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Ash Wednesday

Angie O'Gorman | Mar. 9, 2011

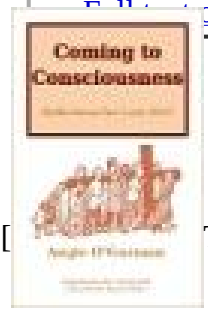
Let?s begin with Joel, the second minor prophet in the Hebrew tradition. He lived in Judea, probably around 400 BCE. A locust plague has attacked and destroyed everything his Hebrew agricultural community needs for survival: fields, produce, flocks, herds, and a good many inhabitants.

Like us, his community seeks meaning in the surrounding terror. Why? Why us? Why now? They seek a way of understanding what seems to be the action of God -- the same God they?d sacrifice to in the Temple to insure their security -- against them.

Joel, likely a priest himself, first calls the priests to penance and fasting. They, in turn, call the people to a community meeting and holy fast. In the midst of loss, Joel insists that if all repent, the power of God will restore the community. It is because of who God is that Joel can say this. The Hebrew God participates in life by bringing restoration from devastation. That participation comes in the form of God?s Spirit, poured out on the community -- women and men, young and old (Joel 2:28-33). On the Day of Yahweh, says Joel, the divine presence will come, like an invading army, an irresistible force. But beforehand, the people must repent and purify themselves, not to placate God, but to be opened to the restorative work of God among them. Otherwise, they might miss it. God can only do so much.

Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:12-18
Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14, 17
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Full text of the readings [1]



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About the Author

Angie O?Gorman?s essays have been published in *America* magazine, *National Catholic Reporter*, and *Commonweal*. She has been involved in human rights work and nonviolent conflict resolution in the United States, Central America, and the West Bank. Her novel, *The Book of Sins* [4], was published last January.

About Pax Christi USA

In a world that settles differences by armed violence and defines ?justice? as ?revenge,? Pax Christi USA [5] dares to break the cycle of violence by fostering reconciliation. Pax Christi USA is the national Catholic peace movement. Our membership includes more than 130 U.S. bishops, 800 parish sponsors, 650 religious communities, 75 high school and college campus groups, 300 local groups, and tens of thousands of individual members. The work of Pax Christi USA begins in personal life and extends to communities of reflection and action to transform structures of society. Pax Christi USA rejects war and every form of violence and domination.

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