

# The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross

COMMENTARY

by Jean Pictet

*(continued)*

## VI

### UNITY

*There can be only one Red Cross Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.*

Under the heading “unity”, the Proclamation brought together three concepts: unity, properly speaking, or uniqueness: there can be only one National Red Cross Society in any one country; multitudinism: it must be open to everyone; and generality in its action: it must extend throughout the entire territory.

#### 1. UNITY

The unique character of a National Society is also found among the Conditions for the Recognition of New Societies (paragraph 2), which require unity of leadership: the Society shall be directed by a central body which shall alone be competent to represent it in its dealings with other members of the International Red Cross.

For practical reasons, which are nonetheless imperative, the Red Cross Society must be the only one of its kind in the territory of each nation, for this is essential to the efficacy of its work. We can well imagine the confusion which would prevail in a country if several associations, all proclaiming the same principles, were to advertise that they were carrying out the same tasks independently !

Unity of leadership is essential for much the same reasons. If it is necessary for the Red Cross Society to be the only one of its kind, it is also necessary that it take its orders from only one central committee, just as an army can only obey one general staff. It is essential to concentrate its energies and resources in the same hands, for the sake of harmonious co-ordination. This requirement also applies at every level of the hierarchical structure.

In federated countries, we find a clear tendency toward decentralization, with local sections often having quite extensive powers and more or less autonomy.

In certain countries, the Red Cross Society is joined to other charitable institutions through affiliation and grants them the right to use the emblem, while preserving their particular characteristics. While we may well be gratified at seeing the Red Cross become a rallying point for people and institutions of good will, such a procedure has its hazards. A Society would accordingly be well advised to define quite precisely its relations with affiliated organizations, so that the authority of its central committee will remain intact and that respect for the principles of the Red Cross will always be ensured.

A National Red Cross Society is therefore its own master in its own domain. This is true to such an extent that International Red Cross Conferences have ruled that a National Society cannot establish a section in, or send a mission to a foreign country without the permission of the Red Cross Society in that country.

## 2. MULTITUDINISM

The Proclamation specified that each National Society must be open to all, that is, as stated more precisely in the Conditions for recognition, it shall *not withhold membership from any of its nationals, whoever they may be, on grounds of race, sex, class, religion or political opinions.*

Concerning this enumeration, we refer to what we said above on the subject on non-discrimination for we are concerned here with non-discrimination in the recruiting of members. Whereas in the case of non-discrimination with regard to the persons being assisted we were in the domain of substantive principles, we are dealing now with organic principles. One can see at a glance the profound difference between the levels of these two kinds of principle in the hierarchy of values, a difference of nature and not only one of degree. While it is important for Red Cross membership to be open to everyone, the essential thing is that it must give its services without distinction to everyone in need. In the latter case, we are in the field of ends and not in that of means.

The principle of multitudinism does not mean that a Red Cross Society must accept all the citizens of its country without exception.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, it has the indisputable right to exclude individuals on grounds of their moral character, and also on grounds of ability. Positions which carry responsibilities or call for specialized knowledge, medical for example, cannot be given to incompetents. The right to eliminate undesirables is obviously less important when it is simply a matter of membership, at least in those Societies in which membership requires nothing more than the paying of dues.

What the principle does mean is that membership must not be refused for discriminatory reasons, reasons based on considerations alien to the institution, to the efficiency of its work or its reputation.

Multitudinism, by making it possible for all social, political and religious elements to be represented, prevents sectarianism and a spirit of partisanship. It provides a guarantee of confidence in the Society, both inside and outside the country and is the best antidote against favouritism.

To succeed, the Red Cross must be a popular organization. It is important for it to have a wide base and to win the mass of people to its cause, for in union there is strength. Its leaders must come from every quarter of the compass.

The foregoing considerations are especially important in countries having a large indigenous population living alongside a more developed population of immigrants. It is indispensable for the natives to be

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<sup>1</sup> Nor does it imply that foreigners in a country are necessarily excluded. It would be quite in the spirit of the Red Cross to accept those of them who want to serve, but this cannot be made obligatory, for it is up to each Society to decide the matter.

progressively associated with the work of the Red Cross and accede to positions of leadership. In this way, the Red Cross will be able to reach into the most remote corners of the country and bring a broader understanding of its ideals. It is also necessary for these people to be capable of carrying on the work that has begun, after they have gained their independence and have only themselves to rely upon. Recent experiences, gained in the course of "decolonization", should be instructive to us in this connection.

The *Tansley Report* considers that the Red Cross does not take community needs sufficiently into account, especially in rural areas. In most countries, the volunteers come from the cities and encounter the traditional mistrust of countrymen for city people. It is for this reason that Dr. Pierre Dorolle expressed his hope to see the coming into being of a "bare-foot Red Cross", composed of people from the villages, which would assure its penetration everywhere.

### 3. GENERALITY OF ACTION

The language in the Conditions for Recognition is more precise, stating in paragraph 7 that the Society shall *extend its activities to the entire country and its dependencies*.

Since there can be only one Red Cross Society in a country, it follows logically that this Society must embrace within its sphere of activities the whole territory of the country, for there would otherwise be gaps in its humanitarian work.<sup>1</sup> The *Tansley Report* has pointed out however that this condition is very far from being universally achieved.

The universality of which we have already spoken, transferred from the international to the national domain, takes the form of generality of action. This is a geographically limited universalism, a universalism proportioned to each National Society but identical in essence to that which inspires the worldwide institution.

This universalism requires the National Society to assume all the activities belonging to its traditional domain which are not already

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<sup>1</sup> Divided countries constitute special cases; there may then be more than one Society, with each covering one of the separate territories.

being carried out by other institutions. In this way, the combination of these rules permits the Red Cross to be present everywhere and to seek to ensure that no suffering shall be without remedy within the jurisdiction of the Society.

To cover the whole national community, the system of territorial decentralization is the most widespread and is doubtless the best. Local sections are set up in all provincial centres and in all major towns. Smaller units in secondary localities, urban neighbourhoods or even apartment blocks may be set up if necessary as adjuncts to these sections. By this means, step by step, the Red Cross can "infiltrate" the population, enabling it to reach all sections of the population, among whom it can carry out its mission and enjoy the co-operation it needs.

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*(To be continued)*

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