

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

December 25, 2018

To the American Bahá'í community

Dearly loved Friends and Co-workers:

Eighty years ago on this date, Shoghi Effendi, the beloved Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, addressed a letter to the believers across the North American continent, calling on them to arise with fresh consecration to fulfill the goals of the recently launched Seven Year Plan. Later to be published in book form under the title *The Advent of Divine Justice*, the letter describes in clear and compelling language the gravity of the challenge to which they were being summoned and the vital importance of their actions not only to the victorious conclusion of that Plan, but, beyond it, to the ultimate establishment of the unified, peaceful, and just World Order envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh. Since that time, that historic missive has seized the imaginations of every succeeding generation of American believers. Posterity will no doubt come to recognize it as having been of incalculable consequence to an understanding of the essentials of our Faith, and to its growth and development throughout the world.

The Advent of Divine Justice is suffused with a spirit of loving encouragement. In it, the Guardian describes the immortal deeds through which the Bahá'ís of North America had, by the time of the letter's writing in 1938, already done much to advance the Faith; confidently recalls 'Abdu'l-Bahá's shining promises of still greater triumphs yet to come; reaffirms the decisive contribution America will make to the establishment of the Most Great Peace; and calls upon us to continue heroically to impart our full share to the tasks required to achieve the great destiny ordained for this nation by Bahá'u'lláh.

Yet Shoghi Effendi makes it clear that it was not because of any intrinsic superiority, whether spiritual or material, that the Blessed Beauty chose America for such a sacred mission. On the contrary, he tells us in no uncertain terms that, just as Persia was chosen as the dawning-place of His Cause because of the thick clouds of religious fanaticism, intellectual torpor, and moral decay with which it was enshrouded, America has been entrusted with the Divine Plan for its worldwide growth owing to the patent evils deeply embedded in its society. The ailing condition of both countries demonstrates in greater measure the efficacy and healing power of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation.

Reflecting further on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's uncompromising assessment of the ills that afflict the American nation—and, to an extent, its Bahá'ís—the Guardian elucidates at length the spiritual prerequisites for success in our efforts to disseminate the Faith's teachings. Let the reader judge whether these are any less relevant today than eight decades ago:

Dearly beloved friends! A rectitude of conduct which, in all its manifestations, offers a striking contrast to the deceitfulness and corruption that characterize the political life of the nation and of the parties and factions that compose it; a holiness and chastity that are diametrically opposed to the moral laxity and licentiousness which defile the character of a not inconsiderable proportion of its citizens; an interracial fellowship completely purged from the curse of racial prejudice which stigmatizes the vast majority of its people—these are the weapons which the American believers can and must wield in their double crusade, first to regenerate the inward life of their own community, and next to assail the long-standing evils that have entrenched themselves in the life of their nation.

The American Bahá'í community has been striving to fulfill this twofold mission ever since, chiefly by furthering the successive Plans given to us first by the Guardian, now by the Universal House of Justice. We labor with the knowledge that—while there are millions of well-intentioned souls in our nation earnestly endeavoring to solve the profound social and economic problems afflicting us—there are none but us to conduct the sacred work with which we have been entrusted. And the uniqueness of this work has less to do with our own present capacity than with the infinite powers inherent in the Word of God—powers which must be progressively shared and systematically applied in the realm of action. As recently stated in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:

“[T]he believers should never, for even one moment, lose sight of the fact that the crisis now engulfing every part of the planet is essentially spiritual.” If the crisis afflicting humanity is spiritual, can there be any question that its solution must also be spiritual? Is it any wonder that Shoghi Effendi referred to the “spiritual” prerequisites for success? Must not that same focus on spiritual truths and principles lie at the heart of the current series of Plans of the Faith? What else but the Word of God can spiritually ennoble, educate, and inspire souls to address the needs of the time? As the House of Justice has explained, the Word of God is at the center of the Bahá'í community's current endeavors: “Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the individual and collective transformation effected through the agency of the Word of God.” In study circles, participants are introduced to the study of the Word of God, consider its application and implications, and enter into a lifelong immersion in it, which will shape their knowledge, volition, and action; in children's classes, children memorize and learn about the Word of God; in the junior youth program, young people explore and are empowered by concepts found in the Word of God; and in devotional meetings, attendees recite and are inspired by the Word of God. Even in the Bahá'í community's other areas of focus—projects and activities for social action and involvement in the discourses of society—the Word of God offers insights for addressing the issues facing society and contributing to its social and economic betterment.

This guidance makes it clear that the Plan cannot be reduced to a mere set of activities, important as they are. It is rather through active engagement with the Creative Word that we and those who join with us gain capacity to reflect the full splendor of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. In the many clusters in our country still in the earliest stages of growth, small numbers of people are walking the spiritual path, steadily learning how to create bonds of true friendship and service with others. As their numbers grow, they are developing the means to systematically expand their efforts to include people of all backgrounds and ages. In our most advanced clusters, where hundreds, even a thousand or more, are involved in the life of the community, we can see the first glimmerings of a pattern of action that will eventually facilitate the movement of populations toward Bahá'u'lláh. It is in such settings that we are beginning to confront and to overcome the negative aspects of our culture that the Guardian identified. It is in pursuit of these ever-widening, ever-deepening relationships that we are acquiring a more profound generosity of spirit, practicing the language and behaviors of inclusiveness, appreciating the value of collective learning and action, developing a loving concern for all, acquiring the fortitude for long-term service for the common weal, increasing the capacity for detached and

consecrated effort, seeing the empowerment and advancement of others as the meaning of a life well lived—in sum, learning all the expressions of love in action that are the harbingers of a nascent Divine Order. It is in this work that patterns of life are emerging that will serve as beacons of hope to our increasingly bewildered fellow-citizens.

We are grateful for the efforts already being made in clusters throughout the country to invite others to join us in creating the dynamics of community life described by the Supreme Body in the foregoing passage. Much remains to be done, however, between now and the end of the current Plan. Far from being unnerved by the negative forces at work in our society—and never giving in to the temptation to expend our precious time and energies on solutions that are at best temporary and at worst illusory—we, the community of the Greatest Name, must appreciate as never before that this is a time for consecrated and focused action to further the Divine Plan. This urgent call embraces all believers, young or old, in every conceivable setting from urban centers to rural outposts. We are delighted at the response awakened by our recent call for believers to serve as homefront pioneers among populations of special significance—including American Indians, African Americans, and various newly arrived immigrant groups. Of some 600 pioneers now serving, nearly 200 arrived at their new posts since Ridván this year. Hundreds more are still needed to fortify the efforts underway—from clusters where growth is just beginning, to those where the process is well established and an increased intensity of effort is required. Yet in whatever locality we may find ourselves, the field is vast and the opportunities limitless.

In our February 25 letter last year on “America and the Five Year Plan,” we mentioned our intention to hold, in due course, a national race unity conference. Since that time we have, chiefly through our Office of Public Affairs, been working diligently to better understand the nature of the current national discourse on race relations, identify potential collaborators in our own community and among others engaged in the work, and refine our contributions to that discourse through participation in various opportunities created either by us or by others. The work has progressed to a point sufficient that we hope to announce details in the coming months.

A few points must be mentioned in connection with the eventual conference. One of its principal aims will be to share not only the spirit and fundamental teachings of the Faith, but what has been learned in applying them in our society. Further, the conference cannot be thought of as a single consummating event. It will be only one milestone in what will undoubtedly be a prolonged engagement with our fellow-citizens on the issue of racial justice. That process will progress in all its dimensions in the years to come—in expansion and consolidation, in social action, and in discourse—in an increasingly coherent manner.

Finally, it is primarily you, the believers throughout the country, upon whom the success of this process depends. As we are reminded in the same letter written on behalf of the House of Justice:

In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi refers to the arenas, private and public, in which believers are called on to fulfill the spiritual prerequisites of success: “a high sense of moral rectitude in their social and administrative activities, absolute chastity in their individual lives, and complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or color.” Similarly, the

House of Justice is now asking the friends to bring such considerations to bear in the countless spaces they have been creating—through their engagement in the Five Year Plan—in the activities for community-building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society. It is this, rather than the introduction of any particular program into the Bahá'í community or its more extensive participation in any specific movement in the wider society, that will ensure the Guardian's ultimate aims for its destiny and the destiny of the nation of which it is a part.

This clearly is not the work of a single Plan or even of a single generation. It will continue until we have contributed our full share, in concert with countless other people of good will, to the eradication of the stain of racial prejudice—together with the defilement of materialism, corruption, and moral laxity—from the fabric of this nation.

The social environment in which we are now living is giving rise to demonstrably new levels of receptivity to the Bahá'í teachings. Experience in dozens of neighborhoods; in some 2,000 activities revolving around race unity reported this year by the friends, many encompassing teaching, social action, and discourse; from social media experiments in a handful of clusters; and from numerous other reports are together proving the high degree of receptivity of many of our fellow-citizens. This is being expressed in a marked eagerness to engage in meaningful conversations based on the Word of God and to afterwards join us in the work of community building.

The intensity of our efforts to advance our work must be commensurate with the urgency of the times. A vast increase in individual and collective teaching activity is now needed. The challenges of the moment will demand from us a degree of sacrifice which, although different in circumstance, must mirror the staunch devotion of our brothers and sisters in the Cradle of the Faith. Every secondary matter must be set aside for the sake of the Cause of God, so that our unity and singleness of purpose will attract the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty. In this spirit, we can and will usher in the second century of the Formative Age soaring on wings of victory!

Though voiced 80 years ago, the beloved Guardian's words of appeal speak to us with undiminished clarity and forcefulness:

The community of the organized promoters of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in the American continent—the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age, who by their death proclaimed the birth of that Faith—must, in turn, usher in, not by their death but through living sacrifice, that promised World Order, the shell ordained to enshrine that priceless jewel, the world civilization, of which the Faith itself is the sole begetter.

Be assured of our abiding love, our unceasing prayers, and our utmost confidence in the capacity of this community to achieve the high destiny to which it has been called.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

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