

Ridvan 2001

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To the Baha'is of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

With great joy in our hearts and high expectations, we come to this Ridvan season at a change of time, when a new state of mind is evident among us all. Abroad in our world community there is a heightened awareness of the value of process, the necessity of planning and the virtue of systematic action in fostering growth and in developing the human resources by which expansion can be sustained and consolidation assured. The coherence of understanding about these prerequisites of progress cannot be overvalued, nor can the importance of perpetuating them through well-ordered training be overestimated. And so the arrival of our community at such a moment of consciousness is an occasion of significance for us. We are deeply grateful to the Blessed Beauty to be able to recognize and acclaim it at the very beginning of the global enterprise being launched during these festive days.

The power of will generated by this consciousness characterized the conference of the Continental Counsellors and the members of their Auxiliary Boards who gathered last January in the Holy Land. The event produced so illuminating an experience as to signalize the Faith's entry into a new epoch, the fifth of its Formative Age. Such a freshness of vitality as was displayed at this historic gathering came to be understood as a manifestation of the rising quality of activity throughout the community. Pursuit during the past year of the essentials for advancing the process of entry by troops confirmed this observation. The path was thus paved for the Five Year Plan, the first venture being entered upon in the Fifth Epoch.

In augmenting major efforts of the previous Four Year Plan that brought into being more than 300 training institutes, the Twelve Month Plan achieved its purpose. It gathered significance through the notable responses of institutions and individuals to the call for a greater focus on the spiritual nurturing of children and the involvement of junior youth in Baha'i community life. The training of teachers of children's classes and the inclusion of junior youth in the institute process have become a regular part of Baha'i activity in a number of countries. Despite its brevity, the Twelve Month Plan had an importance beyond the objectives specifically assigned. The Plan was a dynamic link between a highly eventful epoch in Baha'i history and the immensely promising prospects of a new one, for which its achievements have so well prepared the community. It has been etched in our annals, too, for the enduring effects of the Faith's activities at the end of the twentieth century--a century that deserves to be reflected upon by any Baha'i who wishes to understand the tumultuous forces that influenced the life of the planet and the processes of the Cause itself at a crucial time in humanity's social and spiritual evolution. As an aid to so worthy an effort, Century of Light, a review of the

twentieth century, was prepared at our request and under our supervision. On many occasions during this one-year endeavour, the external affairs activities of the Faith were especially visible. Consider, for example, the instances of Baha'i representatives' having participated prominently in the millennial events that took place in May, August and September at the urging of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The implications of so close and conspicuous an involvement of the Baha'i International Community with the processes of the Lesser Peace will require the passage of time to be properly understood. Among other highlights was the continental colloquium organized in India by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, a new agency operating under the aegis of the Baha'i International Community. Adopting the theme of "science, religion and development", the conference featured the participation of leading non-governmental organizations of India, as well as that of institutions of such renown as UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO and the World Bank. In October, the Baha'i World News Service (BWNS) was launched on the Internet with the intention of reaching both Baha'i and non-Baha'i audiences with news stories about developments throughout the Baha'i world.

The intensive activities at the Baha'i World Centre during the last year were, for the most part, made known to the friends through previous reports that included references to such achievements as the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat on Mount Carmel; the Conference of Continental Counsellors and the embers of their Auxiliary Boards held in the Holy Land last January; and the completion of the Mount Carmel projects, which are now receiving finishing touches in preparation for the celebratory events in May.

Last October, for the first time, pilgrims and visitors were received at the new Reception Centre in Haifa, which became fully operational. At Bahji the embellishment of the sacred site through the development of its gardens has proceeded continually; the effort has, however, received a boost from the new project initiated last year to construct a Visitors' Centre towards the northern end of the property beyond the Collins Gate. Scheduled for completion in the next few months, the structure is fully in place, and work is progressing in all areas, including finishing and landscaping. The new facilities will improve the ability of the World Centre to receive increasing numbers of pilgrims, short-term Baha'i visitors, and special guests.

To conclude this summary of the year, we rejoice in informing you that, after the lapse of almost three decades, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Indonesia was restored at the National Convention held in Jakarta last Ridvan. A ban imposed on Baha'i activities in August 1962 severely restricted the actions of the Indonesian Baha'is for all that time, but they remained steadfast and wise in their long-suffering until changed circumstances in that country resulted in the lifting of the ban. May we not venture to hope, then, that a similar happy report concerning our beleaguered co-religionists in Iran, Egypt and other countries will not be too far distant?

Dear Friends: Two decades from now the Baha'i world will celebrate the centenary of the inception of the Formative Age. We look back at the dawning of the Age from the vantage point of attainments that could hardly have been

imagined at the outset. Up ahead are horizons that urgently summon the community to even greater achievements in the short span separating it from that centennial. Those heights can and must be scaled. The Five Year Plan, to which we call the urgent and sustained attention of the friends throughout the world, is intended to meet this challenge. It constitutes the first of a series of campaigns that will be pursued during these twenty years. This Plan marks the next phase in the aim to accomplish a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. It demands an acceleration of this vital process and, furthermore, insists upon continuity in systematic endeavour on the part of its three constituent participants: the individual, the institutions, and the community.

No need to elaborate on the requirements of the Plan, for these were set out in our message to the assembled Counsellors in the Holy Land and subsequently shared with all National Spiritual Assemblies. Soon after their conference, the Counsellors began consulting with the National Assemblies about the execution of the Plan in their respective jurisdictions. The Plan's direction is therefore known to the friends everywhere, as regional and local preparations for pursuing its major aim are under way. There is a general awareness by now that efforts will be made to effect a deeper penetration of the Faith into more and more regions within countries. For example, where circumstances permit, local communities that exist in close proximity to each other will be mobilized to participate in intensive programmes of growth. Other approaches will require methodical opening of new areas for which homefront pioneers must be raised up in the same consecrated spirit that prompted those who scattered abroad at earlier times to open virgin territories across continents and seas. Suffice it to say that the process animating this divinely driven enterprise will eventually expand as related features are gradually introduced and systematically integrated into its operation.

A feature of the Fifth Epoch will be the enrichment of the devotional life of the community through the raising up of national Houses of Worship, as circumstances in national communities permit. The scheduling of these projects will be determined by the Universal House of Justice in relation to the advancement of the process of entry by troops within countries. This development will unfold throughout successive stages of 'Abdu'l-Baha's Divine Plan. Upon the completion of the Mother Temple of the West, the Guardian started a programme of constructing continental temples. The first among these were the Mashriqu'l-Adhkars in Kampala, Sydney and Frankfurt, which were built in response to Ten Year Plan goals. The Universal House of Justice continued along these lines with the building of Temples in Panama City, Apia, and New Delhi. But this continental stage has yet to be completed: one more edifice remains to be built. It is with profound thankfulness and joy that we announce at this auspicious moment the decision to proceed with this last project.

During the Five Year Plan, erection of the Mother Temple of South America in Santiago, Chile, will commence and thus fulfil a wish clearly expressed by Shoghi Effendi.

Meanwhile, the time is propitious that further steps be taken at the World Centre to develop the functions of the institutions occupying the new edifices

on the Arc. The International Teaching Centre having advanced significantly in its work, attention will be given particularly to organizing the work of the Centre for the Study of the Texts. Enriching the translations into English from the Holy Texts will be a special object of this attention. The purpose of the institution is to assist the Universal House of Justice in consulting the Sacred Writings and to prepare translations and commentaries on the authoritative texts of the Faith. Moreover, in the Holy Land, a continued effort will be devoted towards the devising of measures to make possible a further increase in the number of pilgrims and visitors to the Baha'i World Centre.

In our Ridvan message five years ago, we announced the holding of a major event at the World Centre to mark the completion of the projects on Mount Carmel and the opening of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Bab to the public. The moment is upon us, and we exult in the anticipation of welcoming friends from virtually all countries to programmes that will extend over a five-day period, 21-25 May. We are also happy to say that steps are being taken to connect the Baha'i world to the proceedings through live transmissions on the World Wide Web and by satellite, about which information is being provided. As the World Centre focuses on the preparations, excitement is building up among the public in Haifa, where municipal authorities have undertaken to publish a book entitled *Baha'i Shrine and Gardens on Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel: A Visual Journey* to coincide with the event. Moreover, the Israel Postal Authority is pursuing its decision to release at the same time a commemorative stamp featuring the Terraces. The significance of the occasion lies principally in the pause it will allow for a review of the remarkable distance the Cause has covered in its development during the twentieth century. It will be time, too, for considering the future implications of the phenomenal accomplishments symbolized by the rise of the monumental structures on God's holy mountain--a rise that opens the spiritual and administrative centres of our Faith to the gaze of the world.

As our community rejoices in these thrilling considerations, let every member bear in mind that there is no time for resting on laurels. Humanity's current plight is too desperate to allow for even a moment's hesitation in sharing the Bread of Life, which has come down from heaven in our time. Let there be no delay, then, in advancing the process that has every promise of success in ushering to the banquet table of the Lord of Hosts the souls of all that hunger after truth.

May He Who keeps watch over the destiny of His divine System guide and direct and confirm every effort you make towards the realization of the urgent tasks set before you.

The Universal House of Justice