

Twenty-six miles to go

For Ray Christensen, Sundays mean singing in the parish choir and running marathons

By Larry Nagengast
Special to The Dialog

If running is truly a religious experience, then the "Marathon Man" must have plenty of time for prayer.

Ray Christensen, a member of St. John the Beloved Parish, has dubbed himself Marathon Man, and, yes, he finds that the hours he devotes to training often provide him with "a good time to pray."

To train for a marathon, Christensen has to run five, 10, 15, sometimes 20 miles in a day. The running, he says, clears the problems of the day from his mind, and eventually his thoughts wander. "I do pray at times, but sometimes I have to seriously try to remember to pray," he says.

Christensen, 43, is also a member of the St. John the Beloved choir; through the parish's web site he made a standing offer about a year ago to fellow parishioners to help them train to run a marathon, that 26-mile-plus test of endurance. He hasn't found any takers yet.

A jewelry distribution supervisor for the QVC home shopping channel in West Chester, Pa., Christensen is a relative newcom-

er to long-distance running. For years, he jogged two miles about once a week. As he approached 40, he decided to make a concerted effort to stay in good physical condition. So, after running one lap (about 1.75 miles) around the Delcastle Recreation Area near his home, he stretched it to two laps, then three, and found out

On St. John the Beloved Parish's web site, Christensen has a standing offer to help fellow parishioners train to run a marathon. He hasn't had any takers so far.

that he enjoyed the running and was feeling better.

He started taking running seriously about the same time his father underwent shoulder-replacement surgery to overcome the debilitating effects of arthritis. Coincidentally, Christensen found that many chapters of the Arthritis Foundation, including the Philadelphia-based Eastern Pennsylvania Chapter, sponsor teams of marathon runners known as "Joints in Motion."

The teams, Christensen says, are open to anyone. Participants pledge to raise an amount set by

the foundation, which then provides a coach who gets the runners in shape for a marathon. Now that he's an experienced marathoner, Christensen will serve as a coach for any new Joints in Motion teams.

Christensen ran his first marathon with Joints in Motion in 2002, in Dublin, Ireland. Last year he completed the Anchorage, Alaska, marathon with Joints in Motion and ran the New York Marathon on his own. "As a native New Yorker, that was the most exciting," he says.

This year he ran in the Paris marathon in April and soon will begin training to run in the Chicago Marathon in October. In Paris, Christensen achieved his personal best time, 3 hours 31 minutes.

"There's another religious aspect to marathons," Christensen notes, "because they're usually held on Sundays." And that brings up a side benefit to Christensen's devotion to fitness. Before the New York Marathon he went to a Saturday night Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral. After the Paris marathon he attended Palm Sunday Mass at the Cathedral of Notre Dame.

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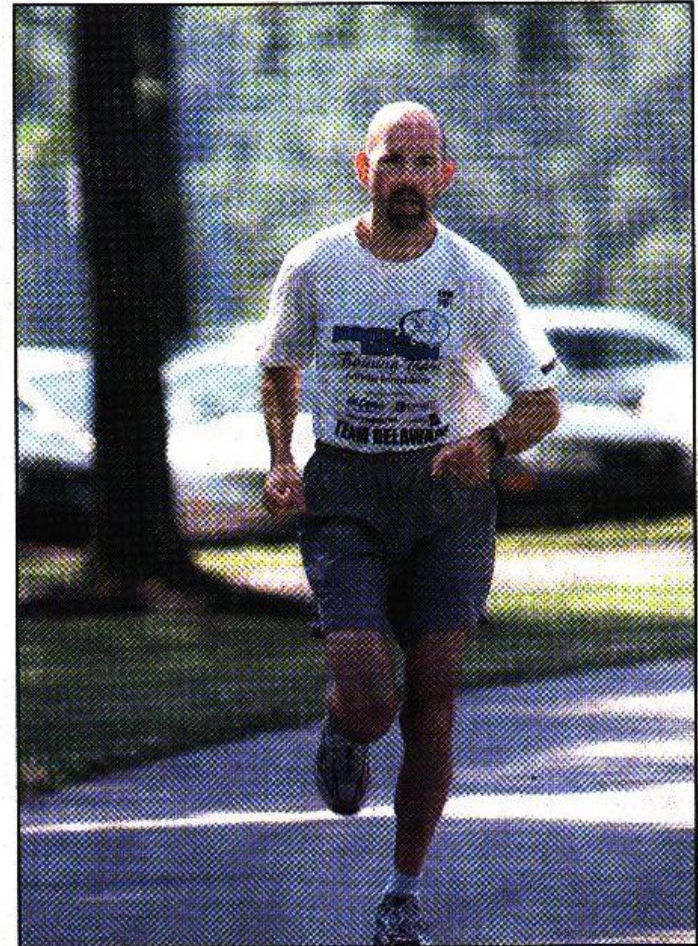


Photo by Chuck McGowen

Ray Christensen finds ways to tie his faith into his running, which will include the Chicago Marathon this October.

Marathoner: Exercise extends to voice, too

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Christensen does admit to soliciting contributions from his fellow choir members to support his running activities with Joints in Motion, but he says they don't mind. After all, he has become the choir's unofficial health-and-fitness adviser.

"Ray is very helpful," says Joe Ambrosino, St. John the Beloved's choir director, who notes that Christensen often leads the group in its warm-up exercises at the beginning of each rehearsal. "We do physical things, stretching and so on, to loosen up — back stretches, neck rolls, it's all delicate stuff."

Christensen has been singing much longer than he's been running. He has been a member of parish choirs since he was in grade school in the New York City borough of Queens.

The highlight of his choir career came in 1991, when he was part of a choir created by the Diocese of Oakland, Calif., for a pilgrimage to Rome. They sang at Mass at St. Peter's Basilica and at the Lateran Cathedral for all

For more info

For information about Ray Christensen and his running activities, go to www.attractweb.com/run.

For information about the Arthritis Foundation and its Joints in Motion program, go to www.afepa.org/jim or www.jointsinmotion.org.

Joints in Motion is sponsoring teams for a marathon (run or walk) or one-day hike in October in Dublin and in December in Hawaii, and for a marathon and half-marathon (run or walk) in January at Disney World. For information go to www.afepa.org or www.attractweb.com/run.

the bishops from East Germany on their first visit to Rome after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The trip featured one other special event, one that's memorialized in a keepsake photo: The choir got to sing "Happy Birthday" to Pope John Paul II.

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Marathon Man website:
<http://attractweb.com/run>

Arthritis Foundation (Eastern PA Chapter):
<http://afepa.org>

To donate: <http://rc.chariteam.com>

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Just do it!

In my age group (M 40-44), I need a time of 3 hours, 20 minutes to qualify for the Boston Marathon. That will require maximum effort and perfect conditions, not to mention prayer!