

MANSION

SPREAD SHEET | SANETTE TANAKA

BLESS OUR HAPPY HOME SALE

When the housing market struggles, some home sellers turn to St. Joseph for help, data show; in better times, sales of the saint’s statue fall

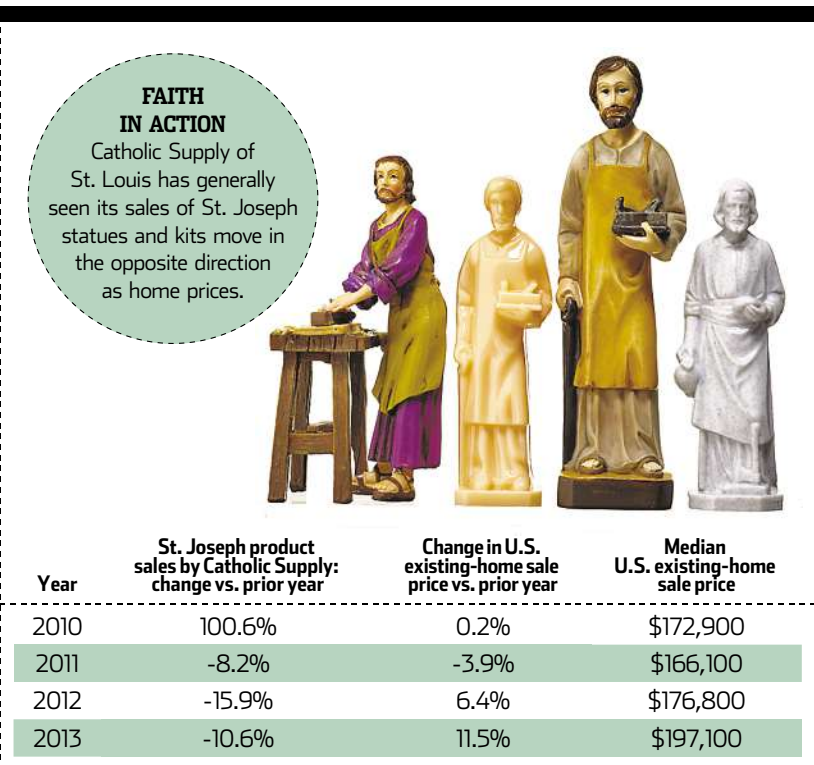


Traditionally, Joseph, the husband of Mary, is hailed as the patron saint of home and family. Some believe that burying a statue of St. Joseph in the yard helps sell a house.

In honor of St. Joseph’s Day on March 19, Spread Sheet asked Catholic Supply of St. Louis Inc., a religious-goods store with three locations in St. Louis, to break down sales of St. Joseph products over the past five years. The data were paired with median sale prices for existing homes compiled by the National Association of Realtors.

In general, sales of St. Joseph statues tend to rise when the market sours, says Lara Traina, director of marketing and web management at Catholic Supply. From 2009 to 2010, when home prices were stagnant, the number of sales of St. Joseph statues slightly more than doubled. When home-sale prices began to creep back up, St. Joseph statue sales dropped.

Catholic Supply offers six real-es-



Sources: Catholic Supply of St. Louis Inc.; National Association of Realtors; Note: Catholic Supply sales tracked since 2009; Photo: F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal

tate-related St. Joseph items and dozens more statues. “It’s probably our No. 1 item in our store,” Ms. Traina says. The company says it serves parishes all over the U.S., as well as world-wide. At a high point in one recent year, Catholic Supply sold nearly 10,000 statues and kits in stores and online, she says.

The St. Joseph Home Selling Kit comes with a 3.5-inch plastic statue and laminated prayer card. It costs \$6.95—less if bought in bulk. Ms. Traina adds that real-estate brokerages that purchase kits for their agents make up a large part of sales.

Phil Cates, a mortgage banker and founder of online store StJoseph-Statue.com in 1996, sees statue sales ebb and flow with the housing market. “Our heyday of sales was in 2006, which happens to be near the top of the real-estate market,” says Mr. Cates, who stepped down as head of the company last year. Sales dropped 50% since 2006, partly due to increased competition among supply companies, he adds.

Here is how it works: Bury a St. Joseph statue upside-down in your yard,

facing toward the for-sale house. After the house sells, the seller is supposed to dig up the statue and place it in a spot of honor in their new home.

The details are debated. Some say the St. Joseph statue should be buried right-side up; others advise burying it by the for-sale sign for easy retrieval.

But Ms. Traina waves the details aside. “We really do emphasize that it’s the belief in St. Joseph and your prayer that really matters,” she says.

Even in stronger market cycles, some agents won’t give up the faith. Elizabeth Kee, an agent with Core in New York City, carries half a dozen thumb-size St. Joseph medallions in her purse at all times.

She places the medallions in nearly every apartment—in herb gardens and potted plants, on window sills and even behind radiators.

And for sellers who are on the fence, tough luck. “Some sellers get weirded out, so sometimes I tell owners and sometimes I don’t,” she says. “If I have a feeling it won’t go over well, I’ll bury it in front of their building.”

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