

The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross

COMMENTARY

by Jean Pictet

INTRODUCTION

A reminder

The Twentieth International Red Cross Conference, meeting in Vienna in 1965, proclaimed the “fundamental principles upon which Red Cross action is based”. Since that time, at every Conference, the representatives of the Red Cross world rise to their feet to hear the solemn reading of those principles.

The principles, however, have not yet been the subject of any commentary. The fact is that the book “*Les principes de la Croix-Rouge*”¹, the source of the Vienna text, antedated the official version which, while being close to the model, was not identical with it. The book referred to was indeed a complete work, of a somewhat scientific character, and not a terse commentary designed to serve the general public.

A desire has therefore been expressed particularly in relation to the study on the Re-appraisal of the Role of the Red Cross, for a simple and modern commentary which would make these principles understandable to everyone, and especially to the young people, who represent the future. For these reasons, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross Societies and the Swiss Red Cross have asked the Henry Dunant Institute to prepare such a commentary. This book² is intended to meet that request. For obvious reasons,

¹ Jean Pictet: *Red Cross Principles*, Geneva, 1956. (Translated from the French, *Les principes de la Croix Rouge*, Geneva, 1955).

² The author would like to thank all those who have been of assistance to him with their advice, and in particular Mr. Jean Pascalis, Deputy Secretary General of the Swiss Red Cross, who rendered invaluable service to him.

it contains elements from *Red Cross Principles*, in abbreviated form, supplemented by more recent material.

The author of the *Final Report on the Re-appraisal of the Role of the Red Cross*¹ raised questions as to precisely what constituted Red Cross principles, commenting that there was some confusion concerning them. In reality, there is no possible doubt, at least with regard to the fundamental principles, for these are set forth in the Proclamation of 1965, whose fundamental character is obvious. The Red Cross world was determined at that time to provide itself with a true charter, as the fruit of a century of experience and the lasting basis for its future activity.

There is also another text on the principles of the Red Cross, adopted by the Board of Governors of the League at Oxford in 1946 and approved by the Eighteenth International Red Cross Conference in 1952. However, the joint commission responsible for drafting the fundamental principles, which subsequently became the Proclamation of 1965, took the Oxford text into consideration and took from it material of a general character.

The Oxford text, a verbose and loosely drafted document produced at the end of the Second World War, consists for the most part of organic or institutional principles and of simple rules for action—which continue to be valid within these limits but which have no place in a proclamation. The same is true for various precepts set forth in resolutions by the International Red Cross Conferences.

It will certainly be useful in due course to bring together all those organic principles, now so dispersed, into a single declaration to which the International Conference could give its approval.

Furthermore, we must avoid confusion of the principles of the Red Cross with the principles of international humanitarian law, mainly embodied in the Geneva Conventions for the protection of the victims of war. The former serve at all times to inspire the action of the Red Cross as a private institution, whereas the latter, which have an official character, regulate in wartime the conduct of States vis-à-vis their enemies.

There is nevertheless a link between these two fields, for humanitarian law had its origin in the ideal of the Red Cross, which continues to stimulate its development. Thus there are certain principles, such as

¹ Donald Tansley: *Final Report: An Agenda for Red Cross*, Geneva, 1975. This document and its annexes contain an important sum of facts and experience to which I shall refer a number of times as the "Tansley Report".

those of humanity and of non-discrimination, which in a sense are common to both.

In addition, when they accord their protection to the National Societies of the Red Cross, the Conventions refer on occasion to *activities which are in conformity with the principles laid down by the International Red Cross Conferences*.¹ These principles are indeed none other than those embodied in the Vienna Proclamation ².

The present work will therefore be concerned with providing a commentary on that Proclamation. In presenting the Proclamation to the International Red Cross Conference in 1965, its authors by no means believed that they had achieved perfection at the first attempt. The fact is that the text suffers from some defects and omissions which will become apparent in the light of the critical examination to which we shall subject it in this study. This should help us sketch the outlines of a future revision when the time comes, for nothing in this world is unchangeable. These imperfections do not, however, have such importance or urgency as to require an early revision. As it stands today, the Proclamation provides the Red Cross, now and for a long time to come, with a firm and healthy doctrinal foundation.

A universal doctrine

The work of the Red Cross is born of a high ideal, from which it continually draws fresh life, but as it primarily consists of practical actions, frequently improvised, there is a serious risk that in the haste of charitable action and in spite of the purity of one's intentions, one may deviate from the guiding principles, and unity of thought may be lacking.

There is also the fact that the Red Cross takes root in all parts of the world, differing greatly one from another. The National Societies are extremely varied, and each has its own distinctive character. Some are strong while others are still weak; they may have many members or only a few; some have had long experience while others have just come into

¹ First Geneva Convention, 1949, Article 44 and Protocol I, 1977, Article 81.

² In the interest of brevity, this will hereafter be referred to as "the Proclamation". It was first read at the Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross at Prague in 1961.

existence. They do not all have identical activities and some do not have clearly defined programmes.

The doctrine of the Red Cross therefore—along with, but more important than, the Statutes of the International Red Cross—is the real link between these Societies, the cement which holds the stones together to make of them a solid and well built edifice. It is this doctrine which creates the unity and the universality of the structure, which, indeed, makes the Red Cross a reality. Without principles, the Red Cross would simply not exist.

It is therefore indispensable for it to have a sound and precise doctrine. Strange as it may seem, however, it was only after the upheavals of the First World War that the International Committee of the Red Cross,¹ the founding body of the movement and designated as the guardian of its principles, felt the need to formulate this doctrine. In earlier days, tradition had more force than the written law. Certain ideas of a moral order which it was not permitted to discuss or necessary to explain imposed themselves upon human conscience. Thus it was that the Red Cross, in all its many aspects, forged its tenets in the hard school of life.

Even as late as in 1921 the first reference to a codified doctrine was unobtrusive. This concerned what we now refer to as the summary of fundamental principles, as they appear in the Statutes of the International Red Cross. They had been enumerated by the ICRC as follows, *impartiality, action independent of any racial, political, religious or economic considerations, the universality of the Red Cross and the equality of the National Red Cross Societies*. This text still lacked the most important principle of all, the principle of humanity. Since then a great servant of the Red Cross, Max Huber, President of the ICRC, determined to provide the institution with a doctrine. He did so, with an incomparable nobility of vision and sureness of judgement. The various elements however were dispersed among his writings, having been worked out for the most part to meet the exigencies of the Second World War.

The first systematic presentation of the principles of the Red Cross, as we have noted, dates from 1955 and served as the basis for the official Proclamation which today has the force of law.

The doctrine of the Red Cross is permanent. It is the expression of long-term wisdom, indifferent to the ebb and flow of popular opinions

¹ Hereafter referred to as the ICRC.

and ideologies of the moment. It outlived those who created it and this lasting character is perhaps a sign of its superiority over everything that happens here on earth.

In order to play the decisive role required of it, this doctrine must be universal. For people of all races, cultures and opinions to be able to accept it, it must be expressed in words which are understood by everyone.

The Red Cross has proclaimed its unity and its universality. These ideas must be based upon something to which they are similar and to which they can be compared. While people differ, human nature everywhere is the same—and there is nothing more widespread than human suffering, to which all men are equally vulnerable and sensitive.

However, even though we recognize today the unity of human feelings, we no longer believe that there is only one valid civilization, worthy of the name. On the contrary, we now acknowledge the pluralism of cultures and the need to become acquainted with them and study them deeply. In doing so we realize that humanitarian principles belong to all peoples and take root under all favourable conditions. When we bring together and compare different moral systems and dispose of the non-essentials, that is to say their special peculiarities, we find in the crucible a pure metal, the universal heritage of mankind.

As we proceed with this study we can see that there is no unmitigable collision between the “different worlds” which we have placed in contrast. All doctrines can lead to the great law of the Red Cross, but each one by its own pathway, in accordance with the convictions and characters of the various peoples. The Red Cross serves to unite, and not to divide. It is thus for the Red Cross to proclaim norms which have universal validity, because they are fully in accord with human nature.

Definition and classification

Before beginning to study the principles of the Red Cross, one must first investigate what a principle is. This is a concept which is not easy to define, but about which everyone nevertheless has relatively clear feelings. In philosophical terms, a principle is an abstraction of a moral nature, derived from the ideal tendencies of society, which imposes itself upon human conscience and becomes an absolute imperative, above and beyond discussion. In terms of what we are now concerned with, we

shall say that a principle is simply a rule, based upon judgement and experience, which is adopted by a community to guide its conduct.

To achieve their purpose, these principles must be presented clearly, so that they are understood by everyone. In this respect, the Proclamation is quite restrained and even lapidary. This does not mean that it does not need a commentary. The more general and condensed a text is, the richer it is in its potentialities and the more open to possibilities for exploration. To deal with cases not specifically provided for, it is necessary to extrapolate, that is, to project the lines beyond the original sketch. I shall try to give this commentary the clarity and simplicity of its model.¹

The principles of the Red Cross do not all have the same importance. They have a hierarchical order, indicated at the outset by the sequence in which they are presented in the Proclamation. They also have an internal logic, so that each one to a degree flows from another. I shall therefore try to place them in appropriate categories. Any classification has a somewhat arbitrary character however and the pattern outlined below will necessarily be theoretical in some aspects and, in practical life, we shall find that some of the categories overlap.

We shall remain faithful to the terminology of the Proclamation by characterizing as *fundamental principles* the seven propositions adopted in 1965. Some of these, however, actually include two or three concepts, bringing to about fifteen the real number of principles. We shall not be dealing here with the simple *rules of action* which are applied in practice and contribute to the efficiency of the organization, such rules as are to be found, for example, in what we referred to above as the Oxford text.

Among the fundamental principles we find first of all the *substantive principles*. These stand above all contingencies and particular cases; they inspire the organization and determine its acts. They belong to the domain of objectives and not to that of ways and means. Among these, the first one, humanity, has a special place because it is the expression of the profound motivation of the Red Cross, from which all the other principles are derived. Accordingly, we speak of this as the *essential principle*.

¹ To this end, I shall on occasion gather under a separate heading some elementary philosophical considerations for those who wish to study these matters more profoundly. Readers with little time at their disposal may thus leave these matters to one side.

The other substantive principles are non-discrimination and proportionality (merged in the proclamation under the heading "Impartiality"). The first of these is closely linked to the principle of humanity; the second results from the concepts of humanity and non-discrimination.

Next in order are the *derived principles* of neutrality and independence, which make it possible to put the essential principle into action and enable us, without deforming them, to translate the substantive principles into factual reality. They also assure the Red Cross of the confidence of all parties, which is indispensable to the discharge of its mission. Here, we are within the domain of means and not of ends. Neutrality and independence are related directly to non-discrimination.

The third category, finally, is that of *organic principles* which have an institutional character. Included among these are unselfishness and voluntary action (combined in the Proclamation under "Voluntary service"), unity and universality. These are standards for application, relating to the structure and operation of the institution, coming into play primarily in connection with specific tasks. They are less far-reaching than the previous principles. It should be noted however that the principle of universality has a mixed character, relating both to an ideal and to practicality, derived in part from the precepts of humanity and of non-discrimination. With regard to unselfishness and voluntary action, we find that these are closely related to the principle of humanity. Lastly, unity is linked to non-discrimination.

Translating principles into action

The doctrine of the Red Cross, as we have said, is universal. Its application should also be universal. If it were to be scrupulously observed everywhere, all Red Cross activity, inspired by it, would proceed along parallel lines in the different countries, which is especially necessary in the event of conflicts.

The doctrine constitutes a coherent system, an indivisible whole, whose different parts are as solid as the stones in a building. It is impossible, therefore, depending upon latitude or longitude, to accept certain elements while rejecting others.

The reading of the Proclamation sometimes gives rise to the following question: is there any one Red Cross Society which puts this admirable

doctrine into effect, at all times and in its totality? It is not easy to answer this question. We have to recognize, at least, that a substantial number of Societies fall far short of complying with all the fundamental principles of the Red Cross, either in letter or in spirit.¹ It suffices to mention as stumbling blocks only such points as non-discrimination in relief and in organic structure, autonomy vis-à-vis the public authorities, political and religious neutrality and the extension of activity to the whole territory of countries.

A second question then arises, one which is no less serious: Is it not hypocritical to proclaim a Charter described as sacrosanct and at the same time to tolerate its transgression? The truth is that nothing in life is absolute. The doctrine of the Red Cross, formulated at a particular moment in history, applies to a living world in never-ending movement, to a society composed of men who have not attained perfection. Sometimes it represents an ideal model to which we may aspire, rather than an unbending and rigorous law.

In legal terms, it is true indeed that the ICRC, in serious cases, could withdraw international recognition from a National Society which displayed conduct in flagrant contradiction of the "conditions of recognition", one of which, specifically, is to "honour the fundamental principles of the Red Cross". If the ICRC did not have this right, the whole procedure for admission to the International Red Cross would be nothing but a farce, for it would be sufficient for a Society to comply for only one day, the day of its recognition! The International Red Cross Conference has recently confirmed this power.² We may note that the ICRC has never yet had to take such an extreme measure. In any event, so long as the spirit of the Red Cross survives, that spirit which makes of the movement a living and coherent reality, sanctions will be superfluous; should such a spirit cease to exist, it is a safe bet that sanctions would be powerless to enforce compliance.

Thus, while the ICRC vigilantly oversees the maintenance of the principles of the Red Cross—which is one of its cardinal objectives—

¹ The *Tansley Report* states that out of 23 National Societies studied, four did not meet the conditions for recognition and that there were grave doubts about two or three of the others.

² Twenty-second Conference, Teheran, 1973, Resolution VI. In addition, the League *Statutes* provide, in certain cases, for suspension of a member Society.

we may be sure that inspired by the adage: *fortiter in re, suaviter in modo*,¹ it will be careful to avoid dogmatism. In publishing, before the Second World War, the conditions for recognition of new Red Cross Societies which it had itself formulated, the ICRC added to them the comment, *bearing in mind in particular the complexity of the international juridical status of various State groupings, the ICRC is obliged to interpret these principles with a certain degree of flexibility, taking into account the particular circumstances in each individual case.*² Such a reservation is a wise one and is valid as well for the principles of the Red Cross.

The National Societies are the auxiliaries of the public authorities, whose full support they need and with whom they must have relations of full confidence. These Societies cannot exist as foreign bodies within their nations, as Max Huber once remarked. We may therefore assume as a general rule that whenever a Society remains for a long period in contradiction with one of the principles it is due to ineluctable exigencies imposed upon it by the law or by the power of the State.

On the other hand, what we do expect of the Society is that it will remain vigilant and on every occasion will seek to obtain a better understanding of the profound significance of the Red Cross; that it will do all within its power to return to a normal situation as quickly as possible.

The important thing is to remain dedicated, come what may, to the ideal and spirit of the Red Cross. In this domain, we may very well display our intransigence. This ideal and this spirit have been expressed in the substantive principles which, as we have seen, rank higher than the others. These the Red Cross cannot surrender at any cost. It will remain faithful to them or it will not survive.

Some additional observations

We observe today a weakening throughout the world of the spirit of service. The Red Cross also suffers from this general tendency. It is therefore confronted by the need to restore and strengthen this spirit among its members.

¹ Strong in action, gentle in method.

² *Manuel de la Croix-Rouge internationale*, seventh edition, page 250.

In a rapidly changing society, too many people seem to be losing sight of the underlying realities which must guide the institution. Donald Tansley found in the Red Cross a great deal of confusion as to its fundamental role and the absence of a sense of common purpose. He saw the cause for this in the extremely diversified development of its activities in the course of its first century, a tendency which is certainly on the increase today.

There was no such problem in the early days of the Red Cross, when it was concerned only with the military wounded and sick. Today however, apart from their traditional tasks, certain National Societies exercise such varied activities as the fight against pollution, mountain rescue services, eradication of illiteracy, birth control, etc. In this connection, Tansley does not only warn against the handicaps of ignorance, but against nothing less than the danger of disintegration. I hope the present work will remedy this to some extent and contribute to better understanding of an overriding ideal.

As the world confronts new needs, it is natural to attempt to meet them. Not all suffering however can be alleviated by the Red Cross. The institution does not have a comprehensive programme, complete and fully defined. To draft such a programme would be a difficult task, demanding a great deal of time and care.

The Red Cross does of course have a certain image of what the world could be, a world with respect for life, individual liberty, universal happiness, rejection of violence and hatred, tolerance and non-discrimination. It could be asserted therefore that its philosophy is optimistic, since it does not despair of the individual and demonstrates by its actions its faith in existence. After all, *if man no longer finds it possible to love his fellow beings, he is lost.*¹

This does not mean that the Red Cross adheres to any particular ideology. It is not part of its role to approve any one system and condemn the others. It takes the world as it is, with its lights and shadows, strengths and weaknesses, aspirations, passions and fictions.

¹ Maxence van der Meersch.

What it seeks and proposes, in the field of assistance, are practical solutions of human proportions.

Thus, as Max Huber recalled, the Red Cross was not based upon an abstract idea but was created on a battlefield, amidst the distress which was an immediate and present fact, by men and women who set to work. It is because of that that it lives and will go on living.

The morality of the Red Cross is therefore valid to the extent that it expresses itself in concrete realities. As Bergson said—and this applies especially to the Red Cross—*We must always act as men of thought and think as men of action.*

I

HUMANITY

The Red Cross, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours—in its international and national capacity—to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Preamble

The Proclamation begins with a brief reference which obviously does not constitute part of the principle of humanity itself. It is a kind of historic preamble, recalling that the Red Cross was *born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield.*

Doubtless, this phrase has no logical place in a declaration which should be devoted only to fundamental principles. It has the merit of serving as a reminder however to those—and they are numerous—who have a tendency nowadays to forget that the Red Cross was born of the sufferings of war. At the time of its creation and for the first years of its existence, the Red Cross had as its only mission the assisting of wounded soldiers and preparing itself to do so.

However, in order to measure up to their task in the event of conflict, the National Societies very soon realized the need to work in peacetime. First of all, they had to train personnel and prepare necessary material, in other words be ready for instantaneous mobilization. This personnel,

on the other hand, could not be allowed to remain idle between conflicts and become demoralized by uselessly awaiting action. One could not train a huge phalanx and hold it in readiness for a very uncertain eventuality, especially when there were so many wounds to heal throughout the world.

The Societies therefore began to care for sick civilians, to run hospitals and nurseries, set up schools for nurses, to work for improved hygiene and to intervene in the event of natural disasters. Finally, they included the entire population in their sphere of activity, and this peacetime work became an end in itself. This tendency was accelerated after the First World War, at a time when it was felt that the spectre of war had been banished forever, and gave rise to the League of Red Cross Societies. The Red Cross movement would certainly never have achieved its universal extension and worldwide popularity if it had remained within its original bounds.

In the early days of the Red Cross, assistance to the war wounded mainly took the form of close co-operation with the military medical services, of which the National Societies were the natural auxiliaries. In a number of countries however it worked the other way and the foundation of the National Society stimulated major reforms in the military medical services. Today, in the most prosperous countries, the military services have assumed such proportions and attained such a high level of efficiency that they hardly have any more need for assistance from National Societies. We should not draw hasty conclusions from this, however, for this is not at all the case in a majority of countries and if, unhappily, a great battle should take place in a developing continent, there is every reason to believe that it would be a new Solferino.

Nowadays, in terms of volume, peacetime work constitutes the greater part of the day to day tasks of the National Societies. The historic reference which stands first in the Proclamation is a very opportune reminder however that the war activities for which the Red Cross was created conserves its precedence in the scale of values. This is not only true for the ICRC, which is the pre-eminent neutral agent in wartime. It is equally true for the whole movement. Other benevolent institutions may care for sick civilians, cripples and orphans, whereas for the Red Cross, war is the decisive test. It is in wartime, when everything seems lost, when man has chosen the path of suffering and annihilation, that the Red Cross stands as the defender of the supreme interests of humanity.

The preamble also provides a reminder of the necessity, recognized from the very beginning, of providing assistance “without discrimination”. This concept, which we shall discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, deserves to have a prominent place, for it is inseparable from the Red Cross and from the very principle of humanity itself. If, in a spirit of equity, the Red Cross extends its action to everyone, it will, in a spirit of humanity, exclude no one, even those one might be tempted to hate. Thus, as was written long ago by the Chinese philosopher Meh-ti, *Only a love which makes no distinction will save the world*. Any philanthropy which based its action upon the merits of the people it helped would be doomed in advance, starting from a false premise and ending in failure.

Terminology

Confusion sometimes arises between the words human and humanitarian, humanism and humanitarianism, abstract expressions which all derive from the same origin—the word man.

Human, in its original sense, refers to all that concerns man. However, in the sense which is now of interest to us, the word human is used to describe a man who is good to his fellow beings. We shall come back to this point.

Humanity is therefore the sentiment or attitude of someone who shows himself to be human. Following Littré’s dictionary, we would define humanity as a sentiment of active goodwill towards mankind. The word humanity in this sense is so perfectly suited to the Red Cross that it was chosen to designate its essential principle. At the same time, the word also serves to specify human nature and even the human species as a whole. In addition, it is rather more a feeling than a principle, so that perfect logic would suggest a preference for the word humanitarianism. These are minor drawbacks however and we should maintain the word humanity, for it is simple, direct and closer to man.

Humanitarian characterizes any action beneficent to man. *Humanism* is a philosophical doctrine whose ultimate object is the human being. This concept is a broader one than humanitarianism, with which we are mainly concerned.

Humanitarianism is a doctrine which aims at the happiness of the human species, or, if one prefers, it is the attitude of humanity towards mankind, on a basis of universality.

Modern humanitarianism is an advanced and rational form of charity and justice. It is not only directed to fighting against the suffering of a given moment and of helping particular individuals, for it also has more positive aims, designed to attain the greatest possible measure of happiness for the greatest number of people. In addition, humanitarianism does not only act to cure but also to prevent suffering, to fight against evils, even over a long term of time. The Red Cross is a living example of this approach.

Closely associated with humanity is charity. *Charity* is an effort demanded of us, either inwardly or from the outside, which becomes a second nature, to relieve and put an end to the sufferings of others. Here again there is a risk of confusion of terms, for the word has also come to refer simply to the giving of alms. Charity is above all an expression of Christian morality and is synonymous with love for one's neighbour. Since there is generally only one word for "love" in modern languages, there has sometimes been a confusion between love in the sense of desire and love in the sense of devotion. It is naturally in the latter sense that we use it here, for we are speaking of altruistic and disinterested love, which can be required of us, which calls for a certain degree of self-control, a love which is extended even to our enemies.

Pity is one of the driving forces of charity. It is a spontaneous movement, an instantaneous affective reaction to the suffering of others. Littré defines pity as "that sentiment aroused at the sight of suffering that prompts one to relieve it". It is also called compassion, *that stirring of the soul which makes one responsive to the distress of others*, according to Larousse. Pity is like a forerunner of charity.

Commentary

In the doctrine of the Red Cross, the principle of humanity, from which all the other principles flow, obviously has to stand in first place. As the basis of the institution, it provides at the same time its ideal, its motivation and its objective. It is indeed the prime mover for the whole

movement, the spark which ignites the powder, the line of force for all its action. If the Red Cross were to have only one principle, it would be this one.

Such a text also enables the institution to define its tasks, to outline the field for its intervention and mark its limits, which is a major necessity. Although it is the purpose of the Red Cross to make the world a better place, it can do so only in certain respects. It cannot undertake every activity regarded as benevolent but must concentrate on specific responsibilities. Only in so doing will it guard itself from a dangerous dispersal of effort.

The principle of humanity was formulated for the first time in 1955, as follows, *The Red Cross fights against suffering and death. It demands that man shall be treated humanely under all circumstances.*¹

In the Proclamation, this principle includes three elements,² very closely related to one another, apart from the reference to peace, a programme element which we shall deal with separately, as follows:

(a) To prevent and alleviate suffering

For the purpose of this commentary, we shall reverse the order of the terms in the declaration since, in its history, the Red Cross has been concerned first of all with relieving human suffering, before giving thought to preventing it. Furthermore, its restorative action, which consists in relieving distress, has continued to constitute by far the greater part of its endeavours.

Everyone knows suffering, that ancient and intimate enemy of man; from his birth it follows him like a shadow and one shudders to think of the indescribable accumulation of pain which has weighed down the human race since the beginning of the world. The most odious form of suffering is that which man inflicts deliberately. As Montaigne said, *I bitterly hate cruelty as the worst of all vices.*

By suffering, we refer not only to all pain, but also to every injury, even though it is not felt. We must make an exception however for cases

¹ Jean Pictet: *Red Cross Principles*.

² This triple mandate was reaffirmed, in the same language, by the Twenty-third International Red Cross Conference at Bucharest in 1977 (Resolution I, entitled "The Red Cross Mission.").

in which the suffering may be due to therapeutic necessity, for it is then admissible to cause pain to avoid a greater pain. We are therefore mainly concerned with unnecessary suffering.

In the past, there was a tendency to accept misery—especially that of other people—with resignation. There was an acceptance of the excessively facile explanation of inevitable destiny. Nowadays, it is true, the total sum of suffering which afflicts the world has certainly not diminished and in some regions it is on the increase. The sense of human solidarity has developed however and people are more aware of the duty of combating distress wherever it manifests itself, and no matter how disproportionate to it are the means available.

Under this heading, the principle of humanity sets for the Red Cross its task in time of war—its primary and essential function—and also its work in time of peace. It governs its work of material, medical and social assistance, both in national and international terms. It does not aim only at relieving physical pain, but also the moral suffering which the Red Cross attempts to alleviate, for example when it relieves a family of uncertainty and anguish as to the fate of a loved one. The principle is valid furthermore no matter what the cause of the suffering may be—whether it is due for example to a catastrophe resulting from natural causes, shortages of life's necessities or to human negligence or malignity.

The Proclamation correctly emphasizes that the restorative action of the Red Cross must be accompanied by preventive action. The best means of fighting against suffering, after all, is to prevent it from arising, to seek out and eliminate its causes, to nip the evil in the bud. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, as the common expression has it.

In the field of health, prophylaxis, vaccinations, hygiene, early detection of diseases, teaching, etc. are increasingly extensive activities among the National Societies.

In the field of administration, prevention takes the form of advance preparation, for the Red Cross must be ready at any time to face the tasks it may encounter. This necessity was apparent from the very beginning of the Red Cross and it was a mark of the genius of Henry Dunant that he understood that in order to be effective relief for the victims of war had to be prepared incessantly in times of peace. This takes the form of training personnel, preparing material, perfecting methods and conducting scientific research. It is therefore one of the

conditions for recognition of new Red Cross Societies that they *become prepared in time of peace for wartime activities*.

In the legal field, prevention calls for the work of developing international humanitarian law. As we know, the ICRC has been concerned since the beginning with promoting and perfecting the rules protecting the victims of conflicts and it was the architect of the Geneva Conventions. Lastly, it is prevention which determines the role of the Red Cross in favour of peace. There are those who are not satisfied to see it confine itself to attenuating the effects of war, but insist that it attack the evil of war at its root and participate directly in the fight against this scourge.

(b) To protect life and health

It has often been said in the past that the Red Cross fights against suffering, but up to now little has been said about its fight against death. This, nevertheless, is just as important an aspect as the former; it is a supreme objective of the Red Cross to save lives. It achieves this both by its action of assistance and its action of protection¹. But, since death is finally inescapable, it can clearly act only to delay its coming.

Statistics inform us that the average length of human life in western Europe was 20 years under the Romans, 40 years in 1800 and around 70 years today. In the Crimean war in the last century, 60% of the wounded died, whereas 100 years later, in the Korean war, the figure for the American forces was down to 2%. In addition, during the military campaigns in the second half of the 19th century, deaths due to disease among the troops were triple or even quintuple the number of losses caused by arms. All this has radically changed, thanks to antiseptic measures and the great advance of medical science. The action of the Red Cross has also been a substantial factor.

Some philosophers maintain that the moral value of an act of charity depends upon the nobility of purpose of the one who performs it. Possibly so, but for the Red Cross what counts is that it be effective, that

¹ The Twenty-third International Red Cross Conference, in Resolution I ("The Red Cross Mission") emphasized the extreme importance of the National Societies' medico-social activities in preventing disease, promoting health and encouraging among their members a sense of social responsibility and the giving of voluntary service.

it be beneficial to those who suffer. As stated in the Koran, *The perfect man is the one most useful to others*. It does not matter a great deal, after all, in what spirit the act is performed. It is certainly true that donors sometimes have ulterior motives of self-interest, vanity or political propaganda—but it already counts for a great deal that people have been relieved, who otherwise would have received no help.

But the way in which that help is given is of great importance. When nursing a patient or giving help, one must show some humanity, that is to say, in this instance, tact, imagination and intelligence. *What is charity which shows no sense of decency towards the unfortunate person and which, before comforting him, begins by crushing his self-respect?* wrote Marivaux. It is true that an act of kindness clumsily bestowed may humiliate the person receiving it and even be taken as an insult. Therefore, the person who is giving or helping must not make his pity felt, but must show a cheerful face to the world. Why? Because happiness is contagious and it does good. It is as simple as that. To give happiness is also charity; sometimes even very great charity. Besides it is not difficult to smile. It is enough to reflect that one is bringing a little happiness to a frequently unhappy world.

Only in the past few years has there been a recognition of the need to “humanize” hospitals. It is no longer enough to make sure that the care is good; the time in hospital must be made as agreeable as possible for the patient and the utmost respect must be accorded to his customs and to his freedom, that most precious possession. Hospitals have made great technical advances, but even today, too often, sicknesses are being treated instead of individuals, who are regarded simply as “numbers”, and there is a neglect of the human relations between those giving and receiving the treatment. This of course is just one consequence of the degeneration of social relations which we observe everywhere, on the highways, in stores, buses and trains—resulting from the erosion of family patterns.

It is in the hospitals, however, and in asylums and old people’s homes where, feeling themselves to be in a state of inferiority and dependence and all the more vulnerable and sensitive, people suffer most from an absence of human sympathy and warmth. Research has demonstrated that patients show better and quicker recovery in a sympathetic and gay atmosphere. There is no merit to be found in grey walls, sour faces and tasteless food. Then, let us have pretty pictures on the walls and smiles

on our faces ! The giving of joy is also charity, and perhaps the greatest charity sometimes.

The National Societies, in their training of nurses and social workers, can play a splendid role in this respect.

Jean PICTET

(To be continued)
