

January 23, 2007 - "Hand of God": A bishop's role revealed  
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IF YOU SAW the documentary "Hand of God" on public television last week, you caught another chilling glimpse of Bishop John McCormack, the man tasked with leading the Roman Catholic Church in New Hampshire.

The film tells the story of Paul Cultrera, who as a boy in Salem, Mass., was abused by Father Joseph Birmingham in the mid-1960s. At the time, McCormack was a priest at the same parish, where several parents told him about Birmingham's abuse.

As Cultrera's story unfolds, McCormack's role becomes increasingly clear. It is not news, but it is worth retelling. McCormack knew that Birmingham was accused of abusing boys in Salem in the mid-1960s. He referred complaining parents to the pastor, and that was it.

For decades he watched Birmingham shuffled to seven other parishes and a juvenile court. When he was in a position to do something about those transfers, he did not.

Viewers of the documentary see McCormack dismissively walk past the camera and hear the conversation in which McCormack turned down the offer to explain himself. (They also see Bishop Richard Lennon call the filmmaker a "sad little man" for trying to expose the truth.)

When the story is pieced together, the victim, Paul Cultrera, emerges as a heroically strong and good man. And Bishop McCormack slinks away like a snake.

If he would slink away from the diocese, too, New Hampshire's wounded Catholics might be able to fully heal from the injuries he helped inflict. But as long as McCormack remains bishop, there will be no final healing for the church or its victims.

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