

ADDRESS BY HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II ON THE OCCASION OF HIS VISIT TO THE ICRC

I thank you most warmly for your kind words about the work of the Holy See and my own personal endeavours. I have listened very carefully to all you have said about my native land, about El Salvador and the Middle East, and about peace in general, for these are matters very close to the hearts of Catholics, whose representative I am, and they are constantly in my prayers.

It is a great joy for me to be able to greet the leading representatives of an organisation to which humanity owes so much, at the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross itself! Since its foundation by Henry Dunant over a century ago, this institution, which took root in the hearts of a few generous Swiss citizens, has met with a commendable response all over the world.

And so I too would like to pay a stirring tribute to all the men and women of goodwill who, under the auspices of the Red Cross and in the name of humanity, have sought to render service to their fellow creatures suffering as a result of senseless conflicts, natural disasters or the inhumanity of other human beings.

Besides, who would not subscribe to the basic principles of the Red Cross, adopted at its Twentieth International Conference, and in particular to its promise to "protect life", to ensure "respect for human being" without discrimination and to promote "mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace among all peoples"?

No doubt that same spirit which inspired the founder of the Red Cross and the members of the original committee forbids me from enlarging upon the very many benefits initiated by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and I am, of course, also thinking of the admirable work carried out by the National Red Cross Societies and their federation, the League of Red Cross Societies. In numerous wars and disasters the Red Cross has provided assistance to the civilian and military victims

of armed conflicts, to the wounded and sick on all sides, to refugees, prisoners and dispersed families. That spirit is one of self-denial, which finds its reward in the knowledge that service has been rendered, and in devotion to duty which at times does not shrink from the supreme sacrifice and is frequently displayed in the performance of humble, but very necessary, tasks.

In carrying out its work of relief, care and comfort; by providing the necessary encouragement and support to local initiative; by remaining faithful to the principle of neutrality which its founders established at the very beginning, and by respectfully but persistently offering its services in conflicts, the Red Cross has acquired a moral authority throughout the world. The effectiveness of your action is not, therefore, confined to the large variety of services you render to relieve all the physical and moral suffering you encounter. The understanding of your mission by belligerent parties and government authorities — as demanded by the Conventions — entails for you moral duties which increase your responsibility towards States and international organizations. You contribute towards the development of international humanitarian law, whose field of application you are constantly trying to extend.

In this connection, thinking of human rights, allow me to dwell once more on torture and other forms of inhuman treatment. The governments parties to the Four Geneva Conventions committed themselves to forbidding such practices and to authorizing Red Cross delegates to visit internees and to interview prisoners in private. I hope that this mission too will be recognized by all countries, so that this plague on mankind will be eliminated. Thus, in your own special way, you are helping to establish respect for the fundamental rights and dignity of human being, and at the same time to unite without any distinction all those who, believers or otherwise, are fired by this ideal.

In service to man, Christians easily identify their own ideals with the aims and practices of the Red Cross. They draw upon their faith for inspiration and for additional reasons to regard anyone who is hurt, mortified, or in distress as a kindred human being to be loved and helped, regardless of his identity. They even go deeper and see in suffering mankind the image of Christ who identified Himself with prisoners and the sick, with foreigners and the destitute. How many pages of the Gospel come vividly to life here, starting with the parable of the Good Samaritan! And as for torture, Christians have been acquainted from childhood with the account of the Passion of Christ. The thought of Jesus being stripped, beaten and derided until His final agony on the Cross should always prompt a Christian to protest against similar treat-

ment of his fellow-men. Of their own accord, disciples of Christ will reject torture, which nothing can justify, which causes humiliation and suffering to the victim and degrades the tormentor.

The Catholic Church has always been ready to work with your organizations. During the two world wars, for example, the Red Cross and the Catholic voluntary agencies united their efforts to carry out joint programmes. This co-operation continued when various projects supported by the Church, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the National Red Cross Societies were set up to assist people suffering from hunger as a result of war and to help victims of natural disasters. A good deal is already being done in this field, and I am happy to say that the Holy See and the ICRC are studying ways of co-operating more closely in their work for peace.

Lastly, in order to achieve the aims it has set for itself, the Red Cross must be assured that the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols will be respected by the States and the authorities whose task it is to ensure that their wise provisions are applied. Like you, I strongly appeal for the humanitarian rules contained in the Conventions to be scrupulously observed and even, if necessary, supplemented by international instruments to combat inhuman treatment, particularly torture. Such provisions could effectively safeguard the physical and psychological well-being of the victims and would ensure that they receive the respect that is their due. Any person, anywhere, should be able to count on such safeguards. And it is the duty of each State, with the welfare of its citizens at heart, to subscribe to them without reservation and to put them into practice.

I am happy to have had the opportunity to express my esteem and encourage you to pursue the work you have undertaken. I pray to God, the God "of all mercies", to bless all those in the Red Cross who, with Christian charity, act with real respect and devotion towards people in distress, and to urge others to do the same, for this will make our tormented, strife-riven world more human. And I pray that He will inspire such sentiments in a growing number of our fellow human beings today. May humanity respond more readily to that call which so strongly moved Henry Dunant: "We are all brothers" !
