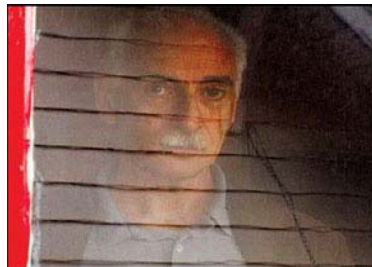


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## Let us prey



COURTESY PHOTOS/ZINGERPLATZ PICTURES

**Paul Cultrera: ' . . . and there was nobody there to protect me.'**

### 'Frontline' program details story of priest's abuse

By **MARVIN READ**  
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

It was a scenario repeated thousands of times during the history of the American Catholic Church: A devout family, rooted in its faith and a popular priest taking special interest in their son, an altar boy.

In this case, as in so many others, the priest, the Rev. Joseph Birmingham, took too special an interest in Paul Cultrera, a 14-year-old boy and a member of St. James Parish in Salem, Mass.

What began in the mid-1960s in the church as a teenager confessing typical transgressions became personal visits and heavy molestation in the priest's rectory and bedroom, in his shiny, black Ford Galaxie and hotel rooms.

Unaware that anything was amiss, Cultrera's devoutly Catholic parents were proud of the relationship ("It was a beautiful thing," his mother had once said) between the assistant pastor and their son, even as his confused psyche deteriorated in guilt, shame, revulsion, confusion and, eventually, outright anger.



**Paul Cultrera, then 13, poses proudly in his home as an altar boy.**

The youth severed the relationship with the priest, and the church, when he was 16.

Three decades later, Cultrera began to wonder if he was Birmingham's only victim and, with the help of queries submitted via newspaper ads, he found out he wasn't - not by a long shot.

Cultrera's brother, Joseph, is a veteran filmmaker and together the two men decided to chronicle their family's experience with each other and the church from which they tried to force an acknowledgement of error, cover-up and complicity.

Theirs is the story that will be told on the Frontline presentation of "Hand of God" at 9 p.m. Tuesday on the local PBS outlet, KTSC-TV.

The film features all the family players - parents, siblings and others - as they chat with depth and even some humor about the unraveling of a naive boy's soul at the ungodly hands of a priest.

Paul Cultrera, the victim, expresses his anger and hurt succinctly: "I think there was a part of me that was just so angry that this had happened to me, angry with everybody who didn't stop it from happening.

"Here I was, a product of the educational school system and this religious system, taken advantage of by that system. And there was nobody there to protect me." Indeed, Birmingham, the priest who had temporarily replaced Cultrera's own dad as a father figure, had not only failed to protect him but set him up for failure, seeming to care not at all about the damage he had done.

In the mid-1990s, encouraged by his estranged wife, friends and his brother, Cultrera took on the church and began receiving responses from the newspaper advertisements, indicating that similar Birmingham abuses had taken place in Lowell, Brighton, Gloucester and Sudbury.

The Frontline film reveals the Cultrera brothers - Paul is now 57, and his brother is 48 - uncovering scores of efforts to protect the molesting, pedophile priest, moving him without explanation from parish to parish and indirectly offering him new fertile fields to prey on.

Birmingham died in 1989 after 29 years of being rotated through Boston-area parishes; one of his close friends who certainly knew of the improprieties was consecrated a bishop in New Hampshire and the Boston archbishop who later became a symbol for higher-ups' mismanagement of hundreds of abusive priests nationwide, Cardinal Bernard Law, resigned in 2002 under pressure yet was given a plush assignment in Rome.



**Bishop Richard Lennon to filmmaker Joe Cultrera: '... if you think you're going to make me feel bad about this, you're not.'**

Throughout, the Frontline program indicates, there was no clear sense of any church official being willing to take on official, honest and personal ownership of the problem, including Bishop Richard Lennon, who was appointed to steer the Boston Archdiocese from the time of Law's resignation until his successor, Archbishop Sean O'Malley, took over in mid-2003.

"Sir, if you think you're going to make me feel bad about this, you're not," the interim bishop told filmmaker Joe Cultrera.

Strides have been made by most dioceses in the reporting and handling of sex-abuse cases. Lawsuits have been filed by the hundreds and hefty judgments and settlements have been paid, driving some dioceses into bankruptcy or close to it. Church properties have been sold and parishes have been closed.

Whether out of a sense of decency and propriety or a fear of more lawsuits, U.S. church officials in Boston and throughout the U.S. have generally instituted a no-tolerance policy in regard to pedophiles. The current situation has improved greatly, but the detritus from past decades remains a sewage heap piled high and malodorous.

Future generations of children may be spared from such horrendous indignities, but for what may be thousands of children - whose lives were tragically affected by selfish men - the damage already has been done to their spirits, souls and psyches.

"Hand of God" tells the story of one such victim, one such priest and one such tragedy.

**WHAT:** Frontline's 'Hand of God'

**WHERE:** PBS, KTSC-TV

**WHEN:** 9 p.m. Tuesday

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