

**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE ICRC  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE VISIT OF  
HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II,  
ON 15 JUNE 1982**

To receive Your Holiness in the headquarters of our Committee is not merely an honour and a privilege, it is above all a great comfort. In fact, this is a unique opportunity to welcome the Head of a State founded on spiritual strength rather than on military might.

In a world too often ruled by the force of arms, You, as Sovereign Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, embody the spiritual values without which no enterprise can be truly described as human.

Moral force is also the foundation of the Red Cross movement. It carries on its activities, like the Churches, unarmed in a violent world, and You Yourself well know the risks which that entails...

Day after day we are convinced afresh that only raising up hearts, maintaining values, being unceasingly vigilant, will enable us to live to the full and convey to the world Your message and ours.

The Red Cross and the Red Crescent are not concerned with the salvation of souls: they leave the individual to make the religious or moral choice dictated by his conscience, and in so doing they gain in universality what perhaps they lack in depth, in order to be capable of taking action in emergencies for the benefit of all without discrimination.

Universality we also achieve thanks to our fundamental principle of neutrality, which is neither insensitivity nor indifference, but respect for the opinions of all, and without which it would be impossible for us to accomplish our mission. It may be, indeed, that the strength of the Red Cross lies in the limits it has set for itself. It does not lay claim to any abstract truth, except that suffering human beings are deserving of help by the very fact of that suffering. What the prisoner of war, the

refugee, the wounded soldier, the shipwrecked sailor and the political detainee, and the victims of flood, famine and earthquake, have in common is their lack of any human protection in an adversity against which they are powerless. And where the State cannot or will not accept its obligations to those whom it should protect, the international community feels compelled to act.

It is in this altruistic action for the benefit of those who have lost everything that the Churches and the Red Cross very often come together to help the victims, our neighbours more than ever in their suffering and their distress.

As a priest, You can well imagine what it means to all the thousands of prisoners we visit—whether prisoners of war or political detainees—to have our delegates with them in their cells, to be able to talk to them in private, to find a friendly hand held out to them in their despair.

As someone who attaches great importance to family ties, You are able better than anyone to put Yourself in the place of the wife who receives news of her husband in captivity or in a refugee camp, or of the child reunited with his mother through the work of our Tracing Agency.

For us, what is more important than material means is the flame of the humanitarian ideal, the flame which brings people of goodwill together when they are most needed. It is also of the first importance for us to keep the trust of the parties to a conflict, and for this reason we pursue a policy of discretion which abstains from making any judgement on events.

But the Red Cross does not confine its help to the victims of man-made disasters, it also goes to the aid of those stricken by natural catastrophes. The federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, also called the League of Red Cross Societies, endeavours to alleviate the effects of disasters and to develop the activities of National Societies, especially in social and medical work. The 129 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies with some 250 million members, are unquestionably the solid basis of all our activities.

For more than a hundred years, the ICRC has also devoted its energies to developing humanitarian law, striving to promote conventions which restrict the States in the choice of methods by which to harm their enemies. In fact, each war with its horrors has given rise to new Geneva Conventions. The most recent diplomatic conference adopted Protocols additional to those Conventions, and the Holy See delegation contributed substantially to the elaboration of the texts. We hope that the Holy See will soon ratify the Protocols and in so doing set an example.

**VISIT OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE ICRC**

**15 June 1982**



**The Pope and the ICRC President**

The Geneva Conventions are, incidentally, frequently invoked at this time: as we welcome You, the world is being torn by armed conflicts, disturbances, internal disputes. Instead of diminishing, they tend to become more numerous and more fierce, too often indiscriminate in their violence. For You, as for us, this is a source of grave concern.

With thirty delegations distributed over almost all the continents, the delegates of the ICRC come face to face with the tragedy of missing persons, torture, intimidation and all kinds of pain and injury, and of course with countless deaths which should never have occurred. Together with the volunteers of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, they attempt, at times risking their lives, to alleviate the victims' suffering by providing protection and assistance.

These men and women are serving the Red Cross cause at this very moment, in the violent war raging between Iraq and Iran, in the territories occupied by Israel, in the fighting in Lebanon, in the conflict between the United Kingdom and Argentina—which, according to the latest news seems near its end—in our assistance to refugees in Pakistan and South-East Asia, and in the innumerable tragedies affecting the people of Angola and of El Salvador. Naturally, we do not forget Poland, the country You hold so dear, where our delegates are also at work.

Evidently, our mission, like Your own, all too frequently encounters severe obstacles. There are many reasons for this, most of them political, and at times they prevent us from discharging our mandate.

Yet, if we refuse to become discouraged, it is not only because we have no right to do so, since the victims depend on us, but also because we are convinced that our activities help to promote a spirit of peace which for us too is a fundamental concern. Work for peace can never be abandoned. By trying to help victims everywhere in the spirit of the Good Samaritan, we are paving the way for reconciliation between enemies, the essential basis of lasting peace.

Moreover, if all parties to a conflict request us to do so, we are prepared to mediate directly between belligerents to help restore peace. In this role of neutral intermediary conferred on us by the community of nations we have succeeded in arranging truces which sometimes led to a lasting cessation of hostilities.

Nevertheless, as you have said, the future of mankind and of the earth is in jeopardy. Like the sword of Damocles, there hangs over all our heads the threat of nuclear weapons and others, indiscriminate or not, which the ingenuity of scientists and soldiers make ever more devastating.

We therefore hail the remarkable recent efforts of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences whose envoys made representations to the heads of state of the great Powers. The ICRC is also studying these questions with the closest attention.

But when universal charters drafted by renowned legal experts and all the assemblies, conferences and sessions attended by all the world's nations have failed to eliminate this appalling threat to our future, there comes the question whether, after all, the essential may not be peace in our hearts, the peace which only a person at ease with his or her innermost self knows truly and without which no legal systems can operate. It is in this realm that the great human traditions have a vital role to play, by extending respect for the rules from the individual conscience to the collective conscience, so that law may reign in the world when peace reigns in our hearts.

I would like to conclude, Your Holiness, by telling You what tremendous admiration we feel for Your own exceptional personal commitment, particularly as in the long run the future of humanity is in the hands of all the moral forces of mankind, of which You are one of the most illustrious representatives.

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