

National/International Report

Father Curran files civil suit against Catholic University

By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — Moral theologian Father Charles E. Curran has filed a civil lawsuit to overturn The Catholic University of America's January decision to suspend him from all teaching.

Father Curran, a priest of the Diocese of Rochester, was told by the Holy See last summer that he is not suitable or eligible to teach as a Catholic theologian after he refused to recant his dissenting views in such areas of sexual ethics as birth control, homosexuality, divorce and abortion.

On sabbatical at the time, he was supposed to resume teaching in January. But he was suspended while awaiting results of an internal academic review of an order withdrawing his license to teach on the ecclesiastical faculty of the university's theology department.

Archbishop James A. Hickey of Washington, chancellor of the university, initiated both the withdrawal of Father Curran's ecclesiastical teaching license and the interim suspension order.

In his lawsuit, filed in District of Columbia Superior Court on Friday, February 27, and released to the press on Monday, March 2, Father Curran said the suspension was a "breach of contract" that bypassed due process and denied him his rights as a tenured professor under university statutes.

He asserted that the suspension has denied him a professor's right to interact with his students and caused harm to his "professional standing and reputation" in the

academic community.

University spokeswoman Anne Smith said the university had no comment. "We don't comment on matters in litigation," she said.

Father Curran asked the D.C. Superior Court to order the university to let him resume teaching theology courses for students working for civil degrees.

He also asked the court to issue a declaratory judgment that Archbishop Hickey's authority over him extends only to teaching in ecclesiastical-degree courses, and that the suspension from teaching courses for civil degrees was a breach of contract.

He asked the court to award damages as it sees fit, including recovery of his legal costs for the suit.

"I am simply asking the court to make Catholic University live in accord with its own regulations," Father Curran said.

At the heart of the legal dispute over Father Curran's suspension are two different interpretations of special university statutes governing ecclesiastical-degree programs in the theology department. The statutes say that those norms do not affect the department in its non-ecclesiastical — or civil-degree — programs.

Professors on ecclesiastical faculties of the university must have a "canonical mission" or Church license to teach. This license is granted by the chancellor and bishop-trustees of the university, acting in the name of the Holy See. Professors on non-ecclesiastical faculties are not governed by those rules and do not need licenses.

In suspending Father Curran, Archbishop Hickey contended that, although the theology department offers two different kinds of degree programs, it has only one faculty body, which is ecclesiastical. Anyone on that faculty must have the Church's teaching license, the archbishop said.

Father Curran contended that, since three-fourths of the degree students in the department are working for civil degrees, it is

possible for a teacher without the ecclesiastical license to remain active on the faculty, offering courses for credit only in the civil-degree programs.

By denying him a right to teach even courses for civil degrees, Father Curran said, "Archbishop Hickey has acted beyond his power and authority as chancellor of the university."

Buffalo priest found stabbed to death

Buffalo (NC) — The central-city vicar of the Diocese of Buffalo was found slain in his parish rectory Feb. 24.

Father A. Joseph Bissonette, 55, pastor of St. Bartholomew Catholic Church, was stabbed to death, according to James Jackson, chief of the Buffalo police homicide bureau.

The body was discovered by another priest when he returned home at 11:30 p.m., a diocesan official said.

As of Tuesday, March 3, police had no suspects in the case. The investigation is still underway, a police spokesman said.

In a statement Feb. 26, Bishop Edward D. Head of Buffalo said Father Bissonette's "tragic and untimely death ... emphasizes once again the sacredness and value of human life as a gift from God."

He said the priest "committed himself and

his priestly ministry to defending and safeguarding all of life, particularly the lives of the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the refugee, and all those struggling for true justice and lasting peace."

As vicar of the central city, it was Father Bissonette's task to coordinate efforts of inner-city parishes and to establish a diocesan office for black Catholics.

Father Bissonette attended Buffalo's Canisius High School and Canisius College, both Jesuit-run schools. He obtained a master's degree in religious education from Loyola University of Chicago.

Ordained in 1958, he completed his seminary training at Christ the King Seminary in Olean.

Father Bissonette was appointed pastor of St. Bartholomew in 1980. In December, 1986, he was named vicar of the central city.

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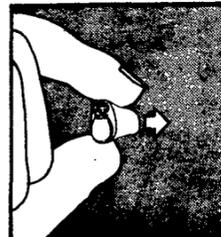
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