

'Hugging Saint' Draws Believers to Herald Square

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Amma, the so-called "hugging saint" from India, packed Manhattan Center with those in search of hugs and inspiration.

STORY



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HERALD SQUARE — Believers flocked to the Manhattan Center on 34th Street Monday in search of a healing touch from the so-called "hugging saint."

[Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, known to her devotees as "Amma,"](#) hails from India and has become known worldwide for her hugs and prayers. She visited 111 W. 34th St. on July 4th as part of her three-day visit to New

York on her tour of North America.

"She's so holy you want to be in her presence," said Ann Reilly, 59, a nurse at the Department of Correction's Manhattan Detention Complex who also volunteers on Amma's welcome team. "She's about treating everyone how you want to be treated."

In Amma's three days in Manhattan, over 10,000 people will receive "darshan," or hugs, according to Dan Marshall, a member of her communications team.

As the white-robed Amma stepped out of her taxi Monday morning, fans gasped and craned their necks for a look.

"It's Amma!" devoted followers said as they watched the petite holy woman shuffle down the red carpet toward grand ballroom.

Louis Gildelamadrid, 60, who also volunteers at Amma's events, said Amma's blessings are religion-neutral.

"Amma was born Hindu but helps each person reconnect with their religious background," Gildelamadrid said, citing his increased connection with his Roman Catholic background since he first encountered Amma in 1996.

"In 36 years she's given hugs to 37 million people," he said. "Tonight so many people will come — it's pandemonium!"

Amma runs Embracing the World, a worldwide charitable organization that has provided \$60 million in disaster relief, built thousands of homes, and treated over 2 million people with illnesses, said Marshall.

As part of her travels, each year she makes a North American tour, which began this year May 27 in Seattle.

"It feels like I'm giving her a hug for one hundred years," said Katie Lower, 29, a music teacher from New Jersey who waited in line for a hug. "Last year I waited seven hours...but this feeling lasts with you, of happiness."