

“Kiss the stole and put it on.” (Homily)

Deacon John Fulton, St. Kevin Roman Catholic Church, Warwick, Rhode Island
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When I came to Rhode Island as a young man, I spent many a weekend visiting my Aunt and Uncle. My uncle, gone 19 years, come July, was an priest of the Episcopal Church. When I first arrived in the state, in '67, my Uncle said Sunday services at two small churches in Coventry. One of the two, Christ Church, was especially small and quaint. I was raised in the Episcopal Church and would attend Sunday services with my Aunt and Uncle. I even served my Uncle, once, at Christ Church.

Soon after my arrival in the State, my Uncle was called to another church, but from time to time, the folks at Christ Church would invite him and my Aunt back for church suppers and the like. One weekend, I accompanied them on one of these outings — a ham and bean supper, if memory serves. When we arrived, my Uncle introduced me to the new pastor, Father Al Balla. Father Al was a slight man, perhaps 5'-7" and thin as a rail, with very pale complexion, and GREAT difficulty breathing. My Uncle and Father Al sat across from one another, and I listened as they conversed.

As it turned out, Father Al, who didn't look a day under 60, though he may have been younger, had been recently ordained. Indeed, for most of his life, he had driven a truck for Sears, but a lung disease had caused him to retire early, for lack of breath and waning physical strength. As Father Al described his health in response to my Uncle's "How have you been doing, Al?" my Uncle, a very loving man, grew visibly concerned. I must have missed something that Father Al said, for I was surprised by my Uncle's response.

"Oh Al," I heard him say, "I am so TERRIBLY sorry for you." Just hearing the sadness in my Uncle's voice riveted my attention on what Father Al said next, and I'll never forget it, or how he said it. For as he struggled to catch his breath, his face became radiant with joy.

"Oh, NO, Fred!" he said, taking another quick breath. "Oh NO!—My illness is a GIFT, Fred! A GREAT gift! For if I hadn't gotten sick, I would not have been able to serve the Lord in this way." "His yoke is EASY, Fred, and his burden light!"

It made quite an impression on me at the time, but that church supper was a lifetime ago, and memory fades. Little did I know that my own life would parallel Father Al's, that decades later, I too would be ordained in the September of life, following a setback I rued in the instant, but came to see as a GREAT gift. And I remembered Father Al on the day of my ordination!

I remembered him when I vested, as the stole was about to be placed on my shoulder, the yoke of service, the yoke of obedience. I was anxious, lest I fail my Lord, my Church, my wife, my Mentors—my Uncle. Of a sudden it all seemed so weighty, what I was about to do, and no turning back. I saw many people in my mind's eye; I felt their pain. Who were they? I did not know. What did they need from me? Could I give it? What did I have to give? And as I stood there, in that instant, from the deep recesses of memory, of a summer's night, a lifetime ago, came the sweet memory of Father Al, and my Uncle's anxiety for him, and his unforgettable response.

"His yoke is EASY, and his burden light!"

I kissed the stole and put it on.

And every day since—every day— I have seen that setback I experienced through the eyes of Father Al: A GREAT gift! For if it hadn't happened, I would not be serving the Lord in this way, today. And so I beg you, if illness besets you, or hard times, if you see no end to laboring, and burdens seem too heavy to bear, remember Father Al; remember today's Gospel.

Come to the Lord, kiss the stole, and put it on.

Gospel: Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus exclaimed:

“I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,
for although you have hidden these things
from the wise and the learned
you have revealed them to little ones.
Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will.
All things have been handed over to me by my Father.
No one knows the Son except the Father,
and no one knows the Father except the Son
and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.”

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am meek and humble of heart;
and you will find rest for yourselves.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”