

Record-breaking marathoner goes the distance in faith

Kenyan marathoner Eliud Kipchoge broke a finishing tape, and a barrier long-thought to be completely unbreakable. On Oct. 12, Kipchoge became the first person to run a marathon in less than two hours, finishing a 26.2 mile (42.1 kilometre) course in Vienna in one hour 59 minutes 40 seconds.

Sometime after the run was over, away from the spotlight, Kipchoge did what he is reported to do after every race: he knelt down, bent his forehead to the ground, and made the sign of the cross, in thanksgiving for a good run.

In his hometown, his friends and family say that Kipchoge's extraordinary accomplishment might have something to do with his deep Catholic faith.

Kipchoge's cousin, Rev. Kennedy Kipchumba, told ACI Africa that the runner's accomplishment was "a moment of joy and jubilation, with a summary of: God fulfills His promise."

"I was part of the close to 3,000 people who were following the race from a big screen and with all of them, we ended up bowing to God to thank him for this much he offered to us," Father Kipchumba said.

After Kipchoge's feat, his family, included several priests, celebrated Mass in thanksgiving.

"Everybody came to Church, to say thank you to God. We celebrated Mass to thank God. We celebrated as a community; we had the family, Father Benjamin Oroiyo who is also a family member, Father Benedict Rono and we were also joined by the deputy governor of Nandi County, area member of Parliament, among other local leaders," Kipchumba said.

The Mass was celebrated in a small village chapel, St. Peter's Kapsisiwa, an "outstation" of St. Joseph's Sangalo Parish in the Diocese of Eldoret.

Kipchoge, 34, was raised in the small village of Kapsisiwa, 320 kilometres from Kenya's capital, Nairobi. The area around Kapsisiwa is a highland of rolling green hills, where Kipchoge began running as a child. The runner now lives with his wife in the west Kenyan city of Eldoret, close to his hometown.

"The main person in the family is the mother, whom we brought from her house" for the Mass, Kipchumba explained.

Kipchoge's mother, Janeth Rotich, is seen as a moral and spiritual supporter of her son.

“I wake up at 3 a.m. every day to pray for Kipchoge. I pray the rosary,” she has told local reporters.



Priests, religious, and laity in his native Kenya have praised Eliud Kipchoge as a man of great inspiration@EliudKipchoge Twitter

Kipchoge left Kenya on the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, Oct. 7 to attempt a sub-two hour marathon in Vienna. But before he left, the parish he attends when in Nairobi offered Mass for him.

On the eve of his departure, special prayers were offered for him by the congregation of St. Paul's University Catholic Church.

“Kipchoge is a friend of students' choir at St. Paul's University Chapel. Last Sunday we had Mass celebration for Eliud Kipchoge,” the chaplain of Nairobi University, Rev. Peter Kaigua told ACI Africa.

Kaigua described the historic marathoner, Kipchoge as “an inspiration to the youths, a mentor to the young people and a humble man; through him the young people get to know that their dreams can be met.”

“Before offering Mass for him last week, we used to talk about him in the university with students. We therefore opted to offer him Mass before going for the marathon race so that God can help him realize his dream,” Kaigua added.

"The day for Mass, young people had t-shirts printed in his name," Kaigua told ACI Africa.

During the Mass, Kaigua said that Kipchoge's run "will push his body and his mind to unknown levels and if he ever needed God, and Mother Mary and all the Saints, this is the time – that is why we are here, praying hard.

As Eliud also famously said, 'you cannot train alone and expect to make a fast time... 100 percent of me is nothing compared to one percent of the team.' We are, therefore, going to be Eliud's pacemakers in prayer."

"The university acted as his 'spiritual pacesetter.' His winning is a sign that prayer for young people has been answered," the priest told ACI Africa.

When Kipchoge crossed the finish line, he said that felt himself to be "the happiest man to run under two hours to inspire many people; to tell people that no human is limited, you can do it."

"I am expecting more athletes from all over the world to run under two hours," he added.

Priests, religious, and laity in his native Kenya have praised Kipchoge as a man of great inspiration. Some interpreting his success in the context of the Church's Extraordinary Missionary Month, whose theme is "Baptized and Sent."

"Eliud Kipchoge, baptized and sent! I saw his mother with a white Rosary on her neck. This is just how faith is handed on in the family set up. The mother passes it on to the child," Rev. Samuel Nyattaya of Kenya's Kisumu Archdiocese told ACI Africa.

The priest said he felt "so happily surprised at the demonstration of his Catholic faith!"

"I believe that God is happy to see us putting efforts to maximize our potential. God must have been so happy to see this courageous Kenyan encouraging the entire world with his belief," said Sr. Margaret Mutiso, a member of the Daughters of Sacred Heart.

Kipchoge "is advocating for a peaceful world where all live together in harmony and we're not limited to do that," she added.

For his part, Kaigua said that the university parish in Nairobi is already "planning to celebrate another Mass for him in his presence immediately, as soon as he is back in the country."

The priest, and the marathoner, surely have something to thank God for.

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