

The reliquary of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, the 17th-century French nun who received visions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, is pictured on display at the Parish of St. Catherine of Siena in Trumbull, Connecticut in September 2026. (Maureen O'Brien)



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I had waited months to see her, counting down the days until the one I'd blocked off on my calendar. Having flown from France in a plane's cargo hold, she'd needed special permission from customs to pass through security. She spent her summer zigzagging across America's highways, guarded and protected by the Knights of Columbus, visiting some of our nation's most prominent basilicas: Denver, Orlando, Baltimore and Newark, as well as Washington D.C.'s St. John Paul II National Shrine. But as our time together neared, I received dispiriting word that her plans had taken an unforeseen turn: a visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

When I finally greeted the relics of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, it was in the Parish of St. Catherine of Siena in, of all places, Trumbull, Connecticut — a town whose prior claim to fame was winning the 1989 Little League World Series. There, the unassuming side chapel is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The priest and parishioners never imagined that the originator of that devotion would pay them a visit.

The bones and tissue of the cloistered 17th-century French nun, who received visions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, were kept in a reliquary that looked like an ornate little chapel, complete with spirals, blossoms, grapes, arches and columns. The result was a breathtaking sacred space, and a lost childlike wonder reignited in me as I bent to peer in.

The saint's bones cast a shadowed beauty from under a white veil. The sheer cloth revealed her, just enough, and yet also seemed to softly protect her. I had come here seeking her protection, and was moved to see that she, too, needed something of the same.

I waited until I could stand privately with her, then tugged up my left sleeve. I've worn the same bracelet every day for 15 years, a plain band with a Miraculous Medal to protect a still-broken part of me: my left wrist, shattered in a freak accident, never fully healed. I've treasured this bracelet because when I look down I see not faint scars and deformity, but the reassurance of Mary. Like the metal holding my bones together under the surface, the metal bracelet has become a part of me.

Three years ago I eagerly crossed paths with a relic of St. Thérèse of Lisieux — whom I love madly — encased under glass in a palm-sized brass vessel that visitors were encouraged to press rosaries upon. I had no rosary with me, but I did have my bracelet; and as I placed the oval of Mary over the tiny bone fragment of St. Thérèse, it buzzed, attaching for a few seconds, pulling like a magnet. It shocked me.

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And so I was eager to bring my bracelet to St. Margaret Mary, not because I expected or needed something tangible to happen but because I had the rare chance to create a place for St. Thérèse and St. Margaret Mary to be together, to overlap. I pressed the Miraculous Medal to the reliquary, closed my eyes and whispered, "Sacred Heart of Jesus, help me feel your love." I took in a breath so long and so deep I caught, from somewhere in the nearby sanctuary, the familiar fragrance of frankincense.

This is why I had come: for a divine encounter.

Before and after Mass, people lined up to approach the reliquary. Two men stood on either side, solemnly handing out prayer cards with the image of St. Margaret Mary holding up the Sacred Heart. Each card, rosary or medallion pressed upon the first-class relic of her glass arches became a third-class relic.

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I stepped aside to take a photo of this procession and was taken aback when I looked down to see the image I'd captured. How had I not noticed all this late afternoon autumn light? "Help me feel your love," I had prayed. The picture I took showed a sanctuary flooded with it. St. Margaret Mary Alacoque had lived for 19 years within the walls of her convent, and yet her wish to spread the message of the Sacred Heart keeps coming true.

In the weeks prior, I had emailed the pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Parish, hoping for greater understanding of the graces that come with venerating relics. Fr. Marcello's answer came to mind at that moment: his prayer that, through the presence of the saint's relics, "all of us will be moved to respond a little more deeply to the thirst of Jesus Christ for our love."

The idea of Jesus thirsting for my love made me reluctant to depart, and yet the sun was setting earlier than I'd anticipated. Sliding into my car, bracelet clicking against the steering wheel, I hit the dark highway and headed home.

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