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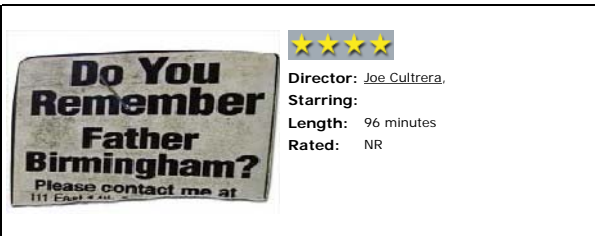
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Hand of God (2006)



Director: Joe Cultrera.
Starring:
Length: 96 minutes
Rated: NR

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Sins of the Father

by [Brian Hughes](#)
 reviewed: 2007-01-16

Let me just start off by saying that I applaud Joe Cultrera for having the balls to make this film. I only wish The Academy would have the same pair and nominate this picture in the Best Documentary category. With expert craftsmanship Cultrera and his two associates, Producer and Co-Editor Laura Corwin and Cameraman Hugh Walsh, not only lay bare the pain that has clouded over the life of his brother, Paul Cultrera, but also expose the hypocrisy and "corporate company" mentality of the Catholic Church. This is a film not made by some young, idealist, ultra liberal documentarian, but by a wise adult male who was raised in the Catholic environment, knows it in and out, and has the grace to realize that it is humanity that ruins religion, not the religion itself. That it is the ultimate in vanity for any man to think he is speaking for God. But, like any secret society, like any fraternity, like any big corporation, secrets must be kept within the family. And it is better to keep things quiet than to expose them. Well, thanks to Cultrera and company, the secrets of the Arch Diocese of Massachusetts are no longer a secret.

The Director starts us off with his childhood in Salem, Massachusetts. The neighborhood is rife with loving Italian and Irish families, old world traditions, and a strict loyalty to the local parish. The house where Joe, Paul, and Maria Cultrera are raised is dotted with Catholic effigies and statues, with pictures of priests and saints hanging on the wall, giving barely enough wall space to their own father's paintings. He also speaks of "hiding spots" he and his siblings had: Perhaps hiding from an abundance of Aunts, Uncles and Nieces around the house, or maybe from the rigors and formality of school, or perhaps from something much more ugly and dark.

Paul Cultrera is the filmmaker's older brother. One of the ways Paul dealt with an absent father who was working all the time to support his family, was to hang out with Father Joseph Birmingham of The St. James School. Paul was an altar boy, and enjoyed the time he spent with his fellow classmates and the ultra hip Father Birmingham. Birmingham would take the boys on a trip to New York City to see The World's Fair, he'd take them to the classic Fellini film Juliet of the Spirits, and he'd also take them riding in his black Ford Galaxy. Natural habits for young kids going through puberty - like lying to your mother, having impure thoughts, or masturbating - are always treated as the "devil's work" and must be confessed to a priest. Father Birmingham didn't approve that Paul was touching himself, so he took it upon himself to be Paul's private counselor. From that first session on, Paul was sexually abused. And what looked normal and even welcoming to his family, was a time of shame and guilt for Paul that would change his character, ruin his own relationship with women, and ultimately lay distrust in his attitude toward Catholicism forever.

The first part of the documentary is about guilt, shame, expectations, and the cold-water reality of false and hypocritical prophets. The second part of the film is about Paul becoming comfortable in coming out with his horrible tale. He tells his first wife of his trauma long after they had separated. And in doing so, not only alleviated a lot of his pain, but raised awareness and helped hundreds of others abused by Father Birmingham to feel somewhat good about themselves again.

There are several things I respect about this film: The first being that, just as you think Paul's story is over, a climax starts to rev up in motion, building to a twist that leads to a much larger problem: One that turns this story from a personal film to a much more important universal expose of secrets that have been hidden for far too long. I also appreciate Joe's wanting to interview Bishop John McCormack (a fellow seminarian and friend of Birmingham's.) Joe rightly believed that to not get the Bishop's side of the story would do a disservice to the film and might call into question some of his reasons for making it in the first place. But the Bishop shoots down Joe's attempt regardless.

His charming, and at times funny parents, give a much needed comic break. They learned of Paul's abuse in the early 90's, were saddened about what happened and yet were open enough to look past the way they were raised and see the priests for what they were - just men. There is a funny moment toward the end of the film when Paul helps his aunt remove a picture of Cardinal Law from her hallowed wall, whose checkered past is overlooked by Pope John Paul II and is given an important post in Rome. Even though Joe feels the Catholic Church ruined his brother and his family, it doesn't deter him from shooting video of his parent's favorite parish (not the church where abuse took place) as it serves Mass for the last time. The parish is condemned to close due to cutbacks from the growing scandal of the Arch Diocese (an Arch Diocese that seemed only too happy to sell the valued property for a sizable check) - thus abusing not only Paul (As Paul points out), but his parents as well, who had relied on the parish for their faith.

I highly recommend this moving portrait of a man who wanted to tell the story that ruined his

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brother, but in the process, helped others on the path of renewal and recovery.

Brian Hughes

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