

The Universal House of Justice

28 December 2010

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

EXCERPT PAGES 10-15

Dearly loved friends: As you well know, we take great pleasure in witnessing how ably you and your auxiliaries, serving in the forefront of the teaching field, are carrying out your duties to nurture in every heart and soul the fire of the love of God, to promote learning, and to assist all in their endeavours to develop an upright and praiseworthy character. When the North American Bahá'í community embarked on its first Seven Year Plan, in pursuit of the responsibilities with which it had been charged in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Guardian addressed to the friends in that land a letter of considerable length and great potency, dated 25 December 1938, subsequently published under the title *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Elaborating on the nature of the tasks at hand, the letter made reference to what the Guardian described as spiritual prerequisites for the success of all Bahá'í undertakings. Of these, three, he indicated, "stand out as preeminent and vital": rectitude of conduct, a chaste and holy life, and freedom from prejudice. Given the conditions of the world today, you would do well to reflect on the implications of his observations for the global effort of the Bahá'í community to infuse cluster after cluster with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

Referring to rectitude of conduct, Shoghi Effendi spoke of the "justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness" that must "distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá'í community." Though applicable to all its members, this requisite was directed principally, he underscored, to its "elected representatives, whether local, regional, or national," whose sense of moral rectitude should stand in clear contrast to "the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests".

The Guardian called for "an abiding sense of undeviating justice" in a "strangely disordered world" and quoted extensively from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, setting the sights of the friends on the highest standards of honesty and trustworthiness. He appealed to the believers to exemplify rectitude of conduct in every aspect of their lives—in their business dealings, in their domestic lives, in all manner of employment, in every service they render to the Cause and to their people—and to observe its requirements in their uncompromising adherence to the laws and principles of the Faith.

That political life everywhere has continued to deteriorate at an alarming rate in the intervening years, as the very conception of statesmanship has been drained of meaning, as policies have come to serve the economic interests of the few in the name of progress, as hypocrisy has been allowed to undermine the operation of social and economic structures, is evident. If indeed great effort was required for the friends to uphold the high standards of the Faith then, how much greater must be

44 the exertion in a world that rewards dishonesty, that encourages corruption, and that treats truth as
 45 a negotiable commodity. Profound is the confusion that threatens the foundations of society, and
 46 unwavering must be the resolve of all those involved in Bahá'í activity, lest the slightest trace of self-
 47 interest becloud their judgement.

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49 Let the coordinators of every training institute, the members of every Area Teaching Committee,
 50 every Auxiliary Board member and every one of his or her assistants, and all members of every local,
 51 regional and national Bahá'í body, whether elected or appointed, appreciate the significance of the
 52 Guardian's plea to ponder in their hearts the implications of the moral rectitude which he described
 53 with such clarity. May their actions serve as a reminder to a beleaguered and weary humanity of its
 54 high destiny and its inherent nobility.

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56 No less pertinent to the success of the Bahá'í enterprise today are the Guardian's forthright
 57 comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, "with its implications of modesty, purity,
 58 temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness". He was unequivocal in his language, summoning the
 59 friends to a life unsullied "by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently
 60 deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters". We need not provide for you here
 61 evidence of the influence that such a deficient code now exerts on humanity as a whole; even the
 62 remotest spots on the globe are captivated by its enticements. Yet we feel compelled to mention a
 63 few points related specifically to the theme of purity. The forces at work on the hearts and minds of
 64 the young, to whom the Guardian directed his appeal most fervently, are pernicious indeed.
 65 Exhortations to remain pure and chaste will only succeed to a limited degree in helping them to
 66 resist these forces.

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68 What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by
 69 the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how
 70 innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration
 71 of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its
 72 obsession with self-gratification. It must be realized that the isolation and despair from which so
 73 many suffer are products of an environment ruled by an all-pervasive materialism. And in this the
 74 friends must understand the ramifications of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "the present-day order"
 75 must "be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead." Throughout the world today, young
 76 people are among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Plan and the most ardent champions of
 77 the Cause; their numbers will, we are certain, increase from year to year. May every one of them
 78 come to know the bounties of a life adorned with purity and learn to draw on the powers that flow
 79 through pure channels.

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81 The Guardian next addressed the subject of prejudice, stating patently that "any division or
 82 cleavage" in the ranks of the Faith "is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals." He made clear
 83 that the friends should manifest "complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of
 84 a different race, class, creed, or colour." He went on to discuss at length the specific question of
 85 racial prejudice, "the corrosion of which," he indicated, had "bitten into the fibre, and attacked the
 86 whole social structure of American society" and which, he asserted at the time, "should be regarded

87 as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present
88 stage of its evolution.”

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90 Independent of the strengths and weaknesses of the measures taken by the American nation,
91 and the Bahá'í community evolving within it, in addressing this particular challenge, the fact remains
92 that prejudices of all kinds—of race, of class, of ethnicity, of gender, of religious belief—continue to
93 hold a strong grip on humanity. While it is true that, at the level of public discourse, great strides
94 have been taken in refuting the falsehoods that give rise to prejudice in whatever form, it still
95 permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness.
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97 It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans
98 seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human
99 group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race,
100 irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We
101 pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over
102 the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized.

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104 The educational process associated with the training institute is, of course, helping to foster the
105 spiritual conditions to which the Guardian referred in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, **along with the**
106 **many others mentioned in the writings that must distinguish the life of the Bahá'í community—**
107 **the spirit of unity that must animate the friends, the ties of love that must bind them, the**
108 **firmness in the Covenant that must sustain them, and the reliance and trust they must place on**
109 **the power of divine assistance, to note but a few.**
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111 That such essential attributes are developed in the context of building capacity for service, in an
112 environment that cultivates systematic action, is particularly noteworthy. In promoting this
113 environment, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants need to recognize the importance of
114 two fundamental, interlocking precepts: On the one hand, the high standard of conduct inculcated
115 by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation can admit no compromise; it can, in no wise, be lowered, and all must fix
116 their gaze on its lofty heights. On the other, it must be acknowledged that, as human beings, we are
117 far from perfect; what is expected of everyone is sincere daily effort. Self-righteousness is to be
118 eschewed.

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120 Apart from the spiritual requisites of a sanctified Bahá'í life, there are habits of thought that
121 affect the unfoldment of the global Plan, and their development has to be encouraged at the level
122 of culture. There are tendencies, as well, that need to be gradually overcome. Many of these
123 tendencies are reinforced by approaches prevalent in society at large, which, not altogether
124 unreasonably, enter into Bahá'í activity. The magnitude of the challenge facing the friends in this
125 respect is not lost on us. They are called upon to become increasingly involved in the life of society,
126 benefiting from its educational programmes, excelling in its trades and professions, learning to
127 employ well its tools, and applying themselves to the advancement of its arts and sciences.

128 At the same time, they are never to lose sight of the aim of the Faith to effect a transformation of
129 society, remoulding its institutions and processes, on a scale never before witnessed. To this end,
130 they must remain acutely aware of the inadequacies of current modes of thinking and doing—this,

131 without feeling the least degree of superiority, without assuming an air of secrecy or aloofness, and
132 without adopting an unnecessarily critical stance towards society. There are a few specific points we
133 wish to mention in this connection.

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135 It is heartening to note that the friends are approaching the study of the messages of the
136 Universal House of Justice related to the Plan with such diligence. The level of discussion generated
137 as they strive to put into practice the guidance received, and to learn from experience, is impressive.
138 We cannot help noticing, however, that achievements tend to be more enduring in those regions
139 where the friends strive to understand the totality of the vision conveyed in the messages, while
140 difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated
141 fragments.

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143 The institutions and agencies of the Faith should help the believers to analyse but not reduce, to
144 ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not
145 compartmentalize. We realize that this is no small task. Society speaks more and more in slogans.
146 We hope that the habits the friends are forming in study circles to work with full and complex
147 thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.

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149 Closely related to the habit of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases is the
150 tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none. It is essential that ideas forming
151 part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another. In a letter written on his behalf,
152 Shoghi Effendi warned: “We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and
153 oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between,
154 there are links uniting the two.” How encouraged we have been to note that many of the
155 misunderstandings of the past have fallen away as appreciation for the provisions of the Plan has
156 grown.

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158 Expansion and consolidation, individual action and collective campaigns, refinement of the inner
159 character and consecration to selfless service—the harmonious relationship between these facets of
160 Bahá’í life is now readily acknowledged. It brings us equal pleasure to know that the friends are on
161 their guard, lest new false dichotomies be allowed to pervade their thinking. They are well aware
162 that the diverse elements of a programme of growth are complementary. The tendency to see
163 activities, and the agencies that support them, in competition with one another, a tendency so
164 common in society at large, is being avoided by the community.

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166 Finally, a significant advance in culture, one which we have followed with particular interest, is
167 marked by the rise in capacity to think in terms of process. That, from the outset, the believers have
168 been asked to be ever conscious of the broad processes that define their work is apparent from a
169 careful reading of even the earliest communications of the Guardian related to the first national
170 plans of the Faith. However, in a world focused increasingly on the promotion of events, or at best
171 projects, with a mindset that derives satisfaction from the sense of expectation and excitement they
172 generate, maintaining the level of dedication required for long-term action demands considerable
173 effort.

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175 The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community encompasses a number of interacting
 176 processes, each of which contributes its share to the movement of humanity towards Bahá'u'lláh's
 177 vision of a new World Order. The lines of action associated with any given process provide for the
 178 organization of occasional events, and from time to time, activities take the shape of a project with
 179 a clear beginning and a definite end. If, however, events are imposed on the natural unfoldment of a
 180 process, they will disrupt its sound evolution. If the projects undertaken in a cluster are not made
 181 subordinate to the explicit needs of the processes unfolding there, they will yield little fruit.

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 183 To understand the nature of the interacting processes that, in their totality, engender the
 184 expansion and consolidation of the Faith is vital to the successful execution of the Plan. In your
 185 efforts to further such understanding, you and your auxiliaries are encouraged to bear in mind a
 186 concept that lies at the foundation of the current global enterprise and, indeed, at the very heart of
 187 every stage of the Divine Plan, namely, that progress is achieved through the development of three
 188 participants—the individual, the institutions, and the community. Throughout human history,
 189 interactions among these three have been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual
 190 clamouring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming
 191 precedence.

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 193 Every society has defined, in one way or another, the relationships that bind the three, giving rise
 194 to periods of stability, interwoven with turmoil. Today, in this age of transition, as humanity
 195 struggles to attain its collective maturity, such relationships—nay, the very conception of the
 196 individual, of social institutions, and of the community—continue to be assailed by crises too
 197 numerous to count. The worldwide crisis of authority provides proof enough. So grievous have been
 198 its abuses, and so deep the suspicion and resentment it now arouses, that the world is becoming
 199 increasingly ungovernable—a situation made all the more perilous by the weakening of community
 200 ties.

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 202 Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh knows well that the purpose of His Revelation is to bring into being
 203 a new creation. No sooner had “the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was
 204 revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths.”
 205 The individual, the institutions, and the community—the three protagonists in the Divine Plan—are
 206 being shaped under the direct influence of His Revelation, and a new conception of each,
 207 appropriate for a humanity that has come of age, is emerging. The relationships that bind them, too,
 208 are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building
 209 powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree.

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 211 At a fundamental level these relationships are characterized by cooperation and reciprocity,
 212 manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe. So it is that the individual, with
 213 no regard for “personal benefits and selfish advantages,” comes to see him- or herself as “one of the
 214 servants of God, the All-Possessing,” whose only desire is to carry out His laws. So it is that the
 215 friends come to recognize that “wealth of sentiment, abundance of good-will and effort” are of little
 216 avail when their flow is not directed along proper channels, that “the unfettered freedom of the
 217 individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice,” and that “the spirit of

218 initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for
 219 concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.”

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221 And so it is that all come to discern with ease those areas of activity in which the individual can
 222 best exercise initiative and those which fall to the institutions alone. “With heart and soul”, the
 223 friends follow the directives of their institutions, so that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “things may be
 224 properly ordered and well arranged”. This, of course, is not a blind obedience; it is an obedience
 225 that marks the emergence of a mature human race which grasps the implications of a system as far-
 226 reaching as Bahá’u’lláh’s new World Order.

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228 And those who are called upon from among the ranks of such enkindled souls to serve on the
 229 institutions of that mighty system understand well the Guardian’s words that “their function is not
 230 to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the
 231 friends whom they represent.” “Never” would they be “led to suppose that they are the central
 232 ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole
 233 promoters of its teachings and principles.”

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235 “With extreme humility,” they approach their tasks and “endeavour, by their open-mindedness,
 236 their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the
 237 welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and
 238 the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real
 239 affection.” Within the environment thus created, institutions invested with authority see themselves
 240 as instruments for nurturing human potential, ensuring its unfoldment along avenues productive
 241 and meritorious.

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243 Composed of such individuals and such institutions, the community of the Greatest Name
 244 becomes that spiritually charged arena in which powers are multiplied in unified action. It is of this
 245 community that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “When any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a
 246 spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They
 247 will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union of theirs, that
 248 connection, will also abide forever. Souls, that is, who will consign their own selves to oblivion, strip
 249 from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage, will
 250 beyond any doubt be illumined with the heavenly splendours of oneness, and will all attain unto real
 251 union in the world that dieth not.”

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253 As more and more receptive souls embrace the Cause of God and throw in their lot with those
 254 already participating in the global enterprise under way, the development and activity of the
 255 individual, the institutions, and the community are sure to receive a mighty thrust forward. May a
 256 bewildered humanity see in the relationships being forged among these three protagonists by the
 257 followers of Bahá’u’lláh a pattern of collective life that will propel it towards its high destiny. This is
 258 our ardent prayer in the Holy Shrines.

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[signed: The Universal House of Justice]