



Published: February 21, 2006 01:18 pm

## Filmmaker tells story of brother's sex abuse

By Tom Dalton

The Salem News (Salem MA)  
SALEM, Mass. —

Joe Cultrera, a documentary filmmaker from New York City, has come home again to tell a story. It is not the first time.

He made "Leather Soul" years ago, a film about Peabody leather workers, narrated by writer Studs Terkel. And he came home a decade ago to do "Witch City," a searing look at his hometown of Salem and its descent into Halloween madness.

But this time is different.

This story is about his family — his brother, in particular. It is personal and painful and took two years to make. It is the story of the sexual abuse of his older brother, Paul, by the late Rev. Joseph Birmingham, a serial predator who served at St. James Parish in Salem in the 1960s.

Today, far away in Montana, "Hand of God" will premiere at The Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, its first stop on a whirlwind tour across the country. It also has been selected by film festivals in Arizona, Oregon, California and Florida and is expected to be shown back here later this year.

It's hard to know how the film will be received. It is not the first film about the priest abuse scandal, but it may be the first told by a brother. It wasn't accepted at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, but that may have more to do with connections than content, Cultrera said.

"I got picked up by the first five I applied to after Sundance," he said. "It's some validation. This is not a film that is sponsored by anybody (like HBO) and it's coming from nowhere."

But it is coming from somewhere, most likely Joe Cultrera's heart.

He was only a little boy when his older brother, a St. James altar boy, was preyed upon by Father Birmingham, one of the worst abusers in the history of the archdiocese, according to court complaints.

Birmingham had just arrived at St. James late in 1964 when 14-year-old Paul Cultrera went to him for confession. Like many teenage boys, he listed masturbation as one of his sins. For penance, Birmingham told the boy to come to the rectory for counseling, the start of a series of sessions that ended in Birmingham's bedroom.

### Years of secrecy

Joe Cultrera, who is nine years younger, did not hear about what happened to Paul until about a decade ago. That's when his brother broke his silence after 30 years. Paul, who met with officials at the archdiocese in 1995, was one of the first abuse victims to come forward — years before the scandal exploded.

One of the hardest parts about making the film was sitting down with his brother and asking questions that resurrected this painful experience one more time. But Joe Cultrera knew he had a story to tell, and his brother agreed to tell it on film.

"I hadn't heard the details, and that's kind of what I didn't want to hear," Joe said.

Hearing every word, and telling it on film, changes the whole picture of their lives.

"This film is very much about going through all those home movies you've seen a hundred times and now looking at them, (but) looking at them differently," Joe said. "A hundred times I've seen pictures of my brother dressed up as an altar boy. It was a fun little childhood moment, and now I look at this stuff

### Photos



Paul Cultrera poses in a family snapshot of him as an altar boy at St. James Parish in Salem, Mass. Cultrera was one of the first priest abuse victims to come forward. His younger brother, Joe, tells the family's story in a new documentary film, "Hand of God." Courtesy photo (Click for larger image)

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and it feels completely different to me. The pictures become really powerful when you look at them within this context."

For Paul Cultrera, who lives in California, the documentary is one more chapter in a past he kept locked inside for most of his life. He first told his deep, dark secret about a decade ago to his ex-wife, then to his family, then the archdiocese. He has confronted and condemned church officials, seethed with anger and even laughed about it all.

"I felt it was a story that should be told, that somebody's story should be told," Paul Cultrera said. "... This film fills in a lot of the blanks. It not only tells exactly how it happened, but also the environment in which it happened. I think you can feel the environment of growing up Catholic in the 1950s. ...

"Some people will react negatively to it. When I watched it, I didn't even realize how angry I was in some of the interviews. I'm not the Catholic Church's best friend."

The feature film also tells the story of Cultrera's parents, devoted Catholics whose faith was profoundly shaken by the abuse of a son and, just a few years ago, by the closing of St. Mary's Church in Salem, their longtime parish in their beloved Italian neighborhood.

When "Hand of God" debuts this month in Montana, Joe Cultrera plans to be there. A recent death in the family may make that impossible, but if he can be in the audience, he will.

"I'm very anxious about showing this film in front of an audience," he said in a telephone interview last week, "and seeing how they feel and what they have to say. In places like Montana, this is a foreign subject."

Tom Dalton writes for The Salem (Mass.) News.

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