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BAHÁ'Í YEAR 99

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THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE BAHÁ'Í ERA

Dear Friends,

On the 21st of March (1 Bahá 100) we begin the last year of the first Bahá'í century. For the first time in Bahá'í history the end of a century. The close of a period honoured by the appearance of two Manifestations of God, a joint event never known before in the history of the world; an era which witnessed the Martyrdom of the Báb, which heard the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh, the Promise of all the Ages, in the Garden of Ridván. Although the next century will assuredly be marked by many wonderful events and will witness breathtaking triumphs for the Cause, the first century, which is so closely associated with the Founders of the Faith, with its Exemplar and with its earliest believers and their struggles and sufferings, has a unique place in history.

And so the commencement of this last year should be a time for deep thought, for a consideration and assessment of the achievements of the Cause, both in our own country and all over the world. Our first thought must surely be of heartfelt thanksgiving to God. In spite of its enemies, in spite of the treacherous attacks on its Founders, repeated later on the growing Cause itself, in spite of the plotting of the faithless within its midst, the Bahá'í Cause is today firmly established in the world. According to the latest volume of Bahá'í World, there are believers in sixty-one different countries; by now, there are probably more, and the Faith is every day becoming more and more widely known.

And what of ourselves? We who have been privileged to be believers in the Cause of God in

the century which saw the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, which witnessed the deeds of Mulla Huseyn, Quddús, and Vahíd, of Qurratu'l-'Ayn, of Keith Ransom-Kehler and of Martha Root, and all the named and un-named martyrs. Out of all history, we have been born into the same century as such people. What have we done, what can we do? There is yet just a little while in which to try and deserve to be nearly contemporaries in time with these radiant souls who have lived and given their lives in the first century of the Bahá'í Era. Let us make this last year a great one in the history of this country.

Let us reflect once again on the message which came to us from our beloved Guardian a little while ago. "May the Beloved graciously assist them to achieve such victories in this field as shall truly befit the conclusion of the first century of the Bahá'í Era." This concluding year of a century of matchless heroism and sacrifice brings us a truly great responsibility. No matter how weak and frail our shoulders may be, the grace and power of Bahá'u'lláh is ever present to help and sustain us in bearing its immensity—provided we gladly and gratefully accept the challenge of this responsibility, and willingly make ourselves worthy channels for the flow of His power and grace.

"Praise be to God, we are living in a century of light. Praise be to God, we are upon earth in the day of divine effulgence. Praise be to God, we are alive in this time of the manifestation of divine love. Praise be to God, that we live in the day of the outpouring of heavenly bounty." —'Abdu'l-Bahá in "The Promulgation of Universal Peace," Vol. II.

THE MASHRIQU'L-ADHKÁR AT WILMETTE

On January 14th we received the following cable from the Guardian:

"Convey glad tidings English believers completion exterior edifice Mother Temple West stop Advise cable congratulations representatives American Bahá'ís superb achievement and wide publicity British press," and the National Spiritual Assembly immediately made known to the American friends in the following message the joy and admiration of the British Bahá'ís at this great achievement:

"British believers thrilled heroic achievement Temple Grateful inspiring example Would like receive photographs quickest possible publicity purposes."

The history of the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár (which means "Dawning Place of the Praise of God") in the West dates back to 1903, when the Spiritual Assembly of Chicago (then called the House of Spirituality), inspired by the news that the foundation stone of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád, Turkestan, had been laid, discussed the possibility of erecting a similar edifice in America, and wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá about it. On June 7th, 1903, in a tablet written at Acca he said: "Now the day has arrived in which the edifice of God, the divine sanctuary, the Spiritual temple, shall be erected in America." This was followed by letters to various American believers emphasising the importance of such a venture. He recommended that the American believers should concentrate on the building of one Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, so that by the united efforts of them all the plan could be brought to completion, and suggested that as the first initiative had been taken in Chicago, the building should be located there.

This was the beginning and very soon, with full faith in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assurance that "you have only to begin, everything will be all right," practical planning commenced. A convention was held in Chicago in November, 1907, to which came nine delegates from various assemblies. They inspected sites to the north and to the south of Chicago and unanimously decided on one at Wilmette to the north, beside the lake as 'Abdu'l-Bahá had directed.

Successive annual conventions followed, to consult on the further prosecution of the work, and a body called the Bahá'í Temple Unity was formed to make plans, collect money and attend to all the business details. The response of the believers was immediate and whole-hearted, so much so that by the beginning of 1914, the whole price of the land, i.e., \$51,500, had been contributed, and consequently all debts contracted for the purchase of the land could be paid off.

The fifth convention, held in 1912, was especially blessed by the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then on his visit to America. He visited the site of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, and dedicated it on May 1st, 1912.

'Abdu'l-Bahá directed that the believers themselves should select the design for the Temple. Accordingly, at the 1920 Convention, a number of Bahá'í architects submitted drawings and models and, after careful consideration and after hearing the opinion of independent architects, the model made by Mr. Louis Bourgeois was chosen.

After that the work went ahead, through difficulties, through good times and bad, through prosperity and slumps, until now when the structure itself and the outside decoration is complete. Many, many were the sacrifices made to help in building it—contributions, large and small, came from Bahá'ís all over the world, all felt moved to help in this great enterprise. To quote an example, a believer in Manchester, having no money to give, had her hair cut off and sold it to help the Temple fund. The most precious gift of all was sent by the Guardian himself, a carpet from Bahji which he called "the most valuable ornament of Bahá'u'lláh's Shrine." This carpet had been given, years before, by Mr. Zia'ulláh Asgarzadeh, and had been laid in the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself. Now it lies in the first Temple of the West at Wilmette.

A large book could be written of the heroic efforts of the builders of the Temple, and another of the building itself, of the unique features of its architecture and construction which have caused much discussion amongst architects, of its amazing beauty. All this may be read in successive volumes of "Bahá'í World." Let us, in conclusion, emphasise, rather, the spiritual significance of the completion of such a building, of which 'Abdu'l-Bahá said at the time of its inception: that it "is possessed of spiritual effect and causes the union of hearts and the gathering of souls . . . its building is the most important of all things. This is the spiritual foundation, for that reason it is the most important of all foundations; from that spiritual foundation will come forth all manner of advancement and progress in the world of humanity . . . When the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, with its accessories, is established in the world, aside from its religious or spiritual influence, it will have a tremendous effect on civilisation . . . Moreover, it contains divine wisdom, spiritual effects upon the intellects and thoughts. Subsequent to its erection these will become evident."

The Guardian wrote last year to the American believers "The completion of the Temple

should, and I feel confident will, release tremendous and unprecedented forces of spiritual energy, destined to be wholly consecrated to the teaching tasks now confronting the American believers." It is, therefore, of the greatest significance that in this year of such crucial importance, when their teaching programme in all parts of the Americas is getting under way, they should have attained their goal.

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In response to the Guardian's request that we should try and obtain for the Temple wide publicity in the British Press, a committee has been formed consisting of Mrs. Slade, Miss Wellby and Mr. Balyuzi. This committee will be glad to have the help of all the believers in the work. All the friends are earnestly asked to co-operate by sending in any ideas they may have on the subject or information about any contacts they may have in the journalistic world who could help us or give advice. Please address all information to the Temple Publicity Committee, care of the London Centre.

"NEW WORLD ORDER"

We hope that the first number of the new quarterly edition will be ready by Nawruz, and it will be sold at a price of 3d. a copy. To recommence publication in wartime is a serious venture and requires the wholehearted support of everyone. We need to buy it not only to make sure that it does not become a financial burden, but much more in order to distribute it widely so that it may fulfil its function of teaching and publicising the Cause. Each issue will not only be a current magazine, but it will also be suitable for use as a teaching pamphlet. A number of complimentary copies of the first issue will be sent out and believers are invited to send in names of associations and people who they think might be interested to receive one. Of course, we must all make every effort to sell copies to our friends and acquaintances. The complimentary list is intended for wider and more impersonal publicity. Names should be sent to the secretary of the N.S.A.

The World Community of Bahá'u'lláh.

We hear that in spite of wartime difficulties a very successful Winter School was held at the end of last August at Adelaide, South Australia. Like the British believers, the friends there were only able to meet for a week-end, but attendance was extremely good, about forty being present at the largest meeting. First among the visitors was Mother Dunn who, with her husband, introduced the Cause to Australia. She had travelled all the way from Sydney to attend and was a great inspiration to the School.

BAHÁ'Í ANNIVERSARIES

The matter of observing our anniversaries and festivals is inherently of utmost importance. We know what they are, and we know that nine of them are specially recorded in the text of Bahá'u'lláh's revealed word. We have to become fully conscious of them, and the growth of that consciousness is very much related to the quality of our faith. The stronger our faith, the more vivid will this consciousness be, and the more vivid this consciousness, the more elevated and purified will the quality of our faith become.

This consciousness is not only a question of commemorating an anniversary. It is primarily a process of inward attunement. It is the experience of an all-compelling spiritual power which mirrors forth in our minds and hearts the true connotation of these sacred anniversaries. Without this experience all outward observances sink to the level of automatic action and senseless imitation.

NEW PRAYER BOOK

It may be possible, later in the year, to publish a new prayer book. The N.S.A. would like, so far as possible, to include in it those prayers which the believers like and find helpful. Anyone who wishes any special prayer included in the book is therefore invited to send details to Mrs. Slade, The Bahá'í Centre, 46, Bloomsbury Street, London, W.C.1.

NEWS

Miss Rose Le Gray, of the London community, has been married and is now Mrs. Jones. She is living in Cardiff.

Mrs. Priest-Shanks, of the Torquay community, has removed to London.

Joan Browne, of Bradford, who is in the Land Army, is now working near Basingstoke.

NEW BELIEVER

We welcome with great pleasure Miss Dorothy Dewhirst, of Bournemouth.

ANNUAL CONVENTION

Convention this year will be held in London during the Easter week-end, i.e., on Saturday, Sunday and Monday, April 24th, 25th and 26th. Further details will be issued later.

N.S.A.

The next meeting of the N.S.A. will be in London on March 13th and 14th.

THE ANNUAL TEACHING CONFERENCE

The Teaching Conference was held at the Bahá'í Centre, Manchester, during the week-end of January 16th. Apart from the members of the Manchester Bahá'í Community, participants came from London, Bradford, Torquay, Birmingham, Blackburn and Ilkeston.

This Teaching Conference had a character entirely its own, which differentiated it from the previous conferences. Those preceding it were mainly concerned with methods of teaching and approach. This conference devoted itself to a searching examination of the National Community's teaching efforts. And it went beyond that in registering a firm conviction that at this crucial hour, nothing short of complete and unreserved dedication to Bahá'í service will be of any avail.

The secretary of the National Teaching Committee presented a very candid report, which was warmly endorsed by the Conference. The report did not by any means portray an unduly rosy picture of our teaching activities. On the contrary, it did frankly reveal an urgent need of solid co-operation between the Committee on the one hand and the believers on the other. It particularly emphasised the fact that neither the pioneer believers nor the Assemblies had fully utilised the services of the National Teaching Committee. The Conference agreed that this report was highly valuable and useful and would provide an added incentive to intensified effort. One of the pioneer believers said that he was happy to see that, after some twenty years, due importance was now being attached to the work of these believers, and he felt sure that henceforth the pioneer believers would be given every assistance that they required in spreading and establishing the Cause of God in their localities.

The cable which the Conference sent to the Guardian reveals the mood and the determination of the assembled believers on that occasion. It read as follows:

"Teaching Conference Manchester thrilled cable example American fellow-believers Pledges utmost effort teach publicise beloved Faith Fortified immeasurably grateful your loving unceasing guidance Deepest love." And the Conference, at its termination, laid stress on the pledge made to the Guardian.

Therefore, the distinguishing mark of this year's Teaching Conference was a renewal of consecration to our supreme task. It was repeatedly said that we must make the service of our Faith the primary consideration and the focal point of our whole life—in other words, we must live every moment conscious of our calling, conscious of the power and grace of

Bahá'u'lláh. It was pointed out that the more we serve at the Threshold of Bahá'u'lláh, and the more we give to the Cause of God, the more we shall find ourselves enriched. To serve and sacrifice means to tap mighty reservoirs of spiritual power and energy.

The Conference also drew particular attention to another aspect of our Bahá'í life, namely our partnership in a community which is world-wide in scope. Over the five continents, the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh has enlisted faithful champions who, under varied conditions ranging from full freedom to complete suppression, toil to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth. The World Community of Bahá'u'lláh is a living, dynamic, divinely-empowered organism that throbs and pulsates with spiritual vigour and energy. And we are a part of that organism which the hand of the Almighty has created to bring His Glory to Mankind. At all times we should be conscious of the reality of this relationship, and remember with humble gratitude the guidance which reaches this world community through our beloved Guardian. And not only that, we should ponder over the immensity of the Guardian's task and responsibilities, and meditate on the love and encouragement which comes to us from him.

A number of questions regarding the Bahá'í Teachings were discussed with great interest at the Conference. One detail, brought up in the course of discussion, needs emphatic recording. It was felt that the communities should exchange speakers as often as practicable, and that neither they nor the pioneer believers need consider the size of a meeting when inviting a speaker to visit them. We should remember, too, that any occasion for meeting believers is conducive of great spiritual results.

On Saturday evening, a public meeting was held at the Centre, and forty-two people were present. Mr. Norton gave a very inspiring talk. There were many inquirers present, and after the meeting they stayed on to talk about the Teachings and to ask questions.

A word in conclusion. The Manchester friends worked hard to make the Conference a success, and their characteristic generosity was once again in evidence. The Teaching Conference of 1943 was truly unique, and cannot but lead to greater strides in the development of the whole National Community.

Three days after the Conference the following reply came from the Guardian:

"Assure attendants Conference loving appreciation prayers."