

Case of dismissed Catholic professor is under review

WASHINGTON - A University of Illinois faculty committee is reviewing the dismissal of a Catholic adjunct professor of religion after a student complained about the instructor's explanation of the church's teaching that homosexual acts are morally wrong.

The review comes after Kenneth Howell, the professor who also directed the Institute of Catholic Thought at the St. John's Catholic Newman Center at the university, said he was told after the spring semester he would no longer be teaching two courses on Catholicism even after offering to change the content of the class in question.

Howell's dismissal followed a complaint from a student, writing on behalf of another student in the "Introduction to Catholicism" class who wanted to remain anonymous, to Robert McKim, head of the religion department. The complaint said the professor's May 4 e-mail to students explaining the morality of homosexual acts amounted to "hate speech."

With the loss of the teaching position, Howell also lost his Newman Center position. His salary was paid by the Diocese of Peoria, Ill., and his position at the Newman Center was dependent on teaching the courses.

Attorney Patricia Gibson, chancellor for the Diocese of Peoria, which is Howell's employer, could not be reached for comment.

University Chancellor Bob Easter asked the Faculty Senate Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure to review Howell's case July 12, according to Robin Neal Kaler, the university's associate chancellor for public affairs. He asked that the review be completed before the start of classes Aug. 23.

Howell, who began teaching Introduction to Catholicism and Modern Catholic Thought in the university's religion department in 2001, declined comment and referred questions to the Alliance Defense Fund, a Scottsdale, Ariz.-based nonprofit

Christian legal defense organization specializing in religious liberty, sanctity of life and protection of family issues.

Attorney Jordan Lorence told Catholic News Service July 14 that Howell's dismissal was wrong.

Describing Howell's comments as conservative in nature, Lorence said they accurately reflected Catholic teaching and are protected under academic freedom standards.

"Universities are supposedly places of free inquiry and debate and (university officials) operated as if the University of Illinois was a suffocating institution where the prevailing orthodoxy will stifle all dissent," Lorence said.

The defense fund's legal team sent a letter to university officials July 12 asking that Howell be reinstated immediately. The letter clarified Howell's contention that students "did not need to adopt Catholic beliefs in order to succeed in class" and that "his goal was for them to understand and critically analyze Catholic thought."

The letter also outlined a meeting Howell had with McKim to discuss the dismissal as well as subsequent offers by the professor to alter his course content to eliminate all references to homosexual conduct to preserve his teaching position. However, according to the letter, McKim told Howell a "higher official" within the university told him that the Catholic professor would no longer be able to teach classes and that a search had begun for a new instructor.

Since then, the letter added, The Associated Press reported that Associate Dean Ann Mester explained that the university discontinued Howell's teaching assignment because his e-mail "violate(s) university standards of inclusivity."

Lorence said the organization asked the university to respond by July 16.

McKim was out of the country and could not be reached for comment.

The News-Gazette in Champaign, Ill., reported that in the e-mail message to students before an exam, Howell explained the differences in how utilitarianism theory and natural law theory would judge the morality of homosexual acts.

“Natural moral law says that morality must be a response to REALITY,” the e-mail said. “In other words, sexual acts are only appropriate for people who are complementary, not the same.”

Howell continued, saying that society had disassociated sexual activity from morality and procreation, a contradiction of natural law.

While declining to discuss specifics of the case because it is a personnel matter, Kaler told Catholic News Service July 14 that academic freedom is vital to the university’s operation.

At the same time, she said, “a department needs to have the ability to decide who teaches its classes.”

“Adjuncts should not have an expectation to be employed beyond (their) contract,” Kaler added.

She said the university is committed to offering the classes in the future. “Right now it’s not determined who’s going to teach the courses,” she said.

Since the dismissal, Howell’s supporters have established a Facebook page, “Save Dr. Ken.” As of July 14, the site had nearly 2,600 members.

Howell, a former Presbyterian minister who became Catholic in 1996, was cited for receiving outstanding ratings from students in the fall 2009 semester in a recent religion department newsletter.

The Alliance Defense Fund’s letter to the University of Illinois can be found at www.telladf.org/UserDocs/HowellLetter.pdf.