

Hopeful home sellers, Realtors dig St. Joseph

The practice attracts people from all income brackets, cultures, ethnicities and geographical locations. Ironically, it also transcends religion, as it doesn't seem to matter if one is Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or, even on occasion, a self-professed atheist.

So, what do all these seemingly unconnected traits have in common? The age-old tradition of buying and burying a statue of St. Joseph on one's property in order to sell it successfully.

Guiding saint

Although many versions exist as to how the practice began, it is generally attributed to St. Teresa of Avila, the Spanish mystic and doctor of the Church.

Tradition teaches that as St. Teresa traveled through Europe searching for land suitable for new Carmelite convents, she encouraged her nuns to pray to St. Joseph for guidance. It is believed that on one such occasion, having found the appropriate property but having no money or place to stay, the nuns immediately began petitioning St. Joseph for funds and buried his statue on the grounds for safekeeping from marauders.

Shortly after the nuns prayed, a buyer purchased the land and built them a convent, whereby St. Teresa dug up the statue and built a shrine to St. Joseph, thanking him for his intercession.

Market indicator

In recent times, the volatility of certain U.S. real estate markets has attracted a new following of St. Joseph devotees. Some say this trend can even measure the condition of the real estate market.

Take, for instance, Chicago and Dallas – two cities where real estate sales have dropped within the last six months and where sales of the small, plastic statues have soared.

Nikki White of Sacred Heart Books and Gifts in Dallas can attest to the phenomenon. She says that while the number of people buying St. Joseph kits and statues fluctuates depending on the season, it is not unusual to sell 15 or more statues a day during the hot real estate months. “You can always tell when someone’s looking for St. Joe. They sort of creep in shyly, and the first thing out of their mouths is, ‘You’ll probably think I’m crazy, but . . .’ “

White said that home sellers are not her only customers. The practice of buying the kits and statues has also grown to include real estate brokers, who are always eager to accommodate their clients’ latest whatever-it-takes-to-sell inclinations.

Digging into prayer

Terry Weller, a real estate professional in the Puget Sound area of Washington, which has not yet been as affected by undervalued home prices as other parts of the country, said that although she is aware of the practice, it is not overly popular in her area, possibly because the “need” is currently not there.

However, she added that she has known people who have successfully used that technique – including one who was Jewish and who had no religious beliefs at all.

“I cannot speak for other Realtors, but I personally believe in the power of prayer and the fact that God can do whatever he wants,” she said. “However, I don’t understand how burying a statue in the yard is supposed to help sell a home. I would think it was the power of the prayer itself that helped their cause.”

Father Henry Schmidt, pastor of St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in Carrollton, Ill., couldn’t agree more. He said he advises sellers to simply place a statue of St. Joseph inside or outside their homes but not bury it.

Although it is not a sin nor morally wrong to bury the statue, he said that “it is not the burying of the statue that will cause any intercession or grace but the simple fact that one prayed.” Father Schmidt said that Catholics should remember that the gift comes from prayer to the saint as an intercessory to God.

Gigi Fotou writes from Utah.

A houseful of saints

When it comes to patron saints of home life, who better to look to than the Holy Family as an example of how to have a devout household? Here are other patron saints who can intercede for protection in specific areas of a home:

In the kitchen

St. Elizabeth of Hungary: When St. Elizabeth's husband complained about her many charitable activities, a basket of roses was miraculously transformed into a basket of bread. She, along with St. Nicholas of Myra, is patron of bakers.

St. Lawrence: The martyr was put to death by being placed on a red-hot grill, where he made a comment that he was roasted on one side and should be turned over. He is now the patron of cooks, along with St. Martha.

In the bathroom

St. Vincent Ferrer: He is the patron of plumbers.

In the den or family room

St. Clare of Assisi: At the end of her life, this holy woman and friend of St. Francis had a vision of the Mass from her bed, which has made her the patron of television.

In the garden

St. Fiacre: His garden in France was a place of pilgrimage for those in need of healing. He is now the patron of those with green thumbs or those who wish they had them.

Homey reads

"Catholic Traditions in the Home and Classroom," by Ann Ball (OSV, \$16.95): Learn how to build a solid Catholic identity in your home with cooking, gardening and craft tips that draw on the Catholic faith.

"St. Joseph, my Real Estate Agent," by Stephen J. Binz (Servant, \$6.99): This slim book offers thoughtful reflections on St. Joseph and includes a prayer service for the burial of a St. Joseph statue.