

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE RED CROSS

It is known that Mr. Jean S. Pictet, Director for General Affairs of the International Committee of the Red Cross has published a book on this subject, which excited universal interest in Red-Cross circles. This book was also the source of inspiration of the commission, which drafted the declaration of the Red Cross principles.¹ This text was adopted by the Council of Delegates in Prague, in 1961.²

Moreover, since its publication, much time has been devoted to the study of this book and to the ideas—so important to all of us—contained therein. One of the last studies was published by Dr. Walter Gruber, Secretary General of the “Landesverband” Baden Württemberg, in a recent number of the “Deutsches Rotes Kreuz”, the Review of the German Red Cross of the Federal Republic of Germany (1962, No. 10). Dr. Walter Gruber, enlightened by Mr. Pictet's teachings, analyses what the principle of “universality” is. We think therefore, that it would be of interest to quote a few passages from this valuable contribution to the study of the Red Cross doctrine.

So far, the most important contribution to the study of the theme of *Universality*, is the one by J. S. Pictet, in his book *Red Cross Principles*. This work is a real guide to us. Moreover, during a session of the Austrian Red Cross in Vienna on May 19, 1962, Mr. Pictet treated the same subject but in a new light. His reflections were published in French and English under the title of “The Doctrine of the Red Cross” in the June 1962 number of the *International Review of the Red Cross* and in German and Spanish in the supplement of the same review.

The central idea of the conference, held in Vienna, is in the following sentence: “I have, moreover, arrived at the conclusion that the future of the Red Cross rests in its universality, in the

¹ *Red Cross Principles*, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1956.

² *International Review*, November 1961.

acceptance of the humanitarian principles by all men and all nations.”

In his book as well as in his lecture, Mr. Pictet underlines the fact that no efforts should be made to attain universality except through the channel of federalism, which is the only means to the end. For this same reason the Societies were from the beginning set up independent of Geneva and free to manage their own affairs. Referring to Mr. Max Huber, Mr. Pictet further on says—and this always in connection with “universality”—that for the Red Cross there can never be a legal no-man’s land, because it must go “wherever human beings are in suffering; it does not serve the interests of a State as such, but only those of human beings in distress.”

Mr. Pictet also underlines the fact that “failure of those responsible to cope with the situation may also lead the Red Cross to take their place for the time being”. However, it is not to be forgotten that “once the difficulty has been overcome, it stands aside and resumes its normal rôle.” Reciprocity is a logical consequence of the principle of universality and at the same time a valuable adjunct. Nothing is more contagious than a good example, whereas any lack of universality will have unfortunate repercussions in other countries and thus diminish the chances of relieving distress in the world.

Furthermore, Mr. Pictet considers that the idea of universality implies a certain identity. The name and the emblem of the Red Cross can have but one and the same significance in the whole world. And again we read the following sentence: “It must be admitted that the Red Cross would not have attained its present universal scope and popularity, if it had continued to confine itself to assisting war casualties.”

Those who know the work of Mr. Pictet would certainly not fail to carry on the discussion by quoting: “The principle of universality does not apply to the National Societies as such... It is the international organisations of the Red Cross, which practice universality.” Without mentioning the fact that the National Societies of the Red Cross, Red Crescent and the Red Lion and Sun, before having been recognized by the ICRC and having been admitted to the League, must explicitly accept the principles in the way they were formulated by the International Conferences

of the Red Cross. On another page, Mr. Pictet writes: "The principle of universality, which applies to the international sphere, becomes on a national level, the principle of total or all-embracing action. It is then universalism within geographical limits, universalism adjusted to the requirements of the National Societies but essentially the same as that on which the world-wide movement is based."

Nothing could be worse than if the Red Cross were to dissipate its efforts. On the contrary, to understand the meaning of universality a certain self-control is necessary, according to the relative degree of urgency and the nature of the mission, which, in the first place, one or the other Red Cross organization has to accomplish.

If, further on, Mr. Pictet expresses the opinion that universality represents the "universal scope" of the Red Cross, he also says, in the same sentence that it lives on its popularity. This expression, however, implies close ties and connections with your own country. The pastor and writer Jeremias Gotthelf, a fellow-countryman of the members of the Committee of Five and a mind much akin to them, put it in these words: "A nation's glory begins in the home."

Besides, is the Swiss Confederation (federalism and sovereignty of the "Commune") not an example, showing how love—with devotion as a starting point in a small community—developed quite naturally into mutual aid on a world-wide scale, the "commune" having taken the shape of a vast collectivity. But, it does not necessarily follow that within the Red Cross, everything—from the First Aid Post to the District Branches, by way of the Local Sections—should be reduced to a communal level.

Basing ourselves on our own thoughts and experiences, we should not forget that the Red Cross is a first aid institution. Its duties are to assist public authorities; if need be, to take orders from them, but it should stand aside whenever others, who are responsible, want to take over. Mr. Pictet even suggests that it would be advisable not to accustom official services too much to rely on Red Cross aid. However, it would then be necessary that during an action both parties should consult each other, so that they may be constantly reminded of the original meaning of real Red Cross actions: team spirit, the system of friendly cooperation

rather than the system of official red tape upheld by a rigid hierarchy. As we are in need of the specialist's advice, so we must guard ourselves against letting the Red Cross be identified with any specific tendency. To let every-one play his own rôle, means putting universality into practice.

Moreover, this implies that we shall entrust the person most qualified with activities, which are new and sometimes more important, without being deterred by the fact that certain persons co-operating of longer standing may feel offended.

Still further consequences spring from the principle of universality. During its life-span, soon approaching its centenary, the Red Cross has kindled many a movement of ideas, and, with the help of the all-pervading love of one's neighbour, it brought together, guided, improved and purified many spiritual movements. On the one hand, because the International Committee's function was from the beginning a glowing source of inspiration and of guidance, the Red Cross on the other hand has given everybody the possibility of playing his own rôle. Indeed, everybody, has the freedom of his own decision, but he must be satisfied, for the good and interest of all, to play a modest and secondary rôle if circumstances so demand it. It has thus given us the opportunity of realizing an universal idea in the concrete form of mutual aid. Universality consequently means: in case of doubt the heart should triumph over objections based on critical reasoning. And this, only after having very carefully examined the problems thus raised...