

In the service of the Red Cross

by J.-G. Lossier

Two events of current interest give us cause to ponder on the significance of service to the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and the Red Lion and Sun. The first is the adoption by the twenty-third International Red Cross Conference, which met recently in Bucharest, of a resolution on the "Mission of the Red Cross"; the other is the commemoration this year of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Henry Dunant's birth. On this 8th of May, however, World Red Cross Day will not only be devoted as in the past to the memory of Dunant, but also to the activities throughout the world of the voluntary workers in the institution which he founded, and their work for the promotion of peace. The resolution in question underlines the "extreme importance" of the work carried out by National Societies "in the encouragement of social responsibility and voluntary service among their members".

In this connection, it should be mentioned that the people who work for voluntary organizations are offered the opportunity to give to others, by their action, something more precious than gold: namely, the demonstration that the spirit of devotion and of communion actually exists in our society and that it is a force of considerable efficacy for shaping the world to come for future generations. Such voluntary organizations are strongest and best recognized when they constitute well-disciplined bodies and call upon voluntary workers to undertake tasks only when they have provided them with the necessary preparation and support. Their members need to feel that they represent an essential part of a body doing a useful piece of work and they judge

the Red Cross in the light of the quality and value of the job proposed to them. That is why it is necessary that every person should be conscious of the motives behind his action of assistance and why the institution itself must bring its message up to date and make clear its meaning.

An enduring example

Henry Dunant lived long enough to witness the extraordinary development of the institution with which his name is associated today, for at the time of his death in 1910 the Red Cross had already become a world-wide movement.

The crucial event in Dunant's life was Solferino. His was truly an incredible experience: there he was, an ordinary civilian, striding along the edge of the field of battle, nobody stopping him until, finally, he was accompanied by a whole group of soldiers and even officers turned into improvised nurses. The story does not end there; it was continued at Castiglione in the Chiesa Maggiore where hundreds of wounded were lying without care or succour. Dunant prevailed upon the doctors and medical orderlies to help him and it was he who led and organized his small team, issued orders, kindled their zeal and, day and night, served, by his fervent devotion, as an example to all. The crowning achievement of the whole episode was when Dunant, who had himself no title or mandate of any kind, got Austrian prisoners to tend French wounded. Some years later, from this contact with human wretchedness, he brought forth his book, *A Memory of Solferino*, which was to stir the consciences of so many people of the nineteenth century, so ready to respond to lofty humanitarian appeals.

Everything in Dunant, his idealism as much as his active belief, contributed to instil in him an unqualified faith in his own work. But this belief was not dogmatic, it brushed aside distinctions and shades of opinion; it was the kind of belief that moved mountains, and it remained alive until the very last days of his life, notwithstanding disappointments and humiliations. This explains why—the particular time and place being also propitious—the movement which he founded expanded so rapidly and why its power to replenish its forces is so strong.

He was truly a man of vision, as was apparent in particular when he submitted to a Berlin congress such a novel and daring proposal as

to attribute neutrality to the wounded and sick members of armed forces in the field. This stroke of genius was to give birth to the Geneva Convention of 1864. Florence Nightingale, too, had considered such a move, but she was thinking primarily in national terms, while for Henry Dunant no agreement was possible save at international level. His eyes refused to distinguish between casualties belonging to this or to that nation; he only saw men who all belonged to a common world of suffering. His idealism, too, showed when, long before air bombings, he advised placing wounded soldiers who were no longer able to fight, together with civilians, into specially designated security zones. His imagination ran riot with ideas of world associations, uniting all men of good will whose voices would be raised in all parts of the world. At times, he spoke of his plans before a mere handful of listeners, but no matter! he continued to orate. An idealist, yes; but certainly not a utopist, as some people said.

He preserved in his inner self a true innocence, the capacity to believe that his dreams could be transformed into real life, and for him the word "impossible" did not exist. A man other than Dunant might have uttered that word to himself as he stood on the plain of Solferino, at the sight of the blood-stained battlefield that stretched before his eyes; he might have thought that it was "impossible" to offer the slightest form of help when everything was lacking: doctors, nurses, water, dressings; that it was of no use even to attempt to alleviate the suffering of a single soldier, when thirty thousand others all around him were dying, their life ebbing out slowly from their wounds. But Dunant did not allow such thoughts to halt his impulses; they did not even cross his mind. For him, there was nothing that was impossible, because he was carried away by his compassion for his fellow-men; there was nothing that could be useless, because he grievously felt the deep solidarity which binds the fortunate to those in misery, the hale and hearty to the maimed, the living to the dying.

Dunant's example has remained alive: the enormous disproportion of the vast humanitarian tasks that have to be done to the meagre resources available to complete them should not put us off. Every person's intrinsic worth counts. To save the life of a single wounded man, the five members of an ambulance team have to put their own lives in peril. Dunant deeply felt that brotherly love for his fellow-men

which impels men, disregarding all reason, to extend a helping hand to any human being in need, were there still thousands of other victims nearby.

Work within the Red Cross

The mind is easily led astray by large numbers. In a world where the hitherto predominant hierarchy of values is changing very rapidly and where so many notions become of relative significance, the Red Cross adheres to the same unchanging idea, which it considers possesses a constant and indisputable value, the idea of respect for every human being, irrespective of race, religious belief or political opinions. The corollary to this concept is the notion of giving help, without taking into account who the sufferer may be, only seeing the countenance of someone in pain. This leads us to still another idea, that of the solidarity that binds all men, and it is precisely at this fountainhead that the Red Cross draws its inspiration and distributes its living waters, which is why it is so important for future generations.

In practice, its worth is equivalent to that of the people who serve in the Red Cross and who can, by their stand or by their actions, either strengthen it in the eyes of the world or do mischief to it. In the latter case, they not only do harm to the institution, but also to the principles guiding it.

In the humanitarian organizations some duties are bureaucratic. One must therefore look beyond one's daily task, raise its general significance, however humble and however lacking in utility it may seem, and integrate it in the image of a better civilization which we are helping to build with our small contribution.

Moreover, because this work always concerns human issues, the Red Cross worker brings a little of his personal life into his occupation. The more society becomes industrialized, the more we are surrounded by faceless bureaucrats, and so the service, wherever it might be, which we accept to do in the name of humanity will have to be fed on spiritual food. Furthermore, it will have to be performed by men and women sufficiently endowed morally to *give*, in a world, governed by statistics and computers, in which too often the rule is to give no more than is received.

There is no denying the fact that the task is a difficult one and that it is impossible to perform it successfully without continually spurring oneself on to greater efforts. Because of its moral implications, it is different from the task pursued in any other enterprise. Working for a humanitarian institution means we must justify the task undertaken—first of all to ourselves—by its humanity; must be aware of our solidarity with all people; must feel that the life of every person has a bearing on our own and that we must be ready at all times.

At whatever level one may be, even at the lowest, one's work is found to have some influence, not only because, as in a machine, all its parts are necessary for it to function properly, but above all, because in a humanitarian institution precisely the human worth of its employees is of great importance. At any step, each one brings his tribute to the Red Cross ideal, each one continually endeavours to maintain deep within himself the strength to continue his task, notwithstanding the contradictions which events seem to present.

While the Red Cross worker sets his faith in humanity and in its protection, newspapers, radio and television programmes are full of examples of hatred and discord. While he struggles—by his everyday work—for peace and for a world where brotherhood should be the rule, he is beset by noises of war. It is necessary that he should continue his work in spite of everything, he must persevere, for if he has no faith in the highest forces for the gradual instauration of a better world, then his place is not in the Red Cross.

An aspect of humanitarian service

The world of morals is indivisible. Too often, modern man no longer notices that he must make a whole of his life, that everything in this field holds together and that one cannot be faithful here and unfaithful there. Thus, all humanitarian work differs from other social activities, by its very nature and by the authority which it claims for itself.

It is important that certain tasks still exist, performed by people who are sensitive to the peculiar quality and value of their daily work. In work performed as an act of faith in an ideal, productivity is not among the main objects to be pursued, nor are high results or performances: it is the fact that the dignity of every person should be respected.

Work done in the service of the Red Cross, performed in this kind of spirit, is precisely an act of faith.

True, it is possible to get through one's tasks as in any office or in any factory. Everything would continue all the same, and nobody would perhaps notice any difference. But work done in this way would no longer be invested with the moral quality necessary for it to be truly humanitarian. It would merely demonstrate an ordinary sort of efficiency, current in all well-run enterprises. No *more*. But it is precisely this *extra* effort which is demanded from us. Because this *extra* quality indicates that Red Cross work is considered to be a service.

A nurse can very well tend her patients by putting into practice no more than the methods she was taught. But that *extra* quality which will turn her into a good nurse, into a true nurse, is "more soul", as Bergson might have put it ("un supplément d'âme"); this nurse knows, then, that she does not exercise her profession with the sole aim of earning her living but—and this is the *extra* quality which gives a meaning to her life—of serving others. It is not a matter involving just machines, syringes, paper and what have you besides, but human beings in physiological or moral distress.

Thus, certain institutions like the Red Cross, for example, give us the possibility to fulfil ourselves better, by our devotion to a cause to which we pin our faith and devote our taste for adventure.

Renewing one's energy

When we feel the desire to participate in something which is beyond us, we sense the need for communion, and the act of service towards our fellowmen constitutes one of the means to fulfil that need. Should we not, then, seek *within ourselves* the pervading reasons which urge us to serve? For it may happen that our giving may find its origin in poverty and not in richness. When we feel weak and doubtful, we find, in giving, the opportunity to justify ourselves, to escape by a gift which in such a case is nothing more than a pretext.

But it is important that it should be otherwise, especially in humanitarian works. There should exist at the start true richness. If not, there will always be a disparity between the gifts we make to others and those we receive from them. To put it briefly, it should not be by way of compensating for something that we serve, but by a deep impulse;

by a recognition of the inextinguishable source of energy represented by the determination to serve. We must always know why we serve, why we give, and finally, why we live, always seeking the origin of our commitments on this earth !

*

The German philosopher Herder referred to humaneness as a quality which is not given to us once and for all; we have to prove its existence every day of our life. This implies that we have to give constant proof of our humaneness by humanitarian action. Therefore, if we want to come out victorious in the struggle against discouragement—that enemy which is permanently with us—we must first discover our own selves in order to get to know those of others. Otherwise, we are liable to be guilty of “activism”, action at all costs, to mask the emptiness inside ourselves. On the other hand, to have a large fund of internal experience is to be generous, to want others to take part in it. One of the most valid manifestations of this generosity is to stretch out one’s hands. Simultaneously, a whole ethic of service, mutual respect and tolerance is spun around our actions.

Of course, each one of us takes part in humanitarian work in accordance with his own concept of the world; each one contributes to it by drawing inspiration from his religion, thought and personal ideals. At the same time, perhaps the greatest good fortune for Red Cross workers is to keep in contact with life and with their fellowmen.

It is true that the scientific and technical civilization, of which gradually all countries are becoming a part, offers constantly new opportunities for humanitarian service. But, nowadays, such service is made up of both reason and sentiment, of both technique and the heart. Technique can then become a sort of screen, and in the end it is no longer brought alive by generosity. Good technical preparation is of course necessary, for the heart alone is not enough in the times we live in, when tasks have to be executed within vast structures in order to be efficacious.

But results expressed in figures are not the concern of the Red Cross. It is the human aspect in which it is interested. A single man saved, among a hundred thousand others in peril, is sufficient justification for Red Cross intervention. One should not attempt to apply to the Red Cross the logic of reason, of the greatest possible yield. That is why

humanitarian work has something special about it in the world of today, something which somehow goes against contemporary utilitarian trends.

Voluntary service and the community

State morality clashes in some respects with Red Cross ethics. By their very nature, States act in accordance with different criteria. But if the Red Cross, faced with State requirements, wishes to be the defender of man standing alone, helpless, it must keep ahead of the State; it must go ahead courageously, using a practical and constantly alert imagination. The growing intrusion of States in the social sphere raises problems for the private organizations which have so often prepared the way by their enterprise.

It is essential that voluntary relief should continue. By adapting itself to constantly new tasks, it has retained its *raison d'être*. For, in truth, there is nothing that can take the place of voluntary assistance. It constitutes a moral capital and the possibility for many, in a harsh and unfamiliar world, to bring brotherly aid, and it provides unceasingly renewed possibilities for the practice of mutual help. In this way, one moves from a narrow solidarity to a wider solidarity. By fighting against isolation and lack of understanding, those two scourges of our epoch, we diminish, too, the aggressivity produced by them.

Moreover, voluntary aid movements exert a growing influence on social policies and become means for citizens to participate in the matter-of-fact existence of the community to which they belong. Besides, the imperatives of Red Cross service, whether paid or unpaid, do not change and in all cases claim the same qualities of character and open-mindedness.

The ever-greater spread of technology in all its forms causes changes in society and enables new problems of organization to be more swiftly solved. But the more rapid general evolution which it generates increases the number and size of social conflicts and internal struggles. It becomes more difficult to control the dynamic impulse of technological progress except by a more active participation of primarily voluntary bodies. Private help, which will supplement to a large extent the State's social policy, will fulfil certain tasks relating to pacification and to the settlement of conflicts within society.

For the Red Cross, voluntary service will retain all its meaning in periods of hostilities, whether international or national. It makes no distinction between friends and enemies, and the people working under one of its three distinctive emblems do not look further than the relief which they have to bring to the victims. Thus, in the midst of hatred and war, they radiate an atmosphere of peace.¹

The meaning of these considerations on service and its significance for the Red Cross may be further clarified and illustrated by an anecdote told by the Mexican poet Torres-Bodet.

A man gave his seven-year-old child a puzzle, consisting of a large map of the world torn into several pieces. The father told the boy not to leave his playroom until he had put the map together again. A few minutes later, the child came along with the map correctly completed. How did he manage to get it done so quickly? The answer was simple enough, for the map had been printed on a sheet of paper on the other side of which there was the picture of a man standing. The boy had only a vague notion of geography, but to re-assemble the pieces of the map, he had called upon something much more familiar: the outline of a human being.

Just as the child had re-created the map of the world by looking at the figure of a man, so, for those who serve the Red Cross, it is by looking towards man—by rebuilding his life and restoring his health and his dignity—that they may contribute to the readjustment of the moral composition of the world. It is in this fashion that we can imagine what should be true service to others, the real humanitarian task in which we can all take part: to trace an outline of the world, put in the countries, recompose the pieces and re-establish unity through the image of humaneness, which unceasingly guides our lives.

Jean-Georges LOSSIER

¹ In 1758, long before the Red Cross was born, Samuel Johnson, the English essayist, wrote these prophetic words: "That charity is best of which the consequences are most extensive: the relief of enemies has a tendency to unite mankind in fraternal affection, to soften the acrimony of adverse nations, and dispose them to peace and amity".