**International Confederation of the**

**Apostolate of the Suffering (CVS)**

**International General Assembly**

**October 15-16, 2021**

**“Converting Peter Pan: Creating an Envisioning Culture”**

**By**

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**Introduction**

As I begin my meditation, I would like to extend to each of you a cordial greeting through the following words that I really admire from Francesco Cataluccio’s *Immaturity: The Illness of our Times:*

“Adults have disappeared like the in-between seasons and fireflies. There remain only the elderly and children who act like adults. Children are forced to grow out of their childhood at an early age, and the elderly act like children. Each role associated with a particular age group has disappeared, and thus it has become quite easy to infringe upon the rules. Instead of having mature individuals, we find ourselves with immature babies: adults acting like children who have never grown up and who see life as a game. Their lives are a parody of wasting time. . . .It is quite evident that the 20th century has been a time when immaturity has triumphed: the Peter Pan Century. The Child Cult has transformed and radicalized adults to live as eternal children: to ‘think young,’ ‘to dress young.’ The child is the role model of the ideal person.”

Since the theme of your International General Assembly is *Healing the World,* it seems to me that I could not avoid talking about this illness: immaturity, that is simply and appropriately called the *Peter Pan Syndrome.* According to James Matthew Barrie, Peter Pan simply does not want to grow up. However, today the Peter Pan adults not only do not want to grow up, but they do not let anyone around them grow up. This is appreciated by today’s economic and cultural system that leads us. The market needs Peter Pan.

Now how can we heal the world if we do not focus directly on this question? Maybe we should ask ourselves if it isn’t time to profoundly heal the true virus that affects and crucifies our world. It is that toxic individualism that Pope Francis cites in *Fratelli tutti.* It is the triumph of Peter Pan making immaturity emblematic of our times.

I hope not and I would like to share some ideas with you. First, let us remember what Pope Francis said: the Christian answer to the Peter Pan Syndrome is to be a good Samaritan. We need to create a new culture that has vision.

Thus, we must understand the roots of this syndrome and explore how the Peter Pan Syndrome has had so much success.

**1.The Radical Change: A New Imaginary Adult**

I would like to continue citing a famous jurist, Gustavo Zagrebelsky, who wrote *Without Adults.* We ask ourselves:

“Where are the men and women who are adults? Where are those who have put all the turmoil behind themselves? Where are those who have cast off their contradictions, their fragility, their lifestyles, their way of dressing, their being in fashion, their massages, their acting like kids? Where are those who fail to realize that there is an end to everything, and we cannot run away from it? Where are the times when people are mature, when they affront reality, when they fearlessly look for solutions to problems? A fake search for eternal youth seems to be the role model to follow: special beauty treatments, diets, vitamins, and plastic surgery. Mothers want to dress and to look and act like their daughters appearing ridiculous many times. The same is true of fathers who give up their own identity and act like their sons.”

*Where are the adults today?* The Peter Pan Syndrome describes many of today’s adults. What has happened to them? Where are those *adults* who are mature and who know where they are going and are ready to affront any difficulty? Where are the role models for the next generations who are witnesses of the beauty of being a Christian?

The only answer is that of Mr. Zagrebelsky: “The adults are gone! Ours is a society without adults.”

Even if it may be difficult to believe, there are fewer and fewer adults. Let us remember that the adult must “forget himself” so that he can aid the new generation to become mature. Unfortunately, it appears that today’s adults are not up to the job. What we find are the unrepentant Peter Pans who as I said do not want to grow up and do not let their children do the same.

The reason for this sad situation lies in a real Copernican Revolution that took place after the Second World War with the generation that was born between 1946-1964. Then it continued with the next generation 1964-1980.

For these generations, their existence was based on not maturing and being responsible. The only thing that mattered was “remaining young” at any cost.

Francesco Stoppa describes them:

“What makes this generation different is that even if they grow up and become old as mothers and fathers, they always remain *young.* They think no one can be as young as they are so they do not give into anything: time does not pass, their bodies do no grow old, they are eternally young.”

This idea of youth has nothing to do with what we normally consider “spirit of youth” or “feeling young inside.” The modern-day concept of youth focuses on the word *performance.*  The most important thing is feeling free to affirm the person’s own sexuality, success, charm, experiences, and to live new situations. Obviously, there is no space for ethics, morality, and good manners.

Marcel Gauchet characterizes the modern adult as a person who:

“is less like a real adult as possible, in the true sense of the word. He takes advantages of situations turning them into personal successes. He does not commit himself too much or follow a specific role. He limits the areas in which he gets involved. He is consumed with the idea of eternal youth, and this guides his whole existence.”

These modern adults are *a generation that has placed being young as their supreme objective.* They are ruining the role of being an adult; they are only Peter Pans.

This can be seen in the modern language that we use. The word “young” is used frequently. A 70-year-old who dies is said “to have died young.” A 40 or 50-year-old is told to be patient with his career because he is “still quite young.” Even on an ecclesiastical level, we say: “young,” “very young,” “young adults,” “adulthood.”

In the final analysis, it seems that the word *young* does not represent the age group between 15 and 34.  *Young* has become an ecumenical term without borders or limits.

For those born from 1946-1964 and 1964-1980, their *youth* *must not end.*

It is their love of youth that creates an inner conflict against aging in all its forms.

It becomes essential to dye their hair, to do plastic surgery, to use all the creams and pills on the market, to do jogging and soccer, etc. In addition, advertisers have studied this phenomenon; and they know that these adults have more buying power. So, advertising campaigns emphasize youth and contribute to the growth of this Peter Pan Syndrome. The market offers only products that combat old age. There is the *yoghurt that helps to digest, the diuretic mineral water,* *the wrinkle-free cream that reinforces face muscles and protects the skin from the elements.*

Peter Pan moves a great deal of money and only Peter Pan can do this!

The number one enemy is old age according to the publicity. No product can be sold that does not *prevent aging*. This is very effective marketing. In Italy, sales from cosmetic products have grown consistently, never losing their market.

How does our society perceive age? When does youth end and old age begin?

Ilvo Diamanti gives some insight into these questions:

It should be noted that “. . . .19% of the Italians think that being young can be considered beyond the 60’s and 45% believe that it ends between 50 and 60 years of age. . . . It is amazing that of 35% of the Italians over 15, 5% consider themselves adolescents and 30% consider themselves young, (Demos Statistics), even if those under 30 are not more than 20% of the population. Therefore, only 15% consider themselves “elderly,” even if 23% of the population is over 65. In essence, no one here admits to being old because according to the Italians old age begins after 80. Thus, they become old only after their death.”

The idea that old age is our number one enemy changes our entire perspective on life. No one admits to being old, and the word does not exist even in Wikipedia. Today being old means one has lost his mind. Is there a greater compliment than saying: “You look so young!” Or a greater injury than remarking: “How old you have gotten!” If one wants to get rid of a person, he can tell him he looks old. The person will disappear.

Thus, the adoration of youth leads to seeing old age as a myth, a malediction—something unreal. The politically correct ignore it to the point that being an adult is no longer popular. Seeing old age as a malediction means that one does not understand how to become or to be a human being. To grow, we must: “learn how to give things up.” (Max Scheler)

Being sick, and here I am focusing on your group’s role, is no longer considered something that attacks the whole body. Instead, it is a temporary state or disturbance to eliminate immediately, so that we can move on without really understanding what we are seeking on the horizon.

And how do we think about death? Today nobody *dies.* One can see this by reading the funeral notices. People disappear, are being missed, extinguish, pass on, rejoin; but nobody *dies!* The medicine is to consider death as a sickness, and thus our society is described as a *postmortal society.*

But who is the human being that cannot address death using the colloquial “You” mode? Philosophers throughout the centuries have taught that one becomes an adult only when he can face death in an open way addressing it as “You.”

**2.Peter Pan is not innocent.**

Therefore, youth is the key to happiness for today’s adults; it is the only way of feeling like a human being. *It represents all good.* But we do not have to think that it is insignificant or only a passing fashion; the triumph of Peter Pan is dangerous.

This is true because it misrepresents the person’s needs and prerogatives. This is the real pain seen in today’s society: the malaise of the new generations. To the extent that adults consider life a continual search for youth, the harder it becomes for them to dialogue with their children. This is the real crisis of the family today: the lack of distinguishing between who are the children and who are the parents. Educating children is based on not allowing them to grow, so that the parents can “play the role of being the kids.”

Thus, the triumph of Peter Pan is solely a theological question. In fact, God appears every time man is seeking his own happiness or wellbeing. The secret of the adult generation is: *we believe only in youth.* This is the only thing that brings happiness. This vision interferes with their witnessing the *Gospel of the Good Life,* the communication between God and His children, so that they become role models of dullness, bloodlessness, and ineffectiveness.

This discontinues the link between the Church and adults, the Church and the family, the Church and people’s feelings. The Catholic faith comes into conflict with the youth universe and its vision of happiness. The cult of youth sees no limits, does not want to mature, avoids the fragility of sickness, and eliminates the words relating to old age and death. Thus, all the situations necessary *to create an exchange of ideas between generations, to share learning and the Word of the Gospel do not exist.*

Whether we like it or not, we adults only believe in the god of youth, and this is what we pass down to our children. At the same time, our children are asking how to become adults, and *eventually believing themselves adults.* They are searching for their identity while being torn between a feeling of total power to achieve anything and the reality of a world where they will be forced to make painful decisions affecting their growth.

**3.Creating an Envisioning Culture**

I would like to give you a summary of these ideas by citing Pope Francis who spoke to the members of the Academy of Life in October, 2017. He said:

“Today, human beings seem to find themselves in a special phase of their existence. . .. Emblematic of this is the rapid growth of a culture centered on the sovereignty of man, as a species and as an individual, with respect to reality. There are those who see a real egolatry, or worship of the ego, in which the “I” is placed on an altar as the most important part of life, even more than the closest personal relationships. This concept is not without consequences. It creates an individual who is always looking at the mirror unable to look others or the world in the eye.”

Here is the heart of the question: inside Peter Pan, there is *egolatry*, or the cult of “I” that closes the person inside and makes him blind to others and the world. He is ready to sacrifice everything and the world to his own “I.” Simply speaking, the person has become *intransitive*, or a person without objectives and goals. The individual becomes of foremost importance, and the person feels that he has all the answers. In fact, Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Fratelli tutti,* defines this situation as most lethal virus in the world. It has even resisted to our present vaccination campaign. That is, becoming immune to Coronavirus 19 will not free us from the virus and the deception thinking that individualistic behavior is the answer.

“Individualism does not make us freer, similar, or brotherly. If we were to put together all the individual interests, we would not create a better world for humanity. Nor would this save us from the evil that is becoming more a global problem. Radicalized individualism is the hardest to defeat. It makes us believe that freeing ourselves from moral constraints and amassing personal ambitions and certainties will contribute to the common good.”

This is the other side of the consequences of the youth generation in the adult western population. It is the black hole around which our sick social-economic system revolves. It is the dark side of all those shadows that lurk in our world and that Pope Francis indicated one by one in *Fratelli tutti.* He outlines the various directions humanity is going. He is worried and asks humanity to reflect upon the consequences of their actions. The main goal is: “to consume without limits everything and to make individualism foremost without having any values.”

*We cannot ignore the rapport between the effects of the Peter Pan Syndrome and the business of Peter Pan!*

Thus, to heal the world, we must convert that Peter Pan individualistic behavior that is so embedded in society. What is the “recipe” for this? Who will take the place of Peter Pan in our hearts? I have no doubts. We must make this a time of the *Good Samaritan,* as Pope Francis notes in *Fratelli tutti.*

We need adults who are *Good Samaritans*. It is easier than you think to achieve this. We can convert Peter Pan by finding within ourselves that Good Samaritan character that envisions new horizons through our spiritual DNA. We have been created in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan for excellence.

We are the only species that can forget about personal needs and aid the suffering to overcome their problems and difficulties and to listen to their call for help. This is what makes us human as Pierangelo Sequeri notes:

“Humanity feels affection, and this has been seen throughout the centuries in the many miracles people have done every day. People are thoughtful and caring for others. They are capable of going that last mile sharing a tragic situation with a brother or sister. This is the moving of the person’s conscience, and its repeats in time. That unrepairable situation looking for justice finds a voice in humanity. The desperation of someone’s child, the cry of the diversely able to be an active part of society become our problems to be shared. The situation is in our hands, and we will be judged on how we affront it. The person who *steps up* is a real adult; whereas, he who only loves himself falls short of being mature.”

We need a “miracle” to restore humanity to its true identity eradicating this individualistic society built upon Peter Pan so that we can create a Good Samaritan who envisions new horizons of brotherhood. Unfortunately, today’s society needs this economic, cultural, and political Peter Pan world. Only through our encountering Jesus and His Gospel, only through Grace and joy renewed in both of these, can we be converted.

In conclusion, we are also called to heal the Church: to aid it to forget about many unimportant things and to focus on helping people to find the Lord and to fall in love with Him. Thus, paraphrasing St. Paul: the adults who find Jesus and love Him can cast off their Peter Pan role and let these Good Samaritan’s deeds be beacons of light and hope.

I wish all a very fruitful meeting, my very good friends!