

Two Bomb Blasts in New Mexico Churches Rattle Believers

Explosions about a half hour apart shattered the serenity of morning services at two Las Cruces churches Sunday, but caused no injuries and only minor damage, police said.

Las Cruces police spokesman Dan Trujillo said they are still investigating explosions that happened near Calvary Baptist Church shortly after 8 a.m. and Holy Cross Catholic Church about a half hour later.

The first explosive device went off at about 8:20 a.m. in a mailbox on a wall near the administrative entrance to Calvary Baptist. According to police, several worshippers were inside the church at the time, but services hadn't started.

Debris was scattered around the mailbox. "Right now, there's just a lot of paper shreds," Las Cruces police Sgt. Robert Gutierrez said Sunday morning.

The next blast came from a trash can outside Holy Cross Catholic at about 8:40 a.m. as Monsignor John Anderson was helping pass Communion. The bomb exploded just outside the front glass doors, shattering the thick glass.

"I was right in the middle of saying the words 'take and eat, this is my body' and there was a 'pow!' I mean, I knew it had to be more than a gunshot," Anderson said. "It didn't know if it was a shotgun blast, I didn't know what. But it was very loud and I just kept on saying the words."

Ann Marie Sullivan, a college student and lifelong parishioner at Holy Cross, described it. "It sounded like something had fallen off and shattered the glass in the back."

Sunday services for later in the day were cancelled at both

churches as police blocked off the streets to allow bomb-sniffing dogs to search the premises.

The Dona Ana County Sheriff's Office Bomb Squad, New Mexico State Police, and an NMSU canine unit are all assisting in the investigation, as are federal officials with the FBI and ATF, Trujillo said.

"It was a real bomb, I saw all the parts," said Cavalry Baptist member Dennis Llewellyn, who said he was outside the church when the explosive went off. Llewellyn said he was a former special forces member with the Marines and recognized bomb parts that included an Eveready battery. He and fellow church member Mike Stewart kept churchgoers arriving for the 8:30 a.m. service from going into the building during the five to 10 minutes it took for police to arrive. Stewart was the one to notice the debris and damaged mailbox, the two men said.

Llewellyn described the explosion as loud, and Stewart, who was inside, said it shook the building. Llewellyn said there were about 30 people inside the building when the explosion occurred.

Trujillo said police could not say at this time what types of explosives were used, or if the two blasts were caused by similar devices. Nor was there information yet as to possible motives.

"Just the fact that they were at churches the same day a half an hour apart or so, that leads us to believe it could be something related," he said.

A local faith group planned to hold a vigil Sunday evening at Pioneer Women's Park in Las Cruces.
