

Prisoners thanked for working on cemetery at state hospital

By JAMES MINTON

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Bishop Alfred Hughes of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge blesses with holy water Friday the graves of 4,000 or more forgotten mental patients.

JACKSON -- The Roman Catholic bishop of Baton Rouge and two advocates for the mentally ill thanked a group of state prisoners Friday for restoring a bit of dignity to the final resting place of 4,000 or more forgotten mental patients.

Bishop Alfred Hughes blessed the graves in Rugged Cross Sanctuary, a potter's field for patients who died at East Louisiana State Hospital without families to claim their bodies for burial elsewhere.

Row after row of unmarked graves occupy a large hillside in the rear of the mental hospital's grounds. Burials began on the site in 1916, hospital officials said earlier this month.

Prisoners at nearby Dixon Correctional Institute began caring for the cemetery this year, and members of the prison's Veterans Incarcerated organization raised enough money for 500 wooden crosses that were placed on a group of graves at the entrance to the cemetery.

"It'll take us awhile, but we'll eventually mark each one," Warden James LeBlanc said.

The Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge's Prison Ministry provided a carnation for each marked grave for the special occasion.

Hughes, who included the cemetery in part of his annual visit to DCI, personally thanked each member of the veterans group as they stood at attention in a military-type formation.

"You know that most of these people were forgotten in the world," Hughes said in praising the inmates for taking an interest in the cemetery.

"You have touched me. You have been the hands of (the Virgin) Mary. ... I am so touched by what you have done; it will remain with me all of my life," added Yvonne Guerrini of Lake Charles, past state president of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

"Thank you so much for being so caring and keep up the good work," added Clarice Raichel of the alliance's Southwest Louisiana chapter.

Guerrini and Raichel placed a wreath at the base of a large cross at the cemetery's entrance.

The two traveled to Jackson for Friday's ceremony after reading a newspaper article on the cemetery Saturday.

"I thought I can't believe this, because it's so symbolic of what's happening to the mentally ill in this country today," Guerrini said.

She said a large percentage of the people who are diagnosed with schizophrenia are either homeless or incarcerated today.

"God only knows where they'll be buried," she said.

LeBlanc said the cemetery was somewhat overgrown when he first came across it several years ago, but DCI trustees gradually cleared away the underbrush that was encroaching on the graves in some spots. They also are mowing the

site on a regular basis.

"They've done an excellent job," said Mark Anders, acting associate director of the hospital.

Jackson sculptor E. Paul Smith also contributed to the restoration project, adding arms to a statue of the Virgin Mary that once stood in front of a Catholic chapel on the hospital grounds.



