

(GSR graphic)



by Rhina Guidos

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Sr. Josefina Cattaneo says that if TikTok had existed in the time of Jesus, he would have used the medium.

He would use social networks to promote his message because he was always seeking ways to communicate love to the people, Cattaneo said.

The 29-year-old Mercedarian of the Child Jesus spoke to Global Sisters Report about her success on social media, particularly on TikTok, where she posts videos of nuns dancing cumbia, where she explains the difference between nuns and sisters, and sometimes prays the rosary.

When she spoke with GSR during the V Latin American Congress of Religious Life in November 2024, her selfie stick was never far from her so she could capture moments with other religious women and men from the continent that included flash dances and interviews.

Under the handle @joseecattaneo, the Argentine sister has accrued more than 210,000 followers on TikTok and 150,000 on Instagram. Sisters from her congregation often appear in cameos in her videos and she says she has many interactions, mostly positive but some negative.

"I try to pray, pray about what might be happening to me and what I'm living with so I can know what Jesus wants to say to me," she told GSR.

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"I think that if we open ourselves up, social networks can also help us find Jesus and make out of those spaces, a place for the Gospel." (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

***GSR*: Tell me a little bit about how your interest in social media came about and how your congregation embraced that.**

Cattaneo: I consider myself a missionary person and I love to proclaim Jesus. I think it's the meaning of my life. And in the middle of the pandemic, I was fenced in because there were no opportunities to go out, to proclaim, and I felt that I was not doing what I had been called to do.

And where were you?

I was in La Carlota, in Córdoba [Argentina]. And, well, I began to wonder how I could proclaim Jesus in that moment of pandemic, because everybody was living in despair, sadness, fear, anguish. I wanted to know how to reach out to others, with Jesus. So, I started to pray, to pray, and at that time, well, TikTok was in fashion and trending.

So, I started kind of uploading videos and content to reach those who were at home kind of not knowing how to go on with their lives at that time. That was one of the things that motivated me.

And the other was, well, to show the human face of consecrated life to people who often think we're strange. They don't know us. People talk without knowing and, well, it doesn't help and it doesn't help them to discover the value and the beauty of consecrated life.

And what kind of content did you use?

For example, I tried to upload reels or videos that were trending at the time with some religious detail or from the religious life. ... I did the same things as others, but with the purpose of bringing them closer to Jesus. But I did a little bit of everything, danced, sang, talked, prayed the rosary, shared the Gospel, a little bit of everything. Quite a variety.

And how did your congregation take it?

In my case, my congregation was very supportive. In fact, I didn't ask permission to start using TikTok, but I did ask permission to appear on some television programs. And, well, they accompanied me a lot. What's more, they usually help me in the discernment of consecrated life when it comes to this so that I can continue.

How do you compare what you do today and what you were doing before the pandemic? Is it the same or different?

It is different because at that time I was proclaiming Jesus all the time [not on social media]. And today I have to integrate everything. Sometimes I do that in the streets, but [during the pandemic] I used to do it at home with my sisters because, here in Argentina, [the coronavirus pandemic] was very strong and we could not leave the house, so it was hard.

But today I do it wherever I am. If I am at school, doing pastoral work, on mission, wherever I am ... I try to integrate virtuality in my life. I am one in these two presences and that sometimes leads me to rethink myself a lot because one always has to have a healthy balance.

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Sr. Josefina Cattaneo interviews Sr. Carmen Ugarte of the Oblate Sisters of the Most Holy Redeemer on Nov. 22, 2024, in Córdoba, Argentina. Cattaneo, a Mercedarian Sister of the Child Jesus, says she started using TikTok at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic to ease the despair many were feeling. She now has more than 200,000 followers on the platform. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Tell me the story of your vocation.

I was always a girl like the rest, like my friends. My family would not have pegged me as a sister. When I said I was going to enter [the convent], they sent me to the psychologist and told me I was crazy, how could I go. My parents ended up telling me, "Yes, yes, go," with the hope and conviction that after two months I would [return], without thinking that I would actually go through with it.

Since I was 15, I had felt that Jesus ... I cared about him more and more, I was giving him more and more of my time, and sometimes I would say: What else can I do for you? Until I realized that Jesus was calling me to give him my life, not for a few minutes, not in a pastoral way, not for a short period of time, but with everything I had.

And then, well, I kind of said, I prefer to live this out now and in this moment and say, "If it's not meant to be, I'll go my own way. But I prefer to live it out now [instead of waking up at] 40, saying, 'I would have been happier being a nun.' " So, there's freedom when you're young and I said, "Well, I'm going to choose this and let it be what God wants."

When did the TikTok account start? Did you have other accounts before?

I used Instagram to save photos because I didn't have a good cellphone or with [a lot of] memory, so I saved them on Instagram, but well, then I had a desire to proclaim [the Gospel].

What has surprised you the most?

I am surprised that so many people who are not religious follow me. I am followed by many people who experience Jesus in their daily lives and who, for different reasons, moved away from the church, from practicing faith in their lives, or who, for different reasons — because they were mistreated by a religious person, or priest, or because they did not find hope in the religious or church spheres, but they have not stopped

believing in Jesus. Well, those are the ones who often follow me. They are the majority and they are grateful that I can show them a close, human and simple face of the church.

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What surprises you most about your vocation?

I am surprised by the fidelity that God has shown me; I am surprised that he calls me as I am, what I am. I am surprised by the strength he gives me to sometimes go through these changes in consecrated life.

Sometimes I am surprised by the desire I have to follow Jesus, whatever the cost and whatever happens, because I consider that it is not mine, it is not something that is mine. It is not something that I seek, but it is something that is a force, bigger than me, that I cannot control and to which I have to respond because it is from God and because it is what he wants.

There are many people your age, and also younger, who are a bit distracted by their phones, by social networks. What would you say to them about how to find God? Can God be found in technology?

God can be found everywhere. I believe that if Jesus were around, he would use social networks ... because in his time he looked at all the different ways to reach people, he did it in all kinds of ways and has always been very creative. That's why we have the parables. ... That's why we have the examples with which he tries to make us understand what the kingdom of heaven means, what it means to follow, what it means to be happy in it.

I think that if we open ourselves up, social networks can also help us find Jesus and make out of those spaces a place for the Gospel. We also have to be there, we are called to be there, make it a place of mission. We cannot leave any space empty when it is about Jesus and his promise of salvation for all.

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