

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

12 August 1984

[To an individual]

From: The Universal House of Justice

...We are very glad to see that the Assembly is taking steps to educate the friends in the laws of the Faith and to emphasize the importance of obedience to them....

1. It would seem to be important to make clear to the friends that the "laws" of the Faith must be regarded in various lights. There are laws, ordinances, exhortations and principles, all of which are sometimes loosely referred to as "laws." All are very important for the life of the community and the spiritual life of the individual, but they are applied differently. Some affect the society and the social relationships and the Spiritual Assemblies are responsible for their enforcement. If a believer breaks such a law, he is subject to the imposition of sanctions. Others, although of very great importance, are not sanctionable, because their observance is a matter of conscience between the individual and God; among these fall the laws of prayer and fasting and the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh. Then there are those high ethical standards to which Bahá'u'lláh calls His followers, such as trustworthiness, abstention from backbiting, and so on; generally speaking obedience to these is a matter for individual conscience, and the Assemblies should not pry into people's lives to see whether or not they are following them; nevertheless, if a believer's conduct falls so far below the standard set by Bahá'u'lláh that it becomes a flagrant disgrace and brings the name of the Faith into disrepute, the Assembly would have to intervene, to encourage the believer to correct his ways, to warn him of the consequences of continued misconduct, and possibly, if he does not respond, to deprive him of his administrative rights.

In other words, the friends should realize the importance of following all the teachings, and not assume that merely because an offense is not punishable it is therefore less grave. Assemblies, on the other hand, should distinguish clearly between those laws which it is their duty to enforce, those which should be left strictly to the conscience of the individual, and those in which it may have to intervene if the misbehavior is blatant and injurious to the good name of the Faith....