



The ashes are those of last year's blessed palms.



Photos by  
Susan McKinney



The priest signs

## Remember, Y

Aelfric, an Anglo-Saxon homilist writing about 1,000 A.D., commends the practice.

"We read," he says, "in the books both in the Old Law and in the New that the men who repented of their sins bestrewed themselves with ashes and clothed their bodies with sackcloth. Now let us do this little at the beginning of our Lent that we strew ashes upon our heads to signify that we ought to repent of our sins during the Lenten fast."

These words seem to be the first indication of the Christian community using ashes as a sacramental.

But wearing ashes to connote repentance and spiritual cleansing is ancient in Jewish ritual, from which the Christian tradition is derived.

Scholars propose that the earliest wearing of ashes meant grief and mourning. References in the Old Testament and even in Homer's Iliad indicate the universality of the practice.

Some scholars point to a passage in

the Book of Numbers the Red Heifer (Num. 19) the ashes of the sacrifice mixed with water had efficacy of purifying rite finds its echo in a Letter to the Hebrews of goats and bulls' ashes of a heifer is cast upon the cleansing of much more will the blood through the Holy Spirit unblemished unto the conscience from dead the living God?" (Heb. 9:13-14)

Earliest Christian wearing being worn as a sign of and rituals exist with sprinkling of ashes on

In the early Middle frequent practice to upon the ground on a with ashes. A priest holy water on the man repentance before God

The words used by these: