



The priest signs the Christian.



...er, You Are Dust

In the Book of Numbers, called the Rite of the Red Heifer (Num. 19: 17) in which the ashes of the sacrificial victim when mixed with water had the ceremonial efficacy of purifying the unclean. The rite finds its echo in a passage from the Letter to the Hebrews: "For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkled ashes of a heifer sanctify the unclean unto the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the Holy Spirit offered himself unblemished unto God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Heb. 9: 13-14)

Earliest Christian writers tell of ashes being worn as a sign of public penance, and rituals exist which prescribe the sprinkling of ashes on the sinner.

In the early Middle Ages it was a frequent practice to lay a dying man upon the ground on a sackcloth covered with ashes. A priest would then cast holy water on the man asking him of his repentance before God.

The words used by the priest included these:

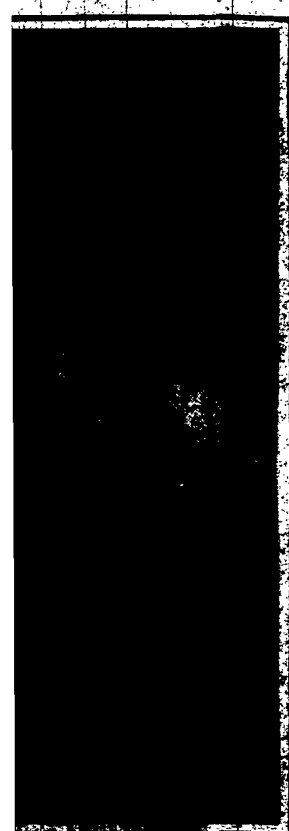
"Remember man, you are dust, and to dust you will return," the same words Christians today are hearing in churches all over the world.

Today's ceremonies are brief. After the Mass homily the priest asks God's blessing on the ashes of last Palm Sunday's palms. He begs for his people God's forgiveness, and for strength to keep the Lenten disciplines.

He dips his thumb into the ashes and signs the brows of those who come forward with a cross, saying "Remember man you are dust and to dust you will return."

Several of these photographs were taken at special ceremonies at the chapel of the Pontifical Societies office. Father Joseph Reinhart is the celebrant. Thomas Frantz receives the ashes and Homer Bliss is the lector.

The photographs of the burning were taken at the motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph. William Gurnow executed the burning.



A blessing is asked on the ashes.