

Understanding vs. Believing

A reflection from Brian Wigger, Pastoral Associate

I recently read an article by one of my favorite authors, Fr. Ronald Rolheiser in which he quoted a story by Christian de Cherge, the Trappist Abbot who was martyred in Algeria in 1996, who said that on the day of his First Communion he said to his mom. I don't understand what I am doing." His mother replied. It's OK, you don't have to understand it now. Later you will understand.

Fr. Rolheiser goes on to say that he imagines this exact conversation at the Last Supper. Jesus says, "This is my body, this is my blood, take and eat, take and drink. Do this in memory of me." The apostles say, "We don't understand what we are doing, and Jesus replies, "It's OK, you don't have to understand it now. Later you'll understand."

As I write this article I am sitting in church and it is about 7:00 PM and I just received word that Fr. Terry Baum has died and how everything is now known to Fr. Terry . As I stare at the tabernacle that is housing the Lord, I can't help from imagining that this is probably what is going on in the Gospel for this weekend. Jesus says, I am the Living Bread come down from Heaven," and the people are murmuring; they are saying, we don't understand what this man is talking about." Jesus says, Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." And they say, "We don't understand." And in fact, in two weeks we will hear in the Gospel them say that this teaching us hard" and many stop following him.

Then we have one of the most beautiful conversations in all of the Gospels: Jesus turns to the twelve and asks them if they too will stop following him. Peter responds, Lord, to who, shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life. Jesus never offers a theological explanation – or any explanation at all of what he means by "I am the Bread of Life" and "the bread that I give is my flesh." When people don't understand He merely says it over and over. He says it six times!

I suppose it's a good thing because what explanation can He give that would make sense? He does not ask us to understand; He asks us to believe. At the end of the article Fr. Rolheiser quotes British theologian Ronald Knox, who says that as Christians we have not been very good at being faithful to Jesus: We don't

always turn the other cheek. We don't love our enemies. We don't feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison. We struggle to make disciples of all nations and recognize God in the poor.

These are things that are easy to understand. But the one thing we have done, as Catholics, is the one thing that is impossible to fully understand. We have kept the Eucharist.

The last thing Jesus asked us to do before he died was to keep the Eucharist, and this we have done even when we don't fully understand.

We don't understand why Jesus invites us to a banquet and then serves himself as food; we don't understand that when we line up to receive the Eucharist, it's like the refugees at the camp lining up to receive their daily bowl of rice. It is like people in the ghetto lining up to receive their food stamps – it's food on-the-go, food for the journey. And we don't understand how God humbles himself under the disguise of bread and wine so that we can gaze upon him, house him, so we can hold him, eat him, so he can be fully integrated and united with us as much as last night's dinner is integrated into us. Perhaps it's not that hard to understand after all.

Jesus says, "I am the Bread of Life; whoever believes has eternal life." He doesn't ask us to understand. He asks us to believe. And when we believe in something, we do it. "Take, eat, this is my body; take, drink, this is my blood. Do this in memory of me