

# Kenyans See 'Hand of God' in Record-Breaking Marathon Run

The two-hour marathon barrier has finally been broken. As Eliud Kipchoge arrived back home in Nairobi on Wednesday (Oct. 16), citizens of his country pointed at a "hand of God" in his record-breaking, sub-two-hour run on Saturday in Vienna.

Kipchoge, a Roman Catholic, ran the 42.2 kilometers (26.2 miles) in 1:59:40 in the race dubbed "No Human Is Limited." He became the first runner in history to run the distance in under two hours. Later, the athlete compared the achievement to Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon in 1969.

"I am ... celebrating. I always celebrate in a calm and humane way," said Kipchoge, after quietly reentering the country.

The race has united the people in villages, towns and cities in Kenya and stirred religious responses in the East African nation, where more than 80% of the population are Christians.

"I think he made it by trusting in God that all is possible," Rev. Nicholas Makau, a Roman Catholic priest in Nairobi, told Religion News Service. "He seemed [to] challenge a widely held view that humanity is limited, but he has shown that when people try, they can succeed. I think he is a religious person by upbringing who was doing it for his belief."

The Rev. Wilybard Lagho, vicar general of the Mombasa Roman Catholic Archdiocese, followed the race from the coastal city of Mombasa.

"This means we can achieve more than we have always thought," said Lagho. "Faith contributes to the success of human beings in mysterious ways we may not be able to quantify. But I think Kipchoge knows how to balance between spiritual and physical ability."

The race has set a good example for humanity, said retired Anglican Bishop Julius Kalu of Mombasa, who keenly watched the race from the start.

“I was impressed by the pacesetters, who I think did a good job,” said Kalu, comparing their work to the call of Christians. “They supported Kipchoge to the end. This is what we should do as Christians—support each other in both good and bad times.”

Since the 1960 Rome Olympics, Kenyans have dominated long-distance running, from 800-meters to marathons, in the Olympics, World Cross Country Championships and the world road racing circuit.

The long-distance running success has often stirred debates, with analysts citing physical attributes, the food and an ingrained culture of running. Recently, some religious analysts have also thrown in faith and ethics.

“The runners need their faith for endurance and perseverance, whether in training or in the actual race,” said Kalu.

In April this year, Kipchoge told Running Coach, a blog for runners, that religion 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 I pray regularly, even in the morning before a race,” he said.

His latest race gripped the world as live coverage drew thousands of people to social and public places, including church centers in Kenya.

On Sunday, Kenyans went to church and thanked God for his achievement. They praised it as the work of a Christian role model.

Even before Kipchoge left Kenya, Christians converged in churches to pray for the success of the race.

The St. Paul's University Catholic Chapel at the University of Nairobi held special prayers for Kipchoge. The choir wore black and yellow T-shirts with inscriptions INEOS , the name of the challenge.

His elderly mother also watched with keen interest.

"I prayed and fasted for him so that he achieves what God had planned," Jane Rotich told the Kenyan newspaper The Standard soon after the race.

She said she had been waking up every morning at 3 a.m. to pray for her son.

Kipchoge, who even before this race held the world record in the marathon, is one of Kenya's most consistent marathon runners. He has participated in 11 marathons and won 10 of them, including the 2016 Olympic marathon. He has come oh-so-close to finishing several marathons in under two hours. In 2017, in Italy, he came within 25 seconds of the two-hour mark. And in Berlin in 2018, he was just 1 minute and 29 seconds over.

However, the record-breaking run in Austria on Saturday will still not count as a record. The "race" was designed specifically for Kipchoge and for the goal of finishing in under two hours. There were no other competitors in the run, the date was chosen for optimal weather and he was supported by a rotating team of pacesetters as well as a car that used lasers to show the best place to run. These advantages are not allowed during typical marathon running and will keep this achievement off any official records.

But, according to the runner, that was not his goal. He wanted, simply, to see if it could be done. In his tweet before the race, Kipchoge wrote: "I don't know where the limits are, but I would like to go there."

"I expect more people all over the world to run under 2 hours

after today,” he said after the race.

Kipchoge hopes to run in the Olympics in Tokyo next year and improve his world record—and perhaps, finally, get an official sub-two-hour marathon on the books. {eo}