

The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross

COMMENTARY

by Jean Pictet

(continued)

VII

UNIVERSALITY

The Red Cross is a worldwide institution in which all Societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other.

This heading also has three parts: universality in the strictest sense—a mixed principle comprising both substantive and organic aspects—the equality of National Societies and the solidarity among them, the latter two belonging to the organic domain.

1. UNIVERSALITY

The Red Cross has a universal vocation. This signifies that it *must extend to all men, in all countries*, in the terms used in 1955¹. The first part of this idea—“to all men”—has an essential significance for the Red Cross, whose ideal requires it to open its arms to all who ask its assistance. The principles of humanity and non-discrimination imply the principle of universality, as their natural and necessary consequence. One of the characteristics which gives the Red Cross its unique quality and perhaps its virtue is the fact that it has put into effect, in its own domain, that universality so often dreamed of and so seldom realized.

The second part—“in all countries”—is a consequence of the first: in order to reach all men the charitable action must be carried out

¹Jean Pictet: *Red Cross Principles*.

everywhere on the surface of the earth. The Red Cross must be able to traverse and explore every part of the great vale of suffering, where all men are brothers.

To achieve universality, the Red Cross had a choice between two roads, that of federalism or that of unity. Standing as an obstacle to unity is the variegated nature of the world, with its multiple facets. The work is therefore shaped along the lines of the widely differing nationalities, crystallized by such elements as sovereignty, culture, political regimes and the characteristics of peoples. On the national basis, the Red Cross proceeded step by step to develop its structures. From the beginning, the National Societies have been created as independent and self-governing institutions. The authority of the international Red Cross bodies has been mainly of a moral character. This reciprocal independence is also a powerful and unique characteristic of the movement.

The National Red Cross Societies, as such, are not governed by the principle of universality. No one expects them to disperse their resources throughout the entire world. Their mission is above all a national one. It is the international bodies of the Red Cross which practice universality and place no geographical limits to their action.

As noted by Donald Tansley, the extremely flexible structure of the Red Cross is remarkably well suited to its universal calling. It is the only institution of its type, combining an action of protection and one of assistance, and, depending on circumstances, disclosing one or another of its three countenances: ICRC, League or National Society.

Has the Red Cross attained true universality? The fact is that there are now National Societies in all the countries in the world, with very rare exceptions of a temporary nature. When a new country accedes to independence, a new Society is created, sooner or later.¹ Does this mean that the Red Cross has come anywhere near to dealing with all the suffering which it has set out to relieve? We cannot claim that it has. The results achieved by the Red Cross in only a little more than a century are already considerable, but the road ahead of us is a long one, with many new tasks to accomplish. The territory already covered must be cultivated

¹ There are now 125 National Societies, whereas there are 149 member States in the United Nations, as a result of the time lag between the moment when a country accedes to independence and the time when the National Society is organized and is internationally recognized.

in greater depth. The vital thing is that the Red Cross must strive unceasingly and with all its energy to achieve true universality. In doing this, the principle will take on its full meaning, that of universalism.

There are certain people, even within the Red Cross, who have expressed doubt as to the real value of universality, which they regard as a façade, and prefer what they speak of as “purity”, by which they mean rigid adherence to the letter of the law of the Red Cross. We have previously referred to this problem.

We shall limit ourselves at this point to a single wish: that all concerned should be wary of breaching or violating, by any hasty and unconsidered gesture, a universality which was so long in the winning. Even if it is not always as authentic as we would wish, it nevertheless represents for the Red Cross a precious heritage from which the institution has derived a good deal of its power of achievement.

It is naturally necessary to examine each case on its merits and weigh the pros and cons. In this matter as in others, the golden rule—the interests of the persons needing assistance—will show us the way. We are sure however that we shall usually find that it is better for an imperfect Red Cross Society to exist in a country than to have no Red Cross there at all. Perfection exists only in the phraseology of the Pharisees.

2. THE EQUALITY OF NATIONAL SOCIETIES

Red Cross Societies, as we have seen, vary considerably in importance from one country to another. Nevertheless, from the beginning, all Societies have been established on the basis of equality. As a result, equality of rights in international terms has made up for factual inequality.

In 1921, the ICRC adopted a “summary” of fundamental principles in which it included “the equality of National Societies”. It should be recalled that at that time the League had recently been established on a different basis: the federation was at that time open only to the Societies in countries which had been allies on the winning side in the First World War, and, following the pattern of the League of Nations, the five principal victorious powers played a preponderant role in it. To many people, this notion appeared partisan and incompatible with the spirit of the institution. Shortly afterwards, in any event, it was discarded.

Opening its doors to all Red Cross Societies on an equal basis, the League cleared the way for that universal solidarity which gives it the strength it has today. The principle of the equality of Red Cross Societies emerged stronger than ever from this venture.¹

Parity of rights is the rule which best fits an institution which does not have the same motivations as those of States and which is entirely devoted to the welfare of the human being. Without it, there would be the danger of introducing elements of a political character into the Red Cross, which would soon make of it an arena for power struggles.

The equality of Societies can be compared to the great principle of the equality of men in the face of suffering, the basis of Red Cross law. The Red Cross is essentially individualistic. In addition, the equality of National Societies is the consequence of their desire for independence. How could one consider a Society to be fully independent if, in international terms, it were dominated by other Societies? The equality of the Societies is also in conformity with the principle of the equality of States, which has now won worldwide recognition.

3. SOLIDARITY

The National Societies are completely independent and have equal rights. Nevertheless, while remaining masters of their destinies and conserving their freedom of action, they have created mutual ties among themselves and have recognized that they have *duties in helping each other*.

Recognizing that it is better to co-operate than to isolate themselves, the Societies cultivate solidarity. Each one works, to a varying degree, for the welfare of all. This is what distinguishes humanitarian work from individual charity. The latter is free from any idea of reciprocity: a free gesture is made and no return is expected. This is the essence of its nobility, but is also a source of weakness. The Red Cross has grown up in an organized world, a world endowed with memory.

¹ Only one thing remains from the original system: Societies belonging to the major world powers usually belong to the Executive Council of the League and to the Standing Commission of the International Red Cross. But, since this is not the result of a statutory provision—the League Constitution for example refers only to “fair geographical representation”—one cannot speak of an infringement of the principle of equality of rights.

The concept of solidarity has been firmly established since the beginning of the Red Cross. In the Conditions for Recognition of New Societies as they exist today, it is set forth in the statement that the Society shall *share in the fellowship which unites its members—the National Societies and the international bodies—and keep in close touch with them.* In addition, the International Red Cross Conferences have passed numerous resolutions on the subject of solidarity. It was clearly the birth of the League of Red Cross Societies, however, which provided the decisive impulse and made this principle a reality. It is thanks to the League that this mutual co-operation has attained the splendid development of today.

As we have seen, the National Societies primarily give their help to people in their own countries; their specific task is carried out within national boundaries and they are not expected to exhaust their resources by attempting to deal with all suffering throughout the world. But when a nation is stricken by a natural or social disaster whose proportions surpass its national capacities, its Society appeals, through the League, to other Red Cross Societies which, on a voluntary basis, bring assistance to it in the form of personnel or material aid. Even though it may cover only a small part of the needs, this assistance is none the less precious. When an armed conflict is involved and a neutral intermediary is needed, it is the ICRC which is competent.¹ There has recently been a tendency for Red Cross Societies in the same region to conclude mutual assistance agreements.

In this way, the National Societies exercise an international action over and above their own specific task. As a rule, the international effort is quite small as compared to the domestic activities, but the Societies of some countries have shown such great generosity that the two spheres of action tend to become equalized.

Charitable solidarity is not only precious in material terms. By the selflessness it displays, it also has symbolic value. When a Red Cross Society devotes itself to the welfare of its countrymen, it is faithfully carrying out its task, but it is not doing anything exceptional and is not acting in a manner essentially different from that of other philanthropic institutions. On the other hand, when it spreads its benefits beyond its own frontiers and in so doing acts beyond any national interest, it then truly represents what is meant by the “Red Cross”.

¹ Generally speaking, assistance between the Societies of allied countries in times of conflict is direct, with no intermediary.

The National Red Cross organizations refer to one another as “sister Societies”, and this means more than the mere words would indicate. Solidarity in the face of suffering, which makes of the Red Cross a “body”, indeed a “family”, is closely related to the original gesture—that simple gesture performed by Henry Dunant as day fell after a great battle, a gesture which did something to change the face of the world.

Such mutual assistance, a branch of activity which is so much in keeping with the spirit of Red Cross work, is now in a phase of full and active development and appears to have a productive future ahead of it. We may well hope that the National Societies will find in this activity an occasion to strengthen even more the bonds between them and to give even more power to that fraternal solidarity which is one of their most glorious accomplishments.

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