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'Hand of God' looks at long suffering of a Catholic family

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"And my fear is great that you have even taken God from me."

This last line from an 8th century Irish poem is the lament of a girl ruined, as they said then, by a boy who has abandoned her. Some scholars say the "boy" is a young priest.

Certainly, a priest at the center of the "Frontline" documentary "The Hand of God" began his pedophilia young and thrived at it, checked only when he died decades later.

If boys could get pregnant, the history of the Roman Catholic Church would have been dramatically different since, say, 1960. Just how long priest pedophiles have indulged themselves is difficult to discern, but the last two decades have been devastating. More than 10,000 cases have been reported, many creating bitter ex-Catholics.

Many of these crimes happened long enough ago for statutes of limitation to prevent criminal prosecution. Even so, civil suits have inflicted something like a fiscal Inquisition on the church. Dioceses have suffered judgments leading to bankruptcy because they had failed to protect the faithful from a corrupt minority of priests and pastors.

Had the priests created babies, the offenses would have surfaced decades earlier. But most victims were boys, and many kept the experience to themselves as well as they could -- often not well at all. But it entailed concealment impossible with pregnancy.

This issue is the core of "Hand," produced by Joe Cultrera the brother of a molestation survivor, Paul, a former altar boy -- and former Catholic.

Paul had coiled his secret inside him for 30-odd years until he chanced to meet his ex-wife. During a surprising heart-to-heart, she asked a shrewd question that spurred him to blurt out the long-festering truth -- the wall between them was built not by a scoutmaster but by a priest.

Paul began a new life then and there. His story was a virtual template for thousands of others. He had felt compelled to hide it for 30 years. Suddenly, he was compelled to tell it.

The epiphany led to his brother's film, whose title is a sinister pun. A priest's hands, in Catholic tradition, turn a crisp wafer into the physical body of Christ. But some priests' hands have turned other things into other things, including Catholics into troubled ex-Catholics.

The epiphany also sent Paul's large Italian-Catholic family back in time. It shocked family members out of a lifelong trust and comfort in the church that -- they had been told and had fervently believed -- was the sole route from this vale of tears to Heaven.

The film begins simply with Paul placing an ad in newspapers in key communities. It consisted of one bland sentence: "Do you remember Father Birmingham?" He had been a longtime friend to many families.

Paul had been molested in his Salem, Mass., parish in the early '60s, but the 100 or so replies sprang from many other places where Birmingham had been a parish priest -- or, incredibly, pastor. Pedophilia actually became a path to promotion for him.

One conclusion became inescapable -- replies shot from people who happened to see particular newspapers on particular days and saw that particular ad. They could be but a bare sample of the true scope of Birmingham's abuses.

In the familiar -- indeed cliché -- pattern Birmingham had molested scores of children, mostly boys, and his colleagues and pastors had shuffled him from parish to parish, sparing victims in his former parishes and imperiling children in his new ones.

For decades.

And the priests who are the subject of lawsuits would be in jail had the church establishment not systematically concealed their crimes. Schoolteachers and other pedophiles in the news famously go to prison for crimes that some priests perpetrated for decades, seemingly with no danger of arrest.

Each case is a misery of its own, and "Hand" concentrates on just one family. The film plays out the tale of a few years of active suffering followed by decades of silent suffering. Then, when the truth finally came, not just Paul but his whole family suffered.

Cultrera interviewed many involved in Birmingham's case, including a surprising number of priests -- up to a point. He also uses footage of Boston Cardinal Bernard Law and others who hit the news when the story burst its dams. Condemned for protecting pedophile priests, Law was nevertheless elevated to even higher office in Rome.

In any other tribulation, a Catholic family turns to the church for guidance and simple consolation. But there is no place to go when one is stunned into helpless disillusionment. The ordeal can even take God from them.

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