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Bitter Fruit in the *Hand of God*

*“The nightingales are sobbing
In the orchards of our mothers.
And hearts that we broke long ago
Have long been breaking others.”* -W.H. Auden (with thanks to G.B.)

Sadly, the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church continues to yield broken hearts and bitter fruit. There's an interesting [post and commentary over at Amy Wellborn's OpenBook](#) regarding last evening's Frontline documentary, [Hand of God](#), in which filmmaker Joe Cultrera examines the sexual abuse of his brother Paul by Fr. Joseph Birmingham, a serial molester and priest of the Archdiocese of Boston. As usual, while the description of sex acts is disgusting, the greatest outrage and disappointment is served up by those diocesan officials who stonewalled the victims' cries for justice. As one of Amy's comboxers says, the reaction of the Church was often “more DMV than BVM.” And how.

In *Hand of God*, the most offensive figure - after the execrable Birmingham - is Bishop John B. McCormack, the very image of the clerical bureaucrat, a company man caught up in a web of his own lies and personal culpability. He served as director of ministerial formation during the years when accusations against Birmingham and others were first beginning to surface. Though he had graduated from seminary with Birmingham and known of his depredations as early as 1970, McCormack did nothing to prevent Birmingham from being made a pastor in 1985. In fact, that very year he vacationed with Birmingham and other priests to “celebrate” the 25th anniversary of their ordinations. McCormack was elevated to bishop in 1995 and in 1998 he was assigned as bishop of Manchester, New Hampshire, where he continues to serve to this day.

Meanwhile, Paul Cultrera's life has been a shipwreck of self-loathing, shame and the loss of faith. Still, in watching the film it's clear that there was a moment when things could have turned around, a moment when the Church could have redeemed itself in the heart and life of this precious man treated so poorly as a mere boy. That moment occurred in 1992, when Cultrera first brought his tale of abuse to the Archdiocese. If he had been treated with true compassion, if the diocesan officials he encountered had met his outrage with their own and committed themselves to justice for Paul Cultrera, his own heart may have softened. He may have recovered the faith that had once created joy in the life of a sunny young boy, a boy soon to be despoiled by a predator.

Instead, it was Paul Cultrera's misfortune - indeed, the misfortune of every Catholic - that the diocesan official he encountered was John B. McCormack, whose indifference and dishonesty inflicted abuse every bit as soul-scarring as Joseph Birmingham's perversions. *Hand of God* is difficult to watch for those of us who truly love the Church. But I believe it is essential to listen to the voices of those who have suffered at the hands of men like Birmingham and McCormack, if only to be reminded of the indelible consequences of sin.

(Mark Gordon)

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2 Responses to “Bitter Fruit in the *Hand of God*”

1. *Anonymous* Says:

[January 20th, 2007 at 9:23 am](#)

I was raised Catholic and have a degree from a Catholic College like Paul Cultrera. It is disturbing what happened to him, but where were his parents when the molestation was taking place? Life is not fair, but this documentary was unfair also. Many good men have gone into the priesthood and done good things for our society and the Church. I thank God for my education and the opportunity it has given me, I wish Mr. Cultrera could have put his education to better use. We all make mistakes, we must learn from them and move on, not be vindictive.

2. *Mark Gordon* Says:

[January 20th, 2007 at 11:50 am](#)

What was Paul Cultrera's "mistake," from which he must "move on?" That one comment borders on what is most egregious in the reaction of many Catholics to the scandal: implicitly blaming the victim.

Since I know nothing about "Anonymous," I can only make conjecture about his or her background, but here are two things I surmise. First, I can only imagine that this commenter is not a parent, or else he/she would not have suggested that Cultrera's parents were somehow to blame. Second, I imagine that this commenter never suffered sexual abuse as a child, or else he/she would not so blithely suggest that life is simply "not fair," or that Cultrera should have put his education to better use.

Vindictiveness is surely a sin, but so is callousness in the face of injustice, particularly injustice committed against a child.

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