

The Nineteen Day Feast

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I. Introductory Letter

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE BAHÁ'Í WORLD CENTRE

27 August 1989

To the followers of Bahá'u'lláh

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Nineteen Day Feast, its framework, purpose and possibilities, have in recent years become a subject of increasing inquiry among the friends. It occupied much of the consultation at the Sixth International Bahá'í Convention last year, and we feel the time has come for us to offer clarifications.

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh encompasses all units of human society; integrates the spiritual, administrative and social processes of life; and canalizes human expression in its varied forms towards the construction of a new civilization. The Nineteen Day Feast embraces all these aspects at the very base of society. Functioning in the village, the town, the city, it is an institution of which all the people of Bahá are members. It is intended to promote unity, ensure progress, and foster joy.

“If this feast be held in the proper fashion,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “the friends will,

once in nineteen days, find themselves spiritually restored, and endued with a power that is not of this world.” To ensure this glorious outcome the concept of the Feast must be adequately understood by all the friends. The Feast is known to have three distinct but related parts: the devotional, the administrative, and the social. The first entails the recitation of prayers and reading from the Holy Texts. The second is a general meeting where the Local Spiritual Assembly reports its activities, plans and problems to the community, shares news and messages from the World Centre and the National Assembly, and receives the thoughts and recommendations of the friends through a process of consultation. The third involves the partaking of refreshments and engaging in other activities meant to foster fellowship in a culturally determined diversity of forms which do not violate principles of the Faith or the essential character of the Feast.

Even though the Feast requires strict adherence to the threefold aspects in the sequence in which they have been defined, there is much room for variety in the total experience. For example, music may be introduced at various stages, including the devotional portion; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá recommends that eloquent, uplifting talks be given; originality and variety in expressions of hospitality are possible; the quality and range of the consultation are critical to the spirit of the occasion. The effects of different cultures in all these respects are welcome factors which can lend the Feast a salutary diversity, representative of the unique characteristics of the various societies in which it is held and therefore conducive to the upliftment and enjoyment of its participants.

It is notable that the concept of the Feast evolved in stages in relation to the development of the Faith. At its earliest stage in Írán, the individual friends, in response to Bahá’u’lláh’s injunctions, hosted gatherings in their homes to show hospitality once every nineteen days and derived inspiration from the reading and discussion of the Teachings. As the community grew, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá delineated and emphasized the devotional and social character of the event. After the establishment of Local Spiritual Assemblies, Shoghi Effendi introduced the administrative portion and acquainted the community with the idea of the Nineteen Day Feast as an institution. It was as if a symphony, in three movements, had now been completed.

But it is not only in the sense of its gradual unfoldment as an institution that the evolution of the Feast must be regarded; there is a broader context yet. The Feast may well be seen in its unique combination of modes as the culmination of a great historic process in which primary elements of community life—acts of worship, of festivity and other forms of togetherness—over vast stretches of time have achieved a glorious convergence. The Nineteen Day Feast represents the new stage in this

enlightened age to which the basic expression of community life has evolved. Shoghi Effendi has described it as the foundation of the new World Order, and in a letter written on his behalf, it is referred to as constituting “a vital medium for maintaining close and continued contact between the believers themselves, and also between them and the body of their elected representatives in the local community”.

Moreover, because of the opportunity which it provides for conveying messages from the national and international levels of the administration and also for communicating the recommendations of the friends to those levels, the Feast becomes a link that connects the local community in a dynamic relationship with the entire structure of the Administrative Order. But considered in its local sphere alone there is much to thrill and amaze the heart. Here it links the individual to the collective processes by which a society is built or restored. Here, for instance, the Feast is an arena of democracy at the very root of society, where the Local Spiritual Assembly and the members of the community meet on common ground, where individuals are free to offer their gifts of thought, whether as new ideas or constructive criticism, to the building processes of an advancing civilization. Thus it can be seen that aside from its spiritual significance, this common institution of the people combines an array of elemental social disciplines which educate its participants in the essentials of responsible citizenship.

If the Feast is to be properly experienced, beyond an understanding of the concept must also be the preparation of it and the preparation for it. Although the Local Spiritual Assembly is administratively responsible for the conduct of the Feast, it often calls upon an individual or a group of individuals to make preparations—a practice which is consonant with the spirit of hospitality so vital to the occasion. Such individuals can act as hosts and are sometimes concerned with the selection of the prayers and readings for the devotional portion; they may also attend to the social portion. In small communities the aspect of personal hospitality is easy to carry out, but in large communities the Local Spiritual Assemblies, while retaining the concept of hospitality, may find it necessary to devise other measures.

Important aspects of the preparation of the Feast include the proper selection of readings, the assignment, in advance, of good readers, and a sense of decorum both in the presentation and the reception of the devotional programme. Attention to the environment in which the Feast is to be held, whether indoors or outdoors, greatly influences the experience. Cleanliness, arrangement of the space in practical and decorative ways—play a significant part. Punctuality is also a measure of good preparation.

To a very large extent, the success of the Feast depends on the quality of the

preparation and participation of the individual. The beloved Master offers the following advice: “Give ye great weight to the Nineteen Day gatherings, so that on these occasions the beloved of the Lord and the handmaids of the Merciful may turn their faces toward the Kingdom, chant the communes, beseech God’s help, become joyfully enamoured each of the other, and grow in purity and holiness, and in the fear of God, and in resistance to passion and self. Thus will they separate themselves from this elemental world, and immerse themselves in the ardours of the spirit.”

In absorbing such advice, it is illuminating indeed to view the Nineteen Day Feast in the context in which it was conceived. It is ordained in the “Kitáb-i-Aqdas” in these words: “It hath been enjoined upon you once a month to offer hospitality, even should ye serve no more than water, for God hath willed to bind your hearts together, though it be through heavenly and earthly means combined”. It is clear, then, that the Feast is rooted in hospitality, with all its implications of friendliness, courtesy, service, generosity and conviviality. The very idea of hospitality as the sustaining spirit of so significant an institution introduces a revolutionary new attitude to the conduct of human affairs at all levels, an attitude which is critical to that world unity which the Central Figures of our Faith laboured so long and suffered so much cruelty to bring into being. It is in this divine festival that the foundation is laid for the realization of so unprecedented a reality.

That you may all attain the high mark set for the Feast as a “bringer of joy”, the “groundwork of agreement and unity”, the “key to affection and fellowship” will remain an object of our ardent supplications at the Holy Threshold.

With loving Bahá’í greetings.

1. General Statements

From the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh

- 1 Verily, it is enjoined upon you to offer a feast, once in every month, though only water be served; for God hath purposed to bind hearts together, albeit through both earthly and heavenly means.¹

(From “The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, ¶57, p. 40)

¹ A newer translation has been substituted for the original.

From the Writings and Utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

2 O thou steadfast in the Covenant!

Thou hast written ... concerning the Feast. This festivity, which is held on a day of the nineteen-day month, was established by His Holiness the Báb, and the Blessed Beauty directed, confirmed and warmly encouraged the holding of it. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance. You should unquestionably see to it with the greatest care, and make its value known, so that it may become solidly established on a permanent basis. Let the beloved of God gather together and associate most lovingly and spiritually and happily with one another, conducting themselves with the greatest courtesy and self-restraint. Let them read the holy verses, as well as essays which are of benefit, and the letters of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; encourage and inspire one another to love each and all; chant the prayers with serenity and joy; give eloquent talks, and praise the matchless Lord.

The host, with complete self-effacement, showing kindness to all, must be a comfort to each one, and serve the friends with his own hands.

If the Feast is befittingly held, in the manner described, then this supper will verily be the Lord’s Supper, for its fruits will be the very fruits of that Supper, and its influence the same.

(From a Tablet to an individual believer—translated from the Persian)

3 As to the Nineteen Day Feast, ye must give this your most careful attention, and firmly establish it. For this Feast bringeth bliss and unity and love to the lovers of God.

(From a Tablet to an individual believer—translated from the Persian)

4 Ye have written of the Nineteen Day festivities. This Feast is a bringer of joy. It is the groundwork of agreement and unity. It is the key to affection and fellowship. It diffuseth the oneness of mankind.

(From a Tablet to an individual believer—translated from the Persian)

5 O ye loyal servants of the Ancient Beauty! In every cycle and dispensation, the feast

hath been favoured and loved, and the spreading of a table for the lovers of God hath been considered a praiseworthy act. This is especially the case today, in this dispensation beyond compare, this most generous of ages, when it is highly acclaimed, for it is truly accounted among such gatherings as are held to worship and glorify God. Here the holy verses, the heavenly odes and laudations are intoned, and the heart is quickened, and carried from itself.

The primary intent is to kindle these stirrings of the spirit, but at the same time it follows quite naturally that those present should partake of food, so that the world of the body may mirror the spirit's world, and flesh take on the qualities of soul; and just as the spiritual delights are here in profusion, so too the material delights.

Happy are ye, to be observing this rule, with all its mystic meanings, thus keeping the friends of God alert and heedful, and bringing them peace of mind, and joy.

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), sec. 48. pp. 96)

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- 6 Thy letter hath been received. Thou didst write of the Nineteen Day festivity, and this rejoiced my heart. These gatherings cause the divine table to descend from heaven, and draw down the confirmations of the All-Merciful. My hope is that the breathings of the Holy Spirit will be wafted over them, and that each one present shall, in great assemblies, with an eloquent tongue and a heart flooded with the love of God, set himself to acclaiming the rise of the Sun of Truth, the dawn of the Day-Star that lighteth all the world.

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), sec. 49. p. 97)

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- 7 Give ye great weight to the Nineteen Day gatherings, so that on these occasions the beloved of the Lord and the handmaids of the Merciful may turn their faces toward the Kingdom, chant the communes, beseech God's help, become joyfully enamoured each of the other, and grow in purity and holiness, and in the fear of God, and in resistance to passion and self. Thus will they separate themselves from this elemental world, and immerse themselves in the ardours of the spirit.

(From a Tablet to the local Spiritual Assembly of Spokane, Washington—translated from the Persian)

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- 8 I beg of God, out of His endless bounties, that many such gatherings will be held, and that the Nineteen Day festivity will also be observed, so that men and women

believers will occupy themselves with making mention of God, and praising and glorifying Him, and guiding the people aright.

(From a Tablet to the Bahá'ís of Stuttgart, Germany—translated from the Persian)

9 O thou who art steadfast in the Covenant!

Your detailed letter hath been received, but because of the press of work a brief answer must suffice. You have asked as to the Feast in every Bahá'í month. This Feast is held to foster comradeship and love, to call God to mind and supplicate Him with contrite hearts, and to encourage benevolent pursuits. That is, the friends should there dwell upon God and glorify Him, read the prayers and holy verses, and treat one another with the utmost affection and love. Should trouble arise between two of the friends, let both be invited in, and efforts be made to compose their differences. Let all discussion centre on the doing of charitable acts and holy deeds, that laudable results may be the fruit thereof.²

(From a Tablet to an individual—translated from the Persian)

² Cf. "Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), sec. 50, p. 97.

10 As to the Nineteen Day Feast, it rejoiceth mind and heart. If this feast be held in the proper fashion, the friends will, once in nineteen days, find themselves spiritually restored, and endued with a power that is not of this world.

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), sec. 51, p. 97)

11 As to the Nineteen Day festivity, it is of the utmost importance that the friends should gather at a meeting where, in complete attunement and love, they should engage in the remembrance of God and His praise, and converse as to the glad tidings of God, and proofs of the Advent of Bahá'u'lláh, and should recount the high deeds and sacrifices of the lovers of God in Persia, and tell of the martyrs' detachment from the world, and their ecstasy, and of how the believers there stood by one another and gave up everything they had. The Nineteen Day festivity is, therefore, of very great importance.

(From a Tablet to an individual believer—translated from the Persian)

- 12 ... make of the Feasts³ occasions of joy and fellowship reminiscent of the feasts⁴ that our forebears used to hold in connection with their commemoration of the Lord's Supper....

(From a Tablet to an individual believer—translated from the Persian)

³ The Nineteen Day Feasts

⁴ The agape or "love feast" of the early Christians.

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- 13 Vigorous steps must be taken to establish the Nineteen Day reception throughout the whole community. Since this Feast is confined to believers only, conclusive proofs must there be set forth as to the people of the Bayán, so that newcomers, unaware of the situation, may be made aware of it.

(From a Tablet to an individual believer—translated from the Persian)

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- 14 It befitteth the friends to hold a gathering, a meeting, where they shall glorify God and fix their hearts upon Him, and read and recite the Holy Writings of the Blessed Beauty—may my soul be the ransom of His lovers! The lights of the All-Glorious Realm, the rays of the Supreme Horizon, will be cast upon such bright assemblages, for these are none other than the Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs, the Dawning-Points of God's Remembrance, which must, at the direction of the most Exalted Pen, be established in every hamlet and city.... These spiritual gatherings must be held with the utmost purity and consecration, so that from the site itself, and its earth and the air about it, one will inhale the fragrant breathings of the Holy Spirit.

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), sec. 55, p. 100)

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- 15 Thou hast written of that meeting held in the quarter where standeth the city gate of 'Abdu'l-'Azím. Do not call it a meeting. Call it a confluence of holy souls; a convocation of those who love the Lord; a retreat for the people of the All-Merciful; a palace-hall for all who sing His praise. For the members of that gathering are each one a lighted taper, and that council a mansion of the moon and stars. It hath been blessed by the Lord of all mankind, and hath made current the Feast as set forth in the Most Holy Book.

(From a Tablet to an individual believer—translated from the Persian)

- 16 And thou, O my dear daughter, stay thou at all times in close touch with my honoured daughter, Mrs...., and be thou her friend. Rest you assured that the breaking of the Holy Spirit will loosen your tongue. Speak, therefore; speak out with great courage at every meeting. When you are about to begin your address, turn first to Bahá'u'lláh and ask for the confirmations of the Holy Spirit, then open your lips and say whatever is suggested to your heart; this, however, with the utmost courage, dignity and conviction. It is my hope that from day to day your gatherings will grow and flourish, and that those who are seeking after truth will hearken therein to reasoned arguments and conclusive proofs. I am with you heart and soul at every meeting; be sure of this.⁵

Hold you the Nineteen Day Feasts with utmost dignity.

(From a Tablet to an individual believer—translated from the Persian)

⁵ Cf. "Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), sec. 216, pp. 282

- 17 You must continue to keep the Nineteen Day Feast. It is very important; it is very good. But when you present yourselves in the meetings, before entering them, free yourselves from all that you have in your heart, free your thoughts and your minds from all else save God, and speak to your heart. That all may make this a gathering of love, make it the cause of illumination, make it a gathering of attraction of the hearts, surround this gathering with the Lights of the Supreme Concourse, so that you may be gathered together with the utmost love.

O God! Dispel all those elements which are the cause of discord, and prepare for us all those things which are the cause of unity and accord! O God! Descend upon us Heavenly Fragrance and change this gathering into a gathering of Heaven! Grant to us every benefit and every food. Prepare for us the Food of Love! Give to us the Food of Knowledge! Bestow upon us the Food of Heavenly Illumination!

In your hearts remember these things, and then enter the Unity Feast.

Each one of you must think how to make happy and pleased the other members of your Assembly, and each one must consider all those who are present as better and greater than himself, and each one must consider himself less than the rest. Know their station as high, and think of your own station as low. Should you act and live according to these behests, know verily, of a certainty, that that Feast is the Heavenly Food. That Supper is the "Lord's Supper"! I am the Servant of that gathering.

("Star of the West", vol. IV, no. 7 (13 July 1913), p. 120)

- 18 The Nineteen Day Feast was inaugurated by the Báb and ratified by Bahá'u'lláh, in His holy book, the Akdas [sic], so that people may gather together and outwardly show fellowship and love, that the divine mysteries may be disclosed. The object is concord, that through this fellowship hearts may become perfectly united, and reciprocity and mutual helpfulness be established. Because the members of the world of humanity are unable to exist without being banded together, cooperation and mutual helpfulness is the basis of human society. Without the realization of these two great principles no great movement is pressed forward....

In brief, this is my hope: that the Nineteen Day Feast become the cause of great spiritual solidarity between the friends, that it may bring believers into the bond of unity, and we will then be so united together that love and wisdom will spread from this centre to all parts. This Feast is a divine Feast. It is a Lord's supper. It attracts confirmation of God like a magnet. It is the cause of the enlightenment of hearts.

Every day great feasts and banquets are being spread with the object of material enjoyment and relish of food. People partake of certain delicacies and waters from various fountains, that they may have a good time. Balls and dances follow. All these are for the body, but this fellowship is of the enjoyment of God, for the partaking of spiritual food, for the elucidation of spiritual subjects, for the discussion and interpretation of the teachings and counsels of God. It is absolute spirituality.

It is my hope that the Nineteen Day Feast may become firmly established and organized so that the holy realities which are behind this meeting may leave behind all prejudices and conflict, and make their hearts as a treasury of love. Even if there is the slightest feeling between certain souls—a lack of love—it must be made to entirely disappear. There must be the utmost translucency and purity of intention.

They must enjoy the love of God, acquire the power for the promotion of the happiness of mankind and the Word of God. With such high mention must this Feast become an established institution. When they gather in this meeting, all those present must turn their faces toward the Kingdom of Abhá, and from their hearts supplicate, invoke and entreat toward the lofty throne, beg of God's forgiveness for all shortcomings, read the teachings and arise to His service.

Then spread the feast and give refreshments. Assuredly great results will be the outcome of such meetings. Material and spiritual benefits will be assured. All who are present will be intoxicated with the breezes of the Love of God, and the Breath of the Holy Spirit will with tremendous power inspire the hearts.

If this meeting be established on such a rock, it will become a power which will

attract heavenly confirmations, be the means of the appearance of the Light of God, and the reality of every subject will become unfolded. Such a meeting will be under the protection of God. It is my hope that you will continually hold these meetings and that each time it will become more and more the centre of all the virtues, the point for the effulgence of God.

May your hearts be enlightened!

May your faces become radiant!

May your spirits be illumined!

May your thoughts find wider range of vision!

May your spiritual susceptibilities be increased!

May the realm of God surround you, and may your hearts become the treasury of heaven!

This is my hope.

(From a talk by 'Abdu'l-Bahá given at a Nineteen Day Feast in London, England, 29 December 1912, quoted in "Bahá'í News Letter" 33 (July 1929), pp. 1-2)

2. The Threefold Feast Celebration

From the Writings of Shoghi Effendi

- 19 Still other factors promoting the development of that Order and contributing to its consolidation have been the systematic institution of the Nineteen Day Feast, functioning in most Bahá'í communities in East and West, with its threefold emphasis on the devotional, the administrative and the social aspects of Bahá'í community life....

("God Passes By", rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), p. 342)

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi⁶

⁶ To individual believers except where noted.

- 20 Regarding the nature of the Nineteen Day Feasts, the Guardian feels that the excellent statement on their nature, function and purpose published in one of the recent issues of the "News Letter" is so comprehensive and faithful in its presentation

that he does not find it necessary to restate and enlarge upon the matter. He has no objection, however, if you feel the need to elaborate the thought expressed in that statement, stressing particularly the spiritual, administrative and social aspects of this vital Bahá'í institution.⁷

(6 September 1933 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í News" 79 (November 1933), p. 3)

⁷ The statement to which reference is made in extract 20 is as follows:

This institution, established by Bahá'u'lláh, has been described by the Guardian as the foundation of the new World Order. The National Spiritual Assembly understands that it is incumbent upon every believer, unless ill or absent from the city, to attend each of these Feasts.

In a general letter issued to Local Spiritual Assemblies several years ago, it was pointed out that the Guardian instructs that the Nineteen Day Feast be held according to the following program: the first part, entirely spiritual in character, is devoted to readings from Bahá'í Sacred Writings; the second part consists of general consultation on the affairs of the Cause, at which time the Local Spiritual Assembly reports its activities to the community, asks for suggestions and consultation, and also delivers messages received from the Guardian and the National Assembly. The third part is the material feast and social meeting of all the friends. Only voting believers are invited to attend the Nineteen Day Feasts, but young people of less than twenty-one years of age, who are declared believers, especially when members of a Bahá'í family, can also be present.

These meetings may be regarded as the very heart of our Bahá'í community life. When properly conducted, and attended by a Bahá'í community which fully appreciates their importance, the Nineteen Day Feasts serve to renew and deepen our spirit of faith, increase our capacity for united action, remove misunderstandings and keep us fully informed of all important Bahá'í activities, local, national and international in scope.

(Statement of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í News" 75 (July 1933), p. 8)

²¹ As to your question concerning Bahá'í Feasts, Shoghi Effendi strongly feels that on such occasions the friends should emphasize both the spiritual and the administrative elements. For these are equally essential to the success of every Bahá'í festival. To maintain the right balance between them is, therefore, the duty and responsibility of every individual Bahá'í or group. Until the believers learn to combine the two, there can be no hope of their gaining any real and permanent benefit from such religious celebrations. A good part of the Feast must of course be devoted to the reading of the Holy Words. For it is through them that the friends can get the inspiration and the vision they need for the successful accomplishment of their work for the Cause.

(27 May 1934)

²² With regard to your question concerning the Nineteen Day Feasts: These gatherings are no doubt of a special importance to the friends, as they have both a social and an administrative significance, and as such should be regularly attended by all

confirmed believers. They should also be observed according to the Bahá'í calendar every nineteen days.

(12 April 1935)

- 23 Concerning the nature of the Nineteen Day Feast: In the “Aqdas”, Bahá'u'lláh has clearly revealed the spiritual and social character of this institution. Its administrative significance, however, has been stressed by the Guardian in direct response to the growing needs of the Bahá'í community in this formative period of the Bahá'í Era for better training in the principles and practice of Bahá'í administration.

(29 July 1935 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

- 24 Regarding the Nineteen Day Feast: in a previous letter to the National Spiritual Assembly the Guardian had made it clear that, although not a binding ordinance, this Feast has been regarded by Bahá'u'lláh as highly desirable and meritorious. In the “Aqdas” He has specially emphasized its spiritual and devotional character, and also its social importance in the Bahá'í community as a means for bringing about closer fellowship and unity among the believers. The administrative significance of this Feast has been stated by the Guardian in view of the increasing need among the friends for better training in the principles and methods of Bahá'í Administration.

The significance of the Nineteen Day Feast is thus threefold. It is a gathering of a devotional, social and administrative importance. When these three features are all combined, this Feast can and will surely yield the best and the maximum of results. The friends, however, should be on their guard lest they overstress the significance of this institution created by Bahá'u'lláh. They should also take care not to underrate or minimize its importance.

(2 October 1935 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

- 25 He was very glad to know you are holding the Feasts, as these form a rallying-point for the friends and help to unite them and deepen them in the Faith.

(5 March 1946)

From Letters Written By Or On Behalf Of The Universal House of Justice

- 26 A group, of course, is not an administrative body and there is no objection to the

members of a group making decisions within their scope on any occasion when all of them happen to be together, even if this should be at a Nineteen Day Feast. The Nineteen Day Feast can only be an official administrative occasion where there is a Local Spiritual Assembly to take charge of it, present reports to the friends, and receive their recommendations. But groups, spontaneous gatherings of the friends, and even isolated believers should certainly remember the day and say prayers together. In the case of a group, it may well hold the Feast in the manner in which a Local Spiritual Assembly would do so, recognizing of course that it has no official administrative standing.

(31 October 1972 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Switzerland)

- 27 Regarding changing the order of the Feast, it is clear from Shoghi Effendi's instructions that the Nineteen Day Feast programme should start with the spiritual part, and not with the social part, which includes refreshments, or breaking bread together.... However, if it is found that some sort of association among the friends or the serving of food and refreshments will be helpful, if this takes place at the outset, there is no objection to this practice, provided it is clear that it is not part of the Feast.

(23 January 1985 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

3. Feast Times

From Letters Written On Behalf Of Shoghi Effendi

- 28 As to your question relative to the last Nineteen Day Feast, Shoghi Effendi sees no objection if the friends choose to celebrate it on one of the intercalary days. They may also celebrate it during the month of fasting, provided they abstain from food.

(2 August 1934 to an individual believer)

- 29 Your third question concerns the day on which the Feast should be held every month. The Guardian stated in reply that no special day has been fixed, but it would be preferable and most suitable if the gathering of the friends should be held on the first day of each Bahá'í month.

(1 December 1936 to an individual believer—translated from the Persian)

- 30 Regarding the time for the holding of the Nineteen Day Feasts and elections: the Guardian would advise your Assembly to urge the friends to hold such gatherings on the prescribed day before sunset. If impossible, then it is permissible to hold them on the preceding day. In connection with the nine holy days however the friends should consider it obligatory to celebrate them on the prescribed day before sunset.
(24 December 1939 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)
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- 31 The Naw-Rúz Feast should be held on March 21 before sunset and has nothing to do with the Nineteen Day Feast. The Nineteen Day Feast is administrative in function whereas the Naw-Rúz is our New Year, a Feast of hospitality and rejoicing.
(5 July 1950 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)
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From A Letter Written By The Universal House Of Justice

- 32 As to your questions concerning the times for Feasts and Holy Days: The Bahá'í Day is from sunset to sunset, therefore if in summer the sun sets too late to enable the Nineteen Day Feast to be held on the preceding evening, it should be held on the day itself. As long as the meeting begins before sunset it is considered to be held on the day which comes to an end with that sunset. Naturally Nineteen Day Feasts should be held on the first day of the Bahá'í month if possible, but if it should be difficult to do so, for example if it coincides with a regular public meeting evening, it is permissible to hold it on the following day, i.e. on a succeeding day of the Bahá'í month.
(23 June 1964 to the National Spiritual Assembly Finland)
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4. Feast Locations

From Letters Written On Behalf Of Shoghi Effendi to Individual Believers

- 33 There is no objection to holding meetings in the open air as long as they are conducted with dignity.
(22 November 1941)
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- 34 Each city will have its own Spiritual Assembly, not a number of district ones. Naturally, district Nineteen Day Feasts can be held where there are very many Bahá'ís in one city.

(31 March 1949)

- 35 The matter of where the Nineteen Day Feasts should be held is certainly one for the Spiritual Assembly to decide; but the Ḥaẓratu'l-Quds seems the logical place on most occasions. Until the friends have a place of worship in ..., this building will also be used for devotional meetings, as well as for administrative purposes.

If, under some circumstances, some special Feast is offered in the home of one of the believers, with the approval of the Spiritual Assembly, there can be no objection; but, generally speaking, he feels it is better to use the Ḥaẓratu'l-Quds.

(18 February 1954)

From Letters Written By Or On Behalf Of The Universal House Of Justice

- 36 We understand and appreciate the problems involved in the holding of Nineteen Day Feasts in the large cities such as New York and Los Angeles and we have no objection to your Assembly authorizing the Local Assembly to provide for the holding of the Feast in different localities as an experiment, if the Local Assembly so wishes, bearing in mind the following precautions:

The tendency in metropolitan areas is towards segregation, and therefore the Local Assembly should be alert to prevent a similar pattern developing in Bahá'í meetings by reason of the location of the Feast.

The Local Assembly should be watchful that neither the unity of the community nor control by the Local Assembly is dissipated by this practice.

(23 January 1967 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

- 37 Your letter of August 9th posing the problem of holding Nineteen Day Feasts and other Bahá'í activities in the two communities ... which have grown so large that it is impossible to conduct such activities in homes is welcomed by us, and we hope you will meet this problem before long in other communities.

We leave it to your discretion as to whether these large communities should

purchase adequate facilities to accommodate the believers at Feasts and other Bahá'í activities, rent facilities, or hold several simultaneous Feasts, still utilizing homes.

(21 August 1972 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Alaska)

- 38 Difficulties of travelling to the Nineteen Day Feasts, and other occasions, which may be met in certain parishes can be overcome by your authorizing the Local Assembly in such a parish to hold more than one Feast within its area. There is no need to establish rigid boundaries for such a purpose, and the friends should be allowed to attend the Feast in their parish most convenient to them; but all should note that every Feast in the area is a portion of the same Feast under the jurisdiction of the Local Spiritual Assembly. Occasions should be provided for the entire Bahá'í community of the parish to meet together, and Feast days need not be excluded from such occasions.

(14 January 1980 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Barbados and the Windward Islands)

- 39 As to the question of holding meetings to commemorate Bahá'í Holy Days on a regional basis, the House of Justice has ruled that it may be desirable in certain areas for the believers in neighbouring localities to join together with other communities in observing Holy Days and certain events. Such matters should be referred to and determined by National Spiritual Assemblies. Observance of the Nineteen Day Feasts and other local activities, however, should be held in the respective civil areas.

(20 March 1986 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 40 The problems implied by your inquiry are not insurmountable. For instance, the Local Spiritual Assembly could be authorized to appoint an administrative committee in each of a number of sub-units of the city; and these committees could deal with the urgent needs of the friends in these areas on behalf of the Assembly; and if found desirable, the Spiritual Assembly could authorize the holding of separate Nineteen Day Feasts in several sub-units. In such a decentralized system, the Local Spiritual Assembly would have to provide for the overall coordination of the efforts of the friends in all sub-units of the city.

The sub-division of the city should be seen merely as an administrative necessity meant to serve the good of the whole community; in this sense, the Assembly should guard strenuously against creating too many sub-units, contenting itself with the

minimum action in this respect. Given the racial and social stratification of large cities, the Spiritual Assembly would also have to exert the utmost care not to allow the Bahá'í community of ... to become, in effect, racially or socially fragmented, even though one race or stratum may be dominant in a sub-unit of the city. One of the questions that should remain uppermost in the minds of the Assembly, the committees and the individual friends is how to uphold at all times, through their functions and deeds, the primary principle and goal of our Faith, namely, the unity of the human race.

(20 December 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

5. Attendance Of Believers At The Feast

From Letters Written On Behalf Of Shoghi Effendi⁸

⁸ To individual believers except where noted

- 41 In regard to the Nineteen Day Feasts, Shoghi Effendi is of the opinion that the believers should be impressed with the importance of attending these gatherings which, in addition to their spiritual significance, constitute a vital medium for maintaining close and continued contact between the believers themselves, and also between them and the body of their elected representatives in the local community.

No radical action, such as the expulsion of any believer from the community, should, however, be taken in case anyone fails to attend these Feasts. It is for every individual believer to realize what the Cause requires from him in this matter. Any threat or menace can be of no avail, unless it is based on appeal to individual conscience and responsibility.

(22 December 1934)

- 42 Also regarding the Nineteen Day Feasts: these are not strictly obligatory, but the believers should endeavour to regularly attend them, mainly for the following two reasons: first, because they foster the spirit of service and fellowship in the community and secondly, in view of the fact that they afford the believers a splendid opportunity to fully discuss the affairs of the Cause and to find ways and means for continued improvement in the conduct of Bahá'í activities.

(30 November 1936)

- 43 Attendance at Nineteen Day Feasts is not obligatory, but highly desirable, and effort should be made by the friends not to deprive themselves of this spiritual and communal rallying-point once in every Bahá'í month.

(23 December 1948)

- 44 The Guardian has never heard of any ruling by which a believer who does not attend three consecutive day Nineteen Day Feasts can be deprived of his voting rights. He does not consider that such action is justifiable at all. The whole question is whether a person considers himself a Bahá'í or not, and is willing to adhere to the principles of the Faith and accept the authority of the Guardian and the Administration—whether that individual is able, or always in a condition psychologically to attend Feasts and Bahá'í meetings is an entirely different subject. If a person makes it quite clear that they do not wish to be considered an active member of the Bahá'í Community and be affiliated with it and exert their voting right, then their name should be removed from the voting list; but if a person considers himself or herself a Bahá'í, and for various reasons is not able to be active in the affairs of the Community, then they should certainly not be removed from our voting list, least of all at present, when the number of the Bahá'í Community is so small.

(2 March 1951 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria)

- 45 He fully appreciates the difficult position your Assembly will be placed in if you adhere to the principle that the members of an Assembly and voting members of a community must live within the civic limits. However, he feels that Paris can be no exception to this general rule which he wishes the Bahá'ís to adhere to ALL OVER THE WORLD, in spite of any temporary inconvenience it may cause.

This does not mean that the Bahá'ís of Paris living outside the civic limits should not attend the Nineteen Day Feast and the Bahá'í Holy Days; on the contrary, they should take an active part in the affairs of the community in the sense of assisting with the teaching work, while at the same time not being active in the administrative work. He feels sure that in the end you will find that, far from having been weakened, your community will grow and be strengthened by this adherence to principle.

(20 February 1953 to the Local Spiritual Assembly of Paris)

- 46 It is inconceivable and wholly inadmissible that any Bahá'ís in a Community should be permitted to hold a Feast in their home and refuse admission to another believer; and your Assembly should write accordingly in very strong terms to the ... Assembly, pointing out that the Guardian is not only surprised to learn of this situation, but disapproves of it in the strongest terms.

Any Bahá'í may attend a Feast—a local Bahá'í, a Bahá'í from out of town, certainly an isolated Bahá'í from the neighbourhood.

(27 May 1957 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, published in "Unfolding Destiny: The Message from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'í Community of the British Isles" (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. 1981), p. 380)

From Letters Written By Or On Behalf Of The Universal House Of Justice

- 47 In reply to your letter of November 8th we feel that all friends, whatever their circumstances, should be encouraged to observe the Nineteen Day Feast. Obviously it can only be an official administrative occasion where there is a Local Spiritual Assembly to take charge of it, present reports to the friends, and receive their recommendations. But groups, spontaneous gatherings of friends, and even isolated believers should certainly remember the day and say prayers together. In the case of a group it may well hold the Feast in the manner in which a Local Spiritual Assembly would do so, recognizing of course that it has no official administrative standing.

As to visitors to a Nineteen Day Feast, Bahá'ís from anywhere in the world should of course be warmly welcomed, and may take part in consultation. However, only members of the local community can vote on recommendations to the Local Spiritual Assembly.

(1 December 1968 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles)

- 48 It is not quite correct to say that a Nineteen Day Feast is changed into a Unity Feast as a result of the presence of non-Bahá'ís. What can happen is that the consultative portion of the Feast has to be postponed....

If it is decided to postpone part or all of the consultative portion of the Feast, the House of Justice states that it is within the discretion of the Local Spiritual Assembly to decide whether another meeting should be held during the Bahá'í month to complete it, or whether it can be postponed until the following Nineteen Day Feast.

(5 September 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany)

- 49 A Bahá'í who is visiting another community may participate fully in the consultation of the Nineteen Day Feast, but has no right to vote on recommendations being made to the Local Spiritual Assembly. Out of courtesy, however, a visitor would normally refrain from taking too much time of the consultation.

Any Bahá'í, whether an isolated believer or a member of a local community or group, may convey his suggestions and recommendations to the National Spiritual Assembly at any time and thus take part in the consultative aspect of Bahá'í community life. Isolated believers and the members of groups may also, of course, attend the Nineteen Day Feasts of communities when they wish to.

(23 July 1985 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 50 With respect to your question asking whether a Local Spiritual Assembly may cancel its Nineteen Day Feast in order to attend Feast in another community, the House of Justice advises that the Nineteen Day Feast should not be cancelled. However, there is no objection to two or more local communities holding a joint Nineteen Day Feast occasionally, although it is not proper to allow such joint Feasts to be held on a regular basis. If members of a community find that the plan to hold such a joint Feast would produce inconvenience to them, they should take the matter up with their Local Spiritual Assembly.

(26 April 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

6. Restrictions Upon Feast Attendance

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

- 51 As regards your question concerning the Nineteen Day Feasts: this is really a matter of secondary importance, and should be decided by the Assembly; meetings which have been publicly advertised for a certain date cannot, obviously, be cancelled. As to non-Bahá'ís attending: this should by all means be avoided, but if non-believers come to a Nineteen Day Feast, they should not be put out, as this might hurt their feelings.

(21 September 1946 to two believers)

- 52 The beloved Guardian has instructed me to write you concerning an action recently taken by your National Assembly, as published in your January-February Bahá'í News, that non-Bahá'ís may attend Nineteen Day Feasts if “the earnestness of their interest in the Faith” is vouched for by a declared believer.

The Guardian wishes me to direct your attention to the fact that none of the institutions of the Faith nor its cardinal principles may be changed under any circumstances.

The Nineteen Day Feast is an institution of the Cause, first established by the Báb, later confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh, and now made a prominent part of the administrative order of the Faith. These Nineteen Day Feasts are for the Bahá'ís, and the Bahá'ís exclusively, and no variation from this principle is permitted.

Thus the Guardian feels you should rescind the action taken by your Assembly in opening the Feasts to “near Bahá'ís”, as it is not consistent with the spirit of the administrative order for non-Bahá'ís or near Bahá'ís to attend the Nineteen Day Feasts, particularly the administrative portion of the Feast.

The Guardian realizes that the spirit which animated you in making the suggested proposal, in order that the teaching work might go forward more aggressively; but he feels in the long run it would be detrimental to the Faith, and therefore should be rescinded as indicated above.

(28 May 1954 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria)

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

- 53 The principle universally applicable is that non-Bahá'ís are not invited to the Nineteen Day Feast. If in Persia it has happened that non-Bahá'ís are present at a Nineteen Day Feast this is an exception and not a rule.

It is well understood in Persia that if a non-Bahá'í should inadvertently attend a Nineteen Day Feast he would be treated courteously. However, it is equally important for the friends to understand that they should refrain from inviting non-Bahá'ís to these special gatherings, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh not only for spiritual refreshment and unity, but also for consultation between the Spiritual Assembly and the body of believers on the domestic affairs of the community.

(4 February 1974 written by the Universal House of Justice a Local Spiritual Assembly)

- 54 In reply to your memorandum of 16 November 1975 requesting elucidation of a

statement from the Guardian published on page 367 of Volume IV of “Amr va Khalq”, ... later instructions of the beloved Guardian clearly forbid attendance at the Nineteen Day Feast by those deprived of their voting rights and the quotation published in “Amr va Khalq” should therefore be replaced by another statement by the Guardian.

(24 November 1975, memorandum written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre)

- 55 The main thing to remember is that a group is not an administrative institution within the Bahá'í Administrative Order; it is, however, the embryo of a Local Spiritual Assembly and while remaining under the direct authority of the National Spiritual Assembly should obviously be encouraged to prepare itself for the time when it will establish that divine institution. There is no objection whatever to its electing officers such as a secretary, chairman and treasurer, holding Nineteen Day Feasts and observances of the Holy Days, undertaking teaching and extension work, so long as it is always understood that the directive authority is the National Spiritual Assembly and not the group itself.

(13 June 1974 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Paraguay)

- 56 It can be explained, in a friendly manner, that the Nineteen Day Feast is an entirely private religious and domestic occasion for the Bahá'í community when its internal affairs are discussed and its members meet for personal fellowship and worship. No great issue should be made of it for there is certainly nothing secret about the Feast but it is organized for Bahá'ís only.

(4 November 1967 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Belgium)

- 57 Regarding the Nineteen Day Feast, the principle universally applicable is that non-Bahá'ís are not invited to attend, and if you are asked about this you can explain that the nature of the Feast is essentially domestic and administrative. During the period of consultation the Bahá'ís should be able to enjoy perfect freedom to express their views on the work of the Cause, unembarrassed by the feeling that all they are saying is being heard by someone who has not accepted Bahá'u'lláh and who might thereby gain a very distorted picture of the Faith. It would also be very embarrassing for any sensitive non-Bahá'í to find himself plunged into the midst of a discussion of

the detailed affairs of a Bahá'í community of which he is not a part. A non-Bahá'í who asks to be invited to a Feast will usually understand if this matter is explained to him.

(12 August 1981 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 58 The following guidance on this subject was sent to a believer on 24 March 1970 by the House of Justice:

...when a non-Bahá'í does appear at a Feast he should not be asked to leave; rather the Assembly should omit the consultative part of the Feast, and the non-Bahá'í should be made welcome....

No doubt you are familiar with this instruction. Likewise, occasionally if the Feast is held in the home of the family where the spouse is not a Bahá'í, it would be discourteous not to allow the non-Bahá'í member of the family to attend at least the social and spiritual parts of the Feast.

(8 January 1985 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia)

- 59 ... if a non-Bahá'í does appear at a Nineteen Day Feast he should be made to feel welcome, but a Bahá'í should certainly not invite a non-Bahá'í to attend.

From all of the foregoing it can be seen that, basically, the resolution of this difficulty is a matter of loving education.

(23 January 1985 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

7. Youth And Children At Feasts

From Letters Written By Or On Behalf Of The Universal House Of Justice

- 60 Concerning your inquiry asking if children under fifteen of non-Bahá'í parents could attend Nineteen Day Feasts or other events held exclusively for Bahá'ís when the children consider themselves as Bahá'ís, such children may be permitted to attend Bahá'í functions provided that their parents have given their consent. This applies only, of course, to children under the age of fifteen years.

(4 August 1970 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Nicaragua)

- 61 Concerning the declaration of young people under the age of 18, ... we can accept a child of the age of 15 and over as a Bahá'í even if his parents do not consent and this remains true even though according to the law of Finland they cannot be officially transferred to the Bahá'í register. You should not, therefore, exclude such believers from the Nineteen Day Feasts. However, although such believers should not be swayed from their belief by their parents' objections, they should, in view of the stress that the Teachings place upon the respect due to parents and in view of the law in Finland, obey their parents as far as taking part in Bahá'í activities is concerned. Their aim should be to gradually awaken in their parents' hearts the same love for Bahá'u'lláh that has fired their own and not to antagonize their parents needlessly or contribute in any way to disharmony in their families at this crucial point in their development.

(1 March 1972 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Finland)

- 62 The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 11 October 1976 inquiring whether children placed in the home of Bahá'ís for temporary or prolonged care are permitted to attend Bahá'í functions, and we have been asked to inform you that such children may be permitted to attend the Nineteen Day Feasts and other Bahá'í functions, and that no distinction should be made between them and the children of Bahá'ís in this regard.

(31 October 1976 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í group)

- 63 ... the House of Justice has instructed us to say that children should be trained to understand the spiritual significance of the gatherings of the followers of the Blessed Beauty, and to appreciate the honour and bounty of being able to take part in them, whatever their outward form may be. It is realized that some Bahá'í observances are lengthy and it is difficult for very small children to remain quiet for so long. In such cases one or other of the parents may have to miss part of the meeting in order to care for the child. The Spiritual Assembly can also perhaps help the parents by providing for a children's observance, suited to their capacities, in a separate room during part of the community's observance. Attendance at the whole of the adult celebration thus becomes a sign of growing maturity and a distinction to be earned by good behaviour.

In any case, the House of Justice points out that parents are responsible for their children and should make them behave when they attend Bahá'í meetings. If children persist in creating a disturbance they should be taken out of the meeting. This is not merely necessary to ensure the properly dignified conduct of Bahá'í meetings but is an aspect of the training of children in courtesy, consideration for others, reverence, and obedience to their parents.

(14 October 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada)

- 64 It would not be administratively proper for a Bahá'í youth under 21 years of age to act as Chairman of the Nineteen Day Feast. However, no great issue should be made of this as it is a purely private matter.

(22 February 1984 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Italy)

- 65 In response to the question you have raised in your letter of 18 October 1984 concerning the place of children in the community, especially with regard to Nineteen Day Feasts, we are asked to share with you the following quotation from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Assembly on the subject.

Since children of Bahá'í parents are considered to be Bahá'ís, they are to be encouraged to attend all Feasts, there to share the reading of the Writings and prayers and be bathed in the spirit of the community. It is the hope of the House of Justice that every Feast will be a feast of love when the children will give and receive the tangible affection of the community and its individual members.

The House of Justice noted the suggestion you have made about holding Feasts on a weekend close to the first day of the Bahá'í month to facilitate the attendance of children and their parents. This is a matter for the Local Assembly to discuss and decide upon....

(22 November 1984 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

8. The Feast Celebration: Prayers And Scriptural Readings

From Letters Written On Behalf Of Shoghi Effendi⁹

⁹ To individual believers except where noted

- 66 With regard to your question concerning the use of music in the Nineteen Day Feasts, he wishes you to assure all the friends that he not only approves of such a practice, but thinks it even advisable that the believers should make use in their meetings of hymns composed by Bahá'ís themselves, and also of such hymns, poems and chants as are based on the Holy Words.

(April 1935)

- 67 Regarding your questions: the Devotional part of the Nineteen Day Feast means the reading of prayers by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master. If, after this, there is a period of reading of the teachings, his [the Guardian's] writings may be included, but this does not form part of the devotional aspect of the meeting.

(15 December 1947)

- 68 Regarding the question you asked him about the Bahá'í sacred writings: These should be regarded as the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and only these should be read during the purely devotional part of the Feast.

(11 May 1948 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and New Zealand)

- 69 During the devotional part of the Nineteen Day Feast any part of the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and the Master can be read, also from the Bible and *Qur'an*, as these are all sacred scriptures. This part of the meeting need not be confined to prayers, though prayers can and should be read during it.

(18 October 1948)

- 70 The question regarding the devotional part of the Feast has been obscured because once he used the term "devotional" in its strict sense, which of course means prayer, and once loosely, in the sense in which the Bahá'ís usually understand it, and that is the meeting together and reading from the teachings which precedes the administrative—or consultative—aspect of the Nineteen Day Feast. The two statements in no way change the method of holding this part of the Feast which, in the East at any rate, is always opened with prayers and afterwards Tablets and

excerpts from Bahá'u'lláh's, or the Master's or the Guardian's, writings may be read or, for that matter, the Bible or Qur'án quoted.

(11 April 1949 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

- 71 Music is permitted during the spiritual part—or any part—of the Nineteen Day Feast.

(30 June 1952 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

- 72 Regarding the questions you raised in your letter:

First, he feels that, although in principle there is certainly no reason why excerpts from other Sacred Scriptures should not be read in the spiritual part of our Feasts, as this is particularly an occasion when Bahá'ís get together to deepen their own spiritual life, it is, generally speaking, advisable for them to read from their own holy Writings in the spiritual part of the Feast.

(18 February 1954)

- 73 The Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh can certainly be read any time at any place; likewise the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are read freely during the spiritual part of the Feast. The Guardian has instructed that during the spiritual part of the Feast, his own Writings should not be read. In other words, during the spiritual part of the Feast, readings should be confined to the Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and, to a lesser extent, of the Master; but during that part of the Feast the Guardian's Writings should not be read. During the period of administrative discussion of the Feast, then the Guardian's Writings may be read. Of course during the administrative part of the Feast there can be no objection to the reading of the Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

(27 April 1956)

- 74 Instrumental music may be used at the Bahá'í Feasts.

There is no objection to showing appreciation by the clapping of hands.

If an individual has a teaching appointment on the same evening as a Nineteen Day Feast, it is left to the individual to judge which is the most important.

(20 August 1956)

From Letters Written by the Universal House of Justice

- 75 We have noted in your Minutes of 27 December, page 1, a statement, “It was agreed to advise the friends in ... that it was not correct to sing a song composed by a Bahá’í at the devotional part of the Nineteen Day Feast.”

It is not clear what your framework of reference for consultation happened to be, nor if a direct question was referred to your National Assembly for decision. However, we feel that it will be helpful to you to know that songs whose words are the primary Writings of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh or ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are all quite fitting for the devotional portion of the Feast. Indeed, the Persian chants are such songs, out of a different tradition; they are a way of giving music to the holy Word, and each person who chants does it in a way which mirrors his feeling and expression of the Words he is uttering. As for songs whose words are poetic and the composition of persons other than the Figures of the Faith, these may be desirable but in their proper place, for, as you know, “music is the language of the spirit.”

Inasmuch as the spirit of our gathering is so much affected by the tone and quality of our worship, of our feeling and appreciation of the Word of God for this day, we would hope that you would encourage the most beautiful possible expression of the human spirits in your communities, through music among other modes of feeling.

(22 February 1971 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Guyana, Surinam and French Guiana)

- 76 Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the Persian writings of Shoghi Effendi are unique in nature, and many of them, unlike his English letters and messages addressed to the western believers, are interspersed with supplications, prayers and homilies of a devotional character which are suitable for the spiritual part of Bahá’í Feasts.

(15 October 1972 to an individual believer)

[See also extract 70, referring to the use of the Guardian's Persian writings in the devotional portion of the Feast in Eastern Bahá’í communities.]

9. The Feast Celebration: Consultation

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

- 77 The main purpose of the Nineteen Day Feasts is to enable individual believers to offer any suggestion to the Local Assembly, which in its turn will pass it to the National Spiritual Assembly. The Local Assembly is, therefore, the proper medium through which local Bahá'í communities can communicate with the body of the national representatives. The Convention should be regarded as a temporary gathering, having certain specific functions to perform during a limited period of time. Its status is thus limited in time to the Convention sessions, the function of consultation at all other times being vested in the entire body of the believers through the Local Spiritual Assemblies.

(18 November 1933 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

- 78 The chief opportunity which the friends have for discussion on administrative questions is during the Nineteen Day Feasts, at which time the members of the Assembly can meet with the body of the believers and discuss in common the affairs of the Cause, and suggest new policies and methods. But even then no reference to individuals should be made.

(27 March 1938 to an individual believer)

- 79 Now with reference to your last dear letter in which you had asked whether the believers have the right to openly express their criticism of any Assembly action or policy: it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the Community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration to the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local Community, and it is the duty of the Assembly also to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them by any one of the believers. The best occasion chosen for this purpose is the Nineteen Day Feast, which, besides its social and spiritual aspects, fulfils various administrative needs and requirements of the Community, chief among them being the need for open and constructive criticism and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Bahá'í Community.

But again it should be stressed that all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be

endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the Community.

(13 December 1939 to an individual believer)

- 80 The Bahá'ís must learn to forget personalities and to overcome the desire—so natural in people—to take sides and fight about it. They must also learn to really make use of the great Feast principle of consultation. There is a time set aside at the Nineteen Day Feasts for the Community to express its views and make suggestions to its Assembly; the Assembly and the believers should look forward to this happy period of discussion, and neither fear it nor suppress it. Likewise the Assembly members should fully consult, and in their decisions put the interests of the Cause first and not personalities, the will of the majority prevailing.

(30 June 1949 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria)

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of the Universal House Of Justice

- 81 As you no doubt realize by this time, enrolling large numbers of new believers in a short period of time brings with it many problems of consolidation, but we are certain that you will be able to handle these problems and move on to even greater achievements.

We note from reading your minutes that the enthusiasm of some of the new believers is being tested by the reading of long, wordy letters at Nineteen Day Feasts, and we think that something should be done about this. While it is important that the believers be informed about important messages from the Holy Land and other important items, it is true that the reading of messages at Nineteen Day Feasts can become a very boring and trying experience particularly for new believers not acquainted with many aspects of Bahá'í administration. We think you should consider other ways and means by which believers could be informed of vital and necessary information, such as through bulletins, institutes and other meetings.

(6 September 1971 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Hawaiian Islands)

- 82 As cited in Article IV of the By-Laws of a Local Spiritual Assembly, “While retaining the sacred right of final decision in all matters pertaining to the Bahá'í community, the Spiritual Assembly shall ever seek the advice and consultation of all members of the community, keep the community informed of all its affairs, and invite full and

free discussion on the part of the community of all matters affecting Faith”.

The actual voting on recommendations made at Nineteen Day Feasts to decide whether they should be forwarded to the Local Assembly is a secondary matter which may be left for decision by the Local Spiritual Assemblies themselves. It is not prohibited that the Local Assembly secretary record suggestions made at Nineteen Day Feasts for consideration by the Assembly. The important point to keep in mind is the provision made in the By-Laws as mentioned above.

(21 January 1982, memorandum written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre)

- 83 Bahá'í youth between the ages of 15 and 21 may certainly take part in discussions, and should be encouraged to do so, but they may not vote on recommendations to the Assembly until they 21.

(16 September 1979 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom)

- 84 As a Local Spiritual Assembly is responsible for the organization of Nineteen Day Feasts, and is expected to make a report of its activities to the community at the Feast, in addition to responding to suggestions submitted to it, a Local Assembly should meet at least once a Bahá'í month. However, the Universal House of Justice does not wish to draw hard and fast rules in this matter, and prefers to leave this question to the discretion of each National Assembly.

If a local community, under the direction of its Local Assembly, observes Nineteen Day Feasts regularly, and it occasionally has a joint Feast with one or more other communities, you may credit in your statistics each Assembly for having held its own Nineteen Day Feast. You, of course, realize that joint Feasts do not fulfil the purpose of the Nineteen Day Feast in its strict sense, and should not become a regular practice among the friends.

(15 February 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Transkei)

- 85 If the friends at a Nineteen Day Feast agree with a recommendation, either unanimously or by a majority, it constitutes a recommendation from the Feast to the Assembly. On the other hand, if an individual believer makes a suggestion that other friends do not take up, it may still be considered by the Assembly....

(27 July 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual

Assembly of Germany)

- 86 There are a number of factors involved in understanding the nature of appropriate interaction between a believer and his or her Local Spiritual Assembly during the consultative part of the Nineteen Day Feast. Chief among these is an appreciation of the purpose of this most important Institution of the Cause. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá described the Feast in these terms:

This Feast is a bringer of joy. It is the groundwork of agreement and unity. It is the key to affection and fellowship. It diffuseth the oneness of mankind.

(25 July 1984 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Argentina)

See also Extract 4

- 87 The By-Laws of a Local Spiritual Assembly clearly imply the roles of the chairman and vicechairman for meetings of the Assembly. For Feasts, the chairman or an appointed representative of the Spiritual Assembly presides during the period of consultation. However, this is not specified in the By-Laws and is a secondary matter left to the discretion of the National Assembly in each country; that Assembly may either adopt a uniform procedure for Local Assemblies to follow, or leave the matter to the discretion of the Local Assembly itself”.

(23 December 1986 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

10. The Feast Celebration: Socializing

From A Memorandum Written By The Universal House Of Justice

- 88 We can understand the desire of some of the friends to provide a warm welcome at the Feasts to newly declared believers and particularly youth, and we see no objection to the Assembly giving a reception before the actual Feast to achieve this purpose. As the Feast is frequently held in the evening, the Assembly might consider it desirable to arrange for the believers to have a light evening meal together before the Feast is held or it could, for example, arrange for social activities of an appropriate kind

while the friends are gathering prior to the actual commencement of the Nineteen Day Feast. This should not, however, take the place of the social part of the Feast itself.

(21 January 1973, to the Hands of the Cause residing in the Holy Land)

11. The Blending Of Cultures In The Feast Celebration

From Letters Written By Or On Behalf Of The Universal House Of Justice

- 89 We have considered your letter of March 11, 1970 concerning the difficulties you are experiencing in getting the Indian believers on reservations to hold regular Nineteen Day Feasts.

In applying instructions about Nineteen Day Feasts, as well as other matters of administration, to indigenous believers it is important that the process of weaning them away from the old forms should be accomplished gradually so as not to destroy their spirit, and your Assembly should not be too rigid in these matters.

(3 April 1970 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada)

- 90 The International Teaching Centre has sent us a copy of your letter of 10 October 1982 asking about language problems brought about by the influx of Iranians who do not understand English. It is important that the Iranian friends be encouraged to make the effort to learn the language used in the country and become integrated into the life and activities of the community.

The Nineteen Day Feasts and other official gatherings of the friends should be conducted in whatever is the conventional local language. This does not mean, of course, that at such gatherings some of the readings could not be in the language of the immigrants, or that, if these friends so wish, some classes and conferences may not be held and conducted in their own language for their benefit. The essential thing is, as stated above, to promote the integration of the immigrants into the community and avoid feelings of estrangement or disunity on account of language.

(10 November 1982 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 91 The Local Spiritual Assembly of ... is correct in its decision to conduct the Nineteen

Day Feasts in Spanish and to not translate the proceedings in Persian, especially in view of the fact that some of the Spanish friends are becoming alienated from the community. Although the Iranian believers should make every effort to attend the Nineteen Day Feasts, they should not expect such meetings to be conducted in Persian. They should try to learn Spanish, particularly if they are planning to make their home in Spain. There is no objection, however, to Persian friends if they so wish having special meetings for fellowship and deepening conducted in Persian.

(6 February 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Spain)

- 92 You have asked for suggestions regarding the preparation of the handbook on Bahá'í Holy Days which you are planning to publish. It is important that notwithstanding whatever details you set forth therein, it be made clear that the contents do not constitute procedures that must be rigidly adhered to. Dignity and reverence befitting the occasion should obviously characterize observances of Bahá'í Holy Days by the friends, but this does not mean that cultural traditions which do not contravene Bahá'í principles may not, and cannot, find expression in the local observances and meetings of the friends.

(1 August 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 93 In answer to your question about the presence of pets during Bahá'í meetings held in homes in Europe, the House of Justice asks us to explain that the European attitude to pets is very different from that of the people of, for example, North Africa, and that this is a minor matter of which no issue should be made.

(29 August 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 94 Wherever linguistic problems exist, the House of Justice welcomes the holding of special classes and gatherings for the Iranian friends in addition to the regular community meetings, so that they will have the opportunity to study the Holy Writings in their own language and will be kept informed of what is going on in the Bahá'í community of Canada. Nineteen Day Feasts and Local Spiritual Assembly meetings should be conducted in English or French, as the case may be, since these are the languages of your country. If, however, it is possible to make arrangements for the Iranians who have not yet learned the language to benefit in some way from the topics discussed at such meetings without interfering with the smooth running of

the meetings, this factor could be taken into consideration.

(7 February 1984 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada)

- 95 The House of Justice has given the advice to Spiritual Assemblies faced with questions of possible conflict between tribal practices and Bahá'í law, that such Assemblies should distinguish between aspects of tribal community life which are related to fundamental laws (such as monogamy) and matters of lesser importance, from which the friends can and should extricate themselves gradually. Furthermore, the House of Justice has offered the advice that:

The institutions of the Faith should be careful not to press the friends to arbitrarily discard those local traditions which are harmless and often colourful characteristics of particular peoples and tribes. Were a new Bahá'í suddenly to cease following the customs of his people, it is possible that they might misunderstand the true nature of the Bahá'í Faith, and the Bahá'ís could be regarded as having turned against the traditions of the land...

(25 October 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to two believers)
