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TV REVIEW | 'HAND OF GOD'

A Painful Account of Abuse and a Celebration of Family

By ALESSANDRA STANLEY
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Sadly, there is little the public doesn't know about pedophile priests and the pastors, bishops and cardinals who covered up for them. The scandal that engulfed the [Roman Catholic Church](#) peaked in 2002, when Cardinal [Bernard F. Law](#) resigned as leader of the Archdiocese of Boston. Other cases have come up, and the church has made many more settlement payments, but that first white-hot fury has eased, replaced by other scandals and disasters.



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The filmmaker Joe Cultrera and Bishop Richard Gerard Lennon.

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And that might make the "Frontline" documentary "Hand of God," about one man's 30-year struggle to confront his past, seem poorly timed: so many books, movies, documentaries and talk shows have gone over this same painful material before.

The story of Paul Cultrera, a former altar boy in Salem, Mass., which will be shown on [PBS](#) tonight, provides a different public service. The documentary, made by his younger brother, Joe Cultrera, a filmmaker, is a bracing antidote to former [Representative Mark Foley](#).

Last year Mr. Foley, then a [Republican](#) congressman from Florida, told the world that he had been sexually molested as a child by his parish priest, after his own inappropriate correspondence with teenage boys was exposed and he had signed into the defendants' protection program known as rehab. His disclosure angered other victims who spoke up when it was not expedient and didn't use their suffering to mitigate their sins.

Paul Cultrera wasn't destroyed or unhinged by the actions of Father Joseph Birmingham, a priest who was accused of molesting scores of boys before his death in 1989. "It's not the story of my life," he says. "It's a thing that happened to me."

Mr. Cultrera kept his secret for 30 years before going public. His story, which he relates in a restrained, matter-of-fact tone, is not told in self-defense, nor is it just an expression of hurt and anger. "Hand of God" is a stinging denunciation of the Catholic Church, but it is also a celebration of the family that survived the ordeal and was in some ways strengthened by it.

Home movies from the 1950s and 60s — faded color film of crowded parish dinners, parlors lined with Virgin Mary statuettes and framed pictures of saints and the pope, children mugging in their First Communion best and Boy Scout uniforms — serve as a map of the working-class Italian-American family half a century ago.

Teachers were nuns, Mass was obligatory, and the local priest a beloved and infallible leader of the community. Paul Cultrera recalls that in 1964 he never questioned Father Birmingham even after the priest began molesting him at the rectory and later in his car, a shiny black Ford Galaxy with a red interior. The boy told no one and blamed himself. "There must be something the matter with me," he recalls thinking.

The film is florid in style — porcelain figurines crushed in a vice, Communion wafers dropped into darkened water and fizzing like Alka-Seltzer — but Mr. Cultrera remains

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understated and calm throughout.

When he finally talks about what happened, he finds he is supported by his family and deserted by his church: he was particularly embittered by the way officials like Bishop John B. McCormack of Manchester, N.H., protected his abuser.

At one point Joe Cultrera films the outside of a church building for the documentary until a priest comes out and puts his hand on the lens to stop him.

When Joe Cultrera explains what his film is about, the priest turns icy. "Sir, if you think you're going to make me feel bad about this," the priest says, "you're not." They later learn that he is Bishop Richard Gerard Lennon, an auxiliary bishop who temporarily took over the archdiocese after Cardinal Law stepped down.

Paul Cultrera seems most upset that Father Birmingham usurped his real father's place as authority figure and role model. "When Birmingham was molesting me," he says, "I probably had more awe for the priest than I did for Dad at that time."

"Hand of God" is both an affidavit against the archdiocese and a novena to the Cultrera sons' elderly parents, who revered the church but loved their children more.

HAND OF GOD

On most [PBS](#) stations tonight (check local listings).

Joe Cultrera, producer, director and writer; Laura Corwin and Hugh Walsh, co-producers; Michael Sullivan, executive producer for special projects; David Fanning, producer for Frontline. Produced by WGBH Boston and Zingerplatz Pictures.

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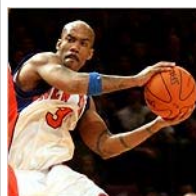
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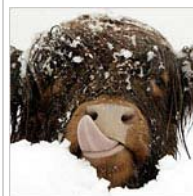
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