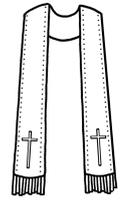


THE MESSAGE OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

DON ANGEL FERNANDEZ ARTIME

THREE STOLES, THREE WONDERFUL STORIES



and a heart that doesn't forget

We must remember the inestimable value of every human encounter, however brief or lengthy, deep or quick it might be. Every encounter leaves a particular scent upon our souls. We experience every human encounter in a special way, like these three that I'm going to tell you about.

My dear friends and readers of the *Salesian Bulletin*, I'm delighted to meet you again in this monthly appointment that we have in the magazine that Don Bosco founded and loved so much. Through the *Salesian Bulletin* Don Bosco wanted to make known the good that was being done in our Salesian houses, especially in the Salesian missions; as he usually did in any personal encounter, he extended his hand with great confidence toward anyone he met, hoping that he'd find many who'd help him carry out his mission among the world's poorest children and families.

I'd like to recall with you three neat stories that happened to me during my visits with Salesians around the world. The protagonist, plain and simple, of all these stories is a *stole*.

The stole is part of what the priest and the deacon wear for liturgical celebrations. This strip of cloth in the liturgical color of the day the priest puts over his shoulders and lets fall over his breast. It marks the priest's distinct dignity and consecration; it brings to mind the sweet yoke of our Lord, the obligations of the priestly office, and it symbolizes in some way the sheep whom the good shepherd bears on his shoulders.

In recent months I was given three stoles that have a particular emotional meaning for me.

The stole of an anonymous woman

The first stole was given to me during the feast of Mary Help of Christians, May 24, at Valdocco. It's a beautiful stole, hand-embroidered with gorgeous gold thread, and it had to take hundreds of hours of work to do that work. A lady devoted to Mary Help of Christians and to Don Bosco wished that it be worn for the celebration of the Eucharist and in the procession of Mary Help of Christians that evening. It was a sacrificial project, simply, done with such great generosity and so much love for the Madonna. I celebrated the Eucharist with that stole, and I prayed in the procession with that stole, and I offered all the prayers of the thousands and thousands of people who were there, my

own in particular, for that woman (whom I didn't know, because the gift had been made anonymously), whose heart overflowed with love for the Help of Christians and with faith in the Lord.

The stole of the youths under bombardment

I received the second stole at Damascus, Syria, on an afternoon when hundreds of boys and girls were gathered in the youth center. We celebrated the Eucharist that afternoon with more than a hundred young university leaders. We believed ardently that peace was near, and at the end of Mass we were to release a white dove as if to say to everyone that they could rejoice for peace, even if not far away from us some mortar shells were exploding violently.

So that afternoon those wonderful young leaders, with solemn faces and a faith that they really lived, gave me a handsome stole on which was embroidered in Arabic, *"Remember us whenever you celebrate the Eucharist."*

The stole of the young prisoners

I received the third stole a month ago, during my visit to Mato Grosso in Brazil. At the end of a meeting with the young, one of the teachers gave me a stole bearing on its back, written with indelible ink, the first and last names of the 56 kids in our Salesian house. These aren't kids with just any story. They're kids sentenced to what once was called juvenile detention; they're kids deprived of their freedom, because of some offense, who after a hearing have been entrusted to us.

These kids couldn't come to our meeting, but they'd sent me the stole with their names, asking that I not forget them and promising they in turn would remember me. I can assure you that every day I remember them at the Eucharist.

I believe

I believe heartily in the attunement and communion of hearts. I believe strongly in prayer, especially when people pray for one another. Praying for others is an expression of true love, whether we know them or not, people who come to dwell in our hearts at the moment that we remember them. In these years I've understood ever more clearly why Pope Francis implores us to pray for him.

That's why I want to leave you this testimony of the precious value of these three stoles.

I want to carve into my memory and yours the inestimable value of every human encounter, however brief or lengthy, deep or quick it might be. Every encounter leaves a particular scent upon our souls. We have to make sure that every human encounter is special. Thus our lives will be enriched.

People are like the strings of a guitar, each with its diverse note, but together capable of producing unforgettable harmonies.

I want to remember how faith succeeds in moving hearts and wills. I've found this out above all in my journeys around the Salesian world.

Each time I understand better what Don Bosco wrote to the boys at Valdocco, when he was far away from them. He called them "thieves." Yes, that's what he called them: *"You're all thieves,"* and then he added, *"because you've stolen my heart."*

It's nice to feel that one's heart can be stolen in so attractively, with so much affection, when it seeks only the good of other persons.

I bless you all, and I promise you that the next time I put on one of these stoles I'll remember you, too, who share with me their profound meaning.

