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Film criticizes how bishop handled abuse

By DANIEL BARRICK
Monitor staff

January 18, 2007 8:00AM

A documentary film broadcast on New Hampshire Public Television this week revives a chapter from the charges of sexual abuse by priests in Massachusetts and is sharply critical of the role played by New Hampshire Bishop John McCormack.

The film, Hand of God, tells the story of Paul Cultrera, who as a child in Salem, Mass., was repeatedly molested by his parish priest, the Rev. Joseph Birmingham.

McCormack served with Birmingham in the same parish at the time of Cultrera's abuse. Birmingham died in 1989, but McCormack is a central figure in Cultrera's story. In the film, Cultrera accuses McCormack of ignoring evidence of his abuse in the 1960s and of lying when confronted by Cultrera with his story in 1994. McCormack ran the Boston Archdiocese's personnel office at that time.

"If there's one thing that's stuck for me and made me feel real bitter, it's the way that McCormack treated my case and, looking at the files, treated lots of them," Cultrera says in the film.

Pat McGee, a spokesman for the Diocese of Manchester, said McCormack had not seen the film. He said McCormack had no response to the allegations raised in it and said, "The bishop continues to offer to

meet with anyone who has been a victim. He's met with many people."

McGee continued: "His focus right now is moving the church forward and putting practices into place to protect children."

In the past, McCormack has acknowledged mishandling abuse allegations against priests, including Birmingham.

Hand of God was produced by Cultrera's brother, Joe Cultrera, a filmmaker in New York. The film follows Paul Cultrera's attempts to come to terms with his abuse decades after it occurred. In 1994, after telling people close to him that he had been molested by Birmingham, Paul Cultrera visited the offices of the archdiocese to speak with church leaders. He said one of his concerns was that Birmingham was still molesting minors.

Cultrera met with McCormack at that time. He said he told McCormack of his abuse and asked if McCormack was aware of any other claims against Birmingham. According to Cultrera, McCormack offered for the archdiocese to pay for counseling for Cultrera and encouraged him not to sue the church. (Cultrera eventually accepted a \$60,000 settlement from the archdiocese.)

McCormack also told him that he knew of only one other allegation against Birmingham, made in 1970, and that he had not kept in touch with Birmingham since they worked together in the 1960s.

Cultrera said he found McCormack's response cold and evasive, and it spurred him to investigate Birmingham's past on his own.

Church documents released in recent years contradict the statements McCormack made to Cultrera. As head of the Boston archdiocese's personnel office, McCormack handled sex abuse complaints against priests and monitored Birmingham's treatment for his abuse problems. And he and Birmingham traveled to Europe in 1985, with three other priests, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of their ordination.

Hand of God was shown on the PSB program Frontline on Tuesday and will be broadcast again tonight at 10. (It can also be viewed at Frontline's website.) The film has been shown at nearly 20 festivals across the country, including the S.N.O.B. Film Festival in Concord in November, where it won the prize for best documentary.

The film does not uncover any new evidence about the abuse in New Hampshire and Massachusetts that broke in 2002 and has resulted in millions of dollars in legal settlements between the church and victims. But it shines a light on McCormack's central role in the event as a high-ranking administrator in the archdiocese in the 1980s and '90s, when many of the abuse allegations were first brought forward.

After documents released by the diocese revealed a decades-long pattern of cover-ups by church officials, including McCormack, he faced pressure to resign. But calls for his ouster have quieted since then, and few of McCormack's critics expect this new film to revive that pressure.

"I don't have too much hope it's going to change anything," said Rose Marie Lanier of Concord, a member of Voice of the Faithful, a Catholic group that has been critical of McCormack and other church leaders. "A lot of people want to turn it off like it's over and it hasn't had any lasting impact. I haven't

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seen any change in the last five years."

McCormack's only appearance in the film comes at the end of a meeting he held in 2003 with several dozen victims of Birmingham's abuse. McCormack would not permit the meeting to be recorded, but as he's seen leaving the meeting, the cameraman asks if he's learned anything from speaking with the victims.

"I've learned what their lives are like because of what has happened to them," McCormack says to the camera without breaking his stride.

In an interview, filmmaker Joe Cultrera said he offered to speak with McCormack for the documentary, but McCormack declined.

"He said that nobody will believe him and that nobody believes him when he explains himself," Joe Cultrera said.

Joe Cultrera also said he has invited McCormack to several screenings of the film and reserved tickets for him when Hand of God was shown in Concord two months ago. He's also sent McCormack copies of newspaper reviews of the film. He said he has received no response from anyone at the diocese.

"I wanted to make film to help people who had just read headlines, let them understand how a family . . . has this happen to them and then deal with it," Joe Cultrera said.

----- End of article

By DANIEL BARRICK

Monitor staff

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