

VOLUNTARISM WITHIN THE RED CROSS

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Origin of voluntarism

“Tutti fratelli”, cried with emotion the women of Castiglione when, with Henry Dunant, they tended the wounded after the battle of Solferino. In this cry from the heart, this testimony to human solidarity in distress and to voluntary assistance to men who suffer, is to be found the origin of a movement which has so widely expanded during the years and which is called the Red Cross.

The dedication of the voluntary workers in Lombardy who devoted themselves to the care of wounded soldiers, admirable as it was, was by no means equal to the immensity of the needs. Henry Dunant himself said, “In the face of so great an emergency, what could be done by a handful of enthusiasts, all isolated and dispersed? (...) But selected and competent volunteers, sent by societies sanctioned and approved by the authorities, would easily have overcome all these difficulties, and would have done infinitely more good.”¹

Voluntary service and the law

This conviction of Henry Dunant's, that it was necessary to found voluntary relief societies to provide care for wounded soldiers in war, was given expression in 1863 in the resolutions of the International

¹ Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino*, Washington, D. C., The American National Red Cross, 1959, pp. 57-58.

Conference in Geneva.¹ National committees—the precursors of the National Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Lion and Sun Societies, were assigned the task of training voluntary nurses in time of peace and of organizing their activities in time of war.

Subsequently, many other official texts mentioned the principle of voluntary service which is one of the characteristics of our movement.

Some of these texts originate from *Red Cross* bodies, particularly the International Conference, the supreme deliberating authority of the movement. For instance, one of the qualifying conditions for a society to become a member of the International Red Cross was approved by the 1948 International Red Cross Conference in Stockholm, and states that the candidate society must be recognized by its legal government as a voluntary relief society and an auxiliary to the public authorities. In addition, among the fundamental principles proclaimed by the 1965 International Conference in Vienna is one which includes the voluntary service concept in the following terms: *The Red Cross is a voluntary relief organization not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.* A number of resolutions, adopted by the International Conference,² the Inter-American Conference,³ or the Board of Governors,⁴ gave support to this notion by underlining its importance or connection with other essential principles of the movement.

Some laws issued by *States* testify to the international community's recognition of the voluntary nature of relief society activities. Such is the case of the Geneva Conventions of 1906, 1929 and 1949 which include a provision placing the staff of voluntary relief societies on the same footing as the medical personnel of armed forces.⁵ In addition, Article 25 of the League of Nations Covenant called on members of the League to promote voluntary National Red Cross organizations. A United

¹ *Compte rendu de la Conférence internationale réunie à Genève, les 26, 27, 28 et 29 octobre 1863 pour étudier les moyens de pourvoir à l'insuffisance du service sanitaire dans les armées en campagne*, Genève, Imprimerie de Jules-Guillaume Fick, 1863, pp. 147-149.

² International Conferences: Res. 17, 18/XV, Tokyo, 1934; 25/XVI, London, 1938; 1/XXIII, Bucharest, 1977.

³ Inter-American Conferences: Res. 6/VI, Mexico, 1951; Recom. I/VIII, Bogotá, 1966.

⁴ Board of Governors: Res. 12, 23, nineteenth session, 1946; 7, 21, twentieth session, 1948.

⁵ Geneva Convention for amelioration of condition of wounded and sick in armies in the field: art. 10/Conv. July 6, 1906; art. 10/ Conv. July 27, 1929; Art. 26/Conv. August 12, 1949.

Nations General Assembly resolution of 1946 adds that at all times and in all circumstances the independence and benevolent character of National Societies must be respected.¹

The meaning of voluntarism

All these documents, deserving of careful analysis, show that voluntary service is recognized as an essential Red Cross principle. But what does it actually mean? The volunteer is he who of his own free will offers to undertake a certain task: he does so without compulsion. As the Latin tag has it, “*Voluntas non potest cogi*”, “the will cannot be commanded”.

For a National Society, the voluntary service, as just defined, is on two levels. All members of a Red Cross Society who work to promote the humanitarian ideal which they uphold are volunteers, at the individual level. But the Society itself, as a group, may also be considered a volunteer. In fact, it is on the Society that the onus falls to decide what activities it will undertake in the spirit of service inspired by its members. Of course, it is bound by the resolutions of International Red Cross Conferences, by its statutes, and by its status as an auxiliary to the public authorities. But it is up to it to decide the tasks it considers itself able to accomplish within the general limits set by the movement and by the authorities. When making its choice, under the attentive eye of its “social partners” (government, voluntary organizations, public), the National Society is guided by the desire to alleviate first the most urgent distress. In other words, the spirit of service is not confined to the National Society members, it spreads throughout the National Society itself, for far from being an instrument available to the government, it enjoys freedom—albeit limited—to decide the work it wishes to do.

¹ Res. of 49th plenary meeting, November 19, 1946.

See also the declaration by Mr Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations, to the Council of Delegates (Geneva, September 2-10, 1963): “... The essentially voluntary character of your organisation enables you to surmount difficulties that intergovernmental organisations would find intractable. For this reason, the General Assembly of the United Nations, in its very first Session in 1946, recommended that the members of the United Nations should encourage and promote the establishment and co-operation of duly authorised voluntary Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and that at all times the independent and voluntary action of those Societies should be respected. The Assembly’s resolution reflected the desire of the world organisation for the closest relations with the Red Cross.”

Voluntarism, paid and unpaid

Does voluntary service signify unpaid service? Is the remuneration of Red Cross staff in conflict with the fundamental principles? This question was studied by the Red Cross in 1950. Until the First World War some privileged people could devote time to relief activities without pay or refund of outlays, but economic conditions had so changed by 1950 that few people could then live without earning their livelihood. In addition, the activities of National Societies had grown and qualified staff with professional training had become increasingly necessary. The investigation conducted by the ICRC and the League showed that all National Societies consulted employed paid staff and did not consider this to be a departure from the Red Cross principle. Indeed, did not Henry Dunant say, in 1863, that voluntary nurses should be enlisted temporarily and be paid for all the time they worked?¹ The ICRC stated, in *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge* in 1950, its conclusion that the question of remuneration of Red Cross personnel depended very much on economic conditions and the social structure of the country, and that it was for the National Society in each country to decide how to organize the recruitment of its staff.²

The proportion of voluntary unpaid workers to professionals varies from one National Society to another but whether paid or unpaid, they all share a common determination to alleviate suffering and promote respect for, and the dignity of, human beings. Voluntary workers who are paid for their Red Cross service freely commit themselves to duties of a more imperative calling than the employees of a profit-making enterprise, for they place the interest of victims of circumstances before their own. Unpaid voluntary workers, for their part, provide a service which enables National Societies to undertake far more activities than would be possible without their support.³ Some give their blood, some comfort people, others might, for example, design Red Cross posters. What is perhaps even more important is the contagious idealism and enthusiasm of the unpaid voluntary workers. They represent the very essence of the "Red Cross spirit".

¹ Procès-verbal de la séance du 17 mars 1863 de la Commission spéciale de la Société d'utilité publique pour les secours aux militaires blessés des armées, in *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, N° 360, décembre 1948, p. 870.

² Lucie Odier, *Le principe du volontariat dans les œuvres de la Croix-Rouge en temps de guerre*, in *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, N° 379, juillet 1950, pp. 506-510.

³ See the report entitled *The British Red Cross Society in 1974*, p. 20, showing the services provided by 131,000 unpaid volunteers without which the Red Cross could not function.

The altruism of the voluntary workers, paid and unpaid, is to be found not only at the service of National Societies. The League and the ICRC share this attachment to the principle of voluntarism which unites all components of the Red Cross. The ICRC, for its part, appreciates all the more the value of the voluntary worker as it has had to face tasks with which it could not have coped without massive support from voluntary workers. For instance, the Central Tracing Agency could not have managed during the two world wars if it had not had the co-operation of many voluntary workers. It is a fact that the nature of its responsibilities and of conflicts requires the ICRC to call increasingly on paid professionals and specialists, but it remains as open as possible to unpaid voluntarism and it is pleased at contact between its personnel and that of the National Societies.

Voluntarism and selflessness

While the Red Cross comprises voluntary workers who are not all unpaid, it gives its services free of charge. How could it assist without discrimination all victims of conflicts or disasters if it were to ask for financial consideration from people who would certainly be in no position to pay? "The Red Cross is a voluntary relief organization not prompted in any manner by desire for gain" proclaimed the International Red Cross Conference in Vienna in 1965. Selflessness seems therefore to be the corollary to voluntarism. One of the first versions of this principle, drafted by a preliminary study commission in 1959, was even more explicit: "The Red Cross, a voluntary institution inspired by the spirit of service, considers only the humanitarian interest of people. It derives no profit from its work".

An illustration of this idea is to be found in Article 44 of the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field, of 12 August 1949. The fourth paragraph of that article says that as an exceptional measure the red cross, red crescent and red lion and sun signs may be displayed in time of peace, under certain conditions, to mark the position of aid stations exclusively assigned to the purpose of giving *free* treatment to the wounded or sick. The emblems of the Red Cross movement must always, symbolize selflessness to reaffirm the institution's moral authority and ensure that it enjoys the confidence of governments and peoples and of all who, voluntarily, by their generosity, enable it to finance its activities.

Voluntarism, independence and neutrality

The support given to the Red Cross in no way diminishes its independence of the authorities or its neutrality which the voluntary spirit of its members ensures. The National Societies welcome and organize the good will of everybody irrespective of sex, faith, social condition and political conviction. The voluntary workers of the Red Cross are not a pressure group. The wide range of their culture, politics and ideologies is an assurance of the independence of the institution they have chosen to serve.

The very close ties linking the concepts of voluntarism, independence and neutrality have often been pointed out. In 1948, the League Board of Governors, developing an idea which it had expressed in 1946, stated that "a Red Cross Society should maintain its position as an independent voluntary organization as recognized by the Government, local authorities and other voluntary organizations engaged in similar work; in time of war as in time of peace the privileged status of the Red Cross in war may be jeopardized if the Society does not retain its independence and maintain the integrity of its aims in accordance with Red Cross principles".¹ If Red Cross workers did not of their own free will undertake to serve the movement's humanitarian ideal, but were forced to join it by the powers that be, they would no longer be autonomous and would be viewed with understandable suspicion.

Voluntarism, a haven for humanity

Another positive aspect of voluntarism which should be mentioned is the opportunity it gives for a person to express his feeling of solidarity in respect of other persons, in a society increasingly controlled by the State, by science and by technology. In his consideration of the voluntary character of the commitment undertaken by members of the Red Cross, Jean-G. Lossier has shown that it "stands out in its full moral importance, for, with present tendencies all against free choice and spontaneity in human relations and all in favour of the cut and dried and legally established in all things, disinterestedness in any form is little understood".² Some people might think that there is no longer any room for

¹ Board of Governors, Res. VII, XXth session, 1948.

² Jean-G. Lossier, *Fellowship, The Moral Significance of the Red Cross*, Geneva, 1948, p. 43.

voluntarism in the world of today, with the State tending more and more to assume responsibility for the individual's social needs and to protect him from the unavoidable adversities resulting from sickness or accident. And yet, there is no escaping the fact that this is not so. There are certain things which a State-controlled body cannot or does not yet do, but which the Red Cross can. For instance, there are National Society voluntary workers who try to look after certain marginal social cases who are not covered by State aid, like those youngsters who wander at night in some towns in Latin America, to whom the local Red Cross branch has decided to bring much needed assistance in the form of medicaments, food and human warmth. Similarly, the voluntary workers of the Red Cross movement bring much appreciated comfort and consolation to the sick in hospitals. In such fashion, they contribute—and they are not the only ones—towards the alleviation of the distress experienced by those who perhaps feel that they may have been forgotten and to opening the hearts of their fellow-citizens to their sense of responsibility for others as well as for their own health and welfare.¹ Finally, in an armed conflict, even though the army medical services may have become more and more efficient, it is only the representatives of National Societies and the delegates of the ICRC who can perform various specific tasks, because of the neutrality of the institution they represent. Therefore, voluntarism retains today all its value, even though its mission has changed somewhat in character since the nineteenth century.

Spirit of service

In conclusion, it should be again stressed that the very essence of voluntarism in the Red Cross is the spirit of service with which its members are filled. The voluntary worker is the person who, of his own free will and whether he is paid or not, lends his services for the fulfilment of the humanitarian mission to which he has decided to devote his life, all the while accepting to submit to the discipline which is essential for the discharge of the tasks entrusted to him.

One should therefore bear in mind Mr. Pictet's warning to the Red Cross, in his commentary on the principles of the Red Cross, when he invited the movement not to lose "the human touch, its direct contact

¹ See Pierre M. Dorolle, *National Red Cross Societies and Health and Welfare*, Joint Committee for the Re-appraisal of the Role of the Red Cross, Background Paper No 4, Geneva, Henry Dunant Institute, pp. 48-50.

with suffering”.¹ A top-heavy administrative machinery, which could become an end to itself, would be liable to distort the spirit of the Red Cross itself. “What use would admirable statutes, a balanced budget and a well-trained staff be to it, if it must lose its soul. Let it meditate on the ancient myth of Antaeus and constantly draw new strength from the source from which it originally sprang”.²

The preservation of an authentic spirit of service, in line with the ideal of voluntary aid advocated by Henry Dunant, such is the task which all Red Cross bodies must perform.

¹ Jean Pictet, *Red Cross Principles*, Geneva, ICRC, 1955, p. 107.

² *Ibid.*, p. 108,