

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

November 21, 2011

To the American Bahá'í Community

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

With the centenary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America fast approaching, and preparation for commemorative events well under way in many communities, further questions have arisen regarding the appropriate use of images of the Master. Attached for ease of reference is our letter of August 16, 2011, providing guidance on the marketing of photographs of the Master, and distinguishing between, on the one hand, actual photographs and, on the other, paintings, or drawings or photographs of paintings of Him. The purpose of this letter is to clarify how this guidance applies to the posting of electronic images on the Internet and to reemphasize other important considerations.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, the appointed Successor to Bahá'u'lláh and the Center of His Covenant, is deeply loved by Bahá'ís, and many believers feel a great personal closeness to Him. At the same time, it is important to remember that His station is unique in religious history and beyond our full comprehension. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Faith, describes the Master in these words:

He is, and should for all time be regarded, first and foremost, as the Center and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, His most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal, the incarnation of every Bahá'í virtue, the Most Mighty Branch sprung from the Ancient Root, the Limb of the Law of God, the Being "*round Whom all names revolve*," the Mainspring of the Oneness of Humanity, the Ensign of the Most Great Peace, the Moon of the Central Orb of this most holy Dispensation -- styles and titles that are implicit and find their truest, their highest and fairest expression in the magic name 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He is, above and beyond these appellations, the "*Mystery of God*" -- an expression by which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him, and which, while it does not by any means justify us to assign to Him the station of Prophethood, indicates how in the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.

When considering how to use images of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we should take caution that the depth of our affection for Him not lead us to a sense of familiarity that becomes casual, inadvertently detracting from the sanctity of His station. It is with a spirit of reverence that we should decide in what manner to share His image, whether in print, for display, or in any electronic format, such as on a web page, a blog, or on any social-networking site.

Generally, the question of propriety must be considered on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the context and circumstances. However, there are certain guidelines which can be recognized as basic to ensuring a dignified and accurate presentation:

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- According to specific guidance from the Universal House of Justice, it is not acceptable to place a photo of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the outside cover of a book, nor to represent Him as a character in a dramatic work.
- Similarly, it would not be appropriate to include His photo in a flyer or on a publicity poster, nor on any item for common use (such as a cup, keychain, postcard or CD).
- In line with our previous letter, drawings or paintings of the Master may not be posted online.
- Clearly, the image of the Master should not be used as a name icon on Facebook or similar social-networking services.
- Use of the video of the Master is reserved for occasions of utmost reverence and sanctity, as determined by the House of Justice. (See letter from the National Assembly dated September 23, 2008, on the Administrative Website, www.usbnc.org.)
- Use of the audio recording of the Master's voice is also reserved for special occasions. (See chap. 10 of *Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies*, also at www.usbnc.org.) Thus, neither the video nor audio recording of Him should be posted online.

While the Bahá'ís strive to meet these high standards in the presentation of images of the Master, it is also to be recognized that we live in a world where the very concept of reverence is often mocked, and “freedom of expression” has been taken to such an extreme that it sometimes defeats the values it is intended to protect. In such an environment, it is to be expected that individuals who are not Bahá'ís may sometimes publicize images or materials that the Bahá'ís view as inappropriate. In such cases, it is best not to become overly concerned about the matter, and to strive to effect change by the example we set in the character of our lives and services.

Anyone who has a question about the appropriate use of the image of the Master in a particular situation is encouraged to consult with his or her Local Spiritual Assembly. While Local Assemblies are entrusted with the task of reviewing all “special materials” created by Bahá'ís for sale and distribution (that is, all items other than literature and audiovisual materials), Assemblies are welcome to contact the National Assembly for guidance if they wish.

You are ever in our hearts as we look forward to learning of all of your efforts to honor 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the coming year, first and foremost through the community's collective endeavors to share His message of hope and unity with burdened souls everywhere.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary

Attachment