

Human Dignity in a Throw-Away Society: *Evangelii Gaudium*, The De-growth Perspective & The Social Quality Approach

An Expert's Seminar

The Faculty of Social Sciences at the Angelicum promoted an expert seminar under the title *Human Dignity in a Throw-Away Society: Evangelii Gaudium, The De-growth Perspective & The Social Quality Approach* on March 16 2015. The main speakers and topics were as follows: Alejandro Crosthwaite, (Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas): *Evangelii Gaudium: Pope Francis' Reflexions on Human Dignity & the "Throw-Away Society"*; Peter Herrmann (Corvinus University): *The Social Quality Approach*; Stefan Brunnhuber (European Academy of Sciences & Arts): *The De-Growth Perspective*.

Several scholarship holders from the student body of our Faculty also made short contributions. Some of them are reproduced below in the section entitled "SPAZIO APERTO / OPEN SPACE".

Indigenous minorities in the Russian North, Siberia and the Far East

Varvara Slivkina

My background is in cultural anthropology and ethnic sociology. One of the lines of work of the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnic Sociology in the State University of St Petersburg, where I have been studying until last September and where I will return to work after completing my studies in Rome, is based on work with people living in different (distinct) environmental and cultural settings. Among them are indigenous peoples. The goal of this work is to promote public discourse about the problem of keeping local identity alive amidst the processes of social transformation.

The indigenous minorities are the native ethnic groups of Russia, living in the Russian Far North (Russian Arctic North) and in officially-recognised equivalent territories located in the European Russian North and in Siberia. They are minority groups in very marginal environments with extremely hostile living conditions. They live in "peripheries", more than 4 hours by plane from Moscow,

under the pressure of the economic and industrial exploitation of the deposits of natural resources to be found in these areas.

Our university research team has only basic information about their everyday life. They are family groups. Most of them are nomadic people. Their traditional economic activities are reindeer herding, hunting and fishing. There are about 5 or 7 members in each family.

Most of them face a huge number of problems. For a start, the Russian government only provides a minimal level of social services in those regions. Schools, hospitals, maternity clinics and the like are located in the urban administrative centers, and these are often far from the villages of the indigenous people. The federal agencies are also under-represented and local government structures are deprived of their autonomy. The other problem is that existing infrastructure does not provide communication between federal centers and the periphery. It means that

travelling from the periphery to the center is very expensive and time-consuming. Therefore, people are almost “blockaded” into their historical territories. This applies especially to such regions as Krasnoyarsk krai and Taimyr.

In such situation the children often are educated in state boarding schools away from their families, and so are immersed in a form of education is based on the values, visions and priorities of the dominant Russian culture. Learning native languages, for instance, is practically impossible. These peoples, therefore, are involved in a long process of assimilation, which in this case also means “russification”.

Another aspect of this situation arises from the current model of Russian economic development, based as it is on the export of raw materials. The energy sector accounts for approximately two-thirds of Russian exports. Most of the important resources are located in the Russian North and in Siberia, where the traditional territories of many of these minorities are to be found. The expansion of the gas and oil industry, for instance, has reduced the pastures available to the reindeer,

partly because these communities are not able to acquire ownership of their traditional hunting and fishing grounds, pastures or agricultural land. In Russian legislative practice the law does not guarantee rights to this kind of ownership. In this case is important to say that in international legislation, the indigenous peoples and communities have rights to self-determination and autonomy, including land rights.

The example of such group could be “entsi”. They are a traditionally nomadic people of the Russian North. Today they number only 130 people. Their traditional economic base has been destroyed by the process of industrialization. In the 1990s, about half their population was unemployed, and they are faced with major social problems such as alcoholism, violence and poverty. Their life expectancy is a mere 45 years.

The nomadic peoples have proverbs such as: “the fire never ends”, meaning: “life goes on” (fire is a very important symbol in the North). In such a context, inclusion does not only mean helping indigenous people to survive from day to day, but also opening up opportunities for them to live fuller lives.