

Srs. Juliana Alfonso and Nicole Daly share a smile before starting their 13.1-mile half marathon in Naples, Florida, Jan. 14, wearing full habits. The two Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco, who are theology teachers at St. John Neumann High School in Naples, finished the race in 2 hours, 21 minutes. (OSV News/Nicole Daly/Courtesy of Salesian Sister of St. John Bosco)

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Not everyone can run a half-marathon. And it's probably a safe bet that even fewer can do so in a habit.

But in a January half-marathon in Naples, among runners dressed in tank tops, short running shorts or even shirtless were two consecrated women religious wearing white, long-sleeved habits and black athletic shoes.

And they crossed the finish line in 2 hours, 21 minutes, with smiles on their faces, cheered by family and students of St. John Neumann High School.

"This is never something I never thought I would ever do," Sr. Juliana Alfonso said in an interview with Florida Catholic Media. "This was not on my radar, but it was a beautiful experience. It was awesome how the community supported us. And the students were supportive and happy to see us at the race."

Sr. Nicole Daly is Alfonso's running buddy and fellow half-marathoner. The Barron Collier Companies Naples Half Marathon Jan. 14 was not the first big race for the Boston native, but she enjoyed running in her habit for the first time during a race to represent her community.

"For myself I thought I would have to give up running when I entered (the novitiate)," Daly said. "But the Lord has shown I don't have to give up the things I enjoy. I'm so grateful that my community is so supportive for me to be able to go for a run and stay healthy."

Alfonso and Daly are part of the community of Salesian Sisters St. John Bosco, also known as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Alfonso, who grew up in Brandon, professed her first vows in August. Daly, a native of Boston, professed her first vows in 2022.

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"God provided because it was supposed to rain during the race," Daly said. "He held up the rain. If it was muggier, the race would have been a lot harder."

The two became running buddies soon after Alfonso came to Naples after her profession. They were inspired to train for the half-marathon by community members, especially by Sr. Patricia Roche, who is principal of St. John Neumann. The younger religious serve as theology teachers and house moderators at the Naples Catholic high school.

"Sister Patricia was such a good encouragement for us," Alfonso said, especially on days the duo might have skipped training because of other responsibilities.

Their training started in the muggy months of summer 2023. They would try to run three days a week before morning prayer, which meant getting up before 4:30 a.m. On weekends, they had more flexibility and could take longer runs.

And did they train in their habits? You better believe it. But not just because they wanted to make sure they could run in the different types of "running gear," but also because the habits are part of who they are as consecrated religious. As Daly said, "We don't go anywhere without our habit."

"My entire life, every waking moment, is set apart for whatever the Lord wants me to accomplish," she continued. "Whenever I go to the supermarket, people come up to me with prayer requests. I represent Christ in his church, so, yeah, I guess all my energy is dedicated to his mission so why wouldn't I wear what I always wear anyways? There wasn't a question about wearing the habit while running."

While they worked to increase their run by a mile each week, life did get in the way — sickness, traveling, school trips. But that didn't stop them from competing. They were glad they had trained in "swampy" conditions. Yet, during the 13.1-mile run, there were times they hit a running "wall," where it seemed they could go no farther. Thankfully they had the Lord, family and students on their side.

"When I was starting to hit a wall, our students were there handing out water," Daly recalled. "They brought so much energy, and they were cheering us on. They were sharing it with everyone (on social media). They were just being themselves, and when I was hitting a wall, it was exactly the kind of motivation I needed to continue."



Sr. Nicole Daly, third from left, stands with her father, sister-in-law, brother, running buddy Sr. Juliana Alfonso and her mother. The Dalys traveled from Boston to witness the consecrated religious sisters compete in the Barron Collier Companies Naples Half Marathon Jan. 14. (OSV News/Nicole Daly/Courtesy of Salesian Sister of St. John Bosco)

Alfonso, a running novice, laughed as she recalled when she hit her wall — around mile seven. But she agreed seeing the students gave her a jolt to continue.

"The thing that I did not anticipate was the joyful reception we got from most of the other runners," she said. "People would smile and yell, ‘Go sister!' I didn't know what to expect because I'm a new sister. But I was joyfully received, and I'm happy to be

an image of Christ to them."

The duo, both self-described as late-stage millennials, hope to continue to be running buddies as they live in community together. Alfonso had started running with friends while she attended Georgia Tech in Atlanta. At first running served as an outlet for stress release, as well as one for companionship or camaraderie. But as her spiritual journey deepened, so did her reasons for running.

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"I began praying while I ran, then it helped me to allow my brain to be free to process what's going (on in my journey)," she recalled. "When my body is occupied and in motion, I can be really reflective and connect with God."

Daly embraced the running bug a decade ago after graduating from high school. She echoed Alfonso's description of running as a time for contemplation.

"When I run, it helps me to pray but specifically to understand the long game of my life," she said. "It takes me out of my worries — out of myself — and helps me remember where I'm going. Running is always an analogy to me of the race towards heaven. Some parts of life are harder to experience, and you have to push through them. Running is a reminder for me to keep pushing, especially through difficulties in life."