A firefighter near Las Vegas, N.M., works to combat the Hermits Peak and Calf Canyon wildfire

A firefighter near Las Vegas, N.M., works to combat the Hermits Peak and Calf Canyon wildfire May 4, 2022. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Mohatt)

Felicia Fonseca

View Author Profile

The Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 12, 2022
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Eileen Celestina Garcia raced down the mountain that overlooks her parents' ranch home in northern New Mexico where friends and family have gathered for decades and where she has sat countless times among the stillness of the Ponderosa pines.

A wildfire was raging and Garcia knew she had just minutes to reach her parents and ensure they evacuated in time. Her hands grazed the trees as she spoke to them, thinking the least she could do is offer them gratitude and prayer in case they weren't there when she returned.

"You're trying not to panic — maybe it's not real — just asking for miracles, asking for it not to affect our valley and stop," she said.

Like many New Mexico families, Garcia's is deep-rooted not only in the land but in their Catholic faith. As the largest wildfire burning in the U.S. marches across the high alpine forests and grasslands of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, many in its path have pleaded with God for intervention in the form of rain and calm winds, and

protection for their neighbors and beloved landscape.

They've invoked St. Florian, the patron saint of firefighters, the Virgin Mary as the blessed mother and the various patron saints of scattered villages. The fire has marched for several weeks across more than 262 square miles (678 square kilometers), destroying dozens of homes and forcing thousands of families to evacuate.

Advertisement

Favorable winds recently helped firefighters, but conditions are expected to worsen over the weekend, with consecutive days of red flag warnings. Forecasters warned of potentially historic conditions.

"There's not going to be any letup in these winds," said John Pendergrast, an air resource adviser on the fire.

During trying times, the largely Hispanic working-class neighborhoods here also rely on community and the lessons of those who came before them. Simply put, it's *querencia* — a love of home or attachment to a place.

Some described fleeing the wildfire and imagining the faces of their neighbors in the lush valleys who they've helped with baling hay, fixing cars or harvesting firewood.

"One of my neighbors described it as seeing the mountains around us burn is really like seeing a loved one burn," said Fidel Trujillo, whose family evacuated from the tiny town of Mora. "And I don't think that's any kind of exaggeration."

Religion is infused in homes across the mountains, where crosses hang above many doors. Elected officials and fire managers frequently credited prayer when winds calmed enough to allow firefighters to get a better handle on the blaze. They prayed even more when things got tough. Some started novenas, or nine-day prayers, and encouraged family and friends to join in.

The preservation of faith in this region was somewhat out of necessity. The Spanish settled the area centuries ago, but the Catholic Church as an institution was far away. Even now, deacons and priests rotate among the mission churches for Mass or to perform sacraments. People like Trujillo and his wife serve as mayordomos, or caretakers of those churches.



An electronic sign outside a business in Las Vegas, New Mexico, on Wednesday, May 4, 2022, asks passersby to "Pray for Rain" as a massive wildfire spreads in the nearby mountains. (AP/Thomas Peipert)

Also layered on the landscape are historic Spanish land grants, large ranches, traditional irrigation systems known as acequias, and *moradas*, which are meeting spaces for a religious brotherhood known as penitentes.

Prayer is intertwined in everything, Trujillo says, something that was passed down through generations. His dad has marked spots along hiking trails with crosses as a reminder to "pause, pray and give thanks," Trujillo said.

By the grace of God, he said, his father-in-law's ranch house in El Carmen survived the fire, and so did his childhood home in Ledoux. He's unsure about his current residence in Mora amid a valley prized for its Christmas trees.

"Sometimes when things are beyond your control, you have to lean on that faith," Trujillo said. "That's what faith is."

For many New Mexicans, regardless of where they live, the pull back home is strong.

Felicia Ortiz, president of the Nevada board of education, recently bought 36 acres (14.5 hectares) behind one of the mission churches to maintain roots in New Mexico. The land burned, but she's hopeful some trees remain.

Nearby at her childhood home in Rociada, she remembers stomping on the dirt to make adobe bricks and peeling logs her family harvested to build a barn. She and her sister skated on a frozen pond in the yard and sledded down the hills. They watched the full moon rise over a tree next to their playhouse as her dad played "Bad Moon Rising" on vinyl.



Crosses and religious quotes adorn the walls of Martina Gonzales' Las Vegas, New Mexico home on Tuesday, May, 3, 2022. (AP/Thomas Peipert)

Flames destroyed the house.

"I look at the pictures, and it looks like something out of a horror movie," Ortiz said. "The tree that I had a swing on, it's just a stick. The big piñon tree where we picked

piñon, it's like *palitos* (little sticks) now."

Las Vegas Mayor Louie Trujillo called northern New Mexicans physically, emotionally and spiritually strong — "a breed of our own." Many residents invoked the teachings and resilient spirits of their ancestors when offering up their homes to evacuees, feeding them, rescuing animals and starting fundraisers.

Garcia and her 9-year-old son, Leoncio, took refuge during the coronavirus pandemic at her parents' ranch in Sapello and haven't left. It's where her family milked cows and made cheese to sell to neighbors. It's where she sat among the trees overlooking the valley and dreamt about going to college and helping her family.

More recently, the trees gave her the solace she needed to write a chapter in a book about female trailblazers.

When fleeing, she grabbed pictures of relatives and a bag with religious items that she carried on a 100-mile (160-kilometer) pilgrimage she organized and walked for 10 years.

"If our ranch and our trees are still there, what I keep seeing is an opportunity to offer space for healing for folks to come and sit with the trees that they've lost," she said.