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Presentation Critique

“Gender flourishing is the idea that our experience of gender in our bodies is graced.”

This is how Dr. Brianne Jacobs defined gender flourishing in her presentation entitled “Engaging the Catholic Tradition, Moving Toward Gender Flourishing.” It was part of St. Norbert’s Coming Out Week and took place on October 17th in the Cassandra Voss Center. Dr. Jacobs is a professor at Emmanuel College in Boston and studies feminist theology with the intention of working toward gender justice and flourishing in the Catholic Church. Her presentation was about the actions that need to be taken in order to reach gender flourishing. She discussed topics related to science, such as genetics, endocrinology, and neurology, and she also discussed topics related to religion, such as grace and current Catholic teachings. Her overall message was that everyone and all of our relationships are graced and that our bodies are sacred. Using scientific fact, she explained that a strict gender binary does not exist. Therefore, the Catholic Church should be accepting of all gender identities and sexualities. Although there were aspects of her presentation that could be improved upon, Dr. Jacobs’ speech had many strengths and was extremely informative and enjoyable to listen to.

First, I would like to discuss the weak spots of Dr. Jacobs’ presentation. I honestly do not think I would have noticed these things if I was not specifically looking for them, meaning they were not distracting to the presentation, but I do believe the presentation could have been even

better if these weak spots were strengthened. To me, one of the most noticeable weaknesses was that Dr. Jacobs read her entire speech from a script. This affected her verbal communication because she would sometimes pause in the middle of a sentence to turn the page, making certain points hard to understand clearly due to that break in her speech. She probably had over twenty pages of material to read through, and because she was reading from a script, I did not feel as engaged as I could have if she was only reading from an outline. I believe this is due to the fact that as her presentation went on, Dr. Jacobs made eye contact with the audience less and less. I found myself zoning out a little bit at the points in the speech where she would be directly reading from her script. I definitely think having an outline instead of a script would have helped the flow of her presentation, and she would have been able to engage the audience with more eye contact.

The second big weakness of Dr. Jacobs' presentation was that she stood behind a podium for the duration of her speech. I could see how her lack of movement could cause a problem for some members of the audience based on how the room was set up. The room was not set up in rows of chairs like a traditional presentation setting. Instead, there were circular tables set up throughout the room, and the podium was on the far left side. Even though I could clearly see Dr. Jacobs for the entire presentation, I know this was not the case for certain other audience members. Some audience members' views were certainly blocked because of how the room was arranged, and since Dr. Jacobs did not move from her spot behind the podium, those members were unable to view her for the entire presentation. This almost definitely had an effect on overall audience engagement. I would definitely recommend that Dr. Jacobs should utilize the entire space of the room to make sure that she can be seen by everyone in order to engage them more effectively.

There were a number of strengths in Dr. Jacobs' presentation, but I would say that the biggest one was her vocal inflection. She was a very interesting speaker to listen to because of the emotion she had in her voice. It was so easy to know when to laugh or when she was moving into a more serious point just by the tone of her voice. Dr. Jacobs used a lot of sarcasm in her speech, which I loved, but the great part about this is that it was very obvious whenever she was being sarcastic. She utilized air quotes and other nonverbal techniques to ensure that the audience was clear about her use of sarcasm. Along with her vocal inflection, I really enjoyed how clear Dr. Jacobs was about the purpose of her speech and what she was going to be talking about. She specifically said, "The purpose of this speech is..." "This is important because..." and "I will be talking about..." Because of this specificity, her entire presentation was incredibly easy to follow and understand. It was really nice to know exactly what she was going to be talking about and in what order.

Another huge strength of Dr. Jacobs' presentation was the content and the way in which the content was presented. As I mentioned previously, one section of her presentation was devoted to discussing science. As an English and Communication major, I do not have a great background in topics such as neurology and endocrinology, but Dr. Jacobs did a great job of making the information easy to understand for people like me. She seemed to have a great understanding of who her audience was and how to tailor her presentation to us. Another aspect of the content that I enjoyed was her transitions. It was incredibly clear when she was transitioning into a new point or subpoint, and with some of the more complex material, her transitions were very helpful. I also enjoyed being able to visibly see the transitions on Dr. Jacobs' PowerPoint (that she made great use of). Some of the quotes she said from other scholars or from scripture were long, and it was really nice to be able to read along with what she was

saying. I liked how each slide of her PowerPoint still included the heading of the overall main topic she was talking about. All of these strengths enhanced the quality and clarity of her presentation and made it enjoyable to listen to.

All in all, Dr. Jacobs' presentation on moving toward gender flourishing in the Catholic Church was very informative and relevant. The two biggest things she could work on to engage the audience even more are using an outline instead of a script and moving around the room more. These two things would allow more opportunities for eye contact and gestures, which would ultimately make for a more interesting and polished presentation. The biggest strengths of Dr. Jacobs' presentation were her vocal inflection and the content of her speech. The way that she changed the pitch and strength of her voice during different moments in her presentation was very appropriate and necessary from an audience member's point of view. The consistent modifications she made to her voice made it seem that she was confident in the material she was presenting and that she was comfortable presenting it. Dr. Jacobs had a great understanding of her audience and accurately presented the information in such a way that we could comprehend the material without having background knowledge in those subjects. Overall, Dr. Jacobs' presentation was informative and moving, two traits that make for a good presentation.