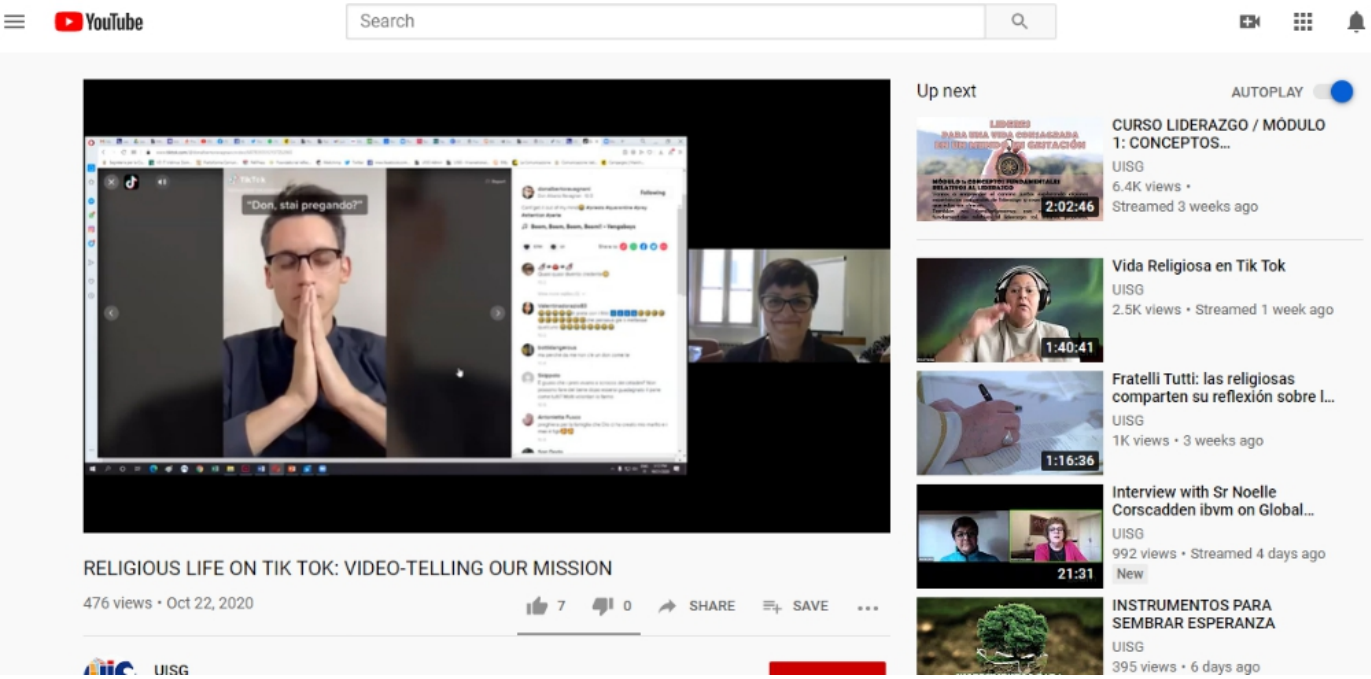
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Patrizia Morgante, communications officer for the International Union of Superiors General, hosts an Oct. 21 webinar on religious life and TikTok. The webinar was the first of three exploring different areas of digital discernment. (GSR screenshot)



by Brittany Wilmes

Engagement Editor

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Sr. Claudia Jiménez comes from the Peruvian Amazon, "where life is a party and you're constantly dancing." So when she came across a new social media platform, she says, she started dancing, "but always trying to send a message, trying to evangelize."

The Sister of Charity of Our Lady of Good and Perpetual Help, who now lives in Rome, is among those in religious life who believe that the new evangelization will, in part, be on TikTok.

> @hermanaclaudia
>
> #duetto con @ginypasticcini #duettoaccettato #suorebps
>
> ♬ suono originale - amo la ginnastica artistica❤

Jiménez spoke at an Oct. 21 webinar hosted by the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) that introduced more than 230 attendees to how men and women religious are using the viral social media app to share religious life and their ministries with the world.

TikTok launched in 2016 in China before merging with Musical.ly in 2018, and since its introduction to the global market, it has rarely left the top of most-downloaded apps lists. Users can create short music, dance and lip-sync videos of up to 15 seconds and short looping videos of 3 to 60 seconds.

Despite recent political tension over its global ownership, TikTok continues to experience seemingly exponential growth. About one in six Americans uses the app weekly, and it is available in 150 countries and has been translated into 75 languages.

Patrizia Morgante, communications officer for UISG, hosted the webinar, the first in a series of three that explore different areas of digital discernment. A second webinar took place Nov. 4, presented by Jesuit Fr. John Dardis, general counsellor for discernment and apostolic planning for the Society of Jesus, and the third will take place Dec. 16, focusing on the press and religious life.

The Oct. 21 webinar was held in Spanish with English translation available, and many attendees represented countries and communities in the global south, chiming in on the chat from Mexico, Spain, Chile, Brazil, Paraguay and other countries.

Morgante emphasized that the webinar "is intended to propose questions," mainly, "Should religious sisters be present on TikTok or not, and if yes, how are we to do it?"

"Often, we're under the impression that we're a little naive. We enter the digital world as if it were a protected space where we can do as we please, but that is not so," she said. "We act in the digital world as if there were no specific rules and language. In religious life, this is a challenge. More than answers, we want to offer criteria."

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Morgante laid out a framework for understanding how this high-speed, seemingly chaotic app is a natural home for younger generations — and how by its very design, users don't want to leave it.

"I downloaded the platform and found myself a victim of binge-watching. I could not stop scrolling through videos," Morgante said, laughing.

TikTok is a platform based on artificial intelligence. As a user continues to watch videos, the app adapts, serving up more and more content to keep users engaged and exploring different TikTok accounts.

Webinar attendees heard from several women religious who have begun to explore TikTok as a tool for evangelization, including Jiménez, whose TikTok account is her active ministry. She said she found the app easy to use when producing her first few video drafts thanks to TikTok's endless options for editing, filtering and designing sophisticated videos.

"When sisters watched the videos, they said, 'Why don't you publish them?' So I did."

She said not long after creating her account, she began receiving requests for prayers. Viewers would send her direct messages with their concerns and petitions.

"So I produced a spontaneous video asking the Lord to bless all the people who were watching the videos, to take care of them and protect them," she said. That video received 3.8 million views, going viral and bringing Jimenez more followers.

"I realized that through the videos, I could be close to the people."

Missionaries of the Beatitudes Sr. Mayra Cuellar also spoke about her experience using TikTok to promote Terra e Missione, an online magazine dedicated to missionary life and integral ecology. The Rome-based publication, a collaborative effort of 10 religious institutes, launched in May.

> @terraemissione
>
> Che cosa è la missione? Scopriamolo insieme #missionispossible #followyourdreams #walkingon
>
> ♬ Run free - Deep Chills feat. IVIE

Cuellar is Bolivian but currently lives in Rome and works with UISG. Her joyful TikTok videos show her sunny spirit and, she hopes, invite viewers to a true encounter with vowed religious like her.

"How do we in religious life motivate young people to ask questions of themselves?" she asked. "Our presence in TikTok should be a connection for communion."

She noted that an evangelizing presence on a secular app like TikTok is both a challenge and an opportunity. "How do we look for a way to translate the Gospel into today's language?"

Attendees added an interactive element to the webinar, keeping up a lively side conversation in the chat box. Sr. Xiskya Valladares Paguaga of the Religiosas Pureza de María shared her TikTok experience in the comments, telling attendees that in six months, her account gained 227,000 followers.

"This is impossible on other social media platforms," she said in Spanish.

Toward the end of the webinar, Valladares spoke about iMisión, an association of religious and laypeople aimed exclusively at digital evangelization. The group, which Valladares co-founded, offers online formation classes and has hosted conferences

for religious congregations and dioceses in Spain, Mexico and South America. A recent grant from Porticus, an international foundation, ensures that iMisión's formation efforts will continue. The association currently offers classes in Spanish with plans to translate courses into French and English in the future.

Groups like iMisión will be key to the success of religious communities adapting their vocation and evangelization efforts to emerging platforms and apps.

"In youth groups, we say, 'If you are not on the internet, you don't exist,' " Monica Marco, a Dominican postulant who ministers to young adults, told attendees. "We need a plan. We need to know how, why and who we want to reach."

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