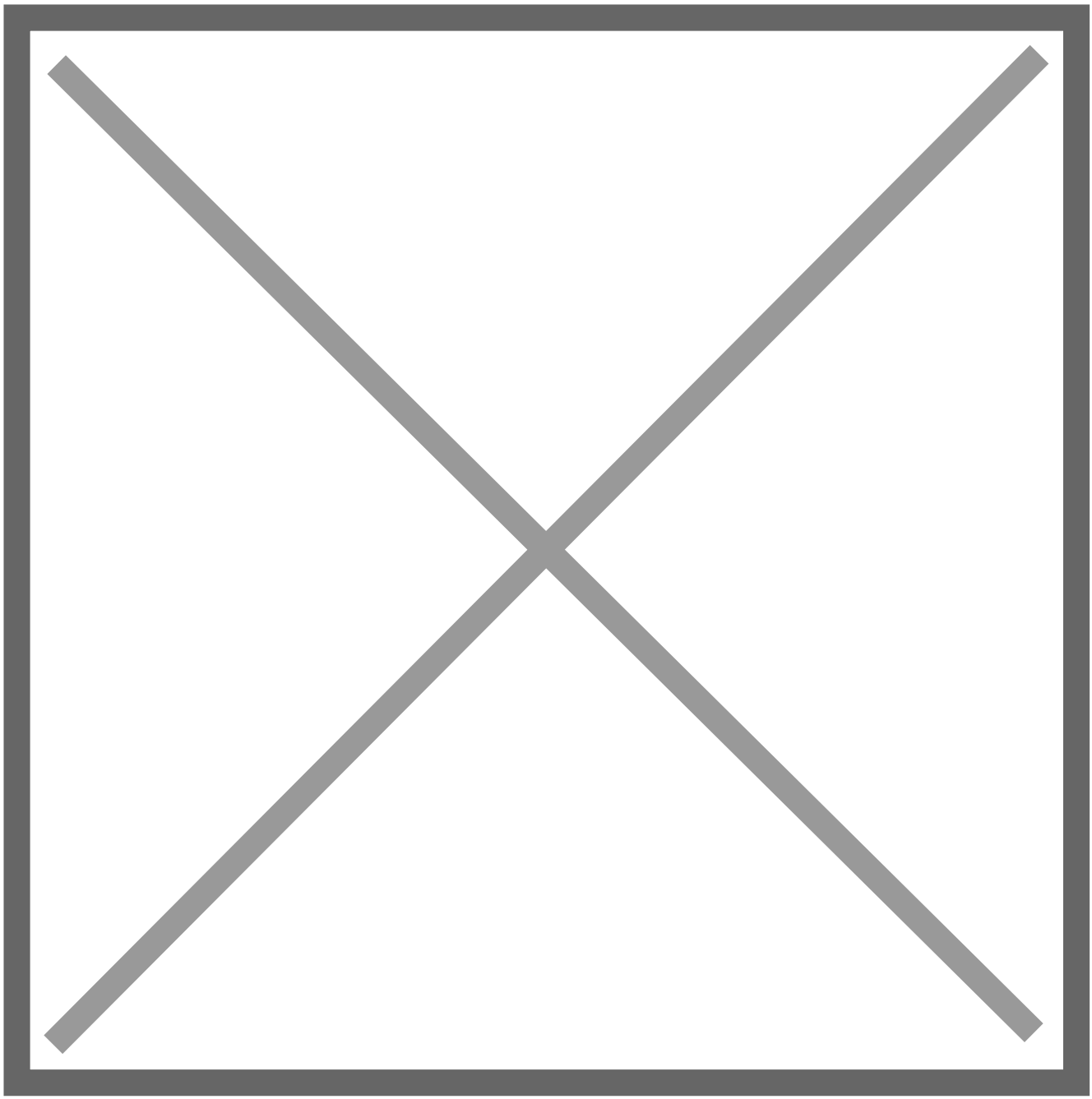
News



Gerard Arens holds a washable mitre developed and sold at the House of Hansen in Chicago April 1, 2021. (CNS/Chicago Catholic/Karen Callaway)

Joyce Duriga

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The House of Hansen, an unassuming small business in Chicago, makes and supplies vestments and liturgical wear — like bishops' mitres and zucchettos — to clergy locally and around the country.

It is one of the few remaining suppliers of handmade clerical garments in the United States and has been in business for over 100 years.

Perhaps one of the most identifiable calls for their expertise comes when a new bishop is named. The bishop-designate needs all of the garments that go along with the position: mitres (tall headgear) in the colors of every liturgical season, a black cassock and cassocks (full-length garments) for Mass as well as rochets (white vestments), zucchettos, (skullcaps), birettas (square caps) and mozzette (vestment capes).

The Chicago business provides all of those custom-made and tailored by hand, said Gerard "Gerry" Arens, the shop's owner.

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In most cases, the new bishops need the items quickly, so the staff works fast to obtain the proper measurements and make the items. For example, each mitre is made to custom fit the head of the bishop who ordered it, so the measurements have to be accurate.

"It is a little bit of a process. We have different people do different parts of the vestments," Arens explained, walking through the back of the shop where several staff members were working on items.

"Someone will start it and another one will do the finishing then someone else will do the buttonholes. It starts out with the actual cutting individually to their measurements."

Not much has changed over the years in how these items are made.

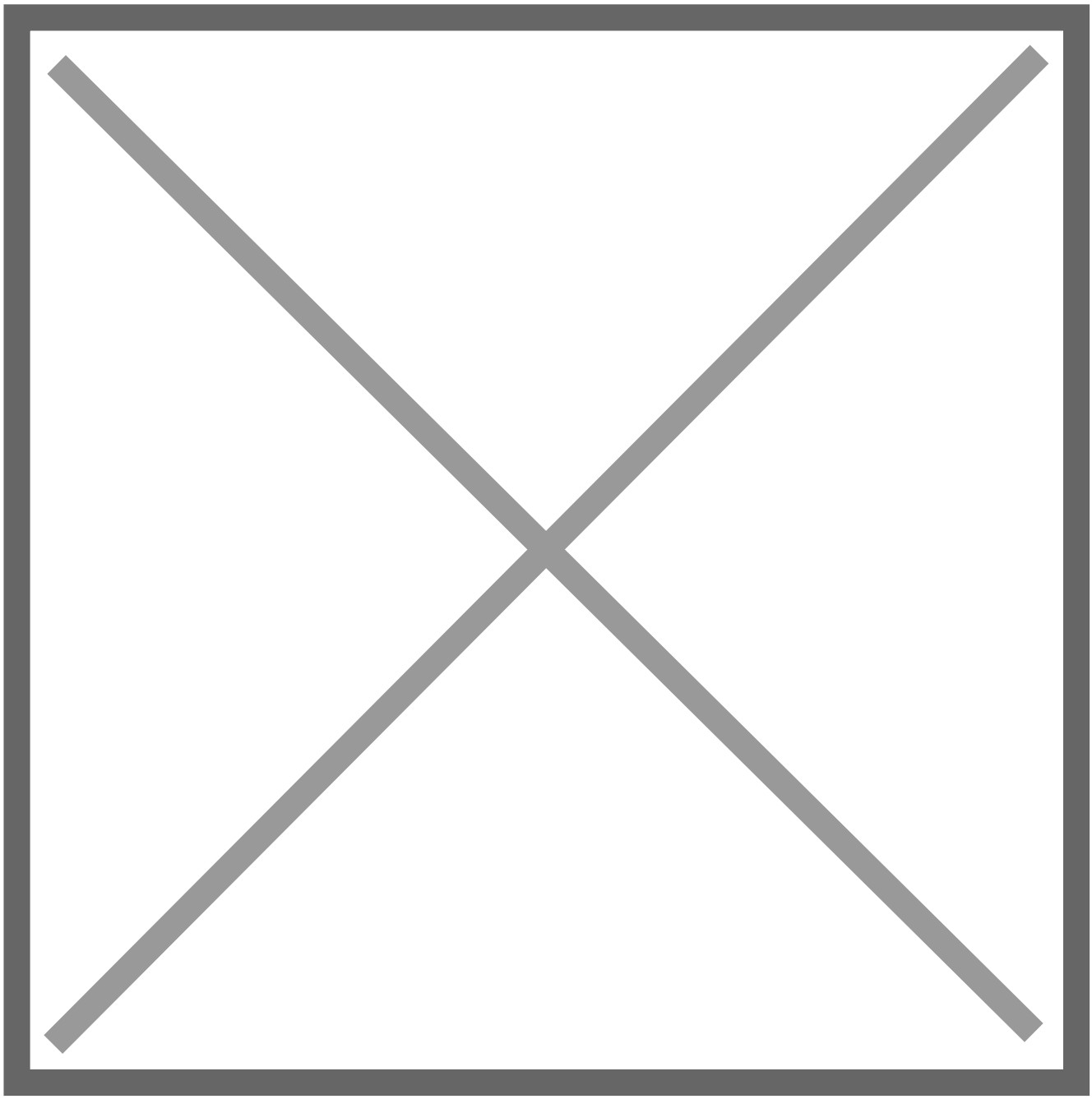
"It's made exactly the same way as it was a hundred years ago, except we have a little better machinery now," Arens told the Chicago Catholic, the archdiocesan newspaper.

One of House of Hansen's clients was Archbishop Fulton Sheen, who wore the cape they made on his popular TV show, "Life Is Worth Living."

They also provide garments needed by priests and deacons. The decorative elements of the vestments can be customized.

Before the pandemic, clergy could visit the store and be measured on site. For now, they are only taking appointments, but there is a self-measurement form where the clergy can record their measurements.

House of Hansen also serves clergy of other faiths who need clerical garments, such as rabbis and Anglican priests and bishops.



Odsuren Mijigsengee cuts material for a bishop's vestment at the House of Hansen in Chicago April 1, 2021. (CNS/Chicago Catholic/Karen Callaway)

The business was founded by D.B. Hansen first as a religious goods store. It later grew into making clerical garments.

Arens' father, Clement, worked at the shop after returning from serving in World War II. Arens, his father and his brother, Martin, purchased the business from the

Hansens in 1977.

When his own father died, Arens and his two siblings took over full time. Both Arens' sister Mary and brother Martin have since died.

"A lot of the priests knew my sister Mary. She passed away about 15 years ago. I still get calls on the anniversary of when she died telling me they are praying for her and that they still have her holy card," Arens said.

The family business also has a patron saint: Rita of Cascia, patron saint of the impossible. When the business fell on hard times, the family prayed for her intercession and business picked up. They have since dedicated their business to her and regularly donate the roses given away during the novena to her at St. Rita of Cascia High School.

Arens and his wife, Ellen, value their time serving the church in a unique way and also value their employees.

Dorothy Ciobanu has worked as a seamstress for over 30 years, 18 of which have been at House of Hansen. She makes the more intricate pieces, like the vestments used in Latin or Orthodox Masses and bishops' mitres.

Her favorite part of the job is the people she works for, she said.

"I worked for so many bosses before. Trust me, these people are so nice," she said.

What is her favorite vestment?

"All of the vestments that I do, I like them. I put my heart in it. I try the best that I can do. I just don't like repairs," she said laughing.