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January 16, 2007 6:59AM

### Effects of priest sex abuse portrayed

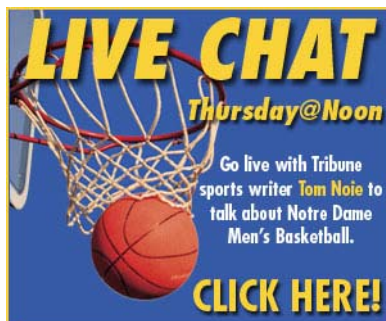
REVIEW

 CLAUDIA BAYLISS  
 Tribune Staff Writer

At the beginning of "Hand of God," viewers see a now middle-age Paul Cultrera and his elderly father shuffling through a basket containing old home movies in the basement of the family home. Paul's voice overlays the camera's next shot: a photo of him as a young altar boy.

"I remember places where it happened. I remember smells. I remember the sun coming through the rectory window."

The note of personal memories is struck again and again throughout "Hand of God," which airs on "Frontline" at 9 p.m. tonight on PBS.



The 2006 documentary examines the priest sex abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church through the eyes of what was once a seamlessly devout Catholic family.

In "Hand of God," Paul -- with the help of his younger brother, Joe, the film's writer, director and

producer -- reflects on his past, when he was a boy and young man, and on the man he is today. The film makes clear that the older brother's identity was profoundly marked by the molestation he says he suffered at the hands of the Rev. Joseph E. Birmingham, now deceased, at the age of 14 in Salem, Mass.

"It's that whole power structure, that whole environment that we're in that allows this to happen," he says of why he kept the abuse secret for 30 years, until 12 years ago, and why he and his brother made "Hand of God." "And hopefully something like this (film) can explain it." The "whole environment" he refers to, viewers soon find out, is Catholic education and the hierarchical structure of the church.

Through interviews, old family photos and films, letters and newspaper clippings, as well as symbolism, "Hand of God" attempts to answer the questions of how and why the sexual abuse of a child by a priest could happen. The film portrays a family that is steeped in the church striving to come to terms with its betrayal not only by priests who molest, but by those who participate in a coverup.

Joe Cultrera wages, in effect, a war of images -- film of Paul's christening contrasts with water from a stained sink flowing over a photo of Paul at a young age, for instance. Those images function as somber revelations about the misuse of spiritual power.

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"Hand of God," however, does not skate over the role of the family in enforcing the church's goal, at the time when the Cultrera children were growing up, of instilling conformity and obedience as part of children's "formation."

And priests were so revered, it never occurred to Paul or his parents to see anything strange in a priest regularly taking groups of teenage boys to the beach, to the movies, golfing and on ski trips.

"Hand of God" cuts back and forth between the past and the present. It shows how the abuse colored Paul's life. A string of odd jobs after graduating from college. Intimacy problems in his relationships with women.

The film documents Paul's sense of lonely isolation and, as the circle of revelations widens, that of other men who were abused as boys. It includes footage of priests that the film alleges are, or public revelations have shown to be, implicated in the abuse or in the church's coverup: the Rev. Anthony Laurano, later indicted on two charges of child sex abuse, and now Bishop John B. McCormack, whom Paul believes knew about Birmingham and chose to do nothing by merely reassigning him.

The interviews, especially in the context of the family's own archives, are both disturbing and poignant.

"Hand of God" contains only a brief reference to the good priests who appropriately carry out their mission. It does, however, show Joe calling McCormack, offering him a chance to have his voice -- his views -- included in the documentary he's filming. (McCormack turns him down.)

Ultimately, "Hand of God" makes it clear that what it indicts is not individuals as much as the institutional church and its built-in potential for abuse. Nothing in the film conveys that more damningly than Laurano's description of a priest, which Joe caught in 1983 while filming a neighborhood party.

"A man of God should be accepted by a community. He should be revered. He should be feared. He should be listened to. (Smiling) No father is ever accepted by the children.

"I'm a man set apart. I'm somebody different."

By the film's end, Paul and Joe make no bones about where they stand: The higher up these men go in the church, the more corrupt they become.

"Hand of God" is most effective in going back and forth in time. By continually shifting between the past and present, the film makes it possible for viewers to feel the slippage the Cultrera family experienced from their idealistic perception of the church to the reality they came to know firsthand.

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