

Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – December 25, 2017
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In many of our homes, it hardly seems like Christmas until we haul out the big box of ornaments from the attic or the storage room and start decorating the tree. There are, I am told, people who change the theme of their décor each year. These people invariably have large elegant, stylish, designer-decorated trees where each ornament matches perfectly in scale and theme and color. These people have no children. Homes with children or grandchildren or nieces or nephews always have an odd assortment of homemade – or more accurately school or Brownie or Cub Scout-made – ornaments that make up for what they may lack in artistic sensibility with an abundance of cuteness. Who can resist an English walnut teddy bear or a felt and fringe horse's head that turns an ordinary candy cane into a miniature hobby horse? Where else would one find that unique mixture of construction paper and popsicle sticks and old Christmas cards but on grandmother's tree? After enough years, enough children and grandchildren, these simple little craft projects invariably crowd out the hundreds of glass and bejeweled store-bought ornaments. And each of these hand-crafted ornaments carries with it a memory – of a time or a place or a person that passed through our lives. Most of these items are seemingly indestructible, but every now and again, we find that a keepsake is broken beyond repair. A few years ago, when the last of my family's macaroni angels bit the dust, it was a bit poignant, a reminder that life, like a Christmas ornament, is delicate and fragile.

We have plenty of reminders of how fragile life is. Just since last Christmas, our world has endured hurricanes, landslides, wildfires, floods and ongoing war and conflict. We've seen terrorist attacks, crime and violence at home and abroad. And many of us have lost loved ones and friends this year, making thoughts of a fragile world, of a fragile humanity all too personal. Yes, human life is fleeting and precarious, and so we take every step to ensure that our lives are as healthy and as long as possible. We get vaccinated, and drive carefully, and practice good hygiene. We do our best to eat sensibly – except during this time of year, of course. We try to take care of ourselves – or, at least, not take ridiculous chances. None of us, for example, would enter a hospital – much less a maternity ward – that wasn't clean, one that had only straw for a mattress, one that usually housed animals and not people. We recognize that life is fragile and we want to play it safe.

Jesus didn't try to play it safe. The eternal Son of God not only took on human flesh, not only became one of us, he did so in the most remote, the most impoverished, the most humble of circumstances imaginable. Born in a stable, surrounded by livestock, sleeping in a manger, Jesus completely embraced our fragile human nature. When the Word became flesh, he subjected himself to every deprivation the world could throw at him – and ultimately conquered them. In the wonder of the Incarnation, Jesus assumed our frail human nature so that he might exalt us, so that he might raise us to the Father. Yes, God himself loved us enough to accept humanity as delicate and fragile – so why is it that we find our fragile nature so difficult to embrace?

Day after day, year after year, we struggle in vain to be our own master, to be in charge not only of our own destiny, but often of the destinies of all of those around us. The world – or at least my little corner of it – would be a much better place if I were in charge, we tell ourselves – and it is a message echoed and reechoed by our society. Everyone needs the best, the newest, the most expensive, the advertisers tell us – and especially at this time of year we fall for it. I can make my own happiness if I only have enough money, enough power, enough electronic gadgets, enough control. Yes, it is control that we want and when control slips through our grasp – as it always does – we grow frustrated, we become disenchanted, we lose heart. How can I be happy if I don't have everything I want? The message of Bethlehem, the message of Jesus Christ is meant for us. We should not fear losing control – especially when we accept that we never had it in the first place. Instead, like our Infant King, born in a stable, we too are invited to accept our human nature, with all of its limitations and all of its frailties. We too are invited to be as humble as the virgin mother of God whose only shelter – as she gave birth – was with the animals. We too are called to be as poor in spirit as the carpenter who put his faith in God and unselfishly cared for his new wife and her infant child. We too are asked to be as vulnerable as a child whose only bed was a manger, an animal's feeding trough. For it is only in accepting our fragile, delicate human nature that we can ever hope to be exalted. Today, the choirs of angels beckon us to rejoice – not in wealth or power or prestige – but in the promise of a vulnerable child in a manger, in the power of his complete embrace of our frail human nature, in the warmth of his overpowering, incarnate love. Merry Christmas.