

Abandoned Altars

Surviving the Fall of the Roman Church

Hand of God, Fist of Truth



This week, PBS's FRONTLINE series showed an incredible documentary about the clergy sex abuse crisis, [Hand of God](#). What made this show stand out from others about the topic, is first of all, it's intimacy.

Joe Cultrera, the filmmaker, is the younger brother of the victim, Paul, and he wisely captures in the film not just the family dynamics, but how they fit into the larger family of the parish, and how, in the end, what happened to his brother was not just abuse of him but of that entire social world. And it shows, with devastating clarity, how that abuse was perpetuated even more by the bishops than by the pervert priest, Fr. Birmingham. For these men not only permitted, enabled, and in effect, blessed his thirty-year crime spree, at the end, as if in cold revenge, they close down the parish to pay for their sins.

Though I was somewhat younger than Paul, my abuse happened at virtually the same time, and so did my awakening. Some of the parallels, including names, are almost eerie. I, too, sent out an ad asking "Do you remember Fr.?" like Paul did in his quest for fellow survivors, and like him, I also found a copy of that ad in my perp's personnel file. (In my case, the priest who had sent it in to the Archdiocese is now himself been accused of abuse. But no other victims of Fr. Thomas P. Wilkinson have ever come forward.)

I suspect there are parallels with the stories of countless victims. What the Cultreras have done is to tell not just the story of one victim, but an entire generation. And they have not been afraid to look into the depths. At one point, Paul muses that the abuse was like a ritual partially intended to separate him from the normal world, to deny him the same chance for a healthy sexual life as had been denied to his perpetrator. This is an incredibly powerful insight, and one that should be quoted at everyone who

thinks celibacy has nothing to do with the problem.

Likewise with the unbelievable arrogance and duplicity of the hierarchy. If, a century hence, historians contemplating the final collapse of the Roman Catholic Church wonder how it could have come about, this film should show them. I hope *Hand of God* wins a lot of awards. It certainly deserves them.

The Frontline episode is available online. There is also a longer theatrical version available at the film's [website](#).

January 20th 2007 Posted to [Heretic's Pulpit](#), [Roman Circus](#)

Comments Off

The Vatican Strikes Back



It's going to be an uphill push to sell World Catholic Abuse Survivors Day. Just getting the word out to victims and survivors is a struggle.

However, there's one group already working on it. It seems the Church knows and is already planning counter-moves. On December 15, the pope's own preacher, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa in an Advent address [called](#) for a "day of fasting and penance" over the clergy sex abuse scandal to ask God's forgiveness and express solidarity for victims.

Well, that should take care of it!

Actually, there was a time when such an action – especially if coupled with evidence of real concern and willingness to reform – would have been gratefully welcomed as a sign that the Church "got it" and was making an honest effort to fix the problem. But those days are long past.

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World Catholic Abuse Survivors Day



For over a decade, victims and survivors of sexual and other abuse within the Roman Catholic Church have been struggling for justice and reform. Grassroots organizations,