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## 'Tis the season when many of us bless our homes

For Christians the world over, Christmas is a time of celebration which is often centred on the home. Many religions recognize the home is so important that special ceremonies have arisen over the centuries to bless and consecrate it when taking possession or upon the happening of a special event or anniversary.

And now the real estate industry is latching on to the idea of offering house-blessing services to clients moving into a new home.

The concept of house blessings goes back to Christ himself. The book of Luke records that Christ instructed his apostles to say upon entering a home, "Peace to this house."

Christians often have their homes blessed around the time of the feast of Epiphany, on Jan. 6. The holiday commemorates the visit of the three wise men to the house of the Holy Family.

In Matthew 2:11, the story is told: "And when they had come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshiped him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh."

The Bible's message is to set apart the home as a place of hospitality to all those who visit, just as the wise men were welcomed to the house of Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

In the Catholic tradition, a ceremonial house blessing may be conducted at any time of year by a priest or a layperson. The leader starts with a blessing at the entrance and then proceeds from room to room, invoking the spirit of Christ on the house and its occupants.

Similar traditions exist in the Anglican/Episcopalian and Eastern Orthodox churches. The United Church of Canada also publishes a special service for the blessing of a house.

Other faiths also have rituals that invoke spiritual protection. In Judaism, homes are consecrated by attaching a decorative case called a mezzuzah to the entrance doorway and one or more interior doorposts of the house. It contains a quotation from Deuteronomy Chapter 6, which appears in the narrative immediately after the Israelites have received the 10 Commandments.

Part of the text commands, "Thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house, and upon thy gates."

As the mezzuzah is attached to a doorpost, various blessings are recited, often in conjunction with the use of the Old Testament, wine, bread and salt as ceremonial objects. One blessing offers thanks to the Almighty "for giving us life, sustaining us, and enabling us to reach this joyous occasion."

Buddhists, too, have a ceremony for blessing a new house. In Thailand, the ritual involves the attendance of nine monks, and the use of holy water, candles, and a sacred white thread followed by a festive meal and music.

Although house blessings may not be as widely known as other religious rites, the practice may soon start to spread as a result of a new idea introduced recently in England. Earlier this year, it was reported that the Church of England is going into partnership with local real estate agents to offer blessing services to people moving into a new home.

Rev. Chris Painter, a vicar in the Manchester suburb of Eccles, has helped pioneer the new initiative and is confident it will demonstrate that Christianity can adapt to an increasingly secular age.

"There is still a huge interest in spirituality and this is a way of our meeting that, but not in a traditional way," he told London's *Daily Telegraph*. "The current trend in New Age spirituality is aimed at self-fulfilment, people wanting to be happy and achieve things. We are trying to focus on Christianity and show people that God has an interest in our lives."

So announcement cards are being left in the offices of real estate agents around the Manchester diocese, informing new residents of the free home blessing service.

"I meet with the owner and explain what is involved," Painter says. "It can be a simple prayer or a full blessing where we go from room to room, and we lay hands on furniture and appliances."

In the bedroom, for example, the vicars will lay hands on the bed, praying for a healthy sex life, and in the bathroom they will pray for good health and "give thanks for sanitation."

In the kitchen, the prayer will ask: "O Lord, to all who shall work in this room that, in serving others, they may serve you and share in your perfect service, and that in the noise and the clutter of the kitchen they may possess you in tranquility."

Will the house-blessing idea spread here? Instead of real estate agents sending a welcoming pizza to the house on moving day, will they soon be showing up with a priest or rabbi?

The pizza companies won't be happy, but it's not a bad idea. .