News



Sabastian Sawe from Kenya crosses the finish line to win the men’s race at the London Marathon in London, April 26, 2026. (AP/Ian Walton)

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A Catholic church in Eldoret, an epicenter of global long-distance running in the north Rift Valley region of Kenya, is in the spotlight after a runner prayed there and later won the London Marathon. In the process, he broke a record many once thought was impossible.

Sabastian Sawe, 31, maintained a blistering pace and clinched the April 26 race in a record time of 1 hour, 59 minutes and 30 seconds, becoming the first human to run the 26.2-mile distance in under two hours in an official marathon. He made his marathon debut in 2024, in Valencia, Spain, winning the city's marathon with a time of 2:02:05.

His win drew wild celebrations across Kenya, the East African nation often referred to as the home of long-distance running, where athletes have dominated middle- and long-distance racing for decades. It also drew attention to the connection between distance running and faith for Kenyans. Athletes' Christian faith is often on display as they perform the sign of the cross at the start and the end of the races.

Sawe, a staunch Catholic, had attended his most recent Mass at his home church, the Holy Family Catholic Church, part of the St. Josephine Bakhita Lower Moiben Parish in the Catholic Diocese of Eldoret. At the service, he requested prayers.

"When I blessed him, I never thought he would achieve such a global victory. It was really a surprise for me when I heard he had won," Fr. Pius Tuwei, the parish priest, told Religion News Service in an interview. "I was just blessing him like any other athlete or any other person."

Then, Sawe shattered the two-hour barrier. Ethiopian runner Yomif Kejelcha arrived at the finish line 11 seconds later, also running the race in under two hours.

"Nothing is impossible," Sawe later told reporters in London.

> 'I think that God helps those who help themselves. So, you know, he gave you a talent, and then you have to get out and use it, and not hide it.'
> —Br. Colm O'Connell

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Back home, Sawe's religious commitment is no secret. The church's parishioners have also celebrated his generosity to the church, a quality he may have gotten from his grandmother, an especially charitable member of the church, Tuwei said.

"That could have really given him a very strong foundation on morals, the church and discipline — this could have contributed to his success," the priest said. "I think giving back to society is also holding him to his faith."

In the Christian-majority country, many children start running at a young age, racing on rugged tracks, paths or roads barefoot. Some become world champions, and sometimes, like Sawe, they achieve feats beyond imagination.

Church leaders said many champions have close relationships with their pastors and priests, often visiting them for blessings before a major race.

Eliud Kipchoge, a world-famous Kenyan athlete, has also said his Catholic faith played an important role in his life.

"It keeps me from doing things that could keep me away from my goals. On Sundays, I go to church with my family and pray regularly, even in the morning before a race," he said in a 2019 interview with running.Coach, a blog for runners.

Kipchoge was the first human to break the two-hour marathon time, achieving a record time in a 2019 event in Vienna called the INEOS 1:59 Challenge. However, the record was not considered official as the event and its route had been constructed to help him break the barrier.

Sports analysts link the success of Kenya's long- and middle-distance runners to a mix of genetic endowment, upbringing and intensive training. Now, the athletes' faith is receiving attention as a possible contributor.

Patrick Makau Musyoki, a former world marathon record holder from Kenya, said coaches believe in talent, but it needs to be sharpened through hard work. He also said that for Christian athletes, faith in Jesus Christ drives them.

"We are able to train very well, but at the end of the day, for us to manage to go to a race and a winner to run the world record, we should have faith in God, who gave us the talent," Makau said. "And he helps you to keep on improving talent."

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Tuwei said religion also plays a role in terms of morals and keeps runners connected to God — the source of the talent.

"When I look at Sawe, it seems his talent is real — not acquired," he said

Br. Colm O'Connell, an Irish missionary and athletics coach often referred to as the "godfather of Kenyan running," said he was inspired to learn that Sawe received blessings from his priest before the race, but O'Connell cautioned that it had little to do with his victory.

"If that was the case, then marathon runners might spend more time in the church than on the road," he told RNS. "I think that God helps those who help themselves. So, you know, he gave you a talent, and then you have to get out and use it, and not hide it."

At the same time, he said, marathon performances and record-setting would continue to progress as training methods, including diet and technology, improve.

"It's 1 hour, 59 (minutes) now," O’Connell said. "Then it will be 1 hour, 58, and then it will be 1 hour, 57."