

Movie details struggle of bishop, church in El Salvador

By Al Antczak
Catholic News Service

LOS ANGELES — While filming "Romero" on location in Cuernavaca, Mexico, Paulist Father Ellwood Kieser told director John Duigan, "You know ... this movie is really about the (Catholic) Church struggling to be church."

"Romero," produced by Father Kieser and distributed by Four Seasons Entertainment, tells the story of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, El Salvador, and the last three years of his life.

The archbishop was an outspoken critic of El Salvador's military dictatorship and right-wing death squads. For his defense of the poor, he was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating Mass.

"This movie is about the church's struggle to be what Jesus Christ set it up to be," Father Kieser said in an interview with *The Tidings*, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

"The protagonist here is Romero — this mouse of a man — who is put into this impossible situation, becomes a tiger defending human rights, speaks for the poor, battles for justice, tries to bring peace to his country," Father Kieser said. "My hope is that the picture will be an experience of the Gospel for viewers and, therefore, hopefully an occasion of conversion for some people, a new response to God as he lives in his people."

Father Kieser said that for Catholics the movie "has to propel an examination of what it means to be a Catholic. I would hope this stimulates vocations because it certainly is what I would call the heroic archetype."

For 33 years, Father Kieser has been a member of the Paulist order, which is devoted to the mission of evangelization. At first the priest conducted inquiry classes on the Catholic faith, becoming involved in

communications efforts 29 years ago.

He organized Paulist Productions, based in Pacific Palisades, Calif., and in 1960 began producing "Insight," a series of TV dramas designed to provide moral insights to a secular audience.

The Philadelphia-born priest has also produced two network television movies, "We Are the Children" and "The Fourth Wise Man."

He said he believes "Romero," with its image of the church defending human rights and battling for justice, is an image of the church "that really appeals to the liberal secular mind, to the secular humanist."

"It shows the church putting its body on the line for humanity. My personal opinion is that secular minds will listen to us talk about God only after they have first seen us willing to put out, to sacrifice ourselves for the cause of humanity," Father Kieser ad-

ded.

"They listen to Mother Teresa talk about God. They see what she does for people," he said. "Oscar Romero — they will listen to what he says because he died for the freedom and justice of his people."

The priest said he thinks the movie will make those who see it "proud to be a Catholic, proud to be a Christian, proud to be a human being."

Because the movie focuses on the church working for justice, the picture's producer said he hoped "a lot of Catholic high schools will integrate this into their social justice courses. We're prepared to do all sorts of booking."

He added that actor Raul Julia, who portrays Romero in the film, plays him as he was — "a flawed human being."

"This is sanctity with warts," Father Kieser added. "This is a sacred, rigid human being who — propelled by grace and

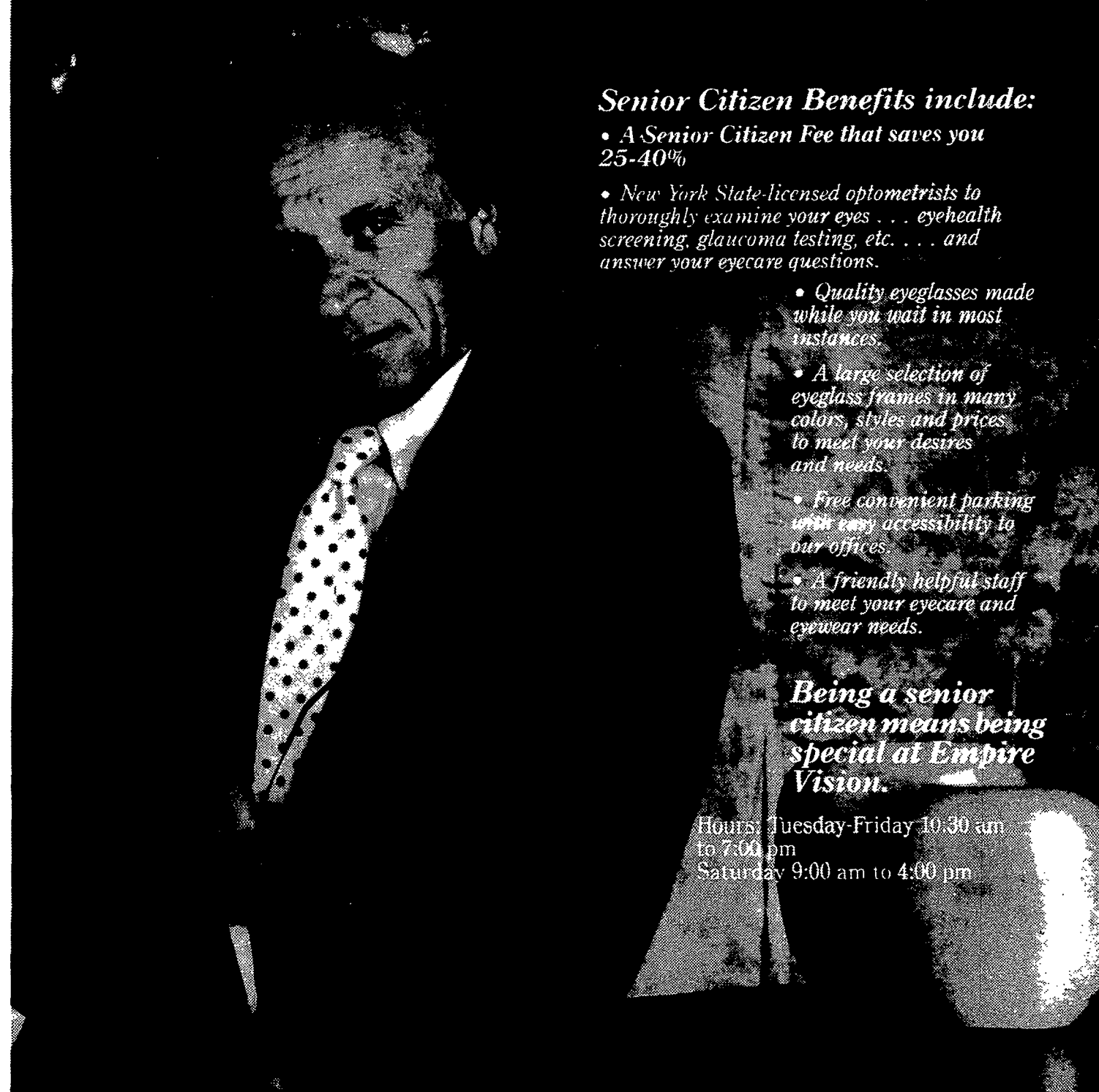
with the courage to confront an impossible situation — transcends his neuroses and becomes a tiger fighting for the life of his people."

Catholic school graduates set Pennsylvania reunion

The class of 1964 of St. Joseph's Grade School in Collingdale, Pa. is holding a reunion on Saturday, Nov. 25. For information, write: 25th Reunion Committee, P.O. Box 640-146, Clifton Heights, Pa., 19018-0640.

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File Photo

Archbishop Oscar Romero's response to death threats is illustrated on this poster from a ceremony commemorating his assassination.

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