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'Hand of God' touches audiences

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They came up from Boston and from the Cape, last week, to see a Salem native's take on the clergy abuse scandal and how it has affected his family.

Last Thursday's 7 p.m. screening of Joe Cultrera's documentary film "Hand of God" at the new CinemaSalem sold out by 6:30, as a line snaked around the corner and out the door for an added 9 p.m. show.

The film features Cultrera's very Italian and very Catholic Salem family, still living on Prescott Street, and the reverberations that have followed his older brother's shared secret of being abused at St. James Church by Father Joseph Birmingham in the 1960s.

Included in the powerful feature-length film is grainy footage of Cultrera's extended family, including Paul serving as an altar boy in 1964, when he was physically violated, often in the Federal Street church's rectory.

The film depicts the two brothers' detective work, before the scandal became public in 2002, as they uncovered the Catholic church's knowledge of Birmingham's behavior, and their shuffling of him from one parish to another in the Boston area.

The story follows Paul Cultrera's battle for a settlement with the Boston Archdiocese, and his lifelong struggle to deal with what happened to him.

The brothers were back in town last week to share their story with Salem and Boston audiences. Paul now runs a food co-op in Sacramento, Calif., while the filmmaker, with 25 years in the film business, is in New York City.

A group from Hull handed out fliers to the crowd, urging them to encourage their legislators to repeal the statute of limitation on such crimes.

"All of them have been assaulted, but cannot do anything about it," said Ruth Moore, holding up aged black-and-white pictures of children who are now adults.

As he waited in line, Christopher Polak stated that the crowd and the anticipation was making him nervous. When he saw an ad for the film on the theater's Web site, he visited it, watched a clip of the film online and was moved to see more.

"I hope it bridges some of the gap between myself and my faith," said the young man, who described himself as a "lapsed Catholic."

He was prepared, however, for the movie to widen that gap.

Lingering scorn

A woman with Polak, who did not want to give her name, commented on how much the scandal touched Salem, and the Italian community in particular. Many of the victims are still here, she said.

Mary Morrissey wanted to stress that sexual abuse is everywhere and not just among clergy. It is the cover-up (by fellow clergy) that is so shocking, she added.

A group of older residents were overheard commenting on how they are tired of receiving letters from the Cardinal. A man said that as soon as these letters arrive, they go right into the garbage.

People stood in the back of the overheated theater, waiting for a panel discussion scheduled to take place in between screenings. What was sure to become sort of a therapy session for local Catholics was moved to the Thai Place restaurant in the mall so that the second screening could get started.

As the viewers of the first showing poured out of the room, Mary McGee, one of the first parents to complain about Father Birmingham at St. James' Church and mentioned in the film, said, "I'm angry because everything in there was true. I'm angry with the Church. I'm still angry with them because of the hypocrisy."

Jo-Ann Giuggio, who lives in Salem's Italian neighborhood near the Cultreras, said she only found out last year what happened to Paul Cultrera.

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"I give so much credit to that family to be so brave to allow this to be shown," she said.

Some watched the second screening with wet eyes. Detailed descriptions of abuse, witty family moments and shocking comments by priests caught on tape were met with the audience's angry huffs, laughter and enthusiastic applause.

At the end of the movie, the filmmaker carried in a big piece of paper with a phone number and the words "Ask for John," referring to John McCormack, now bishop of Manchester, N.H., who has been named in lawsuits for knowing about the abuse and not blowing the whistle.

Connecting with clergy

Paul Cultrera asked if there were any clergy members in the audience who would like to speak. Three people reluctantly identified themselves as members of the clergy, from Boston and from St. James Church.

One man who identified himself as a seminarian said the film mocked the entire Catholic religion, especially scenes he felt desecrated the communion hosts, which the filmmaker was able to order off the Internet.

Paul Cultrera told the man that his sister and elderly parents, who were in the audience, are religious people who would agree with most of what he said.

"When you've been abused and you've seen your family abused, a little sarcasm is justified," he said.

The Rev. John Connelly, rector of Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, stood and said he has often come into contact with survivors of abuse. The film, he said, could only help to prevent further abuse.

When the filmmaker mentioned that he had received less than a warm welcome during a recent visit to St. James Church, he and Father James Sheridan of St. James, sitting in the audience, exchanged a few words.

"I'll be thinking on it and I'll be praying on it," Sheridan said of the film.

"Why? The film's done," a woman in the audience retorted.

The filmmaker smiled wryly and questioned whether the prayers would be for the further distribution of his film.

Several people in the audience shared stories of family members suffering similar stories. One man said his brother's abuse at the hands of a priest led him to "fire bomb" a rectory in Maine. A woman said her brother's abuse caused him to turn around and abuse his sisters.

Paul Cultrera told no one about his abuse for 30 years. He has only been talking about it since the early '90s and, apparently, still has much to say.

It was close to midnight when discussion at the theater ended. The bottom line, said Paul Cultrera, is that blind faith in anything is dangerous.

"I have worked hard to make sure it isn't the story of my life. It's something that happened to me," he said. "...Luckily, I live far enough away from Ground Zero. My mother, father and sister have to live with this and stay in their faith and deal with this stuff."

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