

Ash Wednesday travels to those who can't

CEREMONY: Priests bring the ritual to hospital patients, retirees and prisoners.

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THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Noreen Tuffly believes she is nearing the end of her life. So for Tuffly, 80, Ash Wednesday's message of mortality and penance was more than words.

"It's about trying to prepare yourself to meet your maker," Tuffly said after a Catholic priest

placed ash on her forehead in her Redlands retirement home. "Ash Wednesday is telling you every day that you're getting closer to your grave. You need to do something to make life better and reach your goal, which is heaven."

Thousands of Christians throughout the Inland area on Wednesday received a mark of ash on their foreheads to commemorate the beginning of Lent, the 40-day period that precedes Easter. The Catholic Church and several Protestant denominations observe the practice, in which traditionally the remains of burned palm fronds from the previous Palm Sunday are used.

Most people observed Ash Wednesday in a church. But



The Rev. John Ryan marks the forehead of Vincent Menichelli, 83, with ash at Mission Commons retirement home on Wednesday in Redlands.

clergy and lay ministers brought the placing of the ashes to hospital patients, residents of nursing and retirement homes, prisoners and others who could not make it to a church.

The Rev. Tony Sudario spent

much of Wednesday going from room to room at St. Bernardine Medical Center in San Bernardino, dipping his forefinger into a small clear-plastic container filled with ash and making the sign of the cross on each pa-

tient's forehead.

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return," Sudario told new mother Leslie Fields as she lay in bed two days after having given birth. On a breakfast tray be-

side her sat empty Cheerios and milk cartons.

The 25-year-old San Bernardino woman said Ash Wednesday reminds Catholics that death can come at any time, and they need to make sure that

they are living lives that are pleasing to God.

"We need to be ready at all times," Fields said.

"You have to have it in your heart to take the right steps in life. God's already set the guidelines. It's up to us to follow them."

Not all Catholics know what Ash Wednesday means.

"I forgot," Alma Robles, 43, said with a laugh after Sudario pressed ash onto her forehead.

"We've always gone for ashes, since we were little," Robles said in Spanish.

Sudario said many Catholics attend Ash Wednesday services out of a sense of tradition or obligation.

Even for them, the ash can help strengthen their faith and remind them of their Catholic beliefs, he said.

Tuffly was one of 17 residents of Mission Commons retirement home who sat on sofas and cushioned chairs or in wheelchairs as the Rev. John Ryan celebrated Ash Wednesday Mass in a reading and television room.

"The ashes are a reminder that the most important thing in life is our relationship with the Lord, and the thought leading up to that is that we're strictly transitory," Ryan after Mass. "The oldest person might reach 100, but it's a blink of an eye to the Lord, and while you're here, you have to give God his place."

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