

## MY FREELANCE WRITER DAYS

*Before becoming a pastor in 1972, I worked as a freelance writer on the side. I submitted short stories, poetry and articles to Philippine national magazines, mainly in Pilipino (Tagalog). After becoming a pastor, I managed to submit only a few pieces to magazines. My most memorable piece as a freelance writer was an entry for the **1980 Philippine National Red Cross Contest**, which, by God's blessing, won the first prize. The winning essay is posted on the website, not to boast about myself, but to share the testimony (please see end, after the essay) that God used this contest as a channel of His miraculous provision for our needs at that time.*

## THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE RED CROSS

By Bienvenido A. Llobrera

SPREAD over the five continents of Africa, America, Asia, Australasia and Europe and with National Societies in 126 countries, what sort of organization is this that surmounts natural barriers, crosses ideological boundaries, and risks all dangers in its effort to meet human need?

This is the Red Cross, an organization of the sort that now, after more than a century of humanitarian service, may be described as universal.

Today the Red Cross is everywhere and for everyone. Since its formal beginning in Solferino, Italy, in 1859, it has faithfully carried out the principle that gave it birth: to aid people wherever they may be found and whatever their need simply because they have a need.

The needs people have in today's world range from the very basic to the very complex, and the countries they live in vary from those with struggling economies to those with the affluence of space age technologies. Yet no matter what their need and what their country's economic status, the Red Cross is there to extend them help.

Again, people's needs may be caused by natural disasters or by man's own inhumanity to his fellow, and the areas of disaster may be located in the so-called free countries or in countries where people have limited freedoms. Yet again, whatever may be the cause of the need and whatever ideological restraints may exist in the area of need, the Red Cross stands ready to save life simply because it is human life.

This explains the worldwide presence of the Red Cross. Recently it went to the following places to give aid:

The Philippines, to assist victims of a freak tornado; Montenegro, to help victims of floods; India, to rebuild homes along its cyclone-ravaged coast; Somalia and Ethiopia, to provide food to victims of droughts; Mauritania, to replenish a dwindling food supply; Paraguay, to aid pilgrims, especially babies and children, with milk and biscuits; Greece, to give red blood cells for children affected by thalassemia; and Burma, to mitigate the loss and suffering caused by seasonal fires.

Even before disaster struck the Red Cross started helping. In Gambia, a country which has not experienced large-scale disasters, the Red Cross helped to prepare people for eventualities, such as floods, fires, droughts, and epidemics. In Rwanda it conducted real life education, which included carpentry, manual skills, collecting manioc leaves, and bricklaying. In Thailand it instructed Buddhist priests in the basics of sick care. In Mexico it provided training for health

workers to equip them for disaster relief action. And in Southern Africa it assisted a program aimed to make the country self-reliant in five years.

Not only victims of disasters but unfortunate individuals received the ready help of the Red Cross. In Papua, New Guinea, it focused on the handicapped just as in Lesotho it ran a youth camp for them. In the Federal Republic of Germany it brightened the lives of the aged while in Japan it provided masseurs to banish their aches and pains.

In industrialized countries, too, the Red Cross was there, meeting a different set of needs. In France its first-aiders rushed to the rescue during an airport crash. In Britain it answered life-and-death calls during an industrial dispute. And in New Zealand it helped families which had problems coping with social pressures.

And true to the original impulse of its founder, the Red Cross went to areas of civil and international conflicts – South America, Africa, Indochina.

The refugee problem spawned by the Indochina conflicts provides us with one more tragic proof of the senseless waste that war is. But it is against this dark background that we see what gain it is for the world to have the Red Cross. Seemingly hopeless people like the refugees receive brighter hope because of this Red Cross commitment: “The Red Cross stands ready to make available its full resources, our organizational machinery, trained manpower and experience to assist in carrying out (the) tremendous task (of aiding the refugees in Southeast Asia).”

The worldwide significance of the Red Cross was recently demonstrated in relation to the Iran-U.S. confrontation, which brought the world very close to the brink of a third world war. When ambassadors from several powerful countries met with the Iranian President Bani-sadr for a possible solution to the hostage problem that lay at the root of the Iran-U. S. impasse, the only substantial promise they got was that Iran would allow two representatives of the International Red Cross to see the hostages. The two representatives did very soon see the hostages and reported that the group was being well treated.

A small accomplishment this visit of the hostages by the Red Cross? Small indeed, considering that in this incendiary situation that could well have set off the third and final world holocaust, the Red Cross could be trusted to go where diplomats of powerful countries were barred entry.

Which brings us back to our original question: What sort of organization is the Red Cross that can command such a trust in a very delicate international situation?

The Red Cross is a humanitarian organization, now universal in scope, that was born of one man's response to a need. Henri Dunant, a Swiss young man, was a politically neutral spectator at the battle between Austria and France in Solferino, Italy, on June 24, 1859. But morally neutral he was not. For when he saw at day's end some 40,000 dead and wounded victims strewn all over the battlefield, he was overcome with compassion for the sufferers and proceeded to organize teams of people recruited from a nearby village to attend to the wounded. Dunant himself personally went into the battlefield and attended to the victims.

Three years later, Dunant wrote a little book which he titled *Un Souvenir De Solferino*. And what a souvenir it was! In the book he described the sufferings which a battle inflicted and outlined how the sufferings could be relieved. In every country, he suggested, voluntary aid

societies ought to be organized to give aid to victims of war or peacetime disasters. He recommended that preparations for war relief be made in time of peace.

The one thing that now stands out as the unique and most significant of his appeals was that service to the sick and the wounded should be politically neutral. Or contemporarily paraphrased: Service to the sick and the wounded must be humane and universal, with no exceptions given, no questions asked, and no strings attached.

What effect did Dunant's book have?

The result was a meeting on August 8-22, 1864, in Geneva, Switzerland, to which 16 European nations sent official delegations. Twelve of the nations represented adopted and signed the Geneva Convention of 1864, for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick of Armies in the Field. Provided for in this agreement were the following: the neutrality of the personnel of the medical services of the armed forces and their civilian assistants; the humane treatment of the wounded; and an international emblem to distinguish personnel and supplies. Chosen as the symbol was a red cross on a white background – the Swiss flag with colors reversed – in honor of Dunant's nationality.

In the light of subsequent events which Dunant's book put into motion, it may rightfully be said that the real souvenir of Solferino is the Red Cross as we see it at work today.

How does the Red Cross work at present? It works at four levels.

The first level is the INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS. Originally this was the group of concerned Swiss citizens, which brought about the meeting that organized the International Committee of the Red Cross. At present, this committee has permanent headquarters in Geneva and is composed of 25 Swiss citizens elected by the membership. Its specific duties include recognizing new national Red Cross societies; promoting and developing the observance of international humanitarian agreements (particularly the Geneva Conventions); serving as a neutral go-between in time of war or internal conflicts in order to protect and assist the victims of such conflicts; and, in particular, safeguarding the welfare of prisoners of war in order to secure their release or to improve their condition. In time of peace it prepares National Societies for the activities they will be called upon to perform in time of war.

The second level is the LEAGUE OF RED CROSS SOCIETIES. Created in 1919, the league is a federation of the National Societies and its main purpose is to formulate a program of mutual assistance and development in time of peace. With a permanent secretariat in Geneva, it serves as the continuing organ of liaison, coordination and study between National Societies. Its duties involve promoting new Red Cross societies; encouraging cooperation among Red Cross bodies; developing national Red Cross resources and services; and coordinating relief in international disasters.

The third level is the INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE RED CROSS. This is the highest deliberative body of the International Red Cross, and it meets every four years. In between sessions, the Standing Commission of the Red Cross prepares the International Conference and also settles any misunderstanding which may arise between the International Committee and the League.

It is, however, at the fourth level of the NATIONAL SOCIETIES OF THE RED CROSS (Red Crescent in Muslim countries, Red Lion and Sun in Iran), that most of the action happens. The National Society is the grassroots level of the Red Cross.

To understand more clearly how a National Society begins and operates, let's take a look at our own Philippine National Red Cross. But first a bit of history.

Filipino involvement with the Red Cross dates back to August 30, 1905, when Filipino and American leaders in Manila organized the Philippine branch of the American Red Cross. This branch served the whole Philippine Commonwealth period until the Second World War, at which time the Japanese created, in place of the American branch, a Japanese-controlled "independent" Philippine Red Cross. After the liberation of Manila from the Japanese, the Philippine branch of the American Red Cross was rehabilitated and served until the eventual formation of a truly Philippine National Red Cross.

Since the time of President Manuel L. Quezon, efforts had not been lacking to create a truly Filipino Red Cross. However, certain fundamental requirements needed to be fulfilled first. For one thing, the Philippine government must sign a treaty expressing adherence to the Geneva Conventions; for another thing, the Philippine National Red Cross must be recognized by the Philippine government.

These requirements were fulfilled soon after the Philippines became independent of the United States of America. On February 14, 1947, the President of the Philippines signed the Treaty of Geneva and the Prisoners of War Convention; four days later these same two international agreements were ratified by the Philippine Senate. On March 22, 1947, the President signed the Philippine National Red Cross Charter; and on the same day he signed the Act incorporating the Philippine National Red Cross.

Thus the way was opened for the Philippines to apply for recognition with the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. On March 29, 1947, a cable was received from Geneva with the information that the recognition requested for was granted. On April 15, 1947, the Philippine National Red Cross was inaugurated amidst impressive ceremonies.

As charged by law, the Philippine National Red Cross holds the responsibility of promoting the Geneva Conventions, giving the Filipino people emergency relief in time of disaster, and rendering other services to enhance their health, welfare and safety. It accomplishes these responsibilities through the functioning of three groups of people, namely, the Board of Governors, the National Organization, and the local units called Chapters. The President of the Philippines himself is the Honorary President of the Philippine National Red Cross.

The primary task of the Board of Governors is to formulate policies and to supervise the organization's general activities. The National Organization, operating in and from the national Headquarters, has the responsibility of providing national leadership to all phases of the organization's programs. Each local Chapter has for its main task the carrying out the Red Cross program in the community it serves.

The Philippine National Red Cross program is conveniently termed as its "Seven Service Arms."

First the BLOOD PROGRAM. The Red Cross collects, stores and gives blood free to hospital patients. One of the most essential services of the organization, the blood program, is serving a yearly average of 45,000 patients.

Second is the DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RELIEF SERVICE. The Red Cross aids victims of such calamities as fire, flood, typhoon, volcanic eruption, or earthquake. In normal times, the Red Cross trains individuals and groups in disaster preparedness.

Third is the SAFETY SERVICES. Aimed at equipping individuals with skills and knowledge to enable them to face emergency, this program of the Red Cross teaches first aid, swimming, water safety, accident prevention and life-saving. It also provides an instructor's course to enable individuals to conduct training classes themselves.

Fourth is the NURSING SERVICE. The Red Cross trains women, particularly mothers, in basic home nursing courses such as care of the sick and the injured, mother and baby care, care of the chronically ill, basic nutrition, family planning and disaster nursing. It also helps the government in combatting malnutrition among pre-school children.

Fifth is the RED CROSS AND YOUTH. Under this program the Red Cross seeks to accomplish three objectives: to develop and practice the ideals of service; to promote personal and community health; and to foster international friendship and world peace.

Sixth is the HOME-MILITARY WELFARE SERVICE. Through this service the Red Cross assists the family and the community through counselling and guidance, inquiry and communication, information on government benefits and claims, health and welfare reports and referral to other welfare agencies.

And seventh is the VOLUNTEER SERVICE. Since volunteers provide the Red Cross with its strongest resource, the Philippine National Red Cross constantly recruits and trains volunteers who will help promote all its service programs.

That is how the Philippine National Red Cross began and how it is presently working to meet the needs of people, and it may be taken as a fair example of how other National Societies generally begin and operate in other parts of the world. To be sure, there are differences among National Societies in their actual outworkings; but one thing is certain: though independent of each other and exemplifying each a national characteristic, the National Societies of the Red Cross are motivated by the same principles and united by the same ideal.

But now we come to a final question: Does the Red Cross deserve to be described as universal?

“Red Cross – Everywhere for Everyone.” Does this motto point to an ideal still to be achieved, or does it describe a fact already undeniably true?

Are we not exaggerating when we say that the Red Cross is universal today merely because its service is felt in practically every part of the globe, or because it enjoys the respect of world powers in a way that other similar organizations do not?

No, we are not exaggerating. For the Red Cross symbolizes and embodies universal facts that day after revolution-rocked day are forcing themselves upon us as members of the world community. These facts are indicated by the emblem of the Red Cross.

When the nations that met in Geneva at the original Red Cross meeting chose the Swiss flag with colors reversed as the symbol of the newly formed humanitarian organization, they were certainly motivated by a sincere desire to honor Henri Dunant and his country. Viewed from our perspective, however, we are not too far from the mark if we say that those men at the original Red Cross conference were drawing upon an inspiration very much beyond themselves and their time. For with the symbol of a red cross on a white background they were expressing facts that would universally be experienced in our day.

First of all, red is the symbol of life violently shed. From the time when French and Austrian blood was shed in Solferino, to the time of the bloodbaths of the First and Second World Wars, to our time when rivers of blood are being spilt by national wars of liberation, which are erupting one after another practically everyday; yea, from time immemorial to our time, red has always symbolized the universal fact of man's inhumanity to man. This is what the Red Cross stands for, not as a glorying in inhumanity but as a recognition and condemnation of that universal inhumanity.

Paradoxically, red is also the color of life voluntarily and sacrificially shed. This is the meaning of the blood-stained cross on Mount Calvary. Perhaps, Dunant's vision saw beyond the inhumanity so murderously demonstrated by the warring forces on that day in Solferino. Perhaps, his vision pierced through the hard exterior of human cruelty and saw behind it an unfathomable spring of love waiting to be released. If that was what his vision perceived (and we have no reason to believe it was not) he was not wrong at all. For the Red Cross stands today as a flaming testimony to the universal fact that deep in their hearts people love people, and all it takes to cause that love to spring up is a knowledge of other people's need. The Red Cross is universal because this love is universal.

Finally, the Red Cross is universal because it embodies the universal cry for world peace. This is what we may see in the white background of the Red Cross emblem. Today, the Red Cross, not only in its symbolic flag but more practically in its deeds of mercy, voices out the world's universal appeal for world peace, peace that we must have if we want to save humanity from destroying itself, peace that we can have only as we let love flow everywhere for everyone to meet other people's need simply because they have a need.

– End –

Below is a copy of the letter from the Philippine National Red Cross:

Letterhead: The Philippine National Red Cross  
National Headquarters  
P. O. Box 280  
Manila D-2803, Philippines

3 September 1980

Mr. Bienvenido A. Llobrera  
1069 J. Felipe Blvd.  
Cavite City

Dear Mr. Llobrera:

We are happy to inform you that you won first prize in the Red Cross Essay Writing Contest of 1980.

For this matter, we are inviting you to the awarding ceremonies to be held on September 29 at lunchtime at the Plaridel Hall of the National Press Club. Kindly prepare a response in behalf of the awardees.

We expect an attendance of 100 guests, including members of the Red Cross Board of Governors and respected writers like Mr. Nick Joaquin, Mr. Adrian Cristobal and Mrs. Letty Magsanoc, who were the judges of the contest.

Please confirm your attendance in writing.

Congratulations!

Sincerely yours,

Signed:  
EDILBERTO H. ANGCO  
Director  
PR and Publications

### **MY RESPONSE DURING THE AWARD CEREMONY**

Honorable Chairman and members of the PNRC Board of Governors,  
Officers, members, and friends of the Red Cross and members of the media:

On behalf of the winners I say, "Thank You!" to the Red Cross. Thank you, Board of Governors of the PNRC. Thank you, officers and staff of the National Red Cross Organization. And to all the kind people in the National Office and in our respective local chapters, who provided us with basic research materials on the Red Cross, thank you.

We appreciate the cash prizes – who does not, indeed, in these times of cash crises? To the donors, thank you.

But, just like in the true spirit of the Red Cross, I believe that I speak for each winner when I say that we appreciate the moral and spiritual enrichment we received as a result of our time exposure to the history and ideals of the Red Cross while we were in the process of writing.

Finally, to our judges, to be read by writers of your stature at all is honor enough. To be judged by you as winners is double honor indeed!

Let me quote, in closing, a passage from the Bible, which says, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." This what the original bearer of the original red cross had done, and I mean Jesus Christ our Lord. This many after Him have done, among whom was Henri Dunant, and among whom are all the friends and supporters of the Red Cross cause today.

Thank you.

### **TESTIMONY BEHIND MY ENTRY**

The deadline for submitting entries to the contest was June 20, 1980.

A week before the deadline I accompanied my wife to the market. While she was doing her shopping I was casually reading the newspaper when I happened to see the announcement regarding the contest. I decided to join.

One day that week I did some research at some Red Cross library, I forget where. Then I wrote the essay in about a day or two. Then on the day of the deadline we hitched a ride with our family doctor (who happened to be driving to Manila that day) and requested her to drop off my wife and me at the PNRC Headquarters. I also remember it was raining hard that day. I did not even put my entry in an envelope; I remember handing it as is to Mr. Angco, who said something like "Baka ito pa ang manalo" (This might prove to be the winning entry), and I replied, "Sana magdilang anghel kayo" (I hope your words will turn out true like an angel's words).

And so did his words turn out to be!

The prize money was P5,000.00 (about \$500 at that time). This was how God provided the money for our family vacation a few months later, when we went to see my folks in Marbel, Koronadal City, South Cotabato. King was six, Kai was four, and Ketch was one.

(Below is the news clipping listing the winners. My friend writer-editor Willy D. Marquez clipped it and kindly gave it to me.)

