News
Arts and Media
Coronavirus



Sr. Emanuela Gemza of the Mother of Divine Mercy order and another member of her order are seen rapping the song "Jesus, I trust you," in a screen grab from a YouTube video at the Divine Mercy center in Krakow, Poland. (CNS photo/YouTube)



Jonathan Luxmoore

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Warsaw, Poland — June 10, 2020
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

At Krakow's stately Divine Mercy center, the contemplative atmosphere suddenly evaporates as nuns in black habits come dancing along the corridor.

"Yo yo / Rapping ain't hard to do / It's enough to say 'Jesus, / I trust you! / And right now we don't want masks / We just want merciful grace!"

When Polish rap artists launched "Hot16Challenge" in late April to raise funds for medical staff tackling the coronavirus, they did not expect their country's religious sisters would get in on the act.

Within a month, however, as would-be rap stars exchanged nominations, convents nationwide had posted videos on YouTube, alongside Catholic priests and seminarians and even some Polish bishops.

"When it comes to music, we don't always keep up with the latest stuff, but we're ready to try new things when the call comes," explained Sr. Emanuela Gemza of the Mother of Divine Mercy Order.

"I immediately realized this was a great chance to evangelize — to show in an untypical way how God cares for us. I think the Holy Spirit guided us in putting the words and melody together."

Across town, behind the seemingly austere façade of the Order of Presentation Sisters, a trio of bopping nuns instruct listeners to "learn their Calvary rhymes."

Sr. Wanda Putyra said she and her sisters were egged on by students at the school where they teach. They got some coaching in rap techniques, but did not find it as easy as the Divine Mercy Sisters.

Advertisement

"As a church organist, specializing in Bach, I don't usually do this type of music — and we were worried about getting the rhythm right," Putyra told Catholic News Service. "Having assumed rap was pretty simple, I quickly discovered it's actually really difficult. It truly is an art form, and we all now respect the artists who do it!"

Those nominated for "Hot16Challenge" are given three days to compose a 16-line rap, before passing the baton to others.

Within two hours of its launch, the initiative had exceeded its target of 16,000 zlotys ($4,100), and within a week, it had surpassed a million zlotys.

The rap project has now grossed over 4 million zlotys and has drawn in President Andrzej Duda and top government officials, with invitations favorably received by international stars from Ed Sheeran to Snoop Dogg.

Though that isn't the kind of company Auxiliary Bishop Adrian Galbas of Elk would normally keep, he's been recorded rapping as well. So has Bishop Marian Rojek of Zamosc-Lubaczow, along with his diocesan chancellor, media spokesman and curial staffers.

Yet it's Poland's rapping nuns who've gained most attention, with a catchy mix of religious messages and confident performance skills.

Gemza says it's a reminder that the Polish church, though firmly orthodox in teaching, is up to date and on the spot, even behind the walls of its convents.

"In our mission to proclaim the Gospel, we're open to what the contemporary world demands, and I hope those who present us as sad, withdrawn women will now think again," she told CNS. "The Holy Father has urged us to be a church full of joy, and I'm pleased we've found a way to show this."

Putyra agreed, saying Catholic religious should use their talents to evangelize.

Gemza is wary about talk of a new cool image for Polish nuns. She insists nuns are cool already and said she and her rapping sisters received overwhelmingly positive reactions, despite the occasional raised eyebrow.

She also was moved to receive messages from agnostics and nonbelievers, who said they'd been helped by the nuns' example in their search "for a God who listens to them."