THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

25 November 2020

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

We greet you with immense affection on this special day, an occasion for calling to mind the power of the Covenant, that power which "pulsateth in the body of the contingent world" and forges enduring bonds of love among the believers. In the months since Riḍván, we have seen the evidences of this dynamic power in the unified activity of Bahá'u'lláh's followers, led so ably by the institutions of the Cause in each continent and country, as the friends everywhere have sought with characteristic creativity and determination to minister to the needs of an ailing world. Your resilience and your unwavering commitment to the well-being of those around you, persistent through all difficulties, have filled us with tremendous hope. But it is no wonder that, in some other quarters, hope has become a depleted resource. There is a mounting realization on the part of the world's people that the decades ahead are set to bring with them challenges among the most daunting that the human family has ever had to face. The current global health crisis is but one such challenge, the ultimate severity of whose cost, both to lives and livelihoods, is yet unknown; your efforts to succour and support one another as well as your sisters and brothers in society at large will certainly need to be sustained, and in places expanded.

It is against this background of furious storms lashing humanity that the ark of the Cause is about to embark upon a series of Plans that will carry it into the third century of the Bahá'í Era and significantly strengthen the Bahá'í community's capacity for realizing the society-building powers of the Faith. As you are aware, the first Plan to commence this new series will last but one year. In places where circumstances prevent national communities from establishing as many intensive programmes of growth before Riḍván 2021 as they intended, these twelve months will extend the time available to them to do so. Meanwhile, wherever the process of growth has already been intensified, the year will be an opportunity to consolidate the achievements made during the current Plan, while cultivating the conditions necessary for welcoming larger and larger numbers of souls into the embrace of a community recognized for its fortitude and outward-looking orientation. At the national, regional, and cluster levels, we look to communities of proven strength to help those in which less experience has accrued. In this year-long effort, every community must draw on whatever untapped potential it may possess and seek to overcome any obstacles that are impeding its growth, thereby preparing it for the demands to come. For it is within the context of a flourishing community, especially a centre of intense activity in a village or neighbourhood, and when each element of the Plan's framework is given the attention it requires, that those elements most visibly cohere and connect, multiplying the community's powers in the field of action.

Besides providing for advances within clusters everywhere, the coming Plan will be a year for profound reflection on the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the strength of the Covenant of which He was the Centre, as the community prepares to commemorate the centenary of His Ascension. The observance of this anniversary will undoubtedly prompt individuals and communities alike to contemplate the significance of that infinitely poignant moment when He Who was the Mystery of God departed from this world. His passing took from the Bahá'ís of that era a Figure Who was the object of their ardent love and loyalty; to the faithful of this age, He remains without parallel: a perfect embodiment in word and deed of all that His Father taught, the One through Whom the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh was "proclaimed, championed and vindicated". We are conscious that the coming year will also mark a century since His Will and Testament—that "momentous", "historic", "immortal" Document—"called into being, outlined the features and set in motion the processes" of the Administrative Order, "the very pattern of that divine civilization which the almighty Law

of Bahá'u'lláh is designed to establish upon earth". This "unique" and "divinely-conceived" Order, this "mighty administrative structure", had been fashioned by its Architect to perpetuate the Covenant and channel the spiritual powers of the Cause. It will be apparent, then, that the Day of the Covenant next year, exactly twelve months from now, will be especially meaningful. We ask National Spiritual Assemblies to determine how these two dates, occurring so close together, may each be observed, taking into account prevailing conditions in their countries.

All the while, earnest preparations continue to be made in the Holy Land for the commemoration of the centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá at a gathering at which, it is hoped, representatives of National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils will be present. Similarly, plans are already being made for the conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members, which will coincide, in January 2022, with the lapse of one hundred years since the first public reading of the Will and Testament of the Master. Conditions in the world may, of course, require the plans being made for these gatherings at the Bahá'í World Centre to change. But come what may, we have no doubt that the efforts made in local communities worldwide to befittingly commemorate the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and to honour the Day of the Covenant in this coming centennial year will provide the impetus needed to launch the succeeding stage in God's Minor Plan, even as Providence propels the unfoldment of His Major Plan in accordance with His incontestable decree.

The momentum that is sure to build with each successive cycle of the One Year Plan will be further augmented by the release of two films. The first of these, which will become available in time for the centennial commemoration, will be a portrait of the Person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Besides being a tribute to His life and work, it will explore how, by championing the oneness of humanity through His words and deeds, He offered a challenge to the stale assumptions and prejudices of the age, and gave stimulus to a process of unification which continues to this day. A second film, following soon after the first, will reflect on the expiration of the first hundred years of the Formative Age from the vantage point of the heights to which the Bahá'í community has climbed, and from where it can now gaze upon new horizons.

The significance of the occasions being marked during the One Year Plan will lend it a unique character, enhancing the work being undertaken in clusters and making this single year the ideal preparation for the global endeavour that is to follow. With a sense of joyful anticipation, we announce that the Bahá'í world will, at Riḍván 2022, begin a Nine Year Plan. Its requirements and provisions will be set out at a later date, but its duration already gives an unmistakable indication of the expansive prospect it will present. God willing, it will be heralded by the convocation of a series of conferences held over a span of months across the globe.

This, so far as it can be foreseen, is the course the Bahá'í community will seek to tread. For the present hour, we urge you to recommit your energies, keeping your focus on the mission immediately before you. We are immensely gratified to see the assured composure with which the community of the Greatest Name has sought to offer the divine remedy under all conditions, especially during this period when society's established patterns of life have been disrupted and risks of different kinds are being faced by so many. Withal, the friends must guard against being drawn into the ultimately futile conflict and strife that characterizes so much of the discussion of the affairs of society, or—heaven forbid—allowing interaction of this type to permeate, even fleetingly, the conversations of the community. Yet such vigilance on your part in avoiding discord and in not becoming entangled in society's controversies should under no circumstances be construed as aloofness from the many pressing concerns of this time. Far from it. You are among the most active and earnest of humanity's well-wishers. But, whether through deeds or words, the merit of your every contribution to social well-being lies, first, in your resolute commitment to discover that precious point of unity where contrasting perspectives overlap and around which contending peoples can coalesce.

Less than two full cycles remain of the present Five Year Plan—indeed, of the current series of Plans inaugurated in 1996. In these closing months, we will be sure to offer ardent prayers on your behalf in our supplications at the Sacred Threshold. May you succeed in giving hope to those who know not where to find it in a world disoriented and adrift, sorely lacking the unity which you, through your heart-pledged devotion to the Covenant, so conspicuously manifest.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

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