News
Arts and Media



Sr. Albertine Debacker, 29, is seen in an undated photo in Rome. A member of the Chemin Neuf religious community, she is becoming a surprising Catholic influencer — amassing over 330,000 Instagram followers and 200,000 on TikTok. (OSV News/Courtesy of Albertine Debacker)

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## Join the Conversation

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At just 29, Sr. Albertine Debacker is proving that habit and hashtag can go hand in hand.

The French nun has become an unexpected but powerful voice for the church, reaching hundreds of thousands of young people where they are — online. Since 2022, her joyful witness and authentic faith have made her a rising star in Catholic media, with over 330,000 followers on Instagram and more than 200,000 on TikTok.

Without seeking the spotlight, she's become a digital missionary, bringing Christ to the scroll-happy generation.

She felt the power of online Catholic influence in France — a country for decades proud of its secularism — on March 5, when a surprising, and record, number of young people filled churches during Ash Wednesday Masses.

Many were attending Mass for the first time, and, according to several media inquiries and surveys, many admitted they came because of social media influence. Debacker played an important role.

"I was inundated with messages from young people asking me if they had 'the right' to receive the ashes without being baptized. They felt very comfortable talking about it with their friends, and shared the videos and the answers I provided," Debacker told OSV News.

"Ramadan began at around the same time and many young people were wondering about Lent after conversations with Muslim friends," she said, adding that "I tried to explain to them in a very educational way what Lent actually is, which is not simply 'a Christian Ramadan.' "

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Debacker's digital adventure first began in a Catholic school in Lyon.

"I was in charge of chaplaincy for 15-to 20-year-olds," she said. "I felt frustrated that out of 1,300 students, few came to the chaplaincy meetings. I wondered how I could reach those who did not come. So I had the idea of making videos. I did not think it would go beyond the school. But there are no borders on social media, and they spread very quickly," she said.

"When making these videos, I was thinking specifically about young people who did not practice their Catholic faith," Debacker explained. "You have to start with the basics for them and explain everything in a very simple way, using their codes. From there, they, among themselves, are the best channels of communication."

Before entering religious life in the Chemin Neuf French community at 24, Debacker worked in finance in Paris.

Today, cheerful and smiling, she approaches fundamental topics about God and faith with great humor, as well as practical questions concerning the organization of daily life with God in mind, such as how to pray on a day-to-day basis.

She sometimes stages her presentations by showing ceremonies or confessions and sometimes brings in other speakers.

"Each video is a response to questions asked by a specific person with whom I have spoken, and who has shared with me their doubts or misconceptions about the Catholic faith," she told OSV News.

Chemin Neuf is present in 30 countries, with 2,400 people involved, including 400 consecrated celibates, among them 120 priests. They work with students, run dormitories, and also retreats for couples and families. Since 1995, 30 parishes have been entrusted to the community in a dozen countries.

Debacker has become a mainstream media phenomenon in France and abroad, but when asked about it, she said she always consults her religious superiors before agreeing to interviews. Her community was founded in Lyon, France, by Jesuit Fr. Laurent Fabre in the early 1970s as part of the charismatic renewal movement.

"I joined it because I felt a special calling to the mission," explained Debacker, who is now studying philosophy in Paris.

"I do not spend more than half a day a week on this missionary work on social media," she clarified. "It must not take up too much space. This is the condition, with my daily life within my community, for maintaining balance and distance from social media."

She stressed that "part of this time is spent responding personally to people who write to me via messaging, on a case-by-case basis," adding, "That is where something really important can happen for them."

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> — Sr. Albertine Debacker
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Day after day, these personal contacts enable Debacker to better understand the new generations of young people.

"They have been immersed since childhood in catastrophic scenarios for the future," she noted. "In the frightening world in which they are growing up, they are looking for guidance. In this quest, the church's long history is an asset for them. They are looking for reliable support, something solid on which to build the foundations of their lives, and they trust the church to provide that."

"With the abuse crisis of recent years, one might have thought that the church had lost credibility," Debacker told OSV News. "But that is not the case for young people. They are aware of the abuse, and they know that the church is not perfect, but surprisingly, that does not stop them, whereas it has deeply hurt older generations."

"With all this," she said, "the church has gained in humility."

"One thing is certain, young people are not drawn to the church because of its members, priests or authority figures. They come for God."

For Debacker, the mission's roots on the ground remain crucial. "Something new is happening on these social networks. But Mass and the sacraments cannot be done virtually! Our religion is that of the Incarnation, and we need to come together. The phenomenon we observed on Ash Wednesday was a beautiful combination of the

dynamism of social media and traditional parish life. One nourishes the other."

"We must offer young people the ideal of evangelical life through the means of communication that are theirs," Debacker concluded.

"Sometimes they are far from this ideal, and we must accompany them in their personal situation. But what I try to tell them is that their lives and the Gospel ideal are not incompatible. It is a matter of being signs of God's love and mercy for each person, by witnessing his closeness. Social media is particularly well suited to this. After that, it is the Holy Spirit who does the rest.