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A faith shaken — 'Hand of God' is a sad, personal tale of abuse
By MICHAEL MOORE of the Missoulian



"Hand of God," by New York filmmaker Joe Cultrera, tells the story of the director's brother, Paul, who was sexually abused by a Catholic priest as a teenager. But it also is the story of the Cultrera family, a deeply religious family that comes to see the church it adores in a harsh new light.

In this beautifully paced film about sexual abuse by Catholic priests, filmmaker Joe Cultrera starts with what he knows best - his own Italian Catholic family and its deep religious roots in Massachusetts.

It's there we find the victim, Joe's big brother Paul Cultrera, who was abused by a local priest during his teenage years in the 1960s in Salem, Mass. It's Paul, who was an altar boy, who carries the film, and his calm, steady presence allows his filmmaker-brother to stay out of the way of the devastating narrative.

But it's the ripples of what happens to Paul, the way families and communities are shattered, that resonate most profoundly in this film. Good stories usually work by making the anecdotal universal, and this is top-notch storytelling.

Sadly, Paul's story is all too familiar these days. Although tales of abuse and mysterious reassignments of priests filtered around the Catholic community for years, it was a provocative 2002 series in the Boston Globe that brought the priest scandal home to most Americans.

But victims, people like Paul Cultrera, had been living the story for decades. "Hand of God" traces the Cultrera story from the family's ancestral beginnings in Italy to their life in Salem, a life dominated by their faith. The church was central to the Culteras' lives, and Paul recalls that it was hard to find a place in his boyhood home where there wasn't a saint looking down on him.

Part of the film's power lies in the unfolding revelation of Paul's horrible secret, which shatters the family's very foundations. The family slowly begins to see the way the abuse affected Paul's life and, indirectly, their own.

"I'd have killed him if I'd have known," Paul's father, also named Paul, says late in the film of the priest, Joseph Birmingham.

"Hand of God" is like a symphony that builds through a leisurely first movement, quietly foreshadows a coming tempest, then unleashes itself. And when that tempest comes, it is a fine and glorious example of speaking truth to power.

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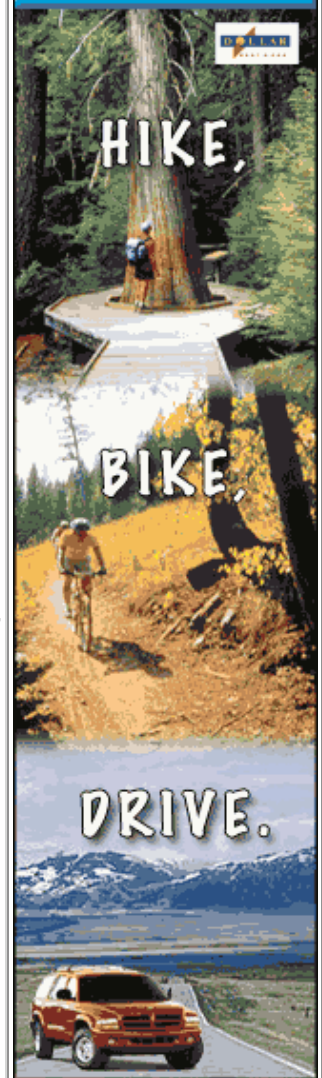
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Joe Cultrera, in his director's statement, saw his mission this way: "(Paul) would be the one giving the sermon, and the clergy would be forced to sit quietly and listen."

"Hand of God" is exceptional documentary work.

Preview


'HAND OF GOD' (World premier; Feature Competition entry)


Directed by: Joe Cultrera

Showing: Tuesday, 10 p.m.

Running time: 96 min.

Reporter Michael Moore can be reached at 523-5252 or at mmoore@missoulian.com.

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