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"Hand of God" filmmaker Joe Cultrera stands in front of St. James Church, in Salem, Mass., the parish where his brother was molested by clergy. (Robert Spencer for the Boston Globe)

TELEVISION REVIEW

The Boston Globe

'Hand of God' story needs few extras

By Janice Page, Globe Correspondent | January 16, 2007

Reprinted from a movie review on Sept. 21, 2006

Ever been to a concert where production values and background noise are so over-amped you find yourself longing to remind the artist that he/she doesn't need all this junk, because he/she actually has decent material? Minus the earplugs, that's how I felt watching "Hand of God."

Written and directed by Massachusetts filmmaker Joe Cultrera, this documentary about sexual abuse by Catholic clergy focuses on a personal history that didn't need a lot of dressing up. At its center is the

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filmmaker's brother, Paul , who was molested while a teenage altar boy in 1960s Salem, and who later battled church hierarchy to find some measure of justice for the lasting damages he says he suffered while entrusted to the spiritual care of the late Father Joseph Birmingham .

Paul's experiences are a tiny part of what was later revealed to be a hugely scandalous local, national, and international story, of course. But "Hand of God" is committed to keeping the spotlight mainly on this one very intimate tale told in the victim's own words, which stretch out over the film's 96 minutes and only really pause for interviews with his family members or bits of stiffly scripted narration by the filmmaker.

With such narrow focus, you might think the oral detail would get tedious, but it doesn't. Paul is articulate, candid, considered, and a natural storyteller whose easy delivery makes the nightmarish tale all the more unsettling. He grew up in a close-knit, working-class Italian neighborhood where kids rarely questioned their safety or the authority figures who guarded it. Birmingham was a trusted friend and mentor. So when Paul was told he needed counseling for his sinful masturbations, he went to the St. James rectory willingly. And the serial abuse he says he suffered there likely contributed to everything from unmotivated career choices to his broken marriage and stunted relationship with his dad.

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Sadly, Paul's story is not unique, but it is gripping because the man telling it radiates quiet power. The filmmaking Cultrera has the good sense to harness his brother's verbal energy at length, but unfortunately he doesn't just let the words stand on their own.

Unnecessarily stacked with visual clutter, "Hand of God" would have been a much better movie if Cultrera had been more judicious about editing himself. The documentary is filled with overdone symbolism and intentionally tacky images: Communion wafers mixing with money in a collection basket, photos of sinister priests dangling from a clothesline, a soapy snapshot of boyhood being washed down the drain. The director's own home movies are universally more compelling than any of these forced attempts at style.

The film's story arc peaks when Paul discovers what appears to be a pattern of abuse by Birmingham that was covered up by church officials who shuffled him from parish to parish. Years ahead of investigative journalists, Paul easily unearths a pile of alleged victims, and the Cultreras proceed to call out Bishop John B. McCormack and several others they think have things to answer for. All the camera had to do was point and shoot. Simple facts would have been enough to make your blood boil. ■

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