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Amma: The 'hugging saint'

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Proceeds go to charities

Last week in suburban McLean, Va., the eighth stop on Amma's 11-city tour, the hotel ballroom and lobby were transformed into an Indian ashram, marketplace and food court.

There were tables of books with her speeches and displays about her charities, plus silks, handicrafts and clothing once worn by Amma, from lavishly brocaded silks to gauzy white daily robes (\$75) to her itchy-bitsy (size 3-4) sea-foam-green terry slippers.

All proceeds go to her charities (detailed at Amma.org), which were described in a film clip. On a dais musicians played Indian music.

Her U.S. charities, including Mother's Kitchen, with soup kitchens operating in 30 cities, are run under the auspices of the M.A. Center, a registered public charity based in San Ramon, Calif.

The tour, now in Boston, ends July 26 in Toronto.

VIDEO

By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY

MCLEAN, Va. — On an ordinary summer day, in a hotel ballroom, thousands of seekers, sufferers and beatifically smiling followers find wordless joy and solace in the embrace of "the hugging saint."

They need no money, no knowledge of any holy text or ritual practice, no special strength or beauty or spiritual fine-tuning.

They need only come to tiny Amma — the endearing nickname for Mata Amritanandamayi ("Mother of immortal bliss").

Her arms are open to all: infants and elderly, wiry collegians, hippies gone gray, dudes in Dockers or saffron robes, Christians and Jews, Hindus and Buddhists, children and the childlike — anyone longing to be enveloped in perfumed softness.

No questions asked. One lesson offered: Open your heart to the world.

They leave glowing, tears on their cheeks, perhaps with a gift from her, a rose petal or an apple in hand or a smudge of sandalwood powder on the photo of a loved one, extending Amma's blessings to that distant soul as well.

So many are so grateful for their encounter, they make donations unasked, small gifts that add up to millions of dollars for Amma's worldwide philanthropies.

In the past 18 months alone, she has committed \$23 million to tsunami relief and \$1 million to Katrina relief, as well as support for schools, hospitals, orphanages, and services to the sick and poor. International humanitarian honors pour down on her.

The modest mystic and philanthropist from Kerala, India, a



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daughter of a lower-caste fisherman, says she has been driven since early childhood to "make an offering of myself" to the poor, the abandoned, the sick and sick at heart. By age 21, she had refused marriage and begun her public philanthropic ministries.

"Just by feeling (someone's) pain you cannot resolve it," she says. "You have to do something. If you see a blind person who is crying, why suffer for him when you can hold his hand and help him across the street?"

Now 52, she has been to the podium of the United Nations, the Parliament of World Religions and countless interfaith gatherings, where she's praised for knowing no boundaries with her spiritual message or earthly assistance.

A movie about her that premiered at last year's Cannes Film Festival will be released in the USA in August. It's called *Darshan*, Sanskrit for an audience with a holy person. But in a radical departure from Indian tradition, Amma's darshan consists of her embrace.

She hugs to spread the idea of motherly love and compassion "felt not only towards one's own children, but all people, animals and plants, rocks and rivers — a love extended to all of nature, all beings."

Three years ago, on her birthday in India, "she hugged 75,000 people in 23 hours, 20 minutes," says Padmini Pooleri of Germantown, Md., one of legions of volunteers who staff and underwrite Amma's tours in the USA and Canada.

It is still an oddity in a traditional Hindu culture for a single woman to touch strangers, much less distribute such intimate personal blessings. Yet Amma has hugged more than 27 million people in her life, says volunteer John Graff of Washington, D.C., a computer consultant and practicing Catholic. He sees no conflict between his church and a mystic who inspires universal love and charity; he says he has seen clergy of all faiths visit Amma.

People line up hours early to kneel before her, and her welcome is as warm, her smile as sparkling, her white robes as untainted by sweat as if each person in her arms were the only person in the room.

She whispers sonorous chants in their ear, massages their backs with child-size hands, presses into their hand a rose petal, a candy Kiss or maybe an apple.

While keeping up a three-hug-a-minute pace, she's looking up at a line of people on one side who have written questions on small orange slips of paper. A translator reads them in her Malayalam dialect.

Most questions are deep, wrenching, particular: Should I leave my husband, my wife, my job? My daughter is sick. My mother. My dad. My hands shake and I'm scared. Where am I going?

Yet Amma never flinches from the tide of pain and confusion. Answers are "different for each person. You cannot open all boxes with one key," Amma says.

"What is beyond the universe?" asks 9-year-old Sierra Bradshaw-Kreimer of Hillsborough, N.C.

"Love," Amma tells her.

A reporter asks, "Does she have a message for Americans?"

Amma tilts her head back, fixes her bright black eyes on the questioner and replies. "We have to regain our original faces rather than wearing masks. ... We go more and more after the external world and we miss the inner self."

"Amma does not issue predictions or play fortune teller or faith healer. She just has a larger consciousness than we have access to," says Ann Deruiter, 48, of San Francisco, who flew cross-country so she can "develop my spiritual practices" during Amma's prayer, meditation and teaching sessions.

What does Deruiter do when she's not following Amma?

"I pine to be with Amma."

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