

## The good abuse-scandal documentary.

Posted by Grant Gallicho on January 15, 2007, 12:36 pm  
in General ( dotCommonweal)

Tuesday night, PBS will air a *Frontline* documentary, *Hand of God* (9 p.m. Eastern, but check local listings, or [watch online](#)). I watched a screener on the flight home for the holidays--nothing says Christmas like a sexual-abuse documentary--and intended to blog on it much sooner, but the holiday swing took hold, and I'm only getting to it now. Here's the preview that's been running on PBS:

The film was first released early last year, but didn't receive the media attention it deserved. The press has been quite taken with another church-abuse doc, *Deliver Us from Evil*, which recently made the shortlist of potential Oscar nominees for best documentary. (As you may recall, I [don't think it's deserving](#).) This is too bad, because *Hand of God* is superior in almost every way.

The director, Joe Cultrera, tells the story of his older brother Paul, who suffered clerical sexual abuse, their Italian-American family in Salem, Mass., and the effect the abuse had on their faith. Paul's abuse, which began in 1964 when he was fourteen, was insidiously fused with sacramental practices. Fr. Birmingham, the film explains, would hear Paul's confessions of "impure thoughts," then invite him to the recory for "counseling," where he would molest the boy.

Paul didn't discuss his abuse until 1992, when contacted the Archdiocese of Boston and was sent to Fr. John McCormack, then-secretary of ministerial personnel, who promised Paul the archdiocese would pay for therapy, but urged him not to sue. ([McCormack](#) is now bishop of Manchester, New Hampshire.) McCormack claimed not to know anything about Birmingham beyond one other abuse accusation, that he had never known Birmingham very well at all.

Turns out that wasn't the case. Paul's brother Joe, the filmmaker, decided to do some research, and found that McCormack and Birmingham graduated seminary together, and had been in touch over the years. So Paul decided to take matters into his own hands, and in 1994 he put an ad in the paper asking simply, "Do You Remember Fr. Birmingham?", and supplying contact information. Many responses came. Salem. Sudbury. Gloucester. "Are you looking for what I think you're looking for?" "Is this concerning what I think?" "Fr. Birmingham did attempt to molest me." And so his struggles with the archdiocese began.

What's so effective about the film is not only the skill with which the narrative is told, but also the people involved. Paul speaks intelligently and movingly about how his abuse had changed him, as does his brother Joe. And their parents--recognizable to any Italian American born before 1980--are also powerfully portrayed. They were kept in the dark about the abuse. How the knowledge of that violation shapes their faith in God and in the institutional church demonstrates, as I've written before, one of the most disturbing effects of neglecting to properly deal with abusive priests. *Hand of God* rounds out the often one-sided view of victims the average Catholic gets from reading the news stories.

Less effective are the montages of religious objects, news photos, and other items that play between footage of interviewees and locations. Nothing is duller than 90 minutes of talking heads, I realize, but these scenes play too heavy in an otherwise impressively subtle work.

This is one example, offered by Paul, of how the abuse permeated every aspect of his life:

There were parts of me that sort of shut down as a fourteen-year-old, and didn't have a chance to mature. When things got difficult in our marriage, and I wasn't confronting the truth about what was going on, I would get defensive, I would get scared. I would think that of course I can't maintain this marriage because there's something the matter with me, and I wasn't going to let her question me to find out what was really going on. Of course it was more complicated than that.

It's precisely that attention to complexity that makes *Hand of God* such a compelling film, and why, despite its depressing subject matter, you should watch it.

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