

Vienna, October 28, 2019

HELPING IN SYRIA

Dear friends and supporters,

Syria has been in a state of war for eight and a half years. With the exception of the disputed areas in northern Syria, the war has come to an end.

In theory, peace should now prevail. As a matter of fact, however, there is more concern now among the population than was the case during the war. This long-standing war has caused a great deal of plight and disaster. Almost half of the inhabited land has been destroyed. If we look at the pictures and videos on the Internet, we can imagine the extent of destruction and thus the scope of human suffering. A vast number of houses, shops, factories, schools, hospitals, etc. have been damaged or totally destroyed. The victims live in poverty, wherever they have fled to. During the blazing war, the prevailing concern was security.

Now, after the roaring of the weapons has muted, the main problem is poverty. According to UN estimates, around 83 per cent* of the remaining population in Syria live below the poverty line. Many of the poorest have limited chances of survival.

The reasons for this degree of poverty are obvious: loss of property through destruction, plundering and looting, hyperinflation, embargo, outflow of foreign currency and capital, brain drain by the emigration of qualified people, high unemployment rate (over 80 per cent). This situation affects not only Christians, but all Syrian citizens. The general trend among Christians (especially young ones) is to leave the country at any cost. Whoever has the opportunity to emigrate will do so. The better-off people turn their backs on their home country. They are moving mainly to Europe, Canada and Australia. **The poorer people are left behind and have to fight for their sheer survival.** For them, emigration remains an unrealizable dream. The question is: what can you do for them?

First, we need to know that the exodus of Christians from Syria is weakening the church there (at this point I do not want to talk about individual churches, as all communities share the same fate). This emigration creates a vacuum in the local society. Unfortunately, even some spiritual leaders today are of the opinion that Christians in the Middle East have no future, which has a negative impact on the pastoral work. It is clear to everyone, that **the humanitarian situation has become unbearable.**

In large parts of the country, the military war is no longer felt. One can observe that the check points on the streets in the cities are gradually being removed.

What are Christians supposed to do? It is the wish of the church in Syria is that they should stay in their home country. However, the church cannot expect the Christians to endure the hopeless economic situation for much longer. Something needs to be done. Without help from outside, the church cannot cope with this crisis.

* <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2019/03/13/united-nations-calls-for-sustained-support-to-syrians-and-the-region-ahead-of-brussels-conference/>

What help can we offer to the Church in Syria? Which ways are possible and which problems are we facing? These are the questions that I am often asked by my friends. I would now like to outline my opinion and my observations concerning these questions as to WHERE, WHAT and HOW help should ideally be given.

1. WHERE: In which areas does the church need a particularly large amount of help?

The tasks of the church are concentrated above all in social and pastoral work, in education and in health services.

a) Social and pastoral work:

Poverty is the most terrible result of the war. If it is not mitigated, it will have even worse effects than the war itself. If the wound remains open, it leads to death. People need help for their basic needs: housing, food, clothing, education, medical care and nursing care.

There are many families without a home or shelter, they only live on water and bread. Children of poor families have to work and leave school. They are often exploited and sent to beg. Some try to get bread by crime and immorality (theft, kidnapping, drug trafficking, prostitution, illegal business, fraud, etc.).

Often, the poor turn to the church for help because they hope that the church will be able to give them something to eat. Wherever even the church closes its doors on them, the hope of survival is very small.

Therefore, it is a mission of the church to help the poor in order to protect society from the influence of evil.

b) Education:

For many years, the church has proven to be a haven of good education in Syrian society. Christians attach great importance to knowledge and morality. The church-run private schools have always been well attended, although the school contributions are sometimes relatively high. During the war, unfortunately, the education level has significantly dropped. Here we encounter the following problems. The parents of the students can no longer afford the annual contributions. As a result, teachers move to those schools where they get a marginally higher pay. The next problem is that the schools themselves are no longer able to repair damage to buildings or to make renovations. University students also need support in order to get good education. Studying is not free for all. Quite a few students have to pay annual contributions. Whatever is now neglected in the education sector will be to the detriment of the country's reconstruction and future.

c) Health services:

Church-run health centers and hospitals are overburdened. Here we have the problem that there is a shortage of both medical doctors and staff. In addition, many important medicines and materials are unavailable.

2. WHAT: Which type of help does the church need from us?

a) Financial support: Financial donations can be used in all sectors and offer the advantage that things can be purchased exactly as required. The acquisition of local materials and services also promotes the creation of jobs or at least of short-term income. In addition, transport costs and distances are eliminated, which makes sense from an ecological point of view.

b) In-kind donations: Apart from clothing, various other useful materials of good quality are needed. These range from school and kindergarten facilities to equipment for large kitchens, nursing beds, walking aids, tools for companies and medical equipment, e.g. after the close-down of a doctor's office or a dental practice. Here, too, additional financial support is needed to cover the cost of container transports to Syria, taking the humanitarian goods to where they are needed.

c) Ideas and advocacy: Help for Syria can also be promoted by contributing ideas and by establishing valuable contacts, for example regarding special projects and advice on creating jobs in Syria. Raising awareness among friends and colleagues regarding the plight in Syria can also make an impact.

d) Good deeds: e.g. volunteer work, help with transporting goods or for loading the containers, organization of collections for our projects, for example at fundraising events, anniversary celebrations and on similar occasions. There are hardly any limits to your creativity in this field.

Without God's support, we are helpless. Therefore, I ask you **to back all your actions by your prayers**. All our actions should be embedded in and strengthened by our prayers. This way, God's love can come through us to those in need.

3. HOW: In what form and by what method should we help?

First and foremost, we need to know that the situation in Syria constitutes an emergency and requires **prompt action**. We must not confront the desperate people with insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles.

Much needed help can arrive too late as a result of lengthy decision-making procedures. Although several relief organizations are active in Syria, the poorest people who don't know how to voice their needs are usually overlooked again and again. When you're in Syria, you realize that, despite all the efforts, there is not enough help given considering the immense need. It is therefore important to use the available funds wisely in order to help as many people as possible in the most sustainable manner.

For these reasons, Korbgemeinschaft tries to take the bureaucratic burden as far as possible off the shoulders of those who need help,- a burden that they simply wouldn't be able to cope with.

Of course, our aid projects are planned as accurately as possible. However, in the given situation, one always encounters new developments that cannot be exactly predicted. This is

the case when, for example, exchange rates fluctuate and when the ongoing embargo creates bottlenecks, certain products and materials suddenly become unavailable, etc.

In order to look at the HOW & WHERE also as a combined question, I should like to note that any help given should if possible improve the situation directly in Syria, so that those who have remained there can start rebuilding a basis of existence and that Syrian emigrants see future opportunities encouraging them to return to their home country. Widely advertised help outside of Syria always encourages further emigration owing to pull factor. For the country of origin this means the further departure of young people. Not to mention the longer-term tensions and even conflicts that may arise from the immigrants' feeling of being uprooting, dependent and disappointed in the host country, where this may eventually cause considerable additional costs.

Based on my experience as a priest, I am deeply convinced that helping people to rebuild their home country is – from the very root of true compassion – the more humane, more Christian, more efficient, more sustainable and – in the long run – by far more reasonable option, for both those who give help and those who receive help.

Conclusion:

We must not close our eyes to the fact that Christians in Syria need our help in order to be able to stay in their home country. They desperately need our help. They need us as brothers and sisters with our compassion, our hearts, our hands, and our financial and material contributions, ideally in the form of long-term and sustainable help for self-help. Please join in to keep Christianity alive in Syria.

God bless you for your compassion and contribution!

Yours in Christ,
Fr. Hanna Ghoneim



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