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How the Hugging Saint brings love to the world

For 30 years Indian
spiritual leader Mata
Amritanandamayi has
been hugging people.
Now the woman known

as Amma is bringing
her message to Europe

by
Rachel

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ITTING on her throne

of orange silk in a lav-
ishly decorated sports
hall, Amma clutches
another head to her
bosom. The man kneel-

ing at her tiny bejewelled feet
snuggles Into her perfumed
robes, closes his eyes, smiles
and waits for a wave of her

compassion to wash over him.
Like almost 30 million people
before aim, be Is there to bathe in
what she describes as "the unbro-
ken stream of love which flows
from -Amma to all beings in the
universe". This outpouring requires
such little effort on her part, appar-
ently, that she can give a rare inter-
view to me while "loving a person
wholly and without prejudice".
She chuckles and gesticulates
furiously as she tells me the
extraordinary story of bow a little
girl from a poor Keralan ashing
village In South India came to be
known as the Hugging Saint. Inter-
mittently, she pats the man on the
back as If she Is burping a baby.
"Even as a little girl, I had a
spontaneous feeling of love and
compassion for suffering people,"
she tells me through her translator
and most senior disciple, Swami
Amritaswarupananda Purl.
"I used to visit SO to 60 houses a
day to collect tapioca peelings to
feed our cows. During these visits
I saw the harsh realities of life.
Families reliant on the catch of the
day often had nothing at all to eat.
"I couldn't stand to watch their
suffering. I wanted to commit
suicide, to jump into the fire.
Helping them was the only way.
"I would wash their clothes and
take them to my house for a bath.
I would steal things from my own
family to give to them, for which I
was punished. I realised it is my
mission in life to serve humanity.
To ease pain and poverty."
But is an exhibition hall in
a wealthy western country really
the best place to do it? "People all
over the world, irrespective of
nationality, language, religion or
material wealth, deserve love and
compassion," she says.
I meet Amma in Dublin, en route
to London, where she says she
hopes to address the critical
"poverty of love and compassion"
in the UK in time for Christmas. -

At a time of global religious
unrest, it is easy to see why
Amma's non-denominational
message has mass appeal. I can
see Muslims, Catholics and Jews

MANY TALENTS: Amma loves a person
'wholly' but at the same time she can
give Interviews, as she did with
Rachel, Inset, and make phone calls

sitting and praying together on
bright pink floor mats. They are
listening to a band of New Agers
jangling tambourines and banging
drums. They queue for hug - or
"darshan" - tokens, then join the
line that winds its way through the
throng to the back of the hall.
They are peacefully united by
Amma, They say that they don't
worship her because she is not a
deity and this is not a church. They
simply love her because she loves
them. Together with the Dalai
Lama and the Pope, she was
named one of the world's 12 most
influential religious leaders.
I pull up a chair at the back of
the room, near the stalls selling
souvenir dolls, beads "worn by
Amma" and "I 'heart' Amma"
T-shirts, to collect my thoughts
and observe proceedings.
Next to me sits Andrew Lohan,
31, a Dubliner who tells me with
tears in his eyes that as a gay Irish
Catholic, he has found in Amma's
conventions a place to worship,
free from Judgment.
"Faith has always been impor-
tant to me but it's 10 years since
I felt able to attend mass. Here I

can feel like I'm part of something
again. Amma just believes in love
and acceptance, nothing more.
There's no part of her faith that
condemns what I am, or what
anyone else is."
I had expected more weeping and
wailing at the head of the darshan
queue but like every aspect of
Amma's operation, including the
vegetarian curry production line in
the makeshift canteen, It is surpris-
ingly orderly. Her helpers surround
the chair, ready to peel off any

clingers-on and direct the next in
line into her arms, while Amma
maintains a steady hugging pace,
keeping one eye on the clock and
using a clicker to keep a head count.
At least four of her followers
tell me with an identical turn of
phrase that in India, where the
crowds are often as big as 100,000:
"Amma has been known to give
darshan for more than 24 hours
without a break."
All the while, Amma multi-tasks.

She gives interviews, takes phone
calls, holds meetings and, as the
head of an ever-expanding charity,
makes multi-million pound deci-
sions as she hugs.
"Then when I retire to my room,
I read all the letters I have been

sent. I call everyone I need to
speak to and give them instruc-
tions. I take care of the macro

management," she says.
Those in her entourage say that
she does most of her sleeping on
long-haul flights but even then, if
fellow passengers request a hug,
Amma will oblige.
"There are two kinds of electrical

appliance. Some are run on
batteries that run down and others,
like me, are eternally connected to
the power source," she giggles.
But while they all enjoy a good
cuddle, it is the more practical
applications of Amma's love that
really inspire her followers.
In accordance with her mantra -

"take the minimum and give the
maximum" - volunteers in her

organisation, Mata Amritan-
andamayi Math, or MAM, build
homes for the homeless, provide
financial assistance for widows, run
state-of-the-art hospitals, schools,
universities, orphanages and care
homes for the elderly, lead refor-
estation efforts and more besides.

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^^•relie f projects that have
is r cemented her saintly status.
When the tsunami struck on
Boxing Day 2003, devastating the
area around her ashram in Kerala,
Amma's swift action and pledge of
£12 million to the relief effort saved
countless lives. The campus of her
university accommodated 4,000
families, all provided with food,
water, clothing, blankets, soap,
toothbrushes and toothpaste.
"Although so much food had
been lost, somehow Amma pro-
vided three meals a day for every-
one," says one wide-eyed disciple,
echoing the biblical tale of loaves
and fishes and demonstrating,
perhaps, how the actions of extra-
ordinary people can evolve into
"miracles" over time.
Amma is more matter of fact.
"As a non-governmental organisa-
tion, I could do things better and
faster because only I have to make
the decisions. I simply tell my
children, 'Do this! Do that! Build
shelters, fast!' and they do it."
She beckons me; it's time I expe-
rienced her legendary embrace. I
lean towards her, suddenly my face
is buried in her incense-infused
shawls. For 30 seconds at least, I
feel nothing but the fear it might
never end but then there is a feel-
ing of warmth. The hug is heartfelt
and unexpectedly touching.
Still, I can hardly claim to be the
first to discover that, among her
many talents, Amma knows how
to give a good hug.

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go to www.amma.OTg.uk