

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jul 31st 2014

Put not your trust in princes,
in the sons of men, in whom there is no salvation.

When his spirit departs he returns to his earth;
on that day his plans perish.

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The astute student of history is hard pressed to find Adolf Hitler and Ignatius Loyola mentioned in the same sentence -- the two, it would seem, could not be farther from one another. And yet this summer, I have found myself holding the two up for constant comparison.

Allow me to explain.

For a week this summer, I joined Creighton Law School's excellent summer course on international law and war crimes. We were stationed in Nuremberg, where post-WWII trials brought justice for Nazi war crimes. To understand the insidious rise of Nazism, one must understand the man Hitler. And what I found...made me think of Ignatius.

Again, allow me to explain.

Although their lives took radically different directions, there are some interesting parallels in their beginnings. Both were born to Catholic families, but their faith was of little importance in early life (for Hitler, never); both Hitler and Ignatius served their countries in battle, and were lauded for their heroism. As young men, each spent nearly a year in solitude, consolidating his emerging thoughts: Hitler stewed in prison for treason after a failed putsch in Munich, and Ignatius spent many months reflecting in a cave outside of Manresa. It was in these times away from the world where ideas flourished, and their reflections matured into two drastically different works: *Mein Kampf* and what would come to be the *Spiritual Exercises*.

And here, thankfully, the similarities end. Hitler believed that humanity could achieve lasting earthly perfection -- but to do so, humankind must rid itself of its impurities -- ideological, racial, religious,

etc. For Ignatius, humanity's chief struggle was not to destroy perceived threats outside us, but to discern the desires within us. How easily our thoughts, intentions, and actions become tinged with pride, envy, greed. Faced with the anxieties of mortality each of us frantically grasps for the greater glory of myself. Ad Majorem Mei Gloriam.

Yet Ignatius at Manresa realized that to live this way yields only hollow pleasure and dissatisfaction. True joy, strength, and freedom came from abandoning his own plans, instead dispatching his energies back to the greater glory of God. Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.

But why do this? Because Ignatius came to see how God labors in love, even as we struggle to control. God's might is revealed in sacrificial love and mercy, not power plays, fear mongering, and (at its worst) mass extermination of peoples.

Hitler tragically writes, "The stronger must dominate and not blend with the weaker, thus sacrificing his own greatness. Only the born weakling can view this as cruel." A marked contrast to St. Paul, who reminds us in Philippians that Jesus,

Though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God something to be grasped,
Rather, he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
coming in human likeness;
and found human in appearance."

St. Paul and Ignatius knew from their conversions, as Hitler never would, that one cannot become a god by grasping at it. Instead, we must aim to pattern our lives on the God-man Jesus Christ, who willingly becomes weak. Only in this, can we share in God's great glory.

The asymmetry of this comparison -- Hitler and Ignatius -- lies not in the breadth of their reach, but in

the source of their strength. For Hitler, solitary reflection bred a hatred that led to ruination and catastrophic evil. Today, his Nazi party grounds in Nuremberg lie in ruin, like so many earthly princes'. For Ignatius, solitude with the Lord led him to become the man through whose weakness God's glory sings forth -- five hundred years later -- beautiful, true, and good. And it is his surrender to God which we celebrate and honor still today.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, pray for us.

Joe Simmons, S.J.