First of all I want to thank His Excellency Bishop William McGrattan for his kindness to allow me to preside this Holy Eucharist, and to concelebrate with me today. Also I want to thank him for his pastoral care towards people of Venezuela in different parishes of Calgary, and especially in this Parish of St Michael’s.

I also want to thank Fr. John Nemanic for his kindness to invite me as part of the celebration of the 60 years of existence of this parish, St Michael’s in Calgary. My congratulations to all the original and current parishioners of Saint Michael’s. My congratulations, of course, to Fr Nemanic as well as to the priests who work in this catholic community, and to the lay staff and all those lay people that cooperate with them to make it a loving and cheerful witness of the presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ here in Calgary. Let your faith in Jesus shine, just like a diamond!

As part of the celebration, and as a token of his love for the Church in the whole world, Fr. John has shown a great interest on the life and struggle of the Church in Venezuela, and for Venezuelans in Calgary. So, thanks a lot for your concern and generosity to our Church in Venezuela, Fr. John and, again, thanks for inviting me. Let me also thank His Excellency William McGrattan, Bishop of Calgary for his kindness to me and for allowing my presence here at St. Michael’s.

OUR LORD CALLS US TO CONVERSION

We are celebrating this Mass at the beginning of Lent. This liturgical time calls us to conversion and precedes and prepares us to celebrate the joyful feast of Easter. The readings at Mass during all this time, but especially on Sundays, present to us the person, life, teachings and examples of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today, in the second reading we are reminded of the importance of hearing and keeping the word of God, which is the word of life (Jn. 6, 68). In the Gospel, we have heard that Our Lord Jesus, after 40 days of prayer and fasting, was tempted by the devil. Satan invited Him to use His divine might to get material goods, by turning stones into bread; to follow his diabolical devices, tempting God, and to go after kingdoms and riches, what we could call “worldly power”. He tempted our Lord to follow him and to forget his mission of showing mankind the way to salvation, which is to adore our God, to keep His Word, to love him more than anything else in the world, and to love our neighbors. And our Lord Jesus Christ defeated him.

We too, my dear brothers and sisters, are very often tempted by Satan to do evil: to follow his diabolical invitations to go after material things forgetting God; and to fall under the force and influence of worldly power.
Instead, our Lord, in the Sermon on the Mount, calls us to follow Him, to adore and love God before anything else, to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world by our lives of virtue and our words and deeds.

My dear brothers and sisters: During Lent Jesus calls us to conversion. By more intense and frequent prayer, by fasting, that is renouncing some goods and nice and pleasant things, and by reading more frequently the word of God, we are called to be the salt of the earth and the life of the world—as we read in Mt. 5:13 and 14. That is a call and a mission each one of us has received from our Lord Jesus at our baptism. So we must strive to attain a higher level of Christian commitment, to be better Christians every day, to be holier as we grow in life. Each one of us has to imitate our Lord Jesus in renouncing the glow and attraction of power: not to be ambitious, make money our god, dominate other people unjustly, and so on.

THE CHURCH AND WORLDLY POWER

And that is also a call that we have received as the community of believers, as Christ’s Church: not to fall under the attitude of powerful people, or under the domination of those who uphold worldly power. Worldly power, meaning the State, the rulers of Nations, tends always to unjustly dominate its citizens. That is a constant throughout history.

Because power, the State, tends to crush people, and to clash also with the Church, many rulers in all ages—you may call them emperors or kings, presidents or prime ministers, or mayors—need to have the balance and control of organized citizens, in parliaments, assemblies, and town councils...

Let me point out that throughout history, starting with our Lord who suffered the injustice of the Jewish king as well as the Roman governor of Judea, the Church has always been in tension with worldly power. That’s why there have been so many martyrs. Let us remember with affection Bishop St. Thomas Becket, murdered by order of King Henry II in the twelfth century; St. Thomas Moore and St. John Fisher himself, Bishop of Rochester and Cardinal in England in 1535, both sent to death by order of Henry VIII.

In this regard, and following Fr. John’s suggestion, I would like to talk to you about the problems and plights that we, the Church in Venezuela, and especially Bishops, clergy and religious, have had in the last 20 years and are having right now with the tyrannical government.

The hierarchy of the Church in Venezuela has been in conflict with the politicians and military party in power in Venezuela at different times, and lately with Mr. Chavez and his party since 1999. For it has been our duty and our challenge as Bishops to uphold and defend the human dignity, and the rights of the people, to fight for justice, freedom, life and peace in our nation.

The problem has come up because 20 years ago, Lieut. Colonel Chavez started to implant a totalitarian Marxist government which has ruined the country and established a tyranny.
Since the beginning of his government his speech and attitude have been violent. On the other hand, he slowly started changing laws to establish a socialist regime: he began to place education, industry, agriculture, and all economic activity under total control of the government. He confiscated and expropriated many farms, enterprises, and private properties, so that the economy became very bad and most Venezuelans, especially the poor, are suffering to this day.

THE PASTORS OF THE CHURCH AND CHAVEZ

When most politicians and sectors of Venezuelan society were silent, we bishops started at the end of 1999 to raise our voices to warn about the abuses of power, and the problems the new rulers were creating. They were violating the rights of the people. When we criticized him, he started attacking the Bishops. Especially in the first three years of his first term, he attacked Cardinal Ignacio Velasco, Archbishop of Caracas, Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara, a brilliant Venezuelan who had served at the Vatican, and the President of the Venezuelan Conference of Bishops, Archbishop—now Cardinal—Baltazar Porras. Chavez did that because we opposed his measures to establish a totalitarian state, and to crush the rights of the people.

Things grew worse every day. And because of that, I have been very critical of the Government. In a press statement on June 27, 2010, as Archbishop of Caracas, in one of the main newspapers of Caracas, I said that Venezuela was headed for a dictatorship and to ruin. Chavez reacted by publicly attacking me before the Parliament on the National Feast Day of Venezuela, in a solemn session, broadcast by every TV and radio station in the country. He also ordered the Assembly to put me on some kind of political trial. So, I had to attend their convocation on July 27, 2010.

I was subjected to five hours of interrogation by 19 deputies, all members of the government. Thank God I had prepared myself well, and they could not take any measure against me, for my speech and my answers were a complete success in the public opinion of Venezuela. His attack backfired.

THE SITUATION OF VENEZUELA TODAY

The economic situation of Venezuela today is very bad. They have established a Marxist socialist system, controlling most of the aspects of the economy: import export, currency exchange, production and distribution of food, monopoly of paper for newspapers, control of communications, and so on. And they have ruined our country. That is why we are now suffering the worst and highest inflation and devaluation of any currency in the world.

Poverty, of course, has worsened exponentially. There is a grave shortage of food, and its prices are in the skies, because the farmers have been ruined; there is also a severe shortage of medication, because the pharmaceutical industry has been ruined. Countless enterprises have been expropriated without restitution, and many companies have been destroyed.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IS ALSO VERY BAD.
After winning the elections in 2006, Chavez strengthened his power and started to establish and carry out his socialist project, totalitarian and Marxist in all respects. So they have been in control of the political activity of the nation. Today they still hold the control of all organs of public power, except for the Assembly, won by the opposition in 2015. But immediately, with an unjust decision by a Supreme Court occupied completely by Chavist followers, they blocked its decisions and functions.

They are inhumanly cruel when dealing with political enemies and have used unrestrained violence against unarmed people in public meetings of protests. In 2014 there were 40 peaceful protestors killed by government forces; 140 in 2017. And recently, since January 23, they have killed some 40 persons, most of them young people from the popular sectors.

We are currently suffering also from a heartbreaking exodus of around three million people over the last years. So, there are Venezuelans working in many different countries: here in Canada, especially in Alberta and Calgary, and even in faraway places like Australia, and Kuwait.

At the moment we have a politically strange situation. The National Assembly and most Venezuelans consider Mr. Maduro an illegitimate president, and the President of the Assembly has been sworn in as interim president. As a result, there is hot political tension. And many Countries like Canada and the United States reject Maduro as the President of Venezuela. Nobody knows how it is going to end.

**WHAT ARE WE BISHOPS DOING?**

We keep doing our primary religious and pastoral work, together with our priests, deacons and religious, in our communities, in spite of many logistic and practical limitations.

In the political field, we have a kind of action principle: “We, Bishops, are impartial as far as political parties are concerned, but not indifferent to the needs of the people”. So, we have spoken out loud when we see that the rights of the people are violated, or an injustice is done to any person or any sector. We are proud to hear that in independent national opinion polls regarding approval ratings and credibility, we are always the first or the second sector of institutions.

And also, we keep our social and charitable institutions and schools running. And we have implemented in the last 3 years the “community jar or common pot”, in many parishes, to give a big bowl of pottage every week to the poor people of the community. We have strengthened Caritas of Venezuela, our catholic relief institution, and it has expanded its units in most regions of the country.

**WHY DO WE DO IT?**

We do it because we proclaim the teaching of our Lord Jesus to all Christians: “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” (Mk. 5: 13-14) And: “The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep, and he knows them and helps them and protects them from the wolves and the thieves.” (Jn.10). and we take seriously our Lord’s words: “Come blessed of
my Father, because I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me water, sick and in prison and you visited me.”(Mt. 25: 31-46)...We do it because we have to defend the rights of the people. We fight for the people because we do not want Venezuelans to suffer worldly power.

“YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH; YOU ARE THE LIFE OF THE WORLD”
(re. Mt.5:13-14).

As I was writing this homily I thought of the challenge that we catholic Christians have today all over the world. Christians, and especially faithful Catholics and priests, have been tortured, put in prison for years, and even killed because of Jesus, because of our Faith, and our values. In our western countries, we are suffering hostility—we might even say war—against our Lord Jesus, against our faith, our values, and our Catholic Church.

Secularism, the cultural tendency to cast God out of public life, social affairs, marriage, and public ethics, has become more and more aggressive.

The recent law in the state of New York that allows the murder of an unborn child up to the moment of birth is but one extreme bloody and cruel example. The blurring of the definitions of “male” and “female”, pushing to allow all kinds of sexual activity without any moral limits, serves as yet another example. To defend themselves, they want to limit the freedom of opinion, speech, information, and religion. We regularly bear witness to attacks against religious Christian images and objects in public places. Indeed, the hostility that St. John Fisher and St. Thomas Moore suffered has revealed itself in our day. Now it is not the will of the King, but secularism, the will and resolve of some in society do away with God, to live without moral law and limits and values, that attacks our religion, our rights, and our values.

And yet, we are called by our Lord to bear active and courageous witness to him by upholding our beliefs, by following him in spite of criticism and physical violence, by standing firmly on his words, which are words of life (Jn. 6, 68). Let’s remember his promise: “Blessed are you when you are insulted or persecuted for my sake. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven”!!!(Mt: 5:12).

CONCLUSION

My brothers and sisters: let us continue our sacred celebration. We are the salt of the earth; we are the light of the world. The call of our Lord is addressed to every one of us. And so all Catholics, my dear friends, all of us religious and lay people, mothers and fathers, University teachers and graduates, young students and workers, boys and girls, men and women have to hear His word and keep it (Lc. 11:28).We all have to follow our Lord Jesus Christ and be firm, strong, and brave in spite of the attacks we may receive.

Let us live this Lent of 2019 with the desire and resolve to imitate our Lord Jesus, who did not fall under Satan’s temptations. Let us convert ourselves and be better and holier every day. Let us listen to God’s word and keep it, for that is the way to happiness.
Let us pray at this Holy Mass that our Lord and His blessed mother Mary help us to be the salt of the earth and the light and life of the world, and to adore the Lord our God and to worship Him alone, and to love our fellow men and women as Jesus loved us. And please, pray with me to the Lord that we, Venezuelans, may solve our present conflicts peacefully and without violence. Amen. God bless you!