

The Universal House of Justice

Riḍván 155

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

At this halfway mark in the Four Year Plan, we affirm with uplifted hearts that the worldwide Bahá'í community is breaking new ground at a dynamic stage in its evolution. The process of entry by troops, upon which its energies are focused, is clearly advancing.

Three developments brighten our expectations. One is in the solid results being produced wherever training institutes are in operation. Tens of thousands of individuals have over the last two years completed at least one institute course. The immediate effects upon them have been a greatly strengthened faith, a more conscious spiritual identity, and a deepened commitment to Bahá'í service. The second pertains to the notable improvement in the conditions affecting the establishment and renewal of Local Spiritual Assemblies. The decision to form these institutions only on the first day of Riḍván, and to do so principally at the initiative of the communities to which they belong, was put into effect in 1997. While there was an immediate but not unexpected drop in the number of Local Assemblies worldwide, the decrease was not very large; in fact, increases were recorded in some countries. This outcome indicates that the process of maturation of these divinely ordained institutions is on course. The third is that a new confidence in teaching is stirring the friends, yielding impressive results in various regions. The potential for a steady and ever-expanding influx of new believers has always been great, and we are able to say with assurance that the capacity to actualize it is methodically being developed more than ever before with the prosecution of the current Plan.

Further to these signs of progress, we are gratified by the marvelous speed with which the construction projects on Mount Carmel proceeded to fulfill the schedule which had been set for the year just ended. Immediately ahead are the establishment in May of three new National Spiritual Assemblies—Sabah, Sarawak, and Slovakia—and the reestablishment of the National Spiritual Assembly in Liberia, raising to 179 the pillars of the Universal House of Justice. In contemplating the divine favors being bestowed on our community, we acknowledge with deep gratitude the constancy of the acts of service being performed by the individual Hands of the Cause of God, by the International Teaching Centre, and by the Counselors and their auxiliaries on all continents. The increasing strength of National Spiritual Assemblies also bolsters our certitude in the imminence of resounding victories.

Against this salutary picture of the community's prospects is the confused background of a planet at odds with itself. And yet, amid the widespread desolation of the human spirit, it is apparent that at some level of consciousness there is among the peoples of the world a growing sense of an irresistible movement towards global unity and peace. This sense is being aroused as the physical barriers between peoples are being virtually eliminated by breathtaking advances in science and technology. Nevertheless, a mixed catalogue of world-shaking tribulations and world-shaping developments keeps humanity concurrently dazed and dazzled. The storms and stresses battering the social fabric are incomprehensible to all except the relatively few of the planet's inhabitants who recognize God's purpose for this Day.

Our fellow human beings everywhere are insensibly subjected at one and the same time to the conflicting emotions incited by the continuous operation of simultaneous processes of "rise and of fall, of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos." These Shoghi Effendi identified as aspects of the Major Plan and Minor Plan of God, the two known ways in which His purpose for humankind is going forward. The Major Plan is associated with turbulence and calamity and proceeds with an apparent, random disorderliness, but is, in fact, inexorably driving humanity

towards unity and maturity. Its agency for the most part is the people who are ignorant of its course and even antagonistic towards its aim. As Shoghi Effendi has pointed out, God's Major Plan uses "both the mighty and the lowly as pawns in His world-shaping game, for the fulfillment of His immediate purpose and the eventual establishment of His Kingdom on earth." The acceleration of the processes it generates is lending impetus to developments which, with all the initial pain and heartache attributable to them, we Bahá'ís see as signs of the emergence of the Lesser Peace.

Unlike His Major Plan, which works mysteriously, God's Minor Plan is clearly delineated, operates according to orderly and well-known processes, and has been given to us to execute. Its ultimate goal is the Most Great Peace. The four-year-long campaign, at the midpoint of which we have arrived, constitutes the current stage in the Minor Plan. It is to the achievement of its purpose that we must all devote our attention and energies.

At times it may seem that the operation of the Major Plan causes a disruption in the work of the Minor Plan, but the friends have every reason to remain undismayed. For they recognize the source of the recurrent turbulence at play in the world and, in the words of our Guardian, "acknowledge its necessity, observe confidently its mysterious processes, ardently pray for the mitigation of its severity, intelligently labor to assuage its fury, and anticipate, with undimmed vision, the consummation of the fears and the hopes it must necessarily engender."

Even a cursory survey of the global scene in recent years cannot but lead to observations fraught with special significance for a Bahá'í viewer. For one thing, amid the din of a society in turmoil can be discerned an unmistakable trend towards the Lesser Peace. An intriguing inkling is provided by the greater involvement of the United Nations, with the backing of powerful governments, in attending to long-standing and urgent world problems; another derives from the dramatic recognition by world leaders in only recent months of what the interconnectedness of all nations in the matter of trade and finance really implies—a condition which Shoghi Effendi anticipated as an essential aspect of an organically unified world. But a development of even greater moment to the Bahá'í community is that a massive number of people are searching for spiritual truth. Several recently published studies have been devoted to this phenomenon. The ideologies that dominated the larger part of this century have been exhausted; at their waning in the century's closing years, a hunger for meaning, a yearning of the soul, is on the rise.

This spiritual hunger is characterized by a restlessness, by a swelling dissatisfaction with the moral state of society; it is also evident in the upsurge of fundamentalism among various religious sects, and in the multiplication of new movements posing as religions or aspiring to take the place of religion. Here are observations that enable one to appreciate the interaction between the two divinely propelled processes at work on the planet. The manifold opportunities thus providentially provided to present the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to searching souls create a dynamic situation for the Bahá'í teacher. The implications for the task at hand are immensely encouraging.

Our hopes, our goals, our possibilities of moving forward can all be realized through concentrating our endeavors on the major aim of the Divine Plan at its current stage—that is, to effect a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This challenge can be met through persistent effort patiently pursued. Entry by troops is a possibility well within the grasp of our community. Unremitting faith, prayer, the promptings of the soul, Divine assistance—these are among the essentials of progress in any Bahá'í undertaking. But also of vital importance to bringing about entry by troops is a realistic approach, systematic action. There are no shortcuts. Systematization ensures consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans. In a general sense, it implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá'í service, whether in teaching or administration, in individual or collective endeavor. While allowing for individual initiative and spontaneity, it suggests the need to be clearheaded, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious. Systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act.

Towards ensuring an orderly evolution of the community, a function of Bahá'í institutions is to organize and maintain a process of developing human resources whereby Bahá'ís, new and veteran alike, can acquire the knowledge and capacity to sustain a continuous expansion and consolidation of the community. The establishment of training institutes is critical to such effort, since they are centers through which large numbers of individuals can acquire and improve their ability to teach and administer the Faith. Their existence underscores the importance of knowledge of the Faith as a source of power for invigorating the life of the Bahá'í community and of the individuals who compose it.

The facts at hand confirm that the Four Year Plan works where a systematic approach is understood and applied. These same facts show that the institutions of the Faith, in their collaborative efforts at national, regional, and local levels, have clearly been adhering to this understanding. However, with individuals, on whom rests the ultimate success of the Plan, this understanding is less clear. For this reason, we must emphasize to our fellow-believers the importance to their individual effort of this prerequisite of success in teaching and in other undertakings.

As translated into programs and projects by national and local institutions, the Plan, among other things, gives direction, identifies goals, stimulates effort, provides a variety of needed facilities and materials to benefit the work of teachers and administrators. This is of course necessary for the proper functioning of the community, but is of no consequence unless its individual members respond through active participation. In so responding, each individual, too, must make a conscious decision as to what he or she will do to serve the Plan, and as to how, where and when to do it. This determination enables the individual to check the progress of his actions and, if necessary, to modify the steps being taken. Becoming accustomed to such a procedure of systematic striving lends meaning and fulfillment to the life of any Bahá'í.

But beyond the necessity of responding to the call of the institutions, the individual is charged by Bahá'u'lláh Himself with the sacred duty of teaching His Cause, described by Him as the "most meritorious of all deeds." So long as there are souls in need of enlightenment, this duty must surely remain the constant occupation of every believer. In its fulfillment, the individual is directly responsible to Bahá'u'lláh. "Let him not wait for any directions," Shoghi Effendi urgently advises, "or expect any special encouragement, from the elected representatives of his community, nor be deterred by any obstacles which his relatives, or fellow-citizens may be inclined to place in his path, nor mind the censure of his critics or enemies." The writings of the Central Figures and of our Guardian are replete with advice and exhortations concerning the individual's irreplaceable role in the advancement of the Cause. So it is inevitable that we should feel impelled, at this particular time in the life of humanity as a whole, to appeal directly to each member of our community to ponder the urgent situation facing us all as the helpers of the Abhá Beauty.

Our lot, dear brothers and sisters, is to be consciously involved in a vast historic process the like of which has not ever before been experienced by any people. As a global community, we have, thus far, attained a unique and magnificent success in being representative of the full spectrum of the human race—thanks to the inestimable expenditure of life, effort and treasure willingly made by thousands of our spiritual forebears. There is no other aggregation of human beings who can claim to have raised up a system with the demonstrated capacity to unite all of God's children in one world-embracing Order. This achievement places us not only in a position of incomparable strength, but more particularly in one of inescapable responsibility. Does not every one of us therefore have a divine obligation to fulfill, a sacred duty to perform towards every other one who is not yet aware of the call of God's latest Manifestation? Time does not stop, does not wait. With every passing hour a fresh affliction strikes at a distracted humanity. Dare we linger?

In a mere two years the Four Year Plan will be concluded, just some months before the end of an unforgettable century. Looming before us, then, is a twofold date with destiny. In extolling the unprecedented potential of the twentieth century, the beloved Master averred that its traces will last forever. Seized with such a vision, the mind of the alert follower of the Blessed Beauty must

undoubtedly be astir with anxious questions as to what part he or she will play in these few fleeting years, and as to whether he or she will, at the end of this seminal period, have made a mark among those enduring traces which the mind of the Master perceived. To ensure a soul-satisfying answer, one thing above all else is necessary: to act, to act now, and to continue to act.

Our heartfelt plea at the Holy Threshold on behalf of us all is that we may be divinely aided and richly confirmed in whatever we do towards meeting the urgent aim of the Divine Plan at so fate-laden a moment in human history.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]