

St. Norbert Theology Department Hosts “Communio Means All”

By: Gracelyn Giese

On Thursday, Nov. 21, students, staff, faculty, community members and members of the press attended “Communio Means All: A Discussion of Gender Identity at SNC,” sponsored by the Theology and Religious Studies Department.

The event, held in response to announcements by the college regarding gender identity and expression, was kicked off by student speaker Scotlyn Roemhild. Roemhild notified those in attendance that Mission and Heritage refused an invitation to the event. Violet Hagan, a queer and two-spirit student, read the land acknowledgement statement before passing the microphone along to first-year Milana Lutes.

Lutes, who is both queer and Christian, shared the difficulties between these two identities she felt at a young age. “I felt as if I had been made broken,” she continued, “I felt lost, insecure and utterly alone.” Now a student at St. Norbert College, Lutes said that “this is not the environment I was promised,” stating that St. Norbert is widening the chasm between the queer and Christian communities.

However, Lutes has hope for a brighter future, “I believe that as a whole SNC is a community built on love, unity and support,” she finished her speech, “we are stronger together than we ever would be apart.”

Dr. Bridget Burke Ravizza, Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, served as the moderator of the event and introduced the panel of speakers. The lineup included Cassidy Catalano, a Senior in Theater Studies and trans-fem student, Dr. Joe Totman, Director of Residential Education and Housing Director, Craig Ford, Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Studies and Abigail Swetz, Director of Fair Wisconsin.

Catalano reflected on the frustration she shares with many students regarding changes not being discussed and coming up abruptly. She voiced her thoughts on the gender-related changes

that have occurred on campus, “Instead of trying to push [LGBTQ+ students] away when they are in the middle of a financial crisis, why not welcome us?”

Next, Dr. Totman described the process through which students with gender or sexuality-related concerns can learn about housing options. He shared that on the housing application students can select an option to learn about gender inclusive housing. Dr. Totman and his team then reach out to students on a case-by-case basis to put together housing groups that make everyone feel supported. Dr. Totman shared “I want [students] to feel safe and welcome in campus housing,” and reminded the students to check their emails for housing updates.

Afterwards, Dr. Ford shared some information about the work he does studying the intersections of the Catholic moral tradition, queer studies and black studies. He then explained what the official Catholic teachings on gender and sex are. The Catholic Church teaches Gender Essentialism, which is God’s intention that human bodies come in one of two types, male or female. However, Catholic teaching states that all forms of gender transitioning are problematic because it is a rejection of a gift from God.

Dr. Ford identified a few theological problems with these teachings, “Why do we have to see transitioning as usurping God?” He also notes that transgender people were not consulted regarding these teachings and that there is no definition to the ‘gender theory’ that the Church critiques.

As far as changes at St. Norbert goes, Dr. Ford said that *Dignitas Infinitas*, the document the school is using as basis for their changes, does not mandate any policy changes occur at Catholic colleges. Dr. Ford said that these changes are not happening at other Catholic institutes currently either.

Finally, Abigail Swetz provided some information regarding the new updates to Title IX. These new updates include added protection against gender and sexual orientation discrimination. Despite actions being taken in courts across the country, Wisconsin federal courts have extended gender-related protections since 2019. Swetz urged students to continue advocacy

work, “You can always do the right thing without a law telling you to honor someone’s humanity.”

Following the panel, the members took time to answer questions before breaking off into individual conversations.

The event concluded with students Abigail Prudlow and Kayla Clark encouraging attendees to write down their thoughts and concerns on a large board, which was then marched across campus by students to the front doors of Main Hall. Some students remained at the Cassandra Voss Center to conduct interviews with NBC 26 as campus security prevented a camera man from entering the event.

Speaker Scotlyn Roemhild closed the event with a personal message, “Prayer without dialogue and action is only a wish.”