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Saints stir piety, superstition

Speaker, author and counselor Stephen Binz's Arkansas home had been on the market for more than seven months when, in desperation, he remembered something his real-estate agent had told him: Many people trying to sell their houses bury statues of St. Joseph upside down in their yards as a way of asking for his help.

With nowhere else to turn, Binz bought a statue of St. Joseph, turned him upside down and buried him in the yard. His house sold within a week — to a man named Joseph.

Binz is not alone in looking heavenward for help with earthly problems. All around the world, Catholics pray daily to a host of saints, many of whom have become patrons in specific areas. People place statues or medals of St. Christopher in their vehicles to protect them while traveling and ask St. Anthony of Padua for help finding lost things. Locally, about 300 people filled the pews of Gates' St. Jude the Apostle Church during each day of an Oct. 20-28 nine-day novena to St. Jude, patron of seemingly impossible causes.

The litany of the saints has swelled by 476 members during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, according to the official Vatican Web site, and the Oct. 19 beatification of Mother Teresa drew even more attention to saints and the canonization process.

St. John's Religious Shop, run by Spencerport's St. John the Evangelist Parish, carries medals, holy cards and books about more than 70 patron saints, with St. Joseph, St. Jude, St. Christopher and St. Michael the Archangel as the store's top sellers, according to Barbara Di-Vincenzo, manager. Many people, she said, also come in looking for medals of St. Peregrine Laziosi, the patron saint of cancer patients, and St. Lucy, the patron saint of the blind and those with eye trouble.

Are such petitions to the saints always acts of prayer, or do they sometimes border on superstition? This is the question Binz addressed in his book, *St. Joseph, My Real Estate Agent*.

"I think a lot of people get stuck in the superstition," Binz remarked. "I think we're called by our Catholic faith to go further than that."

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Photo illustration by Linda Jeanne Rivers and Karin von Voigtlander

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