

Common arrangements made from shredded palm fronds following the blessing of the palms on Palm Sunday include (clockwise from left) a rosette, a crown of thorns and a cross. Staff photos by Jan Underwood



## Palm art symbolizes devotion



Sister Helen Theresa Fleischman, 80, makes a crown of thorns from a palm frond in the Sisters of the Precious Blood convent. Staff photo by Jan Underwood

By Meredith Moss  
Staff Writer

**T**ROTWOOD — The women are gathered around the large table in the Salem Heights activities room, deep in concentration. Slowly and lovingly, the fresh palm fronds they hold in their hands are being transformed into religious treasures.

"This is a crown of thorns," explained Sister Helen Theresa Fleischman, who is dressed in full white habit and bent over her handiwork. "It is harder to make. Have you ever tried braiding three around one? That's what is really difficult!"

Like many other devoted Christians around the world, these Sisters of the Precious Blood take great pleasure and satisfaction from carrying on the centuries-old tradi-

## Easter

tion of palm-crafting — weaving and braiding fresh palms into dried arrangements that can be displayed throughout the year. They are happy to demonstrate this special craft that dates back to the Middle Ages. Many of the early Precious Blood Sisters who came to America from Europe in the mid-1800s, taught the craft to the younger sisters, so it has been passed down for generations.

According to the Gospels, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, his path was strewn with palms. Today, on Palm Sunday, palms are given out to worshippers, blessed by the priest or minister, then given a place of honor after church.

Sister Noreen Jutte, archivist, said the palms are symbolic.

"The palm reminds us of a deeper truth — Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and eventually to his passion, death and resurrection," she said. "The palm is a reminder of Jesus' solemn act of unconditional love."

Sister Noreen said a traditional practice for many Catholics is to put a palm by the crucifix in the home or elsewhere in a meaningful place. Some people put a palm in their car.

"And some people like to make their palm decorative by weaving it into reminders of a spiritual dimension," she said, adding that her own preference is to make weavings known as wheat-and-grapes, symbols of the Eucharist — the bread and wine.

In addition to giving her weavings away

as gifts, for the past 14 years Sister Noreen has added one each year to a dried bouquet. Others, she said, create the instruments of Christ's Passion — the crown of thorns, the nails, decorative crosses. Sister Adeline Mertz and Sister Catherine Nader turn shredded palms into rosettes, crosses and other intricate designs.

"In each case, there is a deeper spiritual meaning," explained Sister Noreen, who also has taught Girl Scouts the weaving of palms during Holy Week.

For many of these nuns, working with the palms brings back fond memories. Some learned the handicraft as a child from mothers or grandmothers, some from other sisters at the convent.

"Our grandmothers did this, too, and some were direct descendents of immigrants from Germany," Sister Adeline said. "My uncle was a priest in a very poor area. They couldn't get the palms, so they would use branches off the cedar trees."

Sister Regina Albers, who spent many years working in Chile, said that in that country the palms weren't totally woven but would be stretched and made into crosses.

"They're nicest when they are fresh," said Sister Noreen, who has been weaving for 50 years and said she always plans time for her palm creations.

"Sometimes it happens that I can't do it on Palm Sunday and then I wrap it in a moist towel and put it in plastic in the refrigerator and do it later in the week."

Though most of the churches get palms commercially from church goods stores, in recent years there also has been a growing trend to obtain them from places such as Africa or developing nations where the sale of palms for Palm Sunday has become a major cottage industry that benefits the local population.

At the end of the year, the old palms are often collected and burned to make ashes for Ash Wednesday.

The sisters say you can always spot the palm weavers at church. They are the ones after Mass who head for the table in search of wider palms to weave.

"We're all palms in God's hands — that's the way I look at it," Sister Helen Theresa said.

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### For more information

Want to give palm weaving a try? For instructions, visit [www.italiansrus.com/palms/palmcones1.htm](http://www.italiansrus.com/palms/palmcones1.htm).