News
EarthBeat



While Canada is fighting wildfires from western Alberta province to eastern Nova Scotia, Fr. Gerald Mendoza (third from left) is on the frontlines of the battle in firefighter uniform. (OSV News/Courtesy of Gerald Mendoza)

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While Canada is fighting wildfires from western Alberta province to eastern Nova Scotia, at least one priest is on the frontlines of the battle in firefighter uniform.

Around 16,400 people had to evacuate their homes near Halifax, Nova Scotia's largest city, on May 29. Drier than normal weather conditions have already caused nearly 550 wildfires in the province — over 100 more wildfires than in 2022.

The blaze led officials to declare a local state of emergency in Halifax late May 28, according to the BBC.

Justin Trudeau, Canadian prime minister, tweeted May 29 that "the wildfire situation in Nova Scotia is incredibly serious," adding that he is "keeping everyone affected in our thoughts, and we're thanking those who are working hard to keep people safe."

Meanwhile, heavy rainfall throughout the province of Alberta over the Canadian long weekend May 20-22 potentially signaled a hopeful turning point in the effort to quell the 2023 wildfire state of emergency.

But it has been the tireless efforts of firefighters across the province that have supplied the most hope since the fires erupted in April during an abnormally dry spring for Alberta.



Large plumes of smoke rise from a wildfire raging in the Upper Tantallon area, as seen from Hubley, Nova Scotia, May 28 in this screen grab obtained from a social media video. (OSV News/Ben Britton via Reuters)

Among the more than 3,000 men and women combating the flames — including 2,900 firefighters from 17 agencies, many more from municipal and county emergency services, as well as 400 Canadian soldiers — is Fr. Gerald Mendoza.

Mendoza is the pastor at Our Lady of Assumption Parish in Chateh and St. Peter and St. Paul Church in Rainbow Lake, both located in Alberta province. These remote northern communities are nestled within a few miles of the Alberta border with British Columbia.

Mendoza, who has served within the Grouard-McLennan Archdiocese for over a decade, first became immersed in the 2023 wildfire battle at the beginning of May.

"On May 3, a fire started in Rainbow Lake, and we were asked to volunteer there," Mendoza told The Catholic Register in Toronto. "The following day we were asked to stand by. We thought we would be going to [Rainbow Lake] again, but nothing happened. We were asked for the next several days to remain on red alert."

Six days later, on May 9, there were two fires in Chateh, one of which was in front of the Dene Thà Community School, and the other was a bushfire.

"By 3 p.m., we were dealing with both fires at the same time," said Mendoza. "We worked to save the community. We ended the fire at 11 o'clock. The following day we examined if there were any spot fires and we found out that everything was clear."



Smoke from the Tantallon wildfire rises over houses in Bedford, Nova Scotia, May 28. (OSV News/Reuters/Eric Martyn)

The evening of May 13, Alberta Wildfire, a website that reports on the status and locations of wildfires and other information, called for the community of Chateh to evacuate because of the ongoing threat. Mendoza said that "day began calmly," but he detected potential trouble.

"Since I have a parish, I watered the lawn so in case there was a grassfire, it would not spread to the church. By 10 a.m. that day we began to see ashes falling from the

sky [accumulating] at half an inch. By 3 p.m., it was one inch and by 5 p.m., it was two inches. Our bishop asked me to secure my passport and all the church records. They are safe to this day in my car," Mendoza recalled.

"At 7 p.m., as I was on my way out of the community, I passed the fire hall and saw that two volunteers were there. I decided, 'Ah, I'll just stay put.' I decided to stay because I was the priest of the community, and I had no family living anywhere close to the area," he said.

Mendoza has continued to combat fires, including one May 19, in addition to completing duties around the fire hall, including watering the plants, hauling water, ensuring the generator in the school remains operational and feeding the dogs.

He first began volunteer firefighting in the town of High Level, Alberta, where he served from 2014 to 2018. He then served the fire detachment in Red Earth Creek, Alberta, from 2020 to 2023, before his current assignment in Chateh.

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Fr. Nel Esguerra, who serves as a volunteer firefighter in Peace River, inspired Mendoza because of how he stepped up to combat the 2011 Slave Lake wildfire.

"I saw the photos and I felt inspired that there is a need for us [priests] to be of service to the community," said Mendoza.

Though mindful of not appearing to be "showy," Mendoza said he tries to bring a "priestly presence" to the fire hall by praying the rosary in his firefighting gear.

There were 63 active wildfires as of May 30, and a total of 546 wildfires in Alberta for 2023. Alberta Wildfire calculated a total of 4,104 square miles of land burned as of the organization's last press briefing May 28.

A special air quality alert remains over most of Alberta, with smoke from the fires causing poor air quality and reduced visibility.