THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

18 January 2019

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Half a century after Bahá'u'lláh summoned the kings and rulers to be reconciled among themselves and enjoined on them the establishment of peace on earth, the great powers of that era were plunged into war. It was the first conflict to be regarded as a "World War", and it is remembered as a conflagration of horrific severity; the unprecedented scale and ferocity of the bloodshed has seared it on to the consciousness of every succeeding generation. And yet, from out the ruin and suffering, possibilities blossomed for a new order to bring stability to the world—notably at the Paris Peace Conference, which opened a hundred years ago on this day. In the years that followed, despite the repeated crises into which international affairs were thrown, Shoghi Effendi could discern "the progress, however fitful, of the forces working in harmony with the spirit of the age". These forces have continued to move humanity towards an age of peace—not merely a peace which rules out armed conflict, but a collective state of being, manifesting unity. Notwithstanding, it remains a long journey, and it proceeds in fits and starts. We find it propitious, at this moment, to reflect on the progress made on that journey, the contemporary challenges to peace, and the contribution to its attainment that Bahá'ís are called to make.

There have been at least three historical moments in the last one hundred years when it seemed as if the human race was reaching for real, lasting peace, albeit always falling short because of weaknesses it could not overcome. The first moment, as a result of the Paris Conference, was the establishment of the League of Nations, an organization intended by its founders to secure peace at the international level. It was the means by which, for the first time in history, the system of collective security enjoined on the world's rulers by Bahá'u'lláh was "seriously envisaged, discussed and tested". But ultimately the peace agreement that concluded the war was fatally flawed, and the League was not able to prevent a second World War, judged by historians to be the deadliest conflict in human history. Just as the first significant step towards world peace followed a period of appalling conflict, so did the second, when not only was the United Nations Organization formed from the ashes of the League, but a system of international economic institutions came into being, and historic advances were made relating to human rights and international law. In rapid succession, many territories under colonial rule became independent nations, and arrangements for regional cooperation grew markedly in depth and range. The post-war decades, however, were also characterized by an atmosphere of brooding and often open hostility between the world's two major power blocs. Known familiarly as the Cold War, it spilled over into actual wars in various regions of the world, and brought humanity perilously close to a conflict involving nuclear weapons. Its peaceful termination, towards the end of the twentieth century, was an occasion for relief, giving rise to explicit calls for the establishment of a new global order. This was the third moment when universal peace seemed to be within grasp. Efforts to put in place new systems for international cooperation and to strengthen existing ones received great impetus, as a series of world conferences on themes of importance to humanity's future were convened by the United Nations. New opportunities for consensus emerged, and the spirit of collaboration propelling progress also found expression in the mandates given to certain international institutions charged with administering justice. This purposeful, deliberative process culminated at the turn of the century in the Millennium Forum, a meeting of representatives of over a thousand civil society organizations from more than a hundred countries, followed by the Millennium Summit, an unparalleled gathering of world leaders which led to agreement on a set of objectives representing a shared ambition of humanity. Styled the Millennium Development Goals, they became rallying points for collective action in the ensuing years. These various advances—despite their many limitations and imperfections and the

horrifying conflicts that continued to unfold during this time—stand nonetheless as signs of a widespread, gradual but inexorable rise in global consciousness on the part of the earth's peoples and their attraction to universal justice, to solidarity, to collaboration, to compassion, and to equality.

As the present century opened, new challenges began to loom. With time, these intensified, leading to a retreat from the promising steps forward with which the previous century had closed. Today, many of the dominant currents in societies everywhere are pushing people apart, not drawing them together. Even as global poverty of the most extreme form has decreased, political and economic systems have enabled the enrichment of small coteries with grossly exorbitant wealth—a condition that fuels fundamental instability in world affairs. The interactions of the individual citizen, governing institutions, and society as a whole are often fraught, as those arguing for the primacy of one or the other show more and more intransigence in their thinking. Religious fundamentalism is warping the character of communities, even nations. The failings of so many organizations and institutions of society have understandably led to a decline in public trust, but this has been systematically exploited by vested interests seeking to undermine the credibility of all sources of knowledge. Certain shared ethical principles, which seemed to be in the ascendant at the start of this century, are eroded, threatening the prevailing consensus about right and wrong that, in various arenas, had succeeded in holding humanity's basest tendencies in check. And the will to engage in international collective action, which twenty years ago represented a powerful strain of thinking among world leaders, has been cowed, assailed by resurgent forces of racism, nationalism, and factionalism.

Thus do the forces of disintegration regroup and gain ground. So be it. The unification of humanity is unstoppable by any human force; the promises made by the prophets of old and by the Author of the Cause of God Himself testify to this truth. Yet the course humanity takes to achieve its destiny may very well be tortuous. The tumult raised by the contending peoples of the earth threatens to drown out the voices of those noble-minded souls in every society who call for an end to conflict and struggle. As long as that call goes unheeded, there is no reason to doubt that the world's current state of disorder and confusion will worsen—possibly with catastrophic consequences—until a chastened humanity sees fit to take another significant step, perhaps this time decisive, towards enduring peace.

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Universal peace is the destination towards which humanity has been moving throughout the ages under the influence of the Word of God that has been progressively imparted by the Creator to His creation. Shoghi Effendi described humanity's advance towards a new, global stage in its collective life in terms of social evolution, "an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations." Now, with the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, the human race stands on the threshold of its maturity. World unity is finally possible. A global order that unifies the nations with the assent of humanity is the only adequate answer to the destabilizing forces that threaten the world.

However, though world unity is possible—nay, inevitable—it ultimately cannot be achieved without unreserved acceptance of the oneness of humankind, described by the Guardian as "the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve". With what insight and eloquence did he expound upon the far-reaching implications of this cardinal principle! Plainly he saw, amidst the turbulence of world affairs, how the reality that humanity is one people must be the starting

point for a new order. The vast array of relations among nations—and within them—all need to be re-envisaged in this light.

The realization of such a vision will require, sooner or later, an historic feat of statesmanship from the leaders of the world. Alas, the will to attempt this feat is still wanting. Humanity is gripped by a crisis of identity, as various peoples and groups struggle to define themselves, their place in the world, and how they should act. Without a vision of shared identity and common purpose, they fall into competing ideologies and power struggles. Seemingly countless permutations of "us" and "them" define group identities ever more narrowly and in contrast to one another. Over time, this splintering into divergent interest groups has weakened the cohesion of society itself. Rival conceptions about the primacy of a particular people are peddled to the exclusion of the truth that humanity is on a common journey in which all are protagonists. Consider how radically different such a fragmented conception of human identity is from the one that follows from a recognition of the oneness of humanity. In this perspective, the diversity that characterizes the human family, far from contradicting its oneness, endows it with richness. Unity, in its Bahá'í expression, contains the essential concept of diversity, distinguishing it from uniformity. It is through love for all people, and by subordinating lesser loyalties to the best interests of humankind, that the unity of the world can be realized and the infinite expressions of human diversity find their highest fulfilment.

Fostering unity, by harmonizing disparate elements and nurturing in every heart a selfless love for humankind, is the task of religion. Great possibilities to cultivate fellowship and concord are open to religious leaders, but these same leaders can also incite violence by using their influence to stoke the fires of fanaticism and prejudice. Writing of religion, Bahá'u'lláh's words are emphatic: "... make it not", He warns, "the cause of dissension and strife." Peace, for "all who dwell on earth", is one of "the principles and ordinances of God".

A heart that has embraced love for the whole of humanity will certainly be pained when confronted by the suffering that so many endure because of disunity. But the friends of God cannot shut themselves off from the increasing turmoil of the society that surrounds them; they must guard themselves, too, from becoming enmeshed in its conflicts or falling into its adversarial methods. No matter how bleak conditions may appear at any given time, no matter how dismal the immediate prospects for bringing about unity, there is no cause for despair. The distressing state of the world can only spur us to redouble our commitment to constructive action. "These are not days of prosperity and triumph" cautions Bahá'u'lláh. "The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared."

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The establishment of peace is a duty to which the entire human race is called. The responsibility that Bahá'ís bear to aid that process will evolve over time, but they have never been mere spectators—they lend their share of assistance to the operation of those forces leading humanity towards unity. They are summoned to be as leaven to the world. Consider Bahá'u'lláh's words:

> Address yourselves to the promotion of the well-being and tranquillity of the children of men. Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also emphasised the importance of the contribution that Bahá’ís are called on to make to the establishment of world peace:

> … peace must first be established among individuals, until it leadeth in the end to peace among nations. Wherefore, O ye Bahá’ís, strive ye with all your might to create, through the power of the Word of God, genuine love, spiritual communion and durable bonds among individuals. This is your task.

“The Promise of World Peace”, the message we addressed to the peoples of the world in 1985, set out the Bahá’í perspective on the condition of the world and the prerequisites of universal peace. It also offered the global Bahá’í community as a model for study that could reinforce hope in the possibility of uniting the human race. In the years since, the followers of Bahá’u’lláh have been patiently refining that model and working with others around them to build up and broaden a system of social organization based on His teachings. They are learning how to nurture communities that embody those prerequisites of peace we identified in 1985. They cultivate environments in which children can be raised untainted by any form of racial, national, or religious prejudice. They champion the full equality of women with men in the affairs of the community. Their programmes of education, transformative in their effects and encompassing both the material and spiritual aspects of life, welcome everyone who wishes to contribute to the community’s prosperity. In the stirrings of social action can be seen their desire to remedy the numerous ills afflicting humanity and to empower each person to become a protagonist in the building of a new world. Taking inspiration from the concept of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, they invite to their devotional meetings followers of all faiths and none. Youth, distinguished for their commitment to a society founded on peace and justice, are engaging their like-minded peers in the work of building communities on this foundation. In the institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly exists the spiritual authority and the administrative capacity to govern in servitude, to resolve conflicts, and to build unity; the electoral process through which Assemblies are formed is itself an expression of peace, in contrast to the vitriol and even violence that often accompanies elections in the wider society. Implicit in all these dimensions of an open, expanding community is the foundational recognition that all of humanity are the children of one Creator.

The friends are also developing their capacity for engaging those around them, regardless of creed, culture, class, or ethnicity, in conversations about how to bring about spiritual and material well-being through systematic application of the divine teachings. One gratifying result of this growing capacity is the community’s increased ability to make meaningful contributions to various important discourses prevalent in society; in certain countries, leaders and thinkers striving to address the challenges confronting their societies increasingly show appreciation for the perspectives offered by Bahá’ís. These contributions articulate insights derived from Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, draw on the experience being generated by the believers around the world, and aim to elevate the discussion above the acrimony and contention that so often prevent discourses of society from progressing. Further, the ideas and lines of reasoning advanced by Bahá’ís are reinforced by their practice of consultation. Sensitized as they are to the importance of harmony and the fruitlessness of conflict, the followers of Bahá’u’lláh seek to cultivate those conditions that are most conducive to the emergence of unity in any setting. We are heartened to see the believers expanding their efforts to participate in the discourses of society—especially those friends who, in their professional capacity, are able to contribute to discourses directly related to peace.

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For Bahá’ís, the attainment of peace is not simply an aspiration to which they are sympathetic or a goal complementary to their other aims—it has always been a central concern. In

a second Tablet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace in the Hague, He asserted that “our desire for peace is not derived merely from the intellect: It is a matter of religious belief and one of the eternal foundations of the Faith of God.” He observed that for peace to be realized in the world, it was not adequate that people should be informed about the horrors of war:

> Today the benefits of universal peace are recognized amongst the people, and likewise the harmful effects of war are clear and manifest to all. But in this matter, knowledge alone is far from sufficient: A power of implementation is needed to establish it throughout the world.

“It is our firm belief”, He continued, “that the power of implementation in this great endeavour is the penetrating influence of the Word of God and the confirmations of the Holy Spirit.”

Certainly, then, none who are conscious of the condition of the world can refrain from giving their utmost to this endeavour and seeking those confirmations—confirmations for which we too earnestly supplicate at the Sacred Threshold on your behalf. Beloved friends: The devoted efforts that you and your like-minded collaborators are making to build communities founded on spiritual principles, to apply those principles for the betterment of your societies, and to offer the insights arising—these are the surest ways you can hasten the fulfilment of the promise of world peace.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

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