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## Cross purposes

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Friday, June 2, 2006 - Updated: 04:38 AM EST

Do you remember Father Birmingham? Perhaps you were part of the support group of clergy-abuse victims who came together at Old Town Hall in 2003 to complain to the Boston Archdiocese.

Paul Cultrera, raised in Salem's Italian neighborhood near the post office, certainly remembers Father Joseph Birmingham. So does his filmmaker-brother, Joe Cultrera, whose newly released feature-length documentary about one family and the Catholic Church has received praise all over the country.

The maddening and disturbing tale of a priest who couldn't keep his hands to himself at several Boston area parishes, including St. James Church in Salem in the 1960s, and the ongoing cover-up by his fellow priests, has stirred audiences at film festivals from Sedona, Ariz., to Tupelo, Miss.

Those in Salem will have an opportunity to see "Hand of God" Thursday, June 8, at a screening at the new CinemaSalem. The film is also part of next week's Boston International Film Festival.

In 1964, Paul Cultrera was an altar boy at the Irish church across town, where he and his siblings went to Catholic school. It was there, at St. James Church, where he says he started receiving special "counseling sessions" from the youthful Birmingham. The abuse happened at the Federal Street church's rectory, in the priest's sports car on outings to Hampton Beach, into Boston, and even at the '64 World's Fair in New York.

In a deeply religious home, inhabited by rosary-toting aunts, where the walls were filled with icons of saints and crucifixes, the boy kept the abuse hidden, continuing on a pathway of Catholic education and mounting rebellion against the church.

Although the subject matter sounds grim, it is a tale of a family and its search for spirituality, says his younger brother, Joe.

"This film has been making itself, before I even picked up a camera, layer upon layer," the filmmaker narrates as 40-year-old footage rolls of him and his two siblings at their christenings and other religious events.

In a roundabout way, Mick Jagger actually paid for this film, jokes Cultrera, on a recent visit to Salem from his home in New York City. Cultrera's Zingerplatz Pictures has been doing post-production work on a behind-the-scenes film of the Rolling Stones.

Some may recognize Cultrera's voice as the narrator on one of his previous projects, the 1996 film "Witch City," about Salem's sometimes comical commercialization of its history. After 25 years in the business, however, this is the film he just had to make.

### Lingering pain

The elder parents are still on Prospect Street in the house where the three children grew up, in a neighborhood where "one house is tied to the next by clotheslines, by culture and by the bonds of family and friendship," Cultrera narrates over grainy images of smiling, well dressed immigrants and their children, packed into the neighborhood around Zavalía Square.

"In a city known for a myth of broomsticks," touts the film's Web site, "we lived Italian, Catholic and protected."

Not only have this 91- and 87-year-old lived to hear their son's story and see the film, they have also endured the staggering blow of watching their beloved 80-year-old neighborhood church, St. Mary's on Margin Street, just around the corner, closed by the Boston Archdiocese. The church was considered by most to be the last thing holding the Italian neighborhood together. It's now the home of the Salem Mission.

"Every time I go by there, my ulcers act up," says Paul Cultrera Sr.

Spunky and matter-of-fact, the senior Cultrera practically steals the show, shaking his head all through the film at the things he never thought he'd live to see, and calling the clergy "nothing but a bunch of hypocrites."



Joe Cultrera's documentary 'Hand of God' about his brother's abuse by local clergy, will be shown at CineSalem next week. (Dinah Cardin photo)

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"The film expresses our feelings more openly," he says. "Our son wouldn't let us know for 30 years."

The Cultreras can hardly contain their pride over one son for speaking up and the other for documenting it. The family recognizes that had the film never been made, their discussions of the abuse would not run so deep. It's as if they can deflect some of the pain by talking about "the film," rather than the nightmarish things that happened to one of their own.

The family had even hoped their son might become a priest, partially because he spent so much time with other young boys at the rectory.

"Maybe if he wasn't my son, I wouldn't believe it," says Josephine Cultrera.

It wasn't until his marriage fell apart in 1992 that Paul Cultrera's ex-wife brought the secret out of him. He began to tell his story to family members, shocking them one by one.

Although his elderly parents won't be searching for a new religion anytime soon, says Cultrera, they certainly have questioned the devout Catholicism so deeply instilled in them by their Sicilian immigrant parents.

"Now, when we go to church, I don't even feel like it's going to church," says Josephine Cultrera. "We go for God, not for the priests."

An aunt, who lived with the family until she was 100, used to say she never thought she'd outlive a church.

### Genesis of revelations

For anyone who still doesn't connect the dots from the scandals, from the lawsuits to the closing of parishes, Cultrera draws it for the audience, making it perfectly clear, while including footage of St. Mary's last Mass, held two years ago.

He actually filmed the service for the parishioners, making a nice video of the saints and stained glass, memorial gifts from church members, without a concrete plan at that time to tell his brother's story. He captured one bishop scowling at him and another gesturing with his thumb for Cultrera to take his camera and scram.

"When he did that, something cracked in me," says the filmmaker. "That thumb is for everyone, that arrogance is for everyone here."

Wine and blood and spicy red sauce, the body of Christ and round communion wafers, the film is full of confused imagery.

"I want the magic to be real," Cultrera says in the film. "I want to believe the impossible. But it's all too human."

When he cuts to images of praying figurines, childlike and innocent, immersed in a world of tainted holy water, Cultrera manages to convey the drowning feeling of these victims, still struggling to cope so many years later.

"This is what they wanted us to be," he says, "get down there and pray and just submit."

Paul Cultrera, now living in Sacramento, Calif., comes off as extremely articulate and human in the film. Looking back, he says, it was as if the priest was taking him through some strange indoctrination of the dark underworld, attempting to rob this adolescent of a healthy sexual relationship in the future because he couldn't have one for himself.

Paul remembers the time he shared a Nathaniel Hawthorne story about an evil clergyman with Joe as one of the closest moments he ever came to telling anyone. His story includes years of an adult life spent feeling adrift and unworthy. He seems, however, to emerge at the end of the film triumphant.

In his search to understand what happened to him through uncovering other victims, Paul, with the help of Joe and other friends, placed an ad in several newspapers in the communities where Birmingham had served, including Salem.

The ad simply asked "Do you remember Father Joseph Birmingham?" and gave a New York City post office box as the return address. After two weeks, letters began arriving from angry people, ready to talk.

Birmingham, who died in 1989, had served parishes in Brighton, Sudbury, Gloucester and Lowell. Some of the letter-writers praised the fact that he is now dead.

### Bringing it home

It was those kinds of discoveries, through some serious detective work, that pushed the filmmaker to pursue his project. He was just coming off making money by producing fundraising films for the Newark archdiocese.

When he sought to make a complaint about his abuse, Paul Cultrera discovered that the

clergyman who handled the Boston Archdiocese's sexual-abuse complaints was John McCormack, who was from Birmingham's graduating seminary class of 1960 and who had served at several places with him, including St. James.

The film shows McCormack, made bishop of the Manchester, N.H. diocese, meeting here in Salem in 2003 with parishioners to hear their claims of abuse.

The filmmaker's camera traces the web of scandal and deceit in a very personal and intimate way, finally pointing it like an accusing finger, Michael Moore style, at high-ranking priests who call him names.

Years before more clergy-abuse victims came forward in the Boston Globe, eventually seeking retribution from the Archdiocese, Cultrera got a settlement of \$60,000.

But probably the biggest payoff comes now, when his brother's film will be screened just blocks from St. James Church at Salem's new movie theater, which celebrates a grand opening tonight in the Museum Place Mall, six days before the local documentary will be shown.

The Cultrera family will be at the Salem screening. Many of their friends from the neighborhood have, in fact, been asking when they will get to see Joe's film.






"I'm proud of both of my brothers," says their sister Maria Morello. "It will always be part of my brother, but I know he has gone past it."

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"Hand of God" will be shown Thursday, June 8, 7 p.m., at CinemaSalem, One East India Square.

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