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**Priest's abuse tests family and faith**

By J.A. Montalbano (Contact)  
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Paul Cultrera was 14 when he was abused by a Catholic priest from his parish in Salem, Mass.

He kept that secret for 30 years.

He was in his early 40s and living in Albuquerque when he finally shared that secret, started his healing process and stood up to the church.

It was on a trip back to Boston, chatting with his ex-wife, that he finally spoke about the six months he suffered at the hands of the Rev. Joseph Birmingham in 1964.

"Once I told her and the ground didn't open up and I didn't get swallowed up and I didn't get hit by lightning, I thought maybe I should talk to other people about this," Cultrera recalled this week.

It took 10 more years for Cultrera and his family to begin to tell that story in a documentary about the abuse scandals of the Catholic Church.

Cultrera, now 57, is the subject of "Hand of God," a film by his brother, Joe. It is creating a buzz on the film festival circuit and stops in Santa Fe next week.

Cultrera remembers exactly when he discovered New Mexico in 1991: "It was Feb. 6 - and 60 degrees and sunny." A revelation to a Massachusetts native.

"I'd never realized I could skip winter," he said.

He stayed seven years before pursuing a full-time job in his longtime industry, food cooperatives, in Sacramento, Calif., where he still lives.

New Mexico wasn't the tipping point that drove the demons out of him, but the change of scenery was a factor.

"Being away from Boston gave me some distance and made it easier to deal with it," he said.

The abuse scandals that broke in New Mexico in the early '90s caught his eye and provided him a legal avenue to discuss his case.

Not only did the period dredge up childhood trauma, but it also introduced new turmoil in Cultrera's life.

The man he reported the abuse to back in Salem was a close colleague of Birmingham, who died in 1989. And Cultrera said the church tried to make him feel guilty and accept a settlement that paled compared with what he eventually walked away with.

A New Mexico lawyer told him not to take the first offer of six months of therapy and to not sign a waiver. "He said, 'Don't sign it. Because, believe me, two months into therapy you're going to be one pissed-off guy,'" Cultrera recalled.

"The process was almost worse than the abuse itself because of the way they treat you," he said.

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"They lie to you. They degrade you."

The tussle with Birmingham's "enabler" took its toll. Cultrera started a process that uncovered hundreds of victims of Birmingham, years before the Boston Globe expos, tore the veil from the Boston archdiocese. He finally reached a settlement and returned to his new home in the Southwest.

"I'd had enough," he said. "I wanted to go back to New Mexico and live my life in the desert and not pay any more attention to any of it."

His brother, a filmmaker, gave him time to settle. But then three or four years ago, the story became bigger than him. The Catholic Church downsized parishes and shuttered St. Mary's Italian church in Salem - his parents' church. And the kicker: The belt-tightening was needed to raise money to pay off the hundreds of victims of Birmingham and the Rev. Paul Shanley and others who abused boys over the years.

"That was the straw that broke the camel's back," Cultrera said. "That's when my brother realized that this was bigger than what had happened to me. It was about our family."

The Cultrera brothers started to research the film. They put tiny notices - eighth-of-an-inch ads that said "Do you remember Father Birmingham?" - in papers in towns the priest had been stationed. Cultrera said he and his brother were deluged with "an avalanche of Joe Birmingham victims."

Cultrera's parents and sister also participate in the film. Joe became a part of the film, advocating for his brother, including an on-camera confrontation with the bishop who succeeds the Boston archdiocese's deposed leader, Cardinal Bernard Law.

The result is a story of a family coming to terms with its faith, a discipline burned into them decades ago.

He said he saw a raw cut of the film about a year ago.

"I was blown away," he said. "It's the story of my family. It's more of a story of my mother and father than it is about me. . . . It's their story as much as mine."

And the film has brought his family together.

"The process of making it has opened up means of communication that hadn't been open before," he said. "It's been really therapeutic for our family."

He said people in the food co-op community in California have rallied around him. With the film's New Mexico debut next week at the film festival, there's a chance some of his colleagues in Albuquerque will learn his story, too.

It's not as if he has shared it with the world, until now. "I don't get up in the morning and stand on the street corner and say, 'Hey, you know what happened to me?'"

And while the movie tells a part of his life, he said, it's just that - a part.

"Everybody has trauma to deal with in their lives," he said. "This isn't the story of my life. This is something that happened to me that I've had to deal with."

"Hand of God" will be shown at 8:45 p.m. Dec. 8 and 6:45 p.m. Dec. 9 at El Museo Cultural de Santa Fe, 1615 Paseo de Peralta.



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