

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

26 November 2007

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

We are moved on the occasion of this Day of the Covenant to reflect on the august Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God in the aftermath of the decease only two months ago of the last remaining Hand of the Cause, Dr. 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá. It was just a few weeks before the fiftieth anniversary of the passing of Shoghi Effendi that our world community suffered this grievous loss. How sobering, indeed, it is to realize that Dr. Varqá's departure brought to an end the remarkable stewardship of an institution whose legacy is unparalleled in religious history! At so significant a juncture in the Formative Age of the Faith, it is only fitting that an effort be made to understand more deeply than before the significance of the achievements of so outstanding an organ of the Administrative Order—one that proved to be so integral to the evolution of our world community during its nascent years.

We trace the origins of the Institution to Bahá'u'lláh Himself, Who designated four renowned promoters of His teachings as Hands of the Cause of God. In a period before the administrative system of the Faith was inaugurated, they became rallying points for the friends, as much because of the virtuous character of their personal lives as for their unceasing endeavours in proclaiming the Teachings and defending the Faith against its detractors. They remained resolute in such activities despite the severe persecution, including imprisonment in some instances, to which they were subjected by the authorities. These distinguished personages remained active during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who, in 1899, instructed them to take steps to form the Local Spiritual Assembly of Ṭihrán, on which they all served. The focus of these first Hands on propagation and protection of the Faith, as well as their efforts to edify believers as to the importance of the new Laws, intimated even then the pattern of functioning the Institution would adopt at a later stage in the advancement of the Bahá'í community.

The Master did not Himself appoint Hands of the Cause, but referred to four believers posthumously as such. However, His Will and Testament confirmed the Institution and extended it by authorizing the Guardian of the Faith to appoint consecrated souls to it. At first, over a period of three decades, Shoghi Effendi named ten such souls posthumously; all were distinguished for the constancy, vigour and impact of their efforts to propagate the Cause and promote its best interests. The Guardian's designation in December 1951 of twelve living believers as Hands of the Cause introduced the Bahá'í world to a wholly new dynamic in the operation of the Order of Bahá'u'lláh; through it the Hands exerted an unusual vitality during the Ten Year Crusade, particularly after the sudden passing of the Sign of God. His subsequent appointment of seven more in February 1952 and replacement thereafter of five of those deceased kept the number of living Hands at nineteen until less than a month before his departure, when in his last message to the Bahá'í world he identified an additional eight,

bringing the total to twenty-seven. Shoghi Effendi's description of them as the "Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic World Commonwealth" prefigured the world-shaking reality of the unexpected responsibilities that would be thrust upon them on the morrow of his passing.

The Guardian now forever gone, the Hands' first task, despite the sorrow that overwhelmed them, was to restore the composure of a grief-stricken community. A vital aspect of that task was, of course, to settle the minds of the friends about the direction that the Faith would take. The Hands acted with dispatch. Only sixteen days after the burial of the Guardian, they issued from the Holy Land a proclamation to the Bahá'ís of East and West. Declaring that, after a thorough search, no will or instruction of Shoghi Effendi had been found, they set forth in this message the procedures they would follow in meeting the daunting challenge they faced. It announced that a body of nine Hands, designated "Custodians", was constituted to function at the Bahá'í World Centre to protect the Faith, maintain communications with National Spiritual Assemblies in connection with the prosecution of the Ten Year Plan and on administrative matters, and attend to all issues related to the preservation of the World Centre of the Faith. The friends everywhere derived from this first communication assurance that the ship of the Cause would safely traverse the waters severely troubled by the Guardian's passing. Subsequent messages issued from conclaves of the Hands held in the Holy Land further infused confidence in the believers who arose to meet the goals set before them in the Plan.

The Hands residing outside the Holy Land, in addition to giving close attention to the progress of the Plan in their own regions, undertook extensive journeys to visit and encourage the believers in every clime. Their travels covered the entire surface of the planet as they pursued every opportunity to advance the work of the Plan left by Shoghi Effendi. The obligations of the Hands spelled out in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá were carried out with the selflessness, fearlessness and zeal characteristic of their activity. To "diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men"—all these they undertook with outstanding, sometimes astonishing, results. Such travels did not cease with the conclusion of the Ten Year Plan but continued with unabated intensity, the legendary journeys of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum generating immeasurable stimulus. Thus the activities of the Hands demonstrated to a superlative degree the efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that the "movement itself from place to place, when undertaken for the sake of God, hath always exerted, and can now exert, its influence in the world."

Among the principal results of their combined labours, these stand out: maintenance of the stature of the Faith as an independent and indivisible Order; protection of the Cause against schism, despite the disloyalty to the Covenant of one among their exalted company, Mason Remey, whom they were obliged to cast out; preservation of the properties and maintenance of the Holy Places and gardens at the World Centre; success in the vast expansion of the Faith. All these hard-won accomplishments prepared the path to the smooth transition that the Hands effected from the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, as head of the Faith, to that of the Universal House of Justice, for whose first election they meticulously prepared the Bahá'í world, especially the fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies that participated in it. The Hands of the Cause delivered to the House of Justice a community that was so greatly transformed during the Ten Year Plan as to place the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh on the map as a world religion in every legitimate sense. The grand celebration at the World Congress in London attended by Bahá'ís from countries of every continent demonstrated the validity of that claim.

Beyond the World Crusade, the Hands of the Cause threw the full weight of their support behind the newly formed Universal House of Justice, whose creation their valiant efforts ensured. They undertook many missions on its behalf and pursued tasks befitting their continuing obligation to propagate and protect the Faith. As in the absence of the Guardian there was no way further to appoint Hands of the Cause, the Hands in the Holy Land in particular performed what may well be viewed as a distinct and final mark of service: they assisted the House of Justice to extend into the future the functions of propagation and protection in the special character of their institution. Hence, in 1968 Continental Boards of Counsellors were raised up and then in 1973 was created the International Teaching Centre foreshadowed in the writings of Shoghi Effendi. In their tireless support of the House of Justice in the design of these institutions and in the guidance they lent to their development, the Hands left to the Bahá'í world a further legacy that only future generations will be able adequately to appreciate. A shining value of their ultimate exertions is evident in the stature to which the International Teaching Centre has risen in such a short time and the permeable influence of the institution of the Counsellors which reaches every nook and cranny of our worldwide community.

It is highly worthy of note that the body of the Hands, with one exception, remained unbeguiled by the allurements of power that commonly corrupt those who are suddenly thrust by force of circumstances into positions of elevated rank and authority. In this instance, all of creation cannot but bear witness to the integrity of their stewardship, the unblemished virtue of their faithfulness to principle.

A point to ponder as well is the survival to the last of the one who was simultaneously appointed in 1955 to the two offices of Hand of the Cause and Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh. That he was able to shape the latter institution and finally to see to its administrative transition in the formation in 2005 of the International Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, with branches spread throughout the globe, is yet another sign of the constancy and abundance of the providential confirmations which have attended the evolution of the Administrative Order. Clearly, then, the work of the divinely ordained Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God was indispensable to the progress of the Faith from the Heroic Age to an early period of the Formative Age; its effects are certain to endure as an integral part of the Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The passing of Dr. Varqá marks both the end of a chapter of Bahá'í history and the beginning of a new stage in the unfolding of that Order.

With such thoughts astir in our minds, we recognize with increasing wonder and appreciation the magnitude of the contributions of the Hands of the Cause of God to the growth and consolidation of the Faith in all parts of the world. In our grateful hearts we recite with deep emotion the benediction so eloquently exclaimed by the Lord of Hosts: "Light and glory, greeting and praise be upon the Hands of His Cause, through whom the light of fortitude hath shone forth and the truth hath been established that the authority to choose rests with God, the Powerful, the Mighty, the Unconstrained, through whom the ocean of bounty hath surged and the fragrance of the gracious favours of God, the Lord of mankind, hath been diffused."

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