

Catholic professor reinstated by University of Illinois for fall term

WASHINGTON - A Catholic professor barred from teaching courses on Catholicism after he defended in class the church's teaching on homosexual behavior has been reinstated by the University of Illinois.

Kenneth Howell, an adjunct professor in the university's religious studies department, learned of the decision July 29. He did not return phone calls from Catholic News Service seeking comment.

The reinstatement came days after a deadline for suing the university set by the Alliance Defense Fund, which had taken on Howell's case.

Based in Scottsdale, Ariz., the alliance is a nonprofit Christian legal defense organization specializing in religious liberty, sanctity of life and protection of family issues.

Attorney Jordan Lorange, part of the alliance's legal team working on Howell's case, told CNS the university's decision came as a surprise. He charged that the university had violated Howell's First Amendment right of free speech by firing him.

"The matter is resolved for the moment and we'll be watching to make sure this is a long-term resolution to the matter," Lorange said, noting that Howell's teaching status for the spring semester is unknown.

Howell was dismissed in May following the spring term after a student described as "hate speech" his explanation of the church's teaching that homosexual acts are morally wrong.

The reinstatement was announced in a press release from Robin Neal Kaler, the university's associate chancellor for public affairs. The release said Howell will be on the university's payroll when he teaches "Introduction to Catholicism" this fall.

Since he began teaching at the university in 2001, Howell had been paid by the

Diocese of Peoria, Ill. The teaching assignment was part of his responsibilities as director of the Institute of Catholic Thought at the St. John's Catholic Newman Center on campus.

Howell also taught a class called "Modern Catholic Thought." The status of that class is unknown.

The reinstatement appears to be temporary. A faculty committee continues to review Howell's dismissal to determine if his academic freedom or right to due process were violated.

Another faculty committee studying how Howell was paid concluded that the arrangement between the university and the Newman Center was inappropriate.

"The university values its relationship with the Newman Center and plans to continue offering courses in Catholic studies," the release said.

When Howell was let go by the university, he also lost his job at the Newman Center because the position was dependent on teaching the courses.

Howell's dismissal led to a campaign by students and alumni to reinstate him to the position. Supporters established a Facebook page, Save Dr. Ken, which had gained more than 5,000 followers.

While posters on the site were pleased by the reinstatement, many voiced caution that the university made no commitment to keeping him on staff beyond the fall term.