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# IDOL CHATTER

—religion & pop culture blog

Tuesday, January 16, 2007

## The Scandal That Won't End

The sexual-abuse scandal that once looked to bring the Catholic church's hierarchy in Boston crashing down has died away. The former Boston archbishop, Cardinal Bernard Law, is comfortably esconced in a favorable position in Rome, and few of the radical propositions to end abuse--popularly elected bishops or married priests--have come to pass, or are on the horizon. The anger that sparked the scandal, however, is as alive as ever, and is on display in tonight's "Frontline" on PBS. In "The Hand of God," Joe Cultrera, a filmmaker once employed by the archdiocese to make fundraising videos, tells the story of his brother, Paul, who was sexually molested by Father Joseph Birmingham, a parish priest in Salem, Mass., in the mid-1960s. As a timely way to share the burden of those who still suffer, or as an introduction to those who didn't pay attention five years ago, "The Hand of God" is a worthy way to spend 90 minutes.

The film has little new to say about the crisis, but Cultrera's closeness to the victim unexpectedly makes his film more insightful than hypercharged media investigations of the time. Moving from an intimate memoir of growing up Catholic in the deeply devout Italian community in Salem to a "Roger & Me"-style confrontation of church leaders, "The Hand of God" explains how abuse could be concealed in the immigrant communities of Boston's Catholic faithful, which, in Cultrera's depiction, were as idyllic as they were isolated. Their innocence withstood even the uprisings of the '60s and the self-empowerment movements of the '70s. Paul Cutrera's internal battle against his molester continued until his distraught ex-wife, looking for answers to her marriage's demise, forces his fight into the light.

"The Hand of God" is hampered by a lack of on-screen interviews by church officials, who understandably declined to cooperate. Cultrera overcompensates with metaphors of dirty laundry, and images of cake-top statuettes of altar boys. Some of this descends to the level of pantomime and is more distracting than illuminating. It's the family interviews that communicate deftly what a spiritual disaster the crisis was, and how it far it is from being resolved, even if the broader public has moved on.

posted by Paul O'Donnell @ 12:02 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments](#)

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#### About the Bloggers

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**Kris Rasmussen**, the author of "WonkaMania," has been a contributing editor to the Christian music magazine CCM and a feature writer for Relevant magazine.

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