

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

17 February 1998

[To a Local Spiritual Assembly]

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email of 8 January 1998 in which you forwarded a question from one of the members of your Bahá'í community ... regarding the recourse of the friends when they believe an Assembly has made an error. We are to reply as follows.

First, it is important to consider the unique nature of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, and the responsibilities of the individuals and the institutions within it. As ... is no doubt aware, in the Bahá'í system, the individual votes for the members of the Spiritual Assembly with the understanding that she or he is free to choose without any interference whomever his conscience prompts him to select, and freely accepts the authority of the outcome. Submission of the believers to the decisions of the Assembly is essential to the achievement and maintenance of unity within the community. In the act of voting, the individual subscribes to a covenant by which the orderliness of society is upheld. The Assembly has the responsibility to guide, direct and decide on community affairs and the right to be obeyed and supported by members of the community. The individual has the responsibility to establish and maintain the Assembly through election, the offering of advice, moral support and material assistance; and he has the right to be heard by it, to receive its guidance and assistance, and to appeal any Assembly decision which he conscientiously feels is unjust or detrimental to the community.

Concerning the accountability of the Spiritual Assemblies, the Guardian in *God Passes By* (p. 331) wrote that the Assemblies are "invested with an authority rendering them unanswerable for their acts and decisions to those who elect them," and that they are "solemnly pledged to follow, under all conditions, the dictates of the 'Most Great Justice' that can alone usher in the reign of the 'Most Great Peace' which Bahá'u'lláh has proclaimed and must ultimately establish." The Assemblies are therefore responsible to God rather than to those who elect them.

The attitude of the believer towards the Assembly decisions should be one of wholehearted acceptance and support. If, however, the individual feels that a decision is incorrect, he is free to bring additional information pertaining to the matter to the Assembly for its consideration. Should the decision remain unchanged, it is preferable if he accepts humbly the view of the Assembly in the spirit of sacrifice, and without further dispute. Then, as the Master has affirmed, any wrong decision will eventually be set right. When the believers act submissively and in the spirit of self-effacement it attracts the good pleasure of God, which in itself serves as a consolation to their hearts.

A believer who is distressed by the decision reached by an Assembly may well find comfort and reassurance in the following passage from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

The Assembly may make a mistake, but, as the Master pointed out, if the Community does not abide by its decisions, or the individual Bahá'í, the result is worse, as it undermines the very institution which must be strengthened in order to uphold the principles and laws of the Faith. He tells us God will right the wrongs done. We must have confidence in this and obey our Assemblies....

If, after taking all this into account, a believer is still unsatisfied with a decision of the Assembly, he can appeal, in the first instance, to his National Spiritual Assembly and ultimately to the Universal House of Justice. However, in so doing it is advisable to bear in mind that such a dissenting voice should make itself heard only within the proper administrative institutions and never elsewhere. Once such a case has been presented to the institutions it is no longer the responsibility of that individual and should be left in the care of those divinely ordained agencies.

The same appeal process applies to an individual who has lost his voting rights, should he feel that they have been unjustly removed. When a believer is deprived of his administrative rights, he is entitled to clear information on the requirements to be fulfilled in order that his rights may be restored; these may include the passage of a prescribed period of time, the performance of certain remedial actions, or the alteration of an attitude or pattern of behavior which is considered unworthy or harmful. A condition for the restoration of voting rights is that the believer be sincerely repentant, as evidenced by his statement to that effect or by his demeanor and conduct.

The House of Justice hopes that the foregoing has sufficiently addressed ...’s question and wishes to assure her of its love for her.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat