

The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross

COMMENTARY

by Jean Pictet

(continued)

(c) To assure respect for the individual

Francis Bacon once wrote that *a man who does not treat his neighbour humanely is not truly human*. The ideal of the Red Cross is much greater than its own action. It does not therefore limit itself to assistance and protection, but demands that everyone must respect the human person, his life, liberty and happiness—in other words, everything that constitutes his existence. This must naturally correspond to the requirements of public order and, in wartime, of military necessity.

This is a duty imposed upon the whole Red Cross movement at all times. In practice, it is manifested primarily by the interventions of the ICRC with the responsible authorities on behalf of victims of armed conflicts and disorders, the wounded and sick, shipwrecked persons, prisoners of war and civilians. These ICRC interventions, backed up by visits to places of detention, tend to bring about a strict and faithful application of humanitarian law, which has found its most complete and up to date expression in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Protocols of 1977. These basic documents, serving as a barrier against the arbitrary exercise of power, are inseparable from the Red Cross, in their source as in their living reality.

*All the provisions of humanitarian law constitute no more than the affirmation, constantly renewed, that the victims of conflicts are first of all men and that nothing, not even war, can deprive them of the minimum things required by respect for the human person.*¹ This law demands that everyone shall be treated as a human being and not as an object, as an end in himself and not as a mere means to an end.

¹ Frédéric Siordet: *Inter arma caritas*, ICRC, Geneva, 1947.

The Geneva Conventions can be summed up in a single principle: persons who have been put out of action or who do not take a direct part in hostilities shall be respected, protected and humanely treated. These ideas are closely akin, but are not synonymous. Together, they constitute a coherent whole.

To respect is primarily an attitude of abstaining, meaning: do not harm, do not threaten, spare the lives, integrity and the means of existence of others, have regard for their individual personality and dignity.

To protect is a more positive attitude. It is a question of preserving others from evils, dangers or suffering to which they may be exposed, to take their defence and give them aid and support.

As regards *humane treatment*, it would be useless and hazardous to enumerate all it constitutes, since it varies according to circumstances. To determine it is a question of common sense and good faith. At least, we can say that humane treatment is a minimum to be reserved for the individual to enable him to lead an acceptable existence in as normal a manner as possible.

We shall give a real example of this action of the ICRC. Amid the hot sands of the desert, in a country where a civil war was raging and in which neither the Red Cross nor the Geneva Conventions had previously penetrated, ICRC delegates obtained an agreement from the two conflicting parties that they would abandon their ancestral practice of executing defeated enemies. Soon afterwards, a local chief suddenly came face to face with an adversary. In the single combat which followed, both were wounded, but the chief, less seriously injured, was able to bandage his wound. Then he turned to the man who, just a moment earlier, had tried to kill him, and treated his wound as well. He then took his captive to his own home. Here, his whole family, all the other warriors and all of his friends were against him and demanded that he kill the enemy. His own mother told him, *If you are a real man, prove it*. This chief held his ground however, and after his wound was healed took the prisoner to military headquarters. This combatant, and hundreds like him, were saved in this manner.

The Red Cross and peace

The Red Cross *promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples*, in the words of the Proclamation.

This phrase, introduced at a meeting of the Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross at Prague in 1961, was not a part of the original draft, because its authors considered that it was a programme question. In their opinion, it was not for the declaration of fundamental principles to enumerate the tasks of the Red Cross but only to specify the imperatives which inspired them. Thus, in their view, action for peace flowed quite naturally from the principle of humanity with its command *to prevent human suffering*. It will be well to bear this point in mind if the Proclamation should ever come to be revised.

The foregoing comment does not in any way tend to minimize the importance of the question which it is customary to raise at meetings of the institution under the heading "The Red Cross and Peace". It cannot be stated too many times that this does not entail a study, in all its amplitude and complexity, of the whole programme for maintaining peace in the world and for the peaceful settlement of conflicts, but only the modest influence which the Red Cross can bring to bear in this connection.

The founders of the Red Cross, Henry Dunant in particular, considered at the very beginning that the ultimate objective of the work they set in motion and the Convention they inspired was none other than that of universal peace. They understood the fact that the Red Cross, by pressing its ideal to its logical outcome, would be working for its own abolition, that a day would come when, men having finally accepted and put into effect its message of humanity by laying down and destroying their arms and thus making a future war impossible, the Red Cross would no longer have any reason for being. This is the meaning of the motto, *Per humanitatem ad pacem* which stands before the Constitution of the League of Red Cross Societies, along with the traditional slogan, *Inter arma caritas*.¹

The fact that since that time the Geneva Conventions came to cover other categories of victims and that the Red Cross enlarged its field of action to cover virtually all forms of human suffering has changed nothing—except of course that no one thinks any longer about the disappearance of the Red Cross once war has been abolished; people think rather of the complete conversion of its energies to charitable peacetime work.

¹ Meaning, respectively, "Through humanity towards peace" and "In war, charity".

In 1921, after the First World War, the ICRC and the young League of Red Cross Societies jointly launched "an appeal in favour of a spirit of peace". It was only in 1930, however, that the subject was first discussed and exhaustively examined by the International Red Cross Conference which then passed a resolution of the greatest importance, since it established guidelines which remain valid today.¹ The resolution said, in part:

"The Conference . . . considering that an essential condition of this activity is a scrupulous observance of the principle of racial, religious and political neutrality, a principle which enables the Red Cross to recruit its helpers among all races, creeds and parties, without excluding any,

considering that the National Societies, in this manner, develop and organize within their territories, on a neutral basis, the efforts of charitable persons with a view to strengthening the efficacy of their work,

considering that the National Societies—extending over all countries and collaborating, through their international organization, towards the realization of a common aim under a distinctive sign consecrated by a universal treaty—represent a moral force in international affairs and an element of mutual aid and reconciliation between peoples,

expresses its conviction that the Red Cross, by its efforts to establish these points of contact will bring the support of its moral force and prestige to the world movement towards comprehension and conciliation, the essential guarantees for the maintenance of peace, and will thus work efficaciously against war as the sole means of preventing that suffering the mitigation of which originally formed the primary object of its activity".

Since the adoption of that resolution, Red Cross gatherings have passed many others on the same subject. In these long texts, we find an abundance of repetition and "literature" but not so much in the way of constructive proposals. Two resolutions nevertheless deserve our attention; both relate to direct action by the Red Cross in favour of peace. The first of these emerged from the Congress which marked the Centenary of the Red Cross.² It approved the role played by the ICRC in

¹ Resolution XXV of the Fourteenth International Red Cross Conference, Brussels, 1930.

² Resolution XXIV of the Council of Delegates, Geneva, 1963.

the "Cuba affair" at the request of the United Nations¹ and concluded in general terms that, *it is desirable that the Committee respond to the call made upon it simultaneously by States in conflict to act as intermediary or assist in the proper discharge of the obligations they have undertaken, thus contributing to the maintenance of peace.*

The second resolution we should like to mention was passed by the International Red Cross Conference in 1969.² This resolution

"recommends that in cases of armed conflicts or of situations which are a threat to peace the ICRC shall, if necessary, ask the representatives of the National Societies of the countries concerned to meet together or separately with the ICRC to study the resolution of humanitarian problems involved and in agreement with the Governments concerned to examine what contribution the Red Cross could make to preventing the outbreak of the conflict or achieving a cease-fire or cessation of hostilities".

Twenty years later, we should note that no case has arisen analogous to the Cuba crisis and that the contingencies provided for in the 1969 resolution are exceptional and inevitably call for an extremely delicate approach. It is not impossible however that certain discussions under the auspices of the Red Cross between countries seriously at odds with one another relieve tension and thus reduce the danger of conflict.

In 1967 and 1969, the ICRC brought together two round table conferences on this subject and the Yugoslav Red Cross convoked a World Red Cross Conference on Peace at Belgrade in 1975, choosing for the agenda a number of items which had been discussed at these meetings. This gathering drew up a detailed programme of action of which the Council of Delegates took note in 1977.³

¹ In 1962, at the time of a grave international crisis, the ICRC was asked to verify whether ships en route to Cuba were carrying nuclear missiles. The ICRC had agreed to do so and had organized a team of qualified observers. Finally, a political détente was arrived at before this team started its operations. The very fact of acceptance of this task by the ICRC, however, a task far removed from its traditional pattern of operations, encouraged this détente and had an impact on people's thinking. The ICRC had naturally made its participation subject to acceptance by all the three parties directly concerned and had received formal assurances in this respect from the General Secretariat of the United Nations. Later on however, at a Red Cross Conference, the Cuban representative stated that his government had not been consulted.

² Resolution XX of the Twenty-first International Conference, Istanbul, 1969.

³ Decision No. 1 of the Council of Delegates, Bucharest, 1977.

The first part of that programme is devoted to the indirect activities of the Red Cross in favour of peace. It takes note of the fact that the work of protection and assistance being carried out every day by the Red Cross, wherever man suffers from the acts of his fellow beings, contributes to peace. This part contains nothing new.

The second part deals with direct action: to contribute, in co-operation with the United Nations, to the elimination of threats to peace, preventing the outbreak of hostilities and helping to bring them to an end and even, as some National Societies wished, to denounce aggression. This extension of the mandate of the Red Cross did not receive the approval of all the participants, some of whom considered that in taking this path the institution would be departing from its proper role and venturing into the political field. The 1977 Council of Delegates recognized that it was essential for their comments to be attached to the programme and taken into account in its interpretation. The Council furthermore specified that the application of the Belgrade document would have to take place "with full respect for the fundamental principles of the Red Cross". This indeed is the key to the problem. We shall never go astray when we refer, as a criterion, to this primordial charter. In doing so, the various organisms of the Red Cross can see, as each case arises, what they can undertake, pursuant to the programme, without violating the doctrine of the movement.¹

From knowing war at close hand, the Red Cross understands better than anyone that war is inhuman, that it is just as contrary to charity as it is to justice, in that it does not necessarily lead to the victory of the righteous. There are few causes that are closer to its heart than the cause of peace.

The Red Cross cannot for all that depart from its principles, and in particular the principle of neutrality, which fixes the limits for its interventions in this field. The essential mission of the Red Cross remains that of protecting human beings in the event of conflict and of relieving their suffering. For the Red Cross, there is no just war and no unjust war—there are only victims in need of help. It cannot carry out its task except by virtue of its apolitical character, which it must safeguard above

¹ The last meeting of the Council of Delegates set up a Commission to oversee the application of the Belgrade programme and propose suitable measures to achieve its objectives.

all else. At the same time, it is through the faithful execution of its traditional mandate that it gains the moral force and credibility without which its appeals in favour of peace would have no weight.

In the field of prevention of war, as in every other field, the Red Cross must refrain from taking sides between countries. This reserve with regard to controversies alien to it is profoundly wise and must be maintained. Indeed, even though peace is dear to all peoples, they are seldom agreed on the way to bring peace into being or to maintain it—even on the character peace should have.¹ To take a position on any of the questions presented by the manner of organizing the world, whether we like it or not, means that one is putting oneself on the level of politics. To seek to exert a direct effect in this sphere nearly always implies a descent into the arena of nations and parties. To exert its influence in this way, for example, it would be necessary for the Red Cross to take a position on such matters as military budgets, the manufacture and sale of arms, and, in general, that it would either support or attack numerous political actions. By involving itself in this way in impassioned struggles for which it is not equipped or prepared, it would find itself on an icy slope upon which it could find no footing, leading it to rapid destruction.

On the other hand, other institutions which have been created to defend peace and bring about a better organization of the world do not have the same limitations and can act more freely. It is apparent, in the crusade against war, that everyone should fight with the means at his disposal, in terms of his own essential nature and inescapable destiny. The means available to the Red Cross to eliminate war are limited. They may even seem to be ridiculous, when we can see all around us the great powers making enormous deliveries of arms to their allies of the moment, and in so doing driving them inevitably into new conflicts.

But, in the general framework of this effort for peace, the Red Cross nonetheless constitutes an important moral element. It is the symbol of peace, present in the midst of combat. Every one of its acts thus becomes a pacifying gesture. To act as intermediary between enemies, to promote humanitarian law, means the creation of a climate of appeasement and reconciliation. By asserting solidarity among men in the face

¹ Nevertheless, in recent exchanges of views within the International Red Cross, it was emphasized that peace is inseparable from justice and that there can be no true peace in which the human person is not respected.

of suffering and by providing assistance, the Red Cross tends to level the inequalities among them and attenuate their frustrations and resentments. It contributes to bringing together individuals and perhaps eventually whole peoples. It is just this which the Proclamation demands of the Red Cross. It is also the mandate confirmed by the Twenty-third International Conference in 1977 in its resolution on the mission of the Red Cross, which stated, that

“the Red Cross, in respecting its principles and in developing its manifold activities, should play an essential part in disseminating to the population, and especially to youth, the spirit of mutual understanding and friendship among all peoples, and thus promoting lasting peace”.

Philosophical considerations

The wellspring of the principle of humanity is in the essence of social morality which can be summed up in a single sentence, *Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them*. This fundamental precept can be found, in almost identical form, in all the great religions, Brahminism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism and Taoism. It is also the golden rule of the positivists, who do not commit themselves to any religion but only to the data of experience, in the name of reason alone. It is indeed not at all necessary to resort to affective or transcendental concepts to recognize the advantage for men to work together to improve their lot.

The idea of mutual assistance originates first of all in the very instinct for preservation. It contributes to the survival of the species; it offers more in the way of rewards than it does of burdens. Through objective consideration of the evidence, basing ourselves on the consent of the majority, we also arrive at the concept of solidarity as an ideal for the organization of the community. The maxim, *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*, another version of the “golden rule” cited above, therefore represents a universal truth, for it is in full conformity with human nature and the needs of society.

In other words, humanity impels each of us to act for the well-being of our fellow men. What is "well-being"? It is the whole pattern of action which, at a given time, seems to be useful, just and reasonable. The inclination to do good is what we call goodness.

Goodness is a complex motive, in which we can recognize a number of related virtues or sentiments, such as benevolence, generosity, devotion, pity, toleration. To be good is also to be sensitive, charitable, helpful and useful.

If we wish to sum up all of this and express it in practical terms, using other language, we may say that a good man, moved by good intentions, is touched by the suffering of others and tries to relieve it; with respect and affection for his fellow being, he protects and assists him, and devotes himself to him. With a tranquil mind, he endures evil; he does not yield to hatred against another, but joyfully forgives him.

Modern humanitarianism is born of this social morality and attempts to organize relations between individuals on the basis of a compromise between their interests, recognizing that charity and justice constitute a far from negligible element in their true interest. Humanitarianism works toward the establishment of a social order which should be as advantageous as possible for the largest possible number of people. It takes man both as its objective and as its means, without deifying man.

Humanitarianism is not a religion in opposition to other religions, a moral philosophy opposed to other moral philosophies. It does however coincide with the precepts of many religions and moral codes. It is one of the rare meeting places where people of all beliefs can come together and grasp one another's hands, without betraying what is most intimate and sacred to each of them.

How does humanitarianism differ from charity, which, as we have seen, is one of its major sources of inspiration? Charity is primarily the mainspring of immediate action by an individual in the presence of a stricken victim. Humanitarianism extends its merciful action to the whole of humanity. It is in permanent revolt against misery and rejects fatalism. It brings together people of good will and creates the necessary institutions. Humanitarianism takes thought and requires a degree of rational discipline.

Does humanitarianism find its inspiration in justice or in charity? Justice, generally speaking, consists in rendering to each person his due. It has different aspects which must not be confused with one another.

First of all there is legal justice, which accords to each person what is rightfully his. This is the kind of justice sanctioned by law and administered by the courts. But, in moral terms, there is also an ideal justice, known also as equity.

If we consider legal justice, we see at once that it differs profoundly from charity. It has been symbolized as a blindfolded woman holding scales. This symbol might also, of course, serve to represent charity, in one sense. Like justice, charity knows man only as a human being, and does not need to know his name. Like justice, charity holds the scales even between men. Like justice, charity gives for a valid reason. The analogy stops here however, for while justice rewards each person according to his rights, charity gives to each according to his suffering. To judge means to separate the good from the bad, the just from the unjust; to measure the degrees of individual responsibility. Charity on the other hand has nothing whatever to do with this kind of justice. It refuses to weigh the merits or faults of this or that individual. It goes much farther. Going beyond and above the opposition between good and evil, it attains, in full serenity, the level of wisdom. Then it becomes the very image of mercy, of goodness without limit, as exemplified by the expression of Lao Tse, *With a good man, I am good; with an evil man, I am also good.*

But, as we said, justice has many levels. From its origins in primitive vengeance, it has passed through different stages of law and of civilization, of time and place, to reach a point far beyond simple legal justice and attain a very high level. On this level, it takes on the qualities of understanding and forbearance; it is not so much concerned with reckoning the responsibility of men, their virtues and faults, but tends rather to become equalitarian and in so doing to offer everyone the same chance to seek a place in the sun. It is more interested in providing people with what they need than it is with punishing them. It is no longer merely a matter of applying the established standards of distribution, but indeed of correcting the inequalities of fate. Such a conception is an ideal, and it is commonly not understood; most of the time it cannot be put into practice by society, which must maintain a degree of social order. At this higher level, one might say that justice joins hands with charity, and in so doing finds its own ultimate fulfilment. Thus we can see that charity and justice, far from standing in opposition to one another,

finally come together and support one another, at a higher level. The Red Cross appeals to justice in its highest form, when charity takes precedence over the laws of men.

To conclude, the Red Cross movement gathers under its flag all those who wish to serve, even though the deeper reasons for their commitment may differ greatly. As Max Huber wrote, *The most varied points of view in philosophy, religion and human experience enable man to understand the idea of the Red Cross, the moral principle it embodies and the action it demands.*¹

¹ Preface to *The Good Samaritan*.

II

IMPARTIALITY

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours only to relieve suffering, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Under this heading, the Proclamation brings together three closely allied but distinct ideas. It would have been preferable to make of them three separate principles. We shall examine them one by one.

1. NON-DISCRIMINATION

Commentary

The fundamental idea of non-discrimination among men is expressed in the first sentence of the Proclamation. It had been expressed as follows in 1955: *The Red Cross is ready to come to the help of each individual, equally and without any form of discrimination.*¹

At the outset, we shall relate an actual event. At the end of the Second World War, a column of soldiers reconquering their own country came to a small town. The commander of the unit approached the woman in charge of the hospital and told her that he had a number of wounded men to leave at the hospital. She told him that the hospital was already full of enemy wounded. "Put them out then and make room for our own men," the officer said. "Over my dead body" she replied, and he realized

¹ J. Pictet: *Red Cross Principles*.

that she really meant it as she stood barring the doorway. For a moment, the officer was nonplussed, and then he realized the truth—that enemies who had been wounded were no longer enemies—and ordered his unit to move on.

This is the principle of non-discrimination, illustrated in this instance in a simple manner with respect to nationality. We shall revert to this example later on.

To define non-discrimination, we shall first have to say what discrimination is. The relatively new and usually pejorative use of the term refers to a distinction or segregation which one makes to the detriment of certain other persons, for the sole reason that they belong to some specific category.

Non-discrimination among men is the greatest of Red Cross principles, after that of humanity, to which it is in any event related. The principle of humanity has its starting point in human suffering. It is this suffering which inspires the charitable action and determines the form it takes. The solicitude of the Red Cross cannot submit to limitations; it extends to all beings whom we recognize as our fellow-men because of the common nature we share with them.¹ In its relations with those in need of assistance, whoever they may be, the Red Cross will show an equal readiness to be of service.

At the very beginning, after the battle of Solferino, Henry Dunant made this appeal with its ultimate connotation: care for the enemy wounded as friends. From its inception, the Red Cross has insisted upon this imperative element of humanity. If it were to be false to this ideal, it would disappear.

From 1864 onwards, non-discrimination found expression in the Geneva Conventions and, later on, in legislation on human rights. It is also a principle of long standing in the field of medical morality and ethics. We shall nevertheless seek it in vain in the Hippocratic oath, as proclaimed by that great physician of antiquity. Hippocrates himself, in fact, refused to go and care for the Persians when they were stricken by a plague, "because they are our enemies," as he put it. Non-discrimination now stands in a prominent place in the "Geneva Oath" and

¹ The activities of National Societies are of course mainly carried out within the borders of their own countries. No one would expect to have these Societies disperse their resources throughout the world, as we shall see under the subject of universality.

the Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association, adopted in our own century.

This is an aspect of great progress made in modern thought. Today, as Louis Pasteur wrote, *We do not ask a suffering man what country he comes from or what his religion is, but say simply that he is in pain, that he is one of our own and that we will give him relief.*

After the sorrowful experiences of the Second World War, it was considered necessary to condemn specifically all the other forms of arbitrary discrimination along with that of nationality. Accordingly, the Proclamation forbids discrimination as to *nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions*. One might also have forbidden distinctions based on *any other similar criteria* as was done in the Geneva Conventions, since it is obvious that the enumeration given above is not limitative but refers only to the most flagrant examples.

In what fields is the Red Cross called upon to fight against discrimination? In all the fields of concern to it and first of all so far as its material action is concerned, in the giving of care and distribution of relief. Then—and this is above all the mission of the ICRC—when it demands that authorities accord the same humane treatment to all victims. Lastly—and we refer here to the National Societies, as will be discussed further with regard to the principle of unity—membership must be available to everyone who wishes to become a member. In this latter case, we are referring to an organic principle and are no longer in the domain of objectives, but in that of means.

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(To be continued)