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HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY

On the 4th of December 2017 the Embassy of the Sovereign Order of Malta in Ukraine, in collaboration with the Institute of International Relations of the Taras Shevchenko University, has organized in Kyiv the international conference on “Humanitarian Diplomacy”. Among the participants there were representatives of Ukrainian churches, International Agencies of the United Nations, International Red Cross, Ukrainian Malteser Relief, diplomatic and academic community. The issue of humanitarian diplomacy is one of the most important and current reference points of the activity of the Order of Malta.

The concept of humanitarian diplomacy has its origins in the complex and powerful experience that the International Committee of the Red Cross lived during the Second World War. As it is sadly known, the total war often made it extremely difficult to protect the rights and dignity of mankind, generating a wide range of new victims: not only war prisoners, but also entire ethnic groups were sentenced to slavery or slaughter, deported, abandoned, imprisoned and so on, without distinction between soldiers and civilians, men and women, old people and children. In such a dramatic context, it became fundamental to guarantee a humane treatment for all those people; and this is the need at the basis of humanitarian diplomacy, which was founded on the three pillars of the International Committee of the Red Cross: prestige, impartiality and neutrality.

Only an institution which was universally acknowledged to possess those characteristics could operate, constructively, through the channels of the humanitarian diplomacy. How did it do that? At that time, its approach to the humanitarian problems created by the war was revolutionary. It became evident that, in some scenarios, in order to achieve concrete results, the humanitarian action had to overcome any potential ideological opposition to the warring parties, especially those who were most responsible for the conflict and its devastating consequences. To the contrary, by attempting to open a dialogue with political regimes of any orientations, included the most radical and totalitarian ones, it was possible to find new opportunities to carry on with the activity in favour of the victims of the war in a more systematic and tangible way. Far from being just silent accomplices, like someone superficially said, those people were skillfully building a sharp network of diplomatic relations aimed at opening valuable channels of communication that could be quite useful to obtain better results.

Nowadays, the emergence of globalization has forced the humanitarian action to adjust to the substantial transformations of history. Those involved in the conflicts are no longer just countries: they are usually different entities, and their composition, together with their location, their constituent basis, their sources of funding and their concrete objectives are often hard to identify. Consequently, it has become more difficult to open a dialogue with them. The situation is made even more complicated by the media, where the information provided is no longer professionally unbiased, but rather undoubtedly manipulated with the most sophisticated technologies. In this scenario, the “contact” strategies of the humanitarian diplomacy has had to evolve, too. However, their principle is still the same: to open, at all possible levels, channels of communication with those who hold the political power to “decide”, and to use every opportunity to influence their “decisions” in order to support the victims of the war.

Among these opportunities, using international fora to launch vast campaigns for raising awareness about humanitarian issues has become a particularly relevant practice, which is, as well, another way to influence the political choices of those who do not care about becoming unpopular in the globalized international community.

Of course, it is still true that the higher the reputation and the credibility of those who practice the strategies of the humanitarian diplomacy are, the better will be their consequent results. And it is still believed that diplomacy and humanitarian action can be combined originating unexpected synergies, either using traditional and formal systems, or taking new, informal paths.

Thus, we come to a general theorization of the humanitarian diplomacy. The International Federation of Red Cross has stated that the objectives to which the humanitarian diplomacy has to aim at are, especially, a better care of the interests of the most disadvantaged strata of the population by the “decision makers” and the “opinion leaders”; a closer contact with the “decision makers”, developing the ability to influence them; a greater capacity for dialogue on both national and international level; greater visibility and facility to communicate for those who work in the field of humanitarian diplomacy; a stronger capability to manage every useful resource; the collaboration with other entities characterized by the same humanitarian goals.

Moreover, the humanitarian diplomacy is said to include “advocacy”; “negotiation”; “communication”; “formal agreements” and any other measure that might turn out to be useful for the purpose. In other words, the final goal of the humanitarian diplomacy can be found in its capacity to redirect the “decision makers” to make them operate for the sake of the most “vulnerable” people in full respect of the fundamental humanitarian principles.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has expressed similar positions and definitions, although, to be precise, in the context of the United

Nations the concept of “humanitarian diplomacy” has not been properly theorized yet. However, just as the International Red Cross does, the UN underlines the basic principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality. The objectives, too, are basically the same: to protect, to help and to find solutions for the refugees, the stateless and people in need. More specifically, it highlights that the humanitarian diplomacy has to address its action towards all the “parts” of the crisis situations, not only state but also non-state actors of international law, and that among its goals there has to be the opening of the borders and the creation of humanitarian corridors that can allow direct assistance to the refugees. The central aim, of course, is to find lasting solutions, avoiding temporary and unstable alternatives.

It is on this basis that the humanitarian diplomacy of the Sovereign Order of Malta was born, with all its peculiar characteristics. As the Grand Master said during his speech to the diplomatic corps on 12th January 2016, at the basis of the mission of the Order there is the dialogue, which has the aim to build bridges and maintain peace between people and governments. However, in order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to provide answers and political solutions with long-term projects and objectives. Besides, the Order underlines the appalling situation of the many millions of refugees in the world and the difficulties that usually arise in the countries where their number is particularly high. In order to improve the living conditions of these people it is necessary to provide constant social support and medical care, and to keep providing assistance even when the attention of the media starts to fade away. Anyway, the Order of Malta also highlights that the humanitarian action – which intervenes in all kinds of crisis, included the ones caused by epidemics or natural disasters – can find a further, significant driving force in the spiritual values animating the religious organizations. This observation opens up new, interesting prospects, which, if properly coordinated, can develop unprecedented synergies in the fight against critical situations, such as poverty, disease and war. But it is necessary to stick by a particular point, as the Order of Malta have always done, ever since its foundation more than nine hundred years ago. The religious belief can act as the glue and represent a profound inspiration for the organizations operating in the humanitarian sector. Nevertheless, it must never turn into a cause of discrimination for the people in need. The humanitarian diplomacy of the Order of Malta, built on values such as independence, apolitical vision, neutrality and absence of territorial and commercial interests, is playing a remarkable role in developing and supporting these activities in favour of the most disadvantaged people without discriminations. The complex global network of diplomatic representatives of the Order proves to be more and more important in a context in which, from one side, there is a tendency towards an almost exaggerated globalization, and from the other side, there are confused attempts to deconstruct the tradi-

tional older states in favour of a wide range of strictly local communities. The one hundred and six embassies of the Order of Malta facilitate the humanitarian activities of the Order all over the world thanks to the constant contact with the governments to which they are accredited. Furthermore, through international cooperation agreements, they also permit the integration of the medical facilities of the Order in the national health systems, support the importation of humanitarian goods and equipment – speeding up the process and obtaining tax exemptions – and contribute, sometimes in collaboration with the United Nations agencies, to the creation of humanitarian corridors that ensure a better management of the crisis regions.

The humanitarian diplomacy of the Order also plays a fundamental role in supporting the action against the tragic trafficking in human beings by systematically and constantly working to increase awareness among the public about several issues, such as: the creation of programmes for the economic and social development of the countries where the biggest migration flows originate, a more reasonable allocation of resources, the necessity of reconciliation agreements between the opposite factions, and the effective implementation of the Geneva Convention signed in 1951. The diplomacy of the Order is especially committed to this last point. It is necessary to reaffirm, in all appropriate fora, the humanitarian values established by the Geneva Convention as a result of the terrible experience of the Second World War. This operation is becoming more and more crucial nowadays, when the conflicts involve the so-called “Non-State Actors” which, with their different kinds of extremism, usually do not care about following the rules of the Convention. This situation gives origin to the tragedy of the victims of the armed conflicts that the Order is particularly committed to help, together with the great flows of refugees in Europe and all over the world.

The Malteser, the International Agency of the Order for the humanitarian aids, is now helping (together with other organizations) the displaced people in Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon; the people migrating towards Greece and the southern Italian coasts; the people migrating towards the so called “Balkan Route”, and the victims coming from the areas of conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Not to mention the help given to the victims of epidemics and natural disasters in Kenya, South Sudan, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, the Philippines and, quite recently, the victims of the earthquake in Central Italy.

However, as mentioned before, the diplomacy of the Order also addresses new horizons. In May 2015, at the United Nations Headquarters, the Sovereign Order of Malta has organized the symposium “Religions Together for the Humanitarian Action”. The aim was to promote the role of the religious entities and organizations in reducing and preventing conflicts, in assuring the respect for human rights and in preventing more and more people from being “left behind”. In other words, what has been underlined is the potentiality of the complex

world of the religious organizations, not only as far as the assistance to people in need is concerned, but also regarding the promotion of the international humanitarian law, the conflict prevention, the resource management, and so on.

The symposium ended with a series of very constructive indications, among which the recommendation for the Order to keep using its diplomatic network not only to support the humanitarian action, but also to promote the dialogue between the different parties. Once again, the traditional role of mediator that the Order has had in its long history comes to surface. It isn't just abstract theory, but concrete and fruitful practice. Let's just mention a recent example: in October 2015, at the Villa Magistrale in Rome, the Order organized a meeting between the two Libyan authorities of Tobruk and Tripoli, with the intervention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Representatives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The debate was very constructive, and it resulted in the common decision to deal with the challenge of fighting against the trafficking of human beings and of strengthening the humanitarian laws of the country.

The diplomatic and humanitarian dimension of the Order of Malta was also reaffirmed during its participation in the "World Humanitarian Summit", held in Istanbul in May 2016. The priorities the Order put forward in that international meeting were, once again, the access to the victims, the safety of the humanitarian workers, the codification and application of the international humanitarian law and the guarantee of respecting the humanitarian principles on the part both of the States and the "Non-State Actors".

Going back to the beginning of this speech and to the experience of the International Red Cross, it has been underlined how important it is, for such organizations, to gain respect and trust. To make an example, in Lebanon the Order has been active for more than thirty years, providing many Christians and Muslims in need with food, shelter and medical aid. In this sorely afflicted land, the Order is surrounded by a feeling of general trust and deep respect. Its presence has become a living symbol of solidarity and coexistence.

To sum up, far from containing – as someone said – an insoluble contradiction, the expression "humanitarian diplomacy" can actually represent an opportunity to address the political action towards the achievement of humanitarian goals, enriching and reinvigorating the principles of the international humanitarian law with the spirit and the true, powerful values of the people who are suffering.