

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Riḍván 2018

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

We greet you in the enduring afterglow of those memorable events that marked the bicentenary of the Birth of the Blessed Beauty. As we consider what transpired then and since, we find that the global Bahá'í community now in view is not the same as when it embarked on the first six cycles of the current Plan. It is more conscious than ever before of its mission. It has experienced an unprecedented surge in its capacity to bring friends and acquaintances into contact with its community life; to inspire neighbourhoods and villages into unified endeavour; to articulate how spiritual truths can be translated into sustained practical action; and, above all, to converse not only about the teachings that will build the world anew, but about the One Who taught them: Bahá'u'lláh. Accounts of His life and of His suffering told in myriad tongues by adults, youth, and children touched countless hearts. Some showed themselves ready to explore His Cause further. Others pledged collaboration. And many a receptive soul was moved to an avowal of faith.

One telling indicator of progress was the numerous places where it became clear that the Faith had emerged from obscurity at the national level. There were government leaders and leaders of thought who stated publicly—and sometimes emphasized privately—that the world stands in need of Bahá'u'lláh's vision and that the Bahá'ís' endeavours are admired and should be expanded. It delighted us to see that it was not only Bahá'ís who wished to honour Bahá'u'lláh and celebrate His life—special gatherings were hosted by some from beyond the Bahá'í community. In areas where hostility to the Faith exists, the friends were undismayed; showing marvellous resilience, they encouraged their compatriots to examine the truth for themselves, and many joyfully participated in the festivities. The bicentenary also gave rise to a seemingly limitless efflorescence of artistic expression, magnificent testimony to the wellspring of love from which it stemmed. The character of the Bahá'í community's entire approach to this occasion was confirmation of how much has been learned over more than two decades now, since the current series of global Plans began. The individual believer took initiative, the community arose in collective effort, and the friends channelled their creative energy into the plans prepared by the institutions. A significant anniversary, marking the passage of two centuries, offered a powerful stimulus to the work of building communities for the century to come. In the period leading up to the second bicentenary, let every seed so lovingly sown at the first be nurtured patiently towards fruition.

Two years into the present Plan, although naturally progress is not uniform from country to country, the number of intensive programmes of growth in the world is approaching half the five thousand contemplated in the current global endeavour, and the rate at which this number is rising has been steadily increasing. Looking more closely, there are promising signs of how the powers and potentialities of individuals, communities, and institutions are being manifested. For the believers everywhere, the experience of the bicentenary celebration demonstrated that many of their day-to-day interactions with the people around them can be infused with the spirit of teaching. And as the work in thousands of villages and neighbourhoods gathers momentum, a vibrant community life is taking root in each. The number of clusters where the system for extending this pattern of activity to more and more locations is becoming well established—enabling, thereby, the friends to pass the third milestone along a continuum of development—has grown markedly. And it is here, at the frontiers of the Bahá'í world's learning, particularly in the movement of populations towards the vision of Bahá'u'lláh, where not only are large numbers coming into the widening embrace of Bahá'í activities but the friends are now learning how

sizeable groups come to identify themselves with the community of the Most Great Name. We are seeing the Faith's educational efforts take on a more formal character in such places, as children move seamlessly through the grades year after year and one level of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme reliably succeeds another. In these places, the training institute is learning to ensure that sufficient human resources are being raised up to provide for the spiritual and moral edification of children and junior youth in ever-increasing numbers. Participation in these foundational activities is becoming so embedded in the culture of the population that it is viewed as an indispensable aspect of the life of a community. A new vitality emerges within a people taking charge of their own development, and they build immunity to those societal forces that breed passivity. Possibilities for material and spiritual progress take shape. Social reality begins to transform.

Cherished friends, this is truly a moment to give thanks to the Best-Beloved. There are a great many reasons to be encouraged. Yet we are only too aware of the scale of the task that remains. Fundamentally, as we have previously indicated, there must emerge in many hundreds of clusters a growing band of believers who can maintain, with those around them, a sustained focus on nurturing growth and building capacity, and who are distinguished by their ability and their discipline to reflect on action and learn from experience. Raising up and accompanying an expanding nucleus of individuals in each place—not just at the level of the cluster but within neighbourhoods and villages—is at once a formidable challenge and a critical need. But where this is occurring, the results speak for themselves.

We are reassured to see that the institutions of the Faith are keeping this supreme need at the forefront of their thinking, devising effective mechanisms to enable the insights arising from progress to be widely applied. At the same time, greater experience is endowing national, regional, and local bodies alike with broader vision. They are becoming involved in all aspects of the community's development and are concerned with the well-being of people beyond its formal membership. Conscious of the profound implications the institute process holds for the advancement of peoples, they are paying particular attention to how the training institute can be strengthened. They remain mindful of the need to maintain the community's focus on the requirements of the Plan and call the ever-widening circle of friends to higher and higher levels of unity. They faithfully uphold their responsibility to refine their administrative and financial systems so that the work of expansion and consolidation can be properly supported. In all this, they are ultimately occupied with cultivating in the community those conditions that conduce to the release of powerful spiritual forces.

As the work of community building intensifies, the friends are using the new capacities they have developed to improve conditions in the society around them, their enthusiasm kindled by their study of the divine teachings. Short-term projects have soared in number, formal programmes have expanded their reach, and there are now more Bahá'í-inspired development organizations engaged in education, health, agriculture, and other areas. From the resulting transformation visible in the individual and collective lives of peoples may be discerned the unmistakable stirrings of the society-building power of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. No wonder, then, that it is from such instances of social action—whether simple or complex, of fixed duration or long sustained—that the Offices of the Bahá'í International Community are increasingly taking inspiration in their efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society. This is another important field of endeavour for the Faith that has advanced well. At the national level, contributions to discourses that are meaningful to that society—the equality of men and women, migration and integration, the role of youth in social transformation, and religious coexistence, among others—are being made with growing confidence, proficiency, and insight. And wherever they live, work, or study, believers of all ages and backgrounds are making valued contributions to particular discourses, bringing to the attention of those around them a principled perspective shaped by Bahá'u'lláh's vast Revelation.

The Faith's standing in various spaces in which discourses unfold has been much enhanced by its official presence on the World Wide Web, a presence which has expanded considerably through the launch of numerous national Bahá'í websites and the further development of the family of sites associated with Bahai.org. This has immense value for both the propagation and protection of the Cause. Over the span of just a few days a large global audience was attracted to carefully conceived content about the Faith that was presented on the bicentenary website and updated in nine languages simultaneously, and which has now been augmented by individual country pages illustrating the diversity of the celebrations that occurred. Plans are already far advanced for introducing to the Bahá'í Reference Library site a feature that will allow previously untranslated and unpublished passages or Tablets from the Holy Writings to be released online over time. As well as this, new volumes of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings rendered into English are set to appear in the coming years.

In Santiago, Chile, and Battambang, Cambodia, the world's most recently dedicated Houses of Worship are becoming established centres of attraction, beacons to their societies of all that the Faith stands for. And their number is about to grow. We are delighted to announce that the dedication ceremony for the Temple in Norte del Cauca, Colombia, is to take place in July. Further, the construction of more Houses of Worship lies just over the horizon. In Vanuatu, permission is being obtained to start building. In India and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a highly complex and exacting process has at last led to the successful acquisition of land. The joy at seeing the design of the first national Mashriqu'l-Adhkár unveiled in Papua New Guinea at Naw-Rúz had hardly subsided when the design of the local House of Worship in Kenya was also revealed. Meanwhile, we have every expectation that the recently released statement and compilation about the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, prepared by our Research Department, will further stimulate the friends' appreciation of the significance of worship in community life. For in their acts of service, especially in their regular devotional gatherings, Bahá'ís everywhere are laying the spiritual foundations of future Houses of Worship.

Only three years remain of a quarter-century effort that began in 1996 focused on a single goal: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. At Ridván 2021, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh will embark on a Plan lasting a single year. Brief, but pregnant with portent, this one-year endeavour will begin a new wave of Plans bearing the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá'í Era. During the course of this auspicious twelvemonth, the Bahá'í world's commemoration of the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá will include a special gathering at the Bahá'í World Centre to which representatives of every National Spiritual Assembly and every Regional Bahá'í Council will be invited. This, however, is to be but the first in a sequence of events that will prepare the believers for the demands of the decades to come. The following January, the elapse of one hundred years since the first public reading of the Master's Will and Testament will be the occasion for a conference in the Holy Land bringing together the Continental Boards of Counsellors and all members of the Auxiliary Boards for Protection and Propagation. The spiritual energy released at these two historic gatherings must then be carried to all the friends of God in every land in which they reside. For this purpose, a series of conferences will be convened worldwide in the months that follow, a catalyst to the multi-year endeavour that shall succeed the coming One Year Plan.

Thus, a new phase in the unfoldment of the Master's Divine Plan is approaching. But a thrilling and more immediate prospect lies directly ahead. The bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb is now just a year and a half away. This is a period in which to recall the extraordinary heroism of the Martyr-Herald of our Faith, Whose dramatic ministry thrust humanity into a new era of history. Though separated from our own time by two centuries, the society in which the Báb appeared resembles the present-day world for the sense of oppression and for the longing of so many to find answers to slake the soul's thirst to know. In considering how this two-hundred-year anniversary might befittingly be marked, we recognize that these festivities will have a special character of their own. Nevertheless, we anticipate a flourishing of activity no less rich and no less

inclusive than that which accompanied the bicentenary just passed. It is an occasion to which every community, every household, every heart will undoubtedly look forward with eager expectation.

The months ahead will also be a time for calling to mind the lives of the Báb's intrepid followers—heroines and heroes whose faith was expressed in matchless, sacrificial acts that will forever adorn the annals of the Cause. Their qualities of fearlessness, consecration, and detachment from all save God impress themselves upon everyone who learns of their ventures. How striking, too, is the young age at which so many of those lionhearts made their indelible mark on history. During the coming period, may their example give courage to the entire company of the faithful—not least to the youth, who are once more summoned to the vanguard of a movement aimed at nothing less than the transformation of the world.

This, then, is our bright, bright hope. In the six cycles that lie between this Riḍván and the next bicentenary—indeed, throughout the remaining three years of the current Plan—let the same all-consuming, all-surpassing love that spurred the Báb's disciples to the diffusion of the divine light inspire you to great deeds. That you may be the recipients of heavenly aid is our supplication at the Sacred Threshold.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]