

Last week Tupac Amaru rebels stormed a party at the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima Peru and captured hundreds of foreign and domestic state and business leaders. Many have been freed, including all the women, and on Sunday night the rebels released an additional 225 hostages in what they called a "Christmas gesture." Now, pardon me, but this is not the Christmas spirit. You don't terrorize people and then expect that when you pay homage to women and Christmas, you've somehow made your actions noble. We thank God that so many have been freed, and we pray for the 140 who remain, but we have work to do if this is how some people make sense out of Christmas.

It's true we act differently on Christmas than we do the rest of the year. There is holiday behavior, and there's everyday behavior. If we ate every day the way we eat on Christmas, there would not be enough sugar in the world to sustain our diet. Christmas is different. On other days we don't spend money, watch football, write cards, decorate church, travel, avoid work, or hunt down Tickle-Me-Elmo the way we do for Christmas. But Christmas should not be an exception to our behaviors; it should influence our behaviors. Being nice on Christmas does not bestow permission to terrorize people every other day.

The coming of Christ should change our behaviors. St. Paul says this in his letter to Titus, the newly appointed bishop of Crete. He writes, "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce worldly passions and to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly;" in short, the coming of Jesus at Christmas trains us to overcome the passions of this world and to live with more self-control. Now, I don't know about you, but when I think of Christmas--the food, the cards, the clothes, the shopping, the gifts--self-control does not define the atmosphere. Christmas can be done in by the very passions it means to overcome. We indulge in excess; we overcompensate for our failures to love. We too make a "Christmas gesture;" we figure if we do something excessively nice on one day, it will take care of our worldly behavior on every other day. No, Christmas trains us, to use St. Paul's expression. It celebrates the gift of love and it disciplines us to love throughout the year.

What is our Christmas behavior? Is it a celebration of love? Or a replacement for love? Are we doing some things today that we have no intention to repeat for another year? Why are those behaviors valuable today, but not tomorrow? Are we freeing a few hostages and calling it the Christmas spirit, or are we prepared to let this feast change us?

What brings us to celebrate Christmas is belief. Belief in goodness, in charity, in happiness, in peace. Belief in a holy Child. That belief has brought us here. Let's bring it to the world, let's bring it home.