

## Film Reviews

---

### *Hand of God.*

By Joe Cultrera, Laura Corwin, and Hugh Walsh.

Zingerplatz Pictures, 2006.

96 minutes. DVD format, color.

*Hand of God* is an agonizing documentary film about an adolescent boy, Paul Cultrera, sexually abused by a priest, Fr. Joseph Birmingham, in Salem, Massachusetts, in the mid-1960s. The film depicts a series of complicated relationships and events, detailing the boy's upbringing among extended family in St. Mary's Italian Parish, where generations of devout Italian Catholics from Sicily comprised the parish community, built the church, and dutifully attended services.

Paul Cultrera attended school in nearby St. Michael's Irish parish school where he was lured into counseling sessions by Birmingham. After Birmingham's death many years later, numerous additional reports of abuse by Birmingham emerged after Cultrera published an ad calling for anyone who had had encounters with Birmingham to come forward.

The substantial Italian parish church was closed at the time the film was being made. The bishop who supervised the closing of the parish, Francis Irwin, Auxiliary Bishop of the Boston Archdiocese, was ordained a priest in 1960 at St. Joseph's Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts, in the same class as Birmingham and Fr. John B. McCormack, later Director of Personnel for the Archdiocese of Boston, who also served in St. Michael's parish at the time Birmingham was on the parish staff.

In a widely published clerical sex scandal that rocked the Archdiocese of Boston, McCormack had served as special assistant to Cardinal Bernard Law. A series of cases similar to Birmingham's had been reported to McCormack who made recommendations to the Archbishop in such matters. The policy at the time, when Cardinal Law headed the Archdiocese, was to discipline offending priests and then reassign them, not disclosing their sexual abuse to the parish communities involved, thus exposing additional youths to their abuse. Amid the scandals that ensued, Cardinal Law was forced to resign while McCormack later was ordained bishop and assigned to Manchester, New Hampshire, where he remains today despite frequent calls for his resignation by groups such as Voice of the Faithful, formed to end church secrecy.

A pattern of similar abuses has been widely reported not only in Massachusetts but across North America and Europe, often covered up by Church authorities despite a stated policy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to follow a strict procedure in handling such cases. The picture is tragic and has led to disillusionment by many church-going Catholics. In the case of Paul Cultrera, the film reports that Church officials agreed to pay for psychiatric treatment and offered a settlement of \$60,000 in restitution but only after Cultrera engaged a lawyer and pursued his own investigations. His unsettled life seems to bear testimony to the trauma he endured and held in secret for much of his adult life. (For one, he attributes the failure of his first marriage to his inability to reveal his painful secret.)

The film, directed by the abused man's brother, Joe Cultrera, is a justifiably angry response to the abuse of Paul Cultrera as a teenager and the unconscionable

administrative response to similar documented reports. Paul was 53 years old at the time the film was made in 2006. He narrates the film with frequent close-up reflections by extended family members, along with clips from home movies and photos taken while the children were growing up. The parents of the abused man, remarkably, maintain their devotion to religion, although not without stirrings of anger and deep resentment against Church officials.

The film details Church mismanagement of clergy accused of sexual abuse, punctuating a series of devastating accusations with sometimes visceral visual effects that suggest the intense disillusionment that motivated the film's making. It speaks more to hypocrisy and insensitivity to the victims rather than to the question of clerical celibacy or to Church teachings on sexuality in general. The lure that Birmingham seemed to use was counseling boys who confessed to self-abuse. While teaching rigid sexual standards, accused priests preyed on teenagers made vulnerable by their pious upbringing. Near the end of the film we hear the soulful lament of the alienated brother: "I want the magic to be real. I want to believe the impossible but the Church is all too human."

*Hand of God* ends with the Vatican's announcement of Cardinal Ratzinger's election as Pope Benedict XVI. The closed clerical culture of the Church that operates in secret underlies the pain and resentment in this family and community.

—DAVID M. BOSSMAN  
*Seton Hall University*

### *Sacco and Vanzetti.*

By Peter Miller.

Willow Pond Films, 2007.

80 minutes. DVD format, color.

On April 15, 1920, a robbery occurred at a shoe factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts, during which a paymaster and his guard were shot to death and nearly \$16,000 of the company's payroll was stolen. A few weeks later, two Italian immigrant anarchists, Nicola Sacco, a shoemaker, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fishmonger, were arrested as suspects in the crime. The following year they were tried, found guilty, and, although the evidence against them was contradictory and inconclusive, they were sentenced to death.

Set against the background of the Red Scare, the case rapidly won the attention of radicals, labor organizations, and the Communist Party, becoming a national and international *cause célèbre*. As motion after motion for a new hearing were denied, worldwide support reached enormous proportions with millions becoming convinced that the two men were innocent. Rallies and demonstrations were held in all major world cities, dozens of pamphlets were written by famous intellectuals, poets, and artists, and hundreds of petitions were signed to protest the unfairness of the trial. But all attempts to save them were vain: on August 23, 1927, Sacco and Vanzetti were electrocuted.<sup>1</sup>