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## Entertainment XML

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MOVIE REVIEW | 'Hand of God'

# A painful, searing account 'Hand of God' | A painful account from the victim of a pedophile priest

## After years of silent suffering, priest's victim opens up to his filmmaker brother.

By ROBERT W. BUTLER  
The Kansas City Star

For several months in the spring of 1964, 14-year-old Paul Cultrera of Salem, Mass., was sexually abused by the Rev. Joseph Birmingham, a priest at the parish where Cultrera was an altar boy.

For almost 30 years Cultrera kept that secret, which ate away at his life, career and relationships. When he finally unburdened himself to his conservative, pious Italian-American family, their reaction was sympathy, outrage and a fierce desire for justice — or maybe vengeance.

The result is "Hand of God," directed by Paul Cultrera's younger brother Joseph and quite possibly the most gripping and illuminating documentary ever made from the point of view of a sexual abuse victim. It joins the Oscar-nominated "Deliver Us From Evil" (which recently ended a monthlong run in KC) as a key document in the case against pedophile priests.

Opening today at the Glenwood Arts, "Hand of God" was named best documentary at last fall's Kansas International Film Festival. It meticulously delves into Cultrera's family, his psyche and the trusting, religious world in which he was raised.

Today he's a thin, white-mustachioed man who speaks rationally about what happened to him. But Cultrera is also an angry soul, embittered by his abuse and the refusal of the church to accept responsibility.

Why did he let it happen?

"He's the priest," Cultrera says. "He's got the hot line to God. He's the guy with the magic."

While the abuse lasted only a few weeks, the fallout continued for a lifetime. Cultrera drifted from job to job — lobsterman, mental hospital attendant, truck driver, stable boy — and his marriage broke up over intimacy issues.

"You want to be trusting," Cultrera says, "but you're always pulling back."

Birmingham had died by the time Cultrera told all to his family. But a desire to understand just what had happened to him led Cultrera in the mid-'90s to run newspaper ads ("Do you remember Father Birmingham?") in towns where the priest had been stationed. Within weeks more than three dozen abuse victims had stepped forward.

"If we found 40 victims more than 30 years later, how many were there in all?" Cultrera wonders.

It gets worse. Cultrera meets with the Rev. John B. McCormack, then in charge of investigating abuse cases in the Archdiocese of Boston. McCormack and Birmingham were in the same seminary class, a class that of 45 graduates produced a dozen confirmed sexual abusers.

McCormack claims not to have seen Birmingham for many years, but the Culterras learn that the priests went on vacation together, that McCormack had a role in moving Birmingham from parish to parish and that he visited Birmingham's death bed.

Subsequently McCormack was elevated to bishop.

Getting angry yet?

By film's end, the pedophile priest scandal in Boston has broken wide open and Cultrera is dismissing the church hierarchy as "a bunch of corrupt businessmen sitting atop an evil empire."

This film works not only as journalism but also as cinematic art. In telling this story Joe Cultrera has created dreamlike collages fashioned from family photos, home movies, blowing leaves, dripping water and common household objects that somehow take on



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ominous meanings when shot in extreme close-up. These passages feel like childhood memories distilled and amplified, and they elevate the picture well above your usual talking-head documentary.

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**'HAND OF GOD' ??? 1/2**

**Director:** Joe Cultrera

**Cast:** Paul Cultrera

**No MPAA rating.** Contains profanity and sexual dialogue

**Running time:** 1:36

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