

From the Chapel – April 1: Hitting the wall



[“From the Chapel”](#) is a series of short, daily reflections on life and faith in a time of uncertainty. As people across the world cope with the effects of the coronavirus – including the social isolation necessary to combat its spread – these reflections remind us of the hope that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

Marathon runners talk about “hitting the wall.” It’s that point in the race – often around the 18-mile mark, but sometimes later – when the energy reserves in your body have been depleted, and you’re relying on the calories that you’re taking in as you run to get you all the way to mile 26.2. Most marathon training programs include nutritional advice to help you maximize those energy stores, and the tradition of carb-loading with a pasta dinner the night before the big race is, at its root, an attempt to give you what you need to power through the wall.

Having run four marathons, I can testify that hitting the wall isn’t a lot of fun. But the worst part about it is not the physical effects but the mental and spiritual challenge that it poses. After months of training, you’ve come to rely on yourself – and suddenly you realize that your ability to make it to the end of the race is no longer something you can control on your own.

I was 47 when I ran my first marathon, and I wasn’t prepared for the profound effect that hitting the wall would have on me. And by that I don’t mean simply what happened in the race. For the first time in my life, there on the streets of Chicago, I had a real metaphor for what I’d always experienced in the second to last week of Lent – the week before Palm

Sunday, known in the traditional calendar as Passion Week.

So here we are on the Wednesday of Passion Week 2020, and like clockwork, I've hit the wall. We're 11 days away from Easter (barely 10 days, really, counting to the beginning of the Easter Vigil Mass). But I. Just. Can't. Even. My Lenten sacrifices feel like millstones around my neck; I'm having trouble concentrating in prayer and spiritual reading; and knowing that we won't be in Sts. Peter and Paul on Holy Saturday night or Easter Sunday morning isn't helping, either.

This, as the Facebook meme goes, is the Lentiest Lent I've ever Lented.

But here's the thing. Remember when I said above that, when you hit the wall, suddenly you realize that your ability to make it to the end of the race is no longer something you can control on your own? That's even more true of Lent.

We've come this far – and for most of us, when we think about it, the circumstances of this year mean that this is farther than we usually come – and now it's time to give up. No, I don't mean to throw in the towel, to abandon our Lenten discipline, to decide it was all for nought. Rather, it's time to give up the illusion, born of pride, that we have been doing this on our own.

Just as we can't save ourselves – just as we need Christ to die for us on Good Friday so that we can rise with him on Easter Sunday – we can't humble our own pride and make our Lent a time of spiritual growth. Only Christ can do that for us.

When I hit the wall in my first marathon, my first thought was to go rest by the side of the road. I was headed over there when my second thought kicked in, and I began to pray. I couldn't form a coherent prayer in my own words, and so, for the last 6.2 miles, I prayed the Hail Mary and the Guardian Angel Prayer and the Jesus Prayer ("O Lord Jesus Christ, Son

of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”) over and over again.

When I crossed the finish line, I knew the victory wasn't mine but his. *Non nobis Domine*: Not to us, O Lord, but to you be the glory. Just as it will be when we cross the finish line of this Lentiest of all Lents, and enter into the joy of Easter.

Scott P. Richert is publisher of OSV.