

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

30 March 1997

To all National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Ever since the launching of the Four Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice has noted, with deep satisfaction, the manner in which Bahá'í institutions and communities of the African continent have welcomed the spirit and letter of the broad lines of activity set forth in the Plan, and have particularly taken to heart its Ridván message for 153 B.E. to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Africa. As a supplement to that message, the Universal House of Justice wishes to convey the following comments to your National Spiritual Assemblies, and through you, to the body of believers in that continent.

The development of the teaching work in Africa has always been characterized by the receptiveness with which the truths of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh have been accepted and valued by the peoples of that vast continent, by the joy stemming from the pure hearts of the African believers as reflected in their radiant faces, and by their growing maturity in appreciating the importance of adherence to Bahá'í laws and ordinances.

One of these ordinances is the clear prohibition in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh of the consumption of alcoholic drinks. This has been explicitly revealed in His Most Holy Book, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. He states, "It is inadmissible that man, who hath been endowed with reason, should consume that which stealeth it away. Nay, rather it behooveth him to comport himself in a manner worthy of the human station, and not in accordance with the misdeeds of every heedless and wavering soul." In other Tablets, we read from His glorious Pen, "Beware lest ye exchange the Wine of God for your own wine, for it will stupefy your minds, and turn your faces away from the Countenance of God, the All-Glorious, the Peerless, the Inaccessible. Approach it not, for it hath been forbidden unto you by the behest of God, the Exalted, the Almighty."

'Abdu'l-Bahá, adding His voice to that of the Blessed Beauty, has written, "The drinking of wine is, according to the text of the Most Holy Book, forbidden; for it is the cause of chronic diseases, weakeneth the nerves, and consumeth the mind." He has also written, "Regarding the use of liquor: according to the text of the Book of Aqdas, both light and strong drinks are prohibited." He further states, "Intellect and the faculty of comprehension are God's gifts whereby man is distinguished from other animals. Will a wise man want to lose this Light in the darkness of intoxication? No, by God!"

In answer to questions, Shoghi Effendi's elucidations, written on his behalf, provide further guidance on this subject. In these letters the habit of drinking is described as a "great misery" and a "great evil."

It was the policy of Shoghi Effendi, upheld by the House of Justice, that, in the early stages of the teaching work in countries whose people have for centuries been accustomed to the use of alcohol, the institutions should be patient and lenient, educate the friends, and allow time for them to extricate themselves from this pernicious habit before applying sanctions. This education has been an ongoing process. Regretfully, however, it has been seen that in some cases, even among certain prominent believers, the friends have not freed themselves from this practice. Some may have wrongly thought that light alcoholic drinks, if taken irregularly, were permitted, without realizing the detrimental effect that their example was having on others. It is always most unfortunate when Bahá'ís of long standing, and even members of institutions at the national level,

partake of alcoholic beverages, thus damaging themselves, harming the good name of the Faith in the eyes of non-Bahá'ís, and setting a bad example for the rank and file of the believers.

The Universal House of Justice feels that it is vital, for the sound development of the Cause of God in those communities where there remains any doubt among the friends as to the importance of obedience to this law, that the National Spiritual Assemblies ensure that all believers are clearly informed of it. Of course, the Assemblies should not pry into the lives of individual believers; but in the case of any Bahá'í who blatantly violates the law, he should be counseled, assisted to overcome the habit, warned repeatedly of the consequences of continued disobedience, and ultimately, if he does not respond positively, be deprived of his administrative rights.

Furthermore, in order to protect the interests of the Faith, the Universal House of Justice has decided that, henceforth, any believer who occupies a Bahá'í administrative or teaching position on the national level and is seen to be consuming alcoholic beverages, should not only be counseled but should be removed from office during the process of the correction of his failing. If he does not give up drinking, he should lose his administrative rights; if he changes his ways, and the National Assembly is satisfied that he is obeying the law, he would regain his full rights. The positions the House of Justice has in mind are those occupied by members of the National Spiritual Assembly or any committee under its aegis, whether national or regional, by Bahá'ís who serve at the national office or in the training institutes at any level, and by traveling teachers and pioneers serving under the direction of the National Assembly or its subsidiary agencies.

It is the hope of the House of Justice that such a step will give a signal to the entire community that, whatever the inherited cultural practices or tribal customs may be, every effort should be made by each conscientious believer to obey the sacred law of God which forbids the drinking of alcohol. The friends must become aware that there are certain essentials of Bahá'í conduct that they cannot continue to disregard with impunity. Continued, blatant disobedience to this law will, in the case of any believer, lead to consideration of deprivation of his voting rights. The friends should also realize that refusing to comply with this requirement will not only harm the offender and injure his family but will certainly impede his spiritual development and lead to the cessation of the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh—confirmations and blessings without which his life will eventually be brought down to misery.

Love for God is best exemplified not through words, but through deeds. “Let deeds,” Bahá'u'lláh says, “not words, be your adorning.” By obeying His laws we demonstrate our love for Him. He has also written: “My love is My stronghold; he that entereth therein is safe and secure, and he that turneth away shall surely stray and perish.”

The guideline that Shoghi Effendi gave at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade, setting forth the manner in which the Bahá'í law on the need to abstain from alcoholic drinks should be explained while teaching the Faith to the people of Africa, is as applicable today as it was in 1953 when the Guardian's secretary gave the following advice on his behalf:

The question of impressing upon the Africans who are seeking enrollment the necessity of not drinking is a delicate one. When enrolling new believers, we must be wise and gentle, and not place so many obstacles in their way that they feel it impossible to accept the Faith. On the other hand, once accorded membership in the Community of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, it must be brought home to them that they are expected to live up to His Teachings, and to show forth the signs of a noble character in conformity with His Laws. This can often be done gradually, after the new believer is enrolled.

Every effort should thus be made by the institutions of the Faith, as well as by those who are directly engaged in the expansion and consolidation work, to make conscious and determined efforts to assist the new believers to realize the grave consequences of disobedience to God's laws,

and to appreciate the bounties that flow from growing spiritually under the shadow of His Holy Cause.

We are to assure you of the prayers of the Universal House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold, that you may be guided in the stewardship of your community as you strive to promote the vital interests of the Faith.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat