

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

1 November 2022

To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Dearly loved Friends,

The Nine Year Plan is now in motion. The outstanding achievements that you bring to this new stage of the Divine Plan place your community in the very front ranks of the worldwide Bahá'í community. Before you stretches a path of great possibilities, and we are confident that you are primed to surpass all you have to this point attained.

Your country is blessed with remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity. How happy we have been over the years to witness the receptivity of its peoples to the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Yet, alas, your nation has time and again suffered from conflict among some of its peoples. As a part of Congolese society, you are, of course, not immune to the forces that generate and drive conflict. What this demands is vigilance by all the believers in ensuring that divisions, especially those related to ethnicity, do not take root in your community. Such divisions can impede your efforts to develop your community and to foster the spiritual and material progress of your nation. Your duty as Bahá'ís is to act as true champions of the oneness of humankind, and to promote unity in your communities and in the life of your nation. It is about this vital duty that we wish to address you.

Each of the hundreds of ethnic groups in your country has a long history, and each has gradually been shaped and reshaped by encounters with other groups and cultures over periods both of peace and of conflict. Such a pattern is, of course, not unique to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is the story of the peoples of the world, a reality on which the Bahá'í conception of history sheds much light. As a distinct organic unit, humanity has passed through evolutionary stages that are similar to the stages of infancy and childhood in the lives of its individual members. The divisions and conflicts that have marked relationships among and within various peoples are tendencies of humanity's childhood. Inexorably, however, humanity has been moving forward along the path of its maturation. On this path, it has, from one age to the next, received impetus from successive Divine Revelations sent by God to progressively educate and civilize it. Humanity is now in the concluding period of its turbulent adolescence and is going through a period of transition. Standing at the threshold of a long-awaited coming of age, its needs are no longer served by the ideas and behaviours of prior stages.

Bahá'u'lláh has appeared to humanity in this period of its adolescence, when it is in need of maturation. As you are well aware, He has provided the means for establishing the unity of humankind, the hallmark of a mature world. What will bind the hearts of all people together is the power of the Word of God. That Word has generative power which in every age has provided the means for refining human character and reordering human affairs. The mission of the Bahá'ís is to learn to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in their individual and collective lives and in the life of their society. Through well-ordered efforts and in collaboration with many others who are dedicated to bettering the world, Bahá'ís bring the principles suited to humanity's age of maturity to bear on the conditions of the world's peoples. They strive for the transformation of the inner and outer realities of human life, and for the cultivation of spiritual and social conditions that will give rise to a new kind of people and a new society founded on unity.

Bahá'ís undertake this work with instruments and means that are conducive to creating a unified world. They are ever conscious that unity is not only the goal they seek but the primary means for creating a new and mature society. They thus labour together in "serried lines", "one locked to the next, each supporting his fellows". They are equipped with pure intent, righteous motives, sincere aims, and faithful hearts. They "associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the

earth with joy and radiance”, with the assurance that “consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord”. They strive to rid their actions of any animosity or hatred and seek always to “hold fast to the cord of kindness and tender mercy”. They are above all cognizant that “the religion of God is for love and unity” and should never be made the cause of enmity or dissension, and that “the means of order” should never become “the cause of confusion”, or “the instrument of union an occasion for discord”.

It is only as a united community that you can thrive as promoters of the oneness of humanity. It is important, then, that you continue to enrich your understanding of how obstacles to unity appear in society. We would like to discuss two such obstacles: the distortion of human identity and the spread of prejudice, in particular, ethnic prejudice.

*

At the heart of the divisions in society today is a crisis of identity. The way people think about who they are and how they see their place in the world determine how they relate to others and what they regard as their individual and collective purpose. For Bahá'ís, it is the Manifestation of God, the Voice of God to the world, who defines human nature and purpose. Bahá'u'lláh describes the purpose of human life as essentially spiritual in nature. An individual's true self is to be found in the powers of the soul, which has the capacity to know God and to reflect His attributes. The soul has no gender, no ethnicity, no race. God sees no differences among human beings except in relation to the conscious effort of each individual to purify his or her soul and to express its full powers. In God's sight, all human beings are as one and have the common duty of knowing and worshiping Him and contributing to advancing civilization. This truth is directly related to another—that humanity is one family. A loving Lord has “created all humanity from the same stock”. He has “decreed that all shall belong to the same household”. “Since We have created you all from one same substance”, Bahá'u'lláh has stated, “it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.”

The powers of the human soul have throughout history and across the planet been manifested in many forms of custom, knowledge, and culture. This diversity endows the human family with richness. Just as differently coloured flowers enrich a garden, diversity gives society natural beauty and strength. “Consider”, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá explains, “the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty.” “In like manner,” He adds, “when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest.” Unity in diversity, not uniformity, is thus the watchword of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings.

But consider what a grave obstacle to the unity of the human family is presented by failure to understand the truth of its essential oneness! Any sense of unity that comes from the shared identity of a group becomes the basis of contest with those perceived as “other”. Humanity is split into competing interest groups, many locked in a fight for dominance. Conceptions of conflicting interests inhibit the collective capacity to transform social conditions and address challenges for the benefit of all. In the religious, social, political, and economic spheres of life, conflict driven by narrow self-interest is deemed natural and inevitable. Rivalry between groups harms all, obstructs justice, and suppresses the potentialities of individuals and groups, whose contributions are necessary for the betterment of society.

The responsibility Bahá'ís bear—the work you are carrying out in your localities, clusters, and nation—is to assist all peoples to recognize their shared identity as members of one human family

and thus join together in building spiritually and materially prosperous societies that manifest unity in diversity. Every people has a part to play in this enterprise. Each brings the best aspects of their culture to broader social interactions and places them at the service of all, even as they discard aspects uncondusive to the common good. In this light, the diversity of ethnic origins and traditions that distinguish the peoples of your country is a treasure that enriches your nation and the world. What a blessing is theirs—each and all—when they widen their loyalty to embrace the best interests of their entire nation and the whole of humanity so that they can, as members of one family, prosper and flourish.

*

The crisis of identity is directly related to the spread of prejudice. Today, prejudices of all sorts are surging around the world, infecting the consciousness of millions and despoiling them of their energies. They are polarizing societies at a time when unity is most vital to resolving local, national, and global challenges that seem intractable.

The statements in the writings of the Faith about the harm that prejudice inflicts on individuals and on society are most emphatic. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated that human beings are degraded when they become captives of their own illusions and suppositions. Prejudice stains the human spirit, debases both its perpetrator and its victim, obscures perception and understanding, and prevents the achievement of that lofty standard of justice proclaimed in the writings to “see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others,” and to “know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has also made it clear that prejudice is “destructive of the human edifice”, “a destroyer of the foundations of the world of humanity”, and the cause of “the world’s sickness”. Until prejudice is removed, “the world of humanity will not and cannot attain peace, prosperity and composure”. “The world of humanity cannot be saved from the darkness of nature and cannot attain illumination except through the abandonment of prejudices and the acquisition of the morals of the Kingdom.”

Our particular concern here, as we have stated, is ethnic prejudice. To distrust, fear, hate, or discriminate against another person or a whole group on the basis of ethnicity is a spiritual disease. It is also a scourge that infects social structures and causes instability. In this light, eradicating ethnic prejudice requires transformation at the level of both the individual and the social environment. “We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us”, Shoghi Effendi stated in a letter written on his behalf, “and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.”

For the individual, striving to be free from ethnic prejudice is a profound spiritual duty that no one who claims to be a loyal follower of Bahá’u’lláh can neglect. To discriminate against anyone because of ethnicity grievously violates the spirit that animates the Faith. “If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated,” Shoghi Effendi stated, “it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favour of the minority”. Whatever the strength of public opinion, a Bahá’í should never act in a way that would alienate anyone. “Let them see no one as their enemy, or as wishing them ill,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines.”

An individual’s efforts in this respect must begin with earnest striving to develop attributes of the soul such as love, truthfulness, kindness, justice, and generosity; to purify the heart of selfishness, envy, and hate; and to align the mind with Bahá’u’lláh’s principles of unity. By striving to rid his or her thoughts, words, and actions of ethnic bias, an individual upholds his or her own nobility and the nobility of all of God’s children. Freedom from prejudice must then manifest itself in all aspects of an individual’s life—in private and public life, in the Bahá’í community, and in the wider society. The home environment must be free of attitudes, tendencies,

expressions, and associations that give room for prejudice. In the Bahá'í community, God forbid that a loyal believer's participation in the electoral processes of the Faith be swayed by narrow ethnic interests or that service on committees, agencies, and institutions be tainted by partiality and favoritism. In society, a believer's freedom from prejudice must be evident in all the social spaces he or she enters—the school, the workplace, the cultural association, the professional organization. A believer's duty at all times is to demonstrate the unifying power of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings by associating with diverse peoples with a spacious heart, an all-embracing love, and a spirit of true friendship. As was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's injunction, "Let those who meet you know, without your proclaiming the fact, that you are indeed a Bahá'í."

As for the social environment, ethnic prejudice can pervade many aspects of collective life and, at its worst, be manifest in recurring cycles of violent conflict. Ethnic prejudice is often driven or exacerbated by prevalent negative social factors, and the friends must seek to obtain a mature understanding of these factors if they are to contribute meaningfully to eradicating its effects. Consider, for instance, the effects of ignorance and how it blinds people to the truths that all human beings share the same spiritual essence, are members of one human family, and are inhabitants of one common homeland. Where people are uninformed of the historical processes that have shaped their society, they can tenaciously cling to divisive identities that may have had their roots in an oppressive past. Political partitions between or within countries, which are but human inventions, become bases for the irrational distrust and fear of other groups. Consider also the consequences of a tendency to blindly imitate and uncritically perpetuate divisive ways of thinking, speaking, and relating. Skewed historical accounts transmitted by one generation to the next are employed to propagate narrow notions of belonging, to advance claims of exceptionalism, to stir old rivalries, or to stress past events that evoke a sense of victimhood. Language is flippantly used to entrench negative stereotypes that stigmatize and malign others. Consider as well how at the service of narrow self-interest—whether political or economic—divisions are stoked, rivalries started, and conflicts sustained, how, in essence, ethnicity is employed as an instrument in pursuit of political power and economic advantage. Consider, too, how materialism widens the extremes of wealth and poverty and how economic injustice produces rifts that intensify prejudice, even among similarly marginalized peoples. Competition for limited resources sullies personal and collective motives and generates hostilities and jealousies that embitter relationships.

These are among the factors that create social environments in which ethnic prejudice proliferates. All well-meaning people have a duty to increase their consciousness of such factors and to strengthen their capacity to counteract them. The influence of culture also has to be borne in mind. Each culture has many salutary elements that are conducive to promoting unity in diversity, which must be reinforced, as well as negative aspects that contribute to breeding prejudice, which must be gradually abandoned. Meaningful interactions among people hailing from different human groups foster an environment within which advances in culture can occur. To retain and promote customs and traditions that generate animosity is a grave obstacle to the betterment of society. A Bahá'í community is robbed of its ability to promote unity in diversity if the friends, knowingly or unknowingly, reproduce in their interactions and their association with society the same tendencies that foment prejudice.

*

What is the work before you then? How are you to strengthen patterns of interaction that promote unity in diversity and eliminate prevalent social factors that drive prejudice? How is this objective related to your current efforts to build vibrant communities and, more broadly, to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of your society?

Shoghi Effendi called on the friends to "scale nobler heights of heroism as humanity plunges into greater depths of despair, degradation, dissension and distress". The global Plans seek to build capacity in every human group to counter negative social forces by contributing to social well-

being through the application of the teachings of the Faith. As the Plans steadily unfold, their processes will gradually realize their potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another and for the perpetuation of conflict and contention. This is central to the work you are carrying out within your own communities. Your efforts in the fields of community building, social action, and public discourse represent ways of awakening the energies latent in the human soul and channelling them towards the betterment of society.

Your endeavours to reach different social groups with the message of the Faith foster profound interethnic and intercultural association. They make cooperation and mutual assistance among people of many backgrounds a distinctive characteristic of Bahá'í community life. You seek, in this, to demonstrate that vital Bahá'í attitude of being truly outward looking, sincerely open to all, and resolutely inclusive. Your attention to strengthening capacity to study the writings of the Faith enables ever-larger numbers to forge relationships that reflect Bahá'í standards and principles. This reinforces in all participants the desire and ability to offer acts of disinterested service to society and to purify their motives as they learn to sacrifice for the progress and well-being of all. Your dedication to a mode of operation centred on ongoing study, consultation, action, and reflection helps to free individuals and communities from blind imitation and to anchor unfolding efforts in learning to establish "new bases for human happiness". The energies you give to the spiritual education of children and the spiritual empowerment of junior youth help the younger generations lay the foundations of a noble character, shield them from the taint of prejudice, and incline their burgeoning powers towards service to society. The focus you place on the family transforms that fundamental unit of society into a space where young people can imbibe the spirit of unity and shun all dispositions that breed division. Your endeavours to build capacity for applying spiritual principles and scientific knowledge to the improvement of social and economic conditions help populations address economic injustice through unified action and without resort to conflict. Your contributions in multiple spaces where conversations on various social problems occur strengthen collective capacity for elevated dialogue and help diverse actors achieve unity of thought and action by drawing on insights from the Bahá'í teachings and experience. The centrality you give to consultation increases capacity for collective investigation of truth, frees decision-making processes from contest and adversarial tendencies, and enables people from diverse backgrounds to transcend differences and harmonize perspectives. The electoral and administrative processes you foster shape thought and conduct that free leadership and governance from self-interest and the associated corruption. By striving to broaden the base of participation in all aspects of the life of your communities, you cultivate conditions in which individuals from various social groups honour their common humanity, recognize their mutual interests, and envision their shared future. Such participation strengthens social bonds as souls serve side by side for the betterment of society. Whether large or small, your community-building efforts are directed at raising the nucleus and pattern of a new World Order by establishing the kind of relationships called for by Bahá'u'lláh. And emerging among all who are labouring together is a language that elevates all and maligns none, a language with the potency to bind hearts with the indissoluble bond of love and the power to unite minds in common pursuit of a society that can truly be as a garden bursting with flowers of every form, every colour, every fragrance. It is in all these ways that you are creating new communities that can serve as a model and relationships that enable you to act as leaven in the life of your nation.

*

Beloved friends in that great African nation! We know that the conditions of societal conflict under which you labour are at times disruptive and dispiriting. Your brothers and sisters in many other lands also face similar conditions. Though it may sometimes appear as if hope for a truly united society grows dimmer day after day as conflicts borne of prejudice recur and resurge, your mission must remain ever clear, your outlook ever confident, your dedication ever firm. You possess the means for unifying thousands upon thousands of hearts. You who are raising the song

of unity in diversity must be, in word and deed, its very emblems. If your actions mirror the tendencies widespread in society, if you are negligent of the fundamentals of your belief, what then will be left? The salt will have lost its savour. Set aside all obstacles, mental and otherwise, and thus deliver to a loving Lord during these nine years a true victory for the oneness of humanity.

In closing, we now address the youth: The future is in your hands. Make no mistake, you are raising an edifice that will be a haven for your peoples upon the foundations your mothers and your fathers have laid. Continued progress will depend on your dedication to building true unity and on the extent to which you strengthen your practice of those spiritual disciplines enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh that help you polish the mirrors of your hearts to reflect the attributes of God. We hope that you will foster among yourselves enduring spiritual bonds that resist the forces of prejudice. Let the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá be your guide—how He lived His life as a daily sacrifice to the cause of the oneness of humanity, how He embraced with selfless love all people who crossed His path, how He saw reflected in each soul the image of a loving God. So, too, are you to see all your compatriots. “In this illumined age”, He stated, “that which is confirmed is the oneness of the world of humanity. Every soul who serveth this oneness will undoubtedly be assisted and confirmed.” We cherish the hope that in your efforts to find life partners you will resist every influence to give primacy to ethnicity, that you will build homes in which every soul would be welcome, and that you will raise children who will become champions of oneness. We are confident that in the life of your nation, you will shine as well-wishers of all, as servants of all, as unifiers of all. Let your deeds write the next chapter of your country's history, one that is free of prejudice and conflict. Thus will your peoples, each as a powerful tributary, stream into one mighty river, whose surging waters will gush forth into the ocean of one human family.

We will supplicate the Blessed Beauty at the Sacred Threshold of His Shrine that He may bind the peoples of your much cherished nation ever more firmly in love.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]