

January 23, 2007 - Salem man still feeling impact of "Hand of God"

By Tom Dalton, SALEM NEWS (MA)

SALEM - Paul Cultrera, the general manager of a food cooperative in Sacramento, Calif., came home from work last Tuesday night planning to spend a quiet evening in front of the television.

He knew, of course, that it wasn't going to be an average night at home because he would be watching himself on TV. "Frontline," the PBS news documentary program, was showing "Hand of God," the story of Cultrera's abuse 40 years ago by a Salem priest. Surprisingly, by the time he got home, there were already messages on the answering machine from viewers who had just finished seeing the film on the East Coast and in the Midwest.

"The credits were rolling, and people were picking up their phones and somehow finding me," said Cultrera, 57. "It amazed me. I've never seen a film or watched something on TV and ... picked up a phone and called that person. But for some reason, something got to people."

One week later, the Salem native is still reeling from the powerful and largely positive impact of a film made by his younger brother, Joe, about Cultrera's abuse by the late Rev. Joseph Birmingham, who served at St. James Church in the late 1960s.

The film, it appears, struck a responsive chord right across the country. The day after it was shown, more than 300 people tried to take part in a Washington Post live Internet chat with the Cultrera brothers. "Frontline," which averages about 150 e-mails a show, got nearly 650 messages after "Hand of God," according to a spokeswoman for the program. Cultrera has received countless calls and e-mails to his home and office - many from people who have been abused or have family members who are victims.

"One caller said, 'This happened to my daughter recently, and we're dealing with it and I wonder if you would be willing to talk to my daughter.'"

A few days after the documentary aired, Cultrera went to dinner at a restaurant near work. When he asked for the check, the waitress told him it had been paid by a young couple sitting at a booth. "I went over and thanked them, and they said, 'We saw the film and we just wanted to do something for you. ... We've got three little kids, and this film meant a lot to us.'"

"Hand of God" is not just the story of priest abuse. After keeping a secret for 30 years, Cultrera took on the Catholic Church almost single-handedly. He conducted his own investigation of Birmingham, a serial abuser who went from parish to parish, and he confronted church hierarchy years before the national priest abuse scandal broke.

When he sat down several years ago to be interviewed by his brother, a documentary filmmaker, Cultrera said he never dreamed his story would wind up before a national audience. "I joked with Joe because usually his films are seen by a few hundred at most. I thought it might get to a (film) festival or two, but I didn't think 6 million people would see it on TV. ... I wasn't apprehensive about people seeing the film. I was apprehensive about what it was going to be like after the film. I led sort of a normal life."

Some viewers have been critical of the film, feeling it painted the Catholic Church with too broad and too negative a brush, or was heavy-handed or disrespectful in its use of Christian symbolism. But the vast majority liked it, according to "Frontline" and the Cultreras.

"People were really moved by this film because it was a story of a family," said Cultrera. "It wasn't just me, or a tearjerker about abuse. It showed a family and how it affected all of us."

"It's been overwhelmingly positive," Joe Cultrera said. "It's a relief and it feels great - not because my film was (on national TV), but people, I think, have been comforted by it and maybe drawn strength from it." Many of the callers and e-mailers said they, too, had been abuse victims or had carried some terrible secret deep inside.

"It's become clear to me," Paul Cultrera said, "it's not just my story."