In the late 1960s, screen actress Sally Field popularized the role of “The Flying Nun” on television. More than four decades later, Father Lukasz Willenberg of Bristol, associate pastor of St. Luke’s Roman Catholic Church of Barrington, is earning the moniker of “The Running Priest.”

Father Willenberg, 29, and a native of Ilawo, Poland (located in the northern region of the country, near the Baltic Sea), is fast making a name for himself in both the spiritual and athletic worlds. The affable priest is a widely popular member of the St. Luke’s community and one of three diocesan masters of ceremony to The Most Rev. Thomas J. Tobin, Bishop of Providence, as well as an accomplished runner and triathlon athlete in New England racing circles.

This Sunday (July 10), Father Willenberg will compete for the second straight year in the Amica Ironman 70.3 Rhode Island triathlon to be staged in the Providence area. The grueling three-stage contest will include a 1.2-mile swim at Olney Pond in Lincoln Woods; a 56-mile bicycle ride from Lincoln Woods to Providence via northern and western Rhode Island; and a 13.1-mile run through the streets of Providence, beginning and ending at The State House.

More than 1,000 athletes from all over the world are expected to compete Sunday. Michael Martone of Bristol is also an entrant.

“The distance is the challenge in a triathlon and it tests your strength of mind and character,” Father Willenberg said earlier this week during an interview at the St. Luke’s Church Rectory. “In a triathlon, you learn how strong you are physically and mentally.”

No one who knows Father Willenberg will ever question his personal strength and character. He rises daily by 5 a.m. and manages a practice regimen around his church and diocesan duties. While he usually trains alone, he also trains with fellow members of the Warren-based Fuel Belt Race Team.

“For me, training is about making time because my duties as a priest keep me busy,” Father Willenberg said. “I try to squeeze five-mile runs between Sunday Masses and weekday appointments. I also swim either at the Barrington YMCA or at outdoor beaches when the weather gets warmer, and I ride my bike every chance I get.”

Father Willenberg has become a prolific competitor as a runner and triathlon athlete. Among a host of other contests he has entered in recent years, he completed the Amica Ironman 70.3 last year in 5:02; placed second last September in the Male 25-29 Division at the Amica 19.7 Newport triathlon (featuring a 0.5-mile swim, 16.1-miles bike ride and 3.1-miles run) in 1:05.33; and in April, tackled arguably the most famous road race in the United States – the Boston Marathon – and navigated the 26-miles, 385-yards course in 3:01.25, good enough for a 10th place finish among all Rhode Island contestants.

“It was always a dream of mine to run in the Boston Marathon and I got the chance this year through the Rhode Island State Police,” Father Willenberg said. “It was a challenging race, but it was worth the sacrifice. There were 27,000 runners in the race and hundreds of thousands of spectators lining the course. The crowds carried me to the finish line.”

While awaiting Sunday’s triathlon, Father Willenberg said he has set his sights on an even more challenging endeavor.

“The dream of every triathlon athlete is to do a full Ironman of 140 miles,” he said. “I’d love to do one someday and I hope to get the opportunity.”

Father Willenberg said his motivation for engaging in strenuous physical activities is predicated on pushing the limits of his endurance.

“It’s not easy, but the satisfaction from finishing is great,” he said. “I think if you really want to try yourself – push yourself to the limits, find out how strong physically and mentally you are – do a triathlon. All triathlon and Ironman races are about strength, endurance, determination, perseverance and persistence, but also of overcoming your limits.”

Illustrating his faith in God and devotion to his vocation, Father Willenberg added: “If it hurts, it will only make you stronger. If it requires sacrifice, victory will be much sweeter. That’s my motivation in everything, in life as well as in sports.”

The son of Jan and Wanda Willenberg, Father Willenberg began his seminary training at the Major Seminary of Plock in Poland before journeying to SS. Cyril & Methodius Seminary in Orchard, Mich., where he completed his studies and was ordained a priest in 2008 in Providence.

As a seminarian, Father Willenberg served at both St. Luke’s Church and SS. John and Paul Church of Coventry. He was assigned to St. Luke’s as associate pastor by Bishop Tobin in 2008.

“I am blessed to be at St. Luke’s,” Father Willenberg said. “We have a wonderful pastor (Father Robert H. Hawkins), wonderful parishioners and are blessed to have St. Luke’s School.”

And St. Luke’s is blessed to have “The Running Priest.”