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## Man shot at church recovering; priest calls Massgoers' actions 'heroic'

by Marie Mischel by Catholic News Service

**Ogden, Utah** — James Evans is expected to recover after he was shot in the head Sunday while he and his wife were attending Mass at their home parish, St. James the Just in Ogden.

"He turned his head just at the right time. If he hadn't turned his head, he would have been hit in the back of the head and he would have been dead," said Tara Evans, his wife, during a news conference Monday at McKay-Dee Hospital Center, where James Evans is recovering.

Barbara Kerwin, the hospital's ICU medical director, said James Evans suffered no brain damage; the bullet entered near Evans' right ear and exited through his cheek. Eventually, he will need reconstructive surgery on his jaw and he will require rehabilitation to relearn to swallow and to speak, Kerwin said, but he was awake and communicating through gestures and by writing.

Charles Richard Jennings Jr., the Evans' son-in-law, was arrested in connection with the shooting. Police say they do not know the motive behind the shooting, but they have received reports of domestic violence in the home of Jennings and his wife, the Evans' daughter.

During the news conference, Fr. Erik Richtsteig, St. James the Just pastor, said the shooting occurred just before the eucharistic prayer. He saw the shooter enter the church, though he said he did not see a weapon. He looked down at the altar, then heard the shot. When he looked up, the shooter had left the church.

Jennings allegedly commandeered a vehicle at gunpoint and drove north. The vehicle ran out of gas, and he was located on Interstate 84, said Ogden Police Lt. Danielle Croyle. He was arrested and booked into the Webster County Jail.

At his arraignment Tuesday, Jennings was charged with attempted murder. He also faces two counts each of aggravated burglary and aggravated robbery and possession of a firearm by a restricted person. As a convicted felon, Jennings was prohibited from possessing a gun. Bail was set at \$105,000.

At the church right after the shooting, "we made sure that Jim was taken care of and the people were OK and the crime scene was preserved, then we started up Mass again," said Richtsteig, a family friend of the Evans' and godfather to one of their grandchildren. "I'm really proud of my parishioners. Their first response was to help Jim, help Tara, and then they were praying. What more can you ask of people?"

Many parishioners acted heroically during the shooting, Richtsteig said, including a teenager who was right next to the Evanses. "Her first response wasn't to freak out or anything; she grabbed her little brother, she shoved him down, and then she ducked down," he said. "There are tons of stories like that. The way people responded was amazing."

Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City, who was out of the state Sunday, called Richtsteig and also spoke with Tara Evans, the priest said. The bishop asked Richtsteig to ensure that psychological counseling has been made available to those affected by the shooting.

"We are appalled by the shooting," the bishop said in a statement. "Any violence against human life is reprehensible and even more so when it occurs in a place of worship."

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"We are grateful to God that James Evans, who was badly wounded, is expected to recover. We also are proud of the St. James the Just parishioners, who in some cases risked their own lives while helping others at the Mass, and who have reached out to those most affected by the violence," Wester said.

He asked for prayers for "God's healing for James Evans, his family and those who witnessed the tragic event as well, as the perpetrator and his family."

"I pray that the Sacred Heart of Jesus will be a source of healing and grace for all of us as we seek to move beyond the tragic events of Sunday," he added. "Our churches are safe places, and we will continue to celebrate in them without fear."

"People are rattled, including me," Richtsteig said. "There were quite a few children at the Mass and they're the ones that we're most concerned about. ... We've got some kids who are afraid to go to church."

At the news conference, Tara Evans thanked all the people who have been praying for her husband and their family. "That means the most to us," she said.

James and Tara Evans had just returned June 14 from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land led by Richtsteig, who said their guide, a Palestinian Christian, learned of the shooting and arranged for a Monday Mass for James Evans at the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth.

During the trip, the Evanses had renewed their wedding vows at the Church of Cana, Richtsteig said.

St. James the Just Church does not need to be reconsecrated, but the priest said he planned to celebrate an evening liturgy of reparation Thursday to "pray for healing, and that all evil will be expunged from the church," he said. "We're not going to let the bad guys win."

[Marie Mischel is editor of the *Intermountain Catholic*, newspaper of the diocese of Salt Lake City.]

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