

# The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross

COMMENTARY

by Jean Pictet

*(continued)*

## V

### VOLUNTARY SERVICE

*The Red Cross is a voluntary relief organization not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.*

#### **Terminology**

The English title “Voluntary service”, which heads this chapter of the Proclamation and of this Commentary, is better than the French title “Caractère bénévole” (“Benevolent character”) which was adopted. In modern French language, the term “bénévoles” refers to persons who work without being paid, who donate their services.

The word “volontaire”, like the English “volunteer”, refers to someone who works of his own free will, without external compulsion—and not necessarily one who is not paid. In an army, volunteers are those who have willingly entered military service, as contrasted with those

conscripted by law, or who offer, without compulsion, to take part in an especially dangerous or difficult mission.

In the Red Cross world, the concept of voluntary service implies that one serves not because of any constraint but because of a freely accepted commitment. Nevertheless, and this is comparable to military service, volunteering may take the form of a commitment which carries with it obligations from which the volunteer cannot free himself once he has signed up; he is no longer free to reject or change the conditions as he likes—that is to say, he is obliged to keep his word.

Thus the concept of voluntary service is a broader one than “*caractère bénévolé*”. Some National Societies however describe as “volunteers” the many people who, in peacetime, give their services without pay. In such cases, “voluntary” and “benevolent” come to mean much the same thing.

We shall deal successively with voluntarism, charity, selflessness and the spirit of service.

## 1. VOLUNTARY SERVICE

Under this heading, we enter the field of organic principles, that is, the standards which govern the form and operation of the institution.

The Red Cross is an institution providing voluntary assistance. At its very inception, it was created on the basis of voluntarism. Henry Dunant at Solferino, confronted by the enormous number of wounded left untreated because of the shortage of doctors, tried to find help from residents and tourists in nearby Castiglione. He succeeded, and it was the women of the region, caring for the victims of both camps, who uttered the words, *Tutti fratelli!* (All of them are brothers.) Dunant spread this cry throughout the world, and it was and will be repeated by all peoples, disregarding frontiers and rising above hatreds.

Nearly a century later, when the atom bomb burst over Hiroshima, wiping out most of the city's doctors and nurses, the blast was followed almost immediately by the arrival of several hundred girls, from 14 to 16 years of age—volunteer workers of the Japanese Red Cross. They were the ones to begin to cope with the consequences of one of the greatest disasters in history.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Junod: *Red Cross Volunteers*, International Review of the Red Cross, May 1959.

From the beginning of the Red Cross, the work was seen as a contribution by private charity to relieve the evils which beset mankind, with warfare heading the list. The founders counted on disinterested assistance, spontaneous co-operation. The project did not seem possible except through the gathering of many people of good will. Henry Dunant himself remarked in his book, *A Memory of Solferino*, in 1862, *For work of this kind, paid help is not what is wanted.*

The outstanding thing that distinguishes the mercenary from the Red Cross worker is that the former works only for what he can get out of it, while the latter looks first at what needs to be done. This fact in itself should gain for nursing personnel the esteem and respect they deserve. They have a right to it because they do not work only to earn a living, but have mainly dedicated themselves to an altruistic calling which may entail certain sacrifices. We are forced to recognize however that in certain countries people still refuse to accord this legitimate consideration to members of the nursing profession, treating them instead as subordinates, as domestic servants.<sup>1</sup> The nursing profession is nevertheless one of the noblest, and the esteem it deserves should be universally accorded it.

The voluntary character of the Red Cross is directly related to the principle of humanity, being in effect a means for putting that principle into effect. For the Red Cross to be able to carry out its work, it has to inspire a feeling of dedication and appeal to the best in people; its ranks must be filled with men and women with a highly developed spirit of service.<sup>2</sup> Charity and self-denial are inseparable.

It is its spirit of individual and spontaneous assistance to which the Red Cross owes its character as a private institution which is at the same time capable of supplementing the efforts of the public authorities. States, characterized by Nietzsche as "cold monsters", however well organized they may be, cannot deal with all misfortunes. Only beings of flesh and blood possess sensitivity and human warmth. It is true

---

<sup>1</sup> This is doubtless one of the hand-me-downs from a tradition dating back to ancient times when such personnel was recruited mainly from among the slaves.

<sup>2</sup> But there is no excuse for invoking the spirit of dedication of nurses as a pretext for underpaying them. For too long the Sisters of Charity were exploited, on the argument of their abnegation. As a result, in certain nurses' organizations today, the words "calling", "dedication" and "mission" are not well regarded, and it is emphasized that nursing is one profession among many which people enter because of its own characteristics, with its advantages and disadvantages.

enough that agents of the State, responsible for social welfare activities, may be humane individuals and often are, but they are bound by laws, regulations, instructions and bureaucratic routine. They act for reasons of professional obligation, whereas a volunteer is impelled by his desire to help and by his feelings of sympathy. The Red Cross thus provides the leavening of individual charity and serves as a rallying point for the generous impulses of private persons who, it is to be hoped, will come forward, and can act with the wholeheartedness and tact which may be needed in delicate cases.

With regard to its internal organization, the Red Cross is threatened by two opposite hazards, and forever stands between them: bureaucratism and amateurism. It must protect itself from both.

Let us take bureaucratism first. The tendency towards over-organization nowadays threatens nearly all institutions. One must make sure that activism and perfectionism are not allowed to drown out the true message. Paradoxically, it is a good thing that the Red Cross does not have too much in the way of material resources, otherwise it would be in danger of losing its soul. It is not by the size of its buildings nor the number of its vehicles that the Red Cross will be judged, but by the fervour of its ideals. In the Red Cross, a certain degree of improvisation, related to the events which call for its intervention, is always indicated.

If it should ever lose its direct contact with humanity and suffering, if it should ever forget its voluntary character, the institution would be like a cut flower and, deprived of its sap, would soon wither and die. The machinery set up in a bureaucratic spirit, however well oiled, would become an end in itself, it would be running on no load, or it could be envisaged as a giant without eyes. Let us instead consider the legend of the giant Antaeus, who gained renewed strength every time he was thrown to the ground, that is, every time he returned to his mother, the earth itself. Let us hope that our institutions will always, in like manner, grow stronger in returning to the source from which they sprang.

The other danger facing us is that of amateurism, a disease afflicting many voluntary organizations. In their report, Donald Tansley and Pierre Dorolle considered in parallel the two major orientations which are present in the fields of assistance and health, seeing in the conflict between them a fundamental problem. A majority of National Societies still follow the traditional and historic conception of "charity", that is to say, individual relief, given sporadically and on a small scale. Without

criticizing the action itself, but the way in which it is carried out, the authors emphasized that the *old clothes* approach of the *Red Cross of the good old days* perpetuated the *dark side of charity*, marked by the dependence of the receiver, who must again and again appeal to the generosity of the donor, and again and again express his gratitude.

In contrast to this pattern, other Societies have adopted a policy of larger scale assistance, more systematically administered, tending toward the improvement of health and social security, incorporated into a general plan. In this way, many more people are reached and there is greater respect for the individual, for the assistance appears to him as something to which he is entitled, as a right.

It does not seem to us that the two approaches must necessarily exclude one another. Is it not possible for them to coexist and supplement one another to suit local needs and conditions? Individual action is essential when a disaster has destroyed the infrastructure. Furthermore, it stimulates an outpouring of spontaneous service and discloses the infinite treasures of good will. It is vital for the Red Cross to conserve this creative spirit of initiative, in the face of rigid and invasive professionalism.

Amateurism produces other ills however. Using the voluntary character of philanthropic work as a pretext, there is too often a tolerance for indiscipline and for poorly defined responsibilities; for a confusion between the conception and the execution of a task. The result of this is a lack of authority and a very damaging dispersion of responsibilities.

Furthermore, certain persons, who are convinced that their unpaid work should assure them of eternal gratitude, think that they can act as they please; they do only the work which pleases them, standing apart from the administrative structure and building little empires for themselves in their chosen field of activity. In substance, they disorganize the whole structure and create confusion. It is perfectly understandable that one Society, in wartime, "paid" a small coin every month to all of its voluntary workers, so that they would conform to the same discipline as everyone else.

Fortunately, there are also real volunteers, whose dedication is attended by modesty. They work as hard as anyone else, are willing to work under the authority of younger people and never remind others of their volunteer status. In other words, they disseminate the true spirit

I ed Cross.

## 2. UNPAID SERVICE

In undertaking its tasks, the Red Cross must be able to count on voluntary donations, not only in money but in work as well. It must therefore appeal for the assistance of unpaid workers.

There are two ways to give: one can give material things or money, and one can also give one's time. This is no longer a matter of class distinctions; those who have little in the way of possessions have just as much right to give as those who have a great deal, and are often more generous.

The advantages of charity for the Red Cross are obvious. Apart from the economy it makes possible, it serves to strengthen the independence and reputation of the institution. More than that, the Red Cross finds in the charitable spirit of its members that enthusiasm which conforms perfectly to its ideals and sets an example for others.

Also, as we shall see, any service constitutes part of an exchange, through the new relationship it creates. The giver also receives. His work takes him away from his solitude, or from his depressing surroundings, takes him out of himself, relieves him of the boredom of idleness and sometimes offers him a new reason for living. In organizing charitable work, the Red Cross thus has a double objective in view.

There are nevertheless real drawbacks to charitable work in a long-term undertaking or work requiring specialized skills. The remarks made by two of the founders of the Red Cross in 1867 are still relevant and deserve to be repeated:

*The giving of one's services has something appealing about it, but those who act in this way are not necessarily those upon whom we can most rely. The generous and heartfelt impulse which makes them come forward is in danger of cooling off when it comes into contact with reality and these people are likely to grow weary sooner than expected... With the system of free work, not only do the Committees have no authority over their agents but, in addition, feel indebted to them and are often embarrassed in knowing how to deal with them; they owe too much to them and are in a poor position to refuse any favours they may ask. Volunteer workers sometimes cost more than the others. The only systematic exception we would make to the application of this principle concerns the members of the Committees themselves. They are so interested in the success of the*

*work and bear so much direct responsibility that there is no reason to fear any slackening in their zeal... They should not be paid, but this should not deter the Committees from paying the expenses entailed in their work !*<sup>1</sup>

Since most people cannot work for nothing and since the Red Cross needs professional and specialized workers, sometimes with very high qualifications, part of the personnel, generally speaking, has to consist of paid employees.<sup>2</sup> As we noted earlier, the work may preserve its voluntary character even though it is paid for. Work does not lose its dignity because it also assures the livelihood of those who do it. The status of people working for the institution is not determined by whether or not they receive salaries. There is therefore no such thing as a superior or an inferior category. The important thing is that the work carried out for the Red Cross shall be voluntary. Whether it is paid for or not is a secondary consideration.

The conception of voluntary service in the Red Cross was born with the movement itself, more than a century ago. The voluntary first-aid workers then constituted the basis of the new institution. At that time only wartime work was involved and the structure of the Red Cross Societies was modelled on that of the armies. The “bare-handed cohorts” of first-aid workers thus submitted themselves to the risks of combat and the discomforts of military life. The word “volunteer” in those days had its fullest meaning.

In our time, the problem is a different one, because the National Societies have a wide range of peacetime activities. Many of these Societies have the benefit of a large number of volunteer workers—for the most part well-to-do women—who give a few hours of their time every week to social welfare work, helping elderly people, visiting hospital patients, caring for children, reading to the blind, etc. There are also a great many first-aiders who have received special training and are prepared to lend a hand in case of accident or illness. These include a large number of factory workers. Others make their automobiles available for the transport of handicapped persons. Then there are the

---

<sup>1</sup> Gustave Moynier and Louis Appia: *La guerre et la charité*, p. 224 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> There are however some National Red Cross Societies consisting entirely of volunteers.

people who give their blood, collect money—and a great many others. Voluntary work does not belong only to the past. It is showing new vigour and popularity every day.

These auxiliaries receive no pay. Sometimes however the time they devote to assistance is subtracted from their regular working hours, or they may be offered a meal, reimbursement of travel costs, etc., none of which alters their status as volunteers. Sometimes they may wear a special emblem.

This brings us back to the problem of terminology. In some countries, people who come in to do occasional work are described as “volunteers”. There is no question however of using this term for paid officials and permanent staff members. These are comparable to government workers or to employees in private enterprises, who also choose their occupations freely.

To conclude our comments on this point: customs, social structures and economic conditions vary so greatly from one country to another that there can be no uniform solution to the problem. It is therefore up to every Society to make its own rules. It seems to us that it would be appropriate however to limit the term “volunteers” or “voluntary workers” to persons who offer their services free or for a low sum, either on a permanent or temporary basis. They would have the right to wear the insignia of the Society or a special badge. We would emphasize again that it is not enough to be generous and devoted and have a kind heart to be a useful volunteer worker. For many tasks it is also essential to be adequately trained. This may require some effort, which the true volunteer must accept.

What is most important however is that those who serve the Red Cross, whether they are paid or not, should create a living and fraternal working community, *all of whose members are aware of reaching out together toward a higher common purpose in which each one, while maintaining his own individuality freely serves the common cause and, regardless of the hierarchical order necessary for any organization, looks upon those under his orders as colleagues.*<sup>1</sup> Under such conditions there is born that team spirit which makes it possible to work shoulder to shoulder, with joy and mutual enthusiasm.

---

<sup>1</sup> Max Huber: *Au service du CICR*, Geneva, 1944.



### 3. SELFLESSNESS

Related to the principle of humanity, of which, on the level of organic principles, it is, in a manner of speaking, the counterpart, selflessness has great significance for the Red Cross. The author has previously called this the “golden rule” of the Red Cross and in 1955, in *Red Cross Principles*, formulated it as follows, *The Red Cross does not reap any advantage from its activities; it is only concerned with the humanitarian interest of the persons who require help.* The Red Cross stands firmly by this single word “selflessness”, a word with a host of potentialities.

In speaking of the selflessness of the Red Cross, we mean that it has no interests of its own, or at least that its interests coincide with those of the persons it protects or assists. Any assistance to the Red Cross serves the victims who need its help, and vice versa.

Whenever a Red Cross body is called upon to act or make a decision, it must first of all ask itself what the interests of the victims are, and if the action will serve those interests. This “golden rule”—in which gold counts for nothing—will always enable the Red Cross to solve most of the problems it encounters, with no danger of going wrong. In moments of difficulty, it will point the way more surely than the needle of a compass.

It will not always be easy however to ascertain the real interests of those in need. To do this requires, in each case, a careful weighing of all the factors involved. What must be attained is the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number. In actual practice however, it is ordinarily the most immediate interests of the victims which must be decisive. It is above all else the lives and health of human beings—the supreme possessions of man—which are involved, and these are increasingly endangered with the passing of time. One cannot take risks when these vital interests are at stake. Knowing that delay may be fatal, the Red Cross will never sacrifice one life today in the uncertain hope of saving more lives later.

The duty of a charitable undertaking is to devote itself wholly to the welfare of human beings; such an ideal does not allow for debate leading inevitably to compromise. The Red Cross is a purely charitable institution. It has only one object, to relieve human suffering. All other activities are subordinate to this single purpose.

The Red Cross has no material motive. It is not impelled by any desire for gain but only by love for human beings. In a sense it serves only

as trustee for the gifts it receives, for these are intended finally to relieve people who suffer. In a world where it seems that everything is for sale, it is remarkable to have one organization working, regularly and permanently, without the compelling incentive of commercial profit.

The Red Cross has not made the providing of free service one of its fundamental principles. However, for the simple reason of its selflessness and the absolute non-discrimination which it observes, its solicitude is extended to all who are in need of it. To make assistance depend upon a financial contribution would mean refusing it to those who are unable to pay. In order to reach everyone, the services of the Red Cross are therefore free in principle. This does not mean that the organization must systematically renounce accepting payment, for example if it undertakes to perform a public service function which is customarily paid for, or accepting and even soliciting contributions from recipients of its services who are well off, for the benefit of the less fortunate. It is quite in accord with the spirit of the Red Cross that those who have pay for those who have not. Such considerations however must never prevent anyone from receiving the care he needs.

#### 4. THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE

The spirit of service is indissolubly associated with the Red Cross and is the source of its vital energy. It has not however been established as one of the fundamental principles, since it is not so much a characteristic of the institution as of the persons who serve the institution.

We cannot however pass over in silence an element without which the Red Cross simply would not exist. One could refer to this concept in the Proclamation by a phrase inserted at the beginning of the principle we are now considering: "*expression of the spirit of service...*"

At this point we shall refer to what has been said by some of the thinkers and servants of the Red Cross. *After the verb "to love", the most beautiful one in the world is "to help"*, wrote Bertha von Suttner, the great pacifist and source of inspiration for Henry Dunant. Of course any organization must aim at efficacy. But, for the Red Cross worker, there must be something more, the *spiritual dimension* referred to by Bergson.

*To serve is to sacrifice a part of oneself, a part of what one owns, for the benefit of another*, said Jean-G. Lossier.<sup>1</sup> In his view, it is always necessary to begin by knowing oneself, finding oneself, as the only way of knowing and finding others. It is certainly true that the greater our interior richness, the more fruitful will be our work. *If there is no light within us, how shall we find the path in the darkness?*

We have to know why we serve. The Red Cross calls for dedication. If its workers are not inspired by an inner fire, if they do not know why they have chosen to serve the Red Cross, it would be better if they went into business instead—and all the more so if what they want is wealth and fame.

*To serve the Red Cross is in some respects like taking religious vows.*<sup>2</sup> This bears repeating, at a time when too many people, under the pretext of serving the Red Cross, mainly intend to use it to serve their own interests. Yet, they may ask, as did Sophocles, *who does not befriend himself by doing good?* One who is truly moved by the spirit of service will be happy in making others happy. He should not expect gratitude, for he will generally be disappointed. Yet again, as Lossier said, *There are unforeseeable rewards for acts of love.*<sup>3</sup> And, as he pointed out, service enables one to liberate and express oneself; it is a form of communication, of exchange. Everyone needs to participate in something which transcends him, and gives to him something of its grandeur.

The relationship between those who give and those who receive has gone through great changes in our time. The gift, as a token of superiority or pride for the giver, of inferiority or humiliation for the receiver, is an outdated idea. Today, we understand more easily that the benefactor and the beneficiary stand on the same level when they reach out their hands to one another. In this field, we have much to learn from the Third World where the sense of natural solidarity exists in its pure state. In these countries, misfortune, poverty and suffering do not abase man.

We can thus arrive at the recognition that the duty to help and the right to receive come together as aspects of pure human solidarity. We

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean-G. Lossier: *Les civilisations et le service du prochain*, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Chenevière, 1946.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-G. Lossier: *Les civilisations et le service du prochain*, p. 207.

must go still further, and speak as well of the right to give. This right belongs to all of us and to each of us. To give relief must no longer be regarded as belonging only to a privileged class.

The true Red Cross worker will efface himself as he confronts the work to be done, and his deeds will often be hidden, for he will learn that to climb up on the pedestal of useless recognition means to lower himself on the scale of real values. The glory of the Red Cross consists above all of unknown acts of heroism.

We can see at the same time that the Red Cross mission is becoming more and more difficult and for those working "in the field" more and more dangerous. In a world of increasing fanaticism, service to the Red Cross may be at the risk of one's life.

In the words of an oath sworn by the members of a National Society, *To belong to the Red Cross is to devote one's life to the service of humanity, to regard all men as one's brothers; to feel their sufferings as one's own and seek to relieve them; to respect human life and be prepared to risk one's own to save that of others; to condemn violence and seek universal peace...*<sup>1</sup>

Let us conclude this section with a quotation from a speech by Max Huber:

*If I were to look for a comparison to portray the work of the Red Cross from the viewpoint of the International Committee, I would think first of those magnificent cathedrals of the Middle Ages, which were also built in the form of a cross. Nearly all the architects and artists who conceived, built and adorned these masterpieces, among the greatest of all time, remained gloriously unknown. These masters and their workers, sculptors and masons, generation after generation, constituted working teams which were capable of producing these perfect works of beauty and solidity because each one in his place, leaders and labourers alike, was inspired by the lofty purpose of their common efforts. So it was that every part of the structure bore the imprint of the same spirit; that a sculptor working on a part of the cornice, invisible to all eyes except those of the birds in the sky, devoted as much of his heart and skill to his work as the one who decorated the main portal. If these cathedrals were a source of legitimate*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Decalogo*, Cuban Red Cross, 1960 (excerpt).

*pride to the cities which raised them; if the architects and workers were fully conscious of the sacred use to which the structures were dedicated, the cathedral bore for them in itself its reason for being what it was, in its serene and majestic beauty, like a hymn of praise rising to heaven.<sup>1</sup>*

**Jean PICTET**

*(To be continued)*

---

<sup>1</sup> We reproduce this passage for the sake of its beauty and nobility of thought. In choosing the example of a cathedral, the speaker was evoking an image familiar to his European audience. It is certain however that the thrust of his thinking can readily be extrapolated to other cultures.