

Dear friends,

Even in this Christmas letter, I feel compelled to first of all address the current situation in Syria. I regularly receive so much first-hand information – during my visits and in numerous phone calls and e-mails between visits – that I should like to outline the current situation for you, the loyal friends and supporters.

### **The current situation in Syria**

There is still great need all around. The humanitarian situation remains tense because poverty is keeping a tight grip on people owing to the high rate of unemployment. The still existing embargo is hindering the reconstruction and thus the return of refugees. To make matters worse, the current crisis in Lebanon, with constant inflation in Lebanon and Syria has brought about an inflation against the dollar by 1/3 within just one month! The closing of the banks is an obstacle for money transfers. The Syrian state has hardly any income.

The war is more or less over, but people are getting ever poorer. The need grows in every respect. One factor that has contributed to the rise in the dollar exchange rate is that people in all their desperation are trying to sell their last possessions and exchange them for dollar amounts at any cost. Unfortunately, there are quite a few Christians among those willing to sell. This pull to leave home is getting ever more pressing. As always, the poor and weak remain behind, which is in a way plausible. The need grows and at the same time the help that arrives becomes less and less. Very frequently one hears the argument that there is currently no way to send money to Syria.

The political situation has stabilized significantly. The security situation is no longer an issue. It is the economic situation, the lack of jobs and regular income that continues to be disconcerting.

What I don't want to judge politically as a priest, but still cannot understand from a human point of view, is the unchanged attitude of the West towards the embargo. The US President has put it quite bluntly that all he wants in Syria is to control the oil fields. Now winter is approaching and the Syrians have to import oil from abroad to avoid freezing to death, even though the country itself has sufficient oil reserves. Energy therefore remains in short supply for the poor and impoverished people. There is more need for action than ever.

### **Conference in Hungary**

From November 26th to 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the Second International Conference for Persecuted Christians took place in Budapest. Many political and church dignitaries from all over the world had been invited, especially priests and bishops from countries where Christians suffer persecution. A common thread was felt throughout the conference, namely the call that it is important to do something so that Christians can stay in their countries of origin. They need support from outside to build or operate schools and hospitals. Damaged or destroyed monasteries and churches also have to be rebuilt or repaired. Many projects were presented that are supported



by Hungary. At the closing of the Conference participants were asked to tell the world what the Hungarian government is doing for persecuted Christians so that other countries will hopefully follow Hungary's example. The widespread wish was that politics in the West should show more commitment to Christians in the countries concerned. I had the opportunity to talk to people who were interested in the situation in Syria. I hope that these talks will eventually bear fruit.

### **The Melkite Patriarch in Austria**

The conference in Budapest was followed by the visit to Austria of the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch, His Beatitude Youssef I. Absi, accompanied by the Melkite Archbishop of Australia and New Zealand Robert Rabbat. The Patriarch came at the invitation of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. His intention was also to visit the Melkite community in Vienna. I had the opportunity to speak openly with the Patriarch about the situation in Syria and the concerns of the Church. He told me and my community in Vienna that the number of Christians in the Orient is getting smaller and smaller. Now the clergy no longer is looking at the sheer number of Christians, but at their basic presence. The Patriarch's request is to strengthen this presence (the holy rest). I understood from



*From left to right: President Pro Oriente Kloss, Syrian Ambassador Sabbagh, Ap. Nuntius Lopez, Patriarch Youssef I., Bishop Rabbat, Lebanese Ambassador*

him that there was a risk that this help might arrive too late. This has been my impression for a long time, which I have emphasized again and again.

During the visit there were many good encounters, which hopefully will also bear fruit for the needy people in Syria.

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### **Bread for Syria – Bakery of Grace**

Many friends and supporters ask me how far we are with the regional bakery that was announced two years ago. We are currently still working on the building. Work is proceeding well. Thanks to the many donations that we have received in the past three months, we will be able to finish the shell structure and to complete the space for the bakery. The office and the other rooms will be completed later.



*Shell construction of the bakery: as per December 22, 2019*

Now we need active help to buy the machines, which will cost around EUR 200,000. We paid a small portion to order the machines. The remaining amount for the machines should be paid by the end of February. All people in the village and in the area are looking forward to the bakery, especially the poorest. Therefore I want to ask again for your help at this point.

## Further aid projects that were carried out during this year



Dialysis patient

Thanks to the help of many friends, dioceses and aid organizations, the following projects were implemented in the course of this year:

the purchase of a school bus, the renewal of the electrical system in one church, the installation of loudspeaker systems in two

churches, support for catechesis and for

summer camps; five large containers with humanitarian goods from Austria and

Germany were gratefully received in Syria, medical support and medication for dialysis patients was granted, support was provided for priests and for poor families, and Christmas presents for children were provided.



2 large humanitarian containers Obersiebenbrunn

## Request for further help and may God bless your hands



I think it has become clear to us that the people in Syria urgently need our helping hands for such humane projects. Korbgenossenschaft tries to join these hands for the needy people in Syria. This is also expressed in our logo. Christ in the middle connects them into one community.

At this point I would like to thank the numerous friends and supporters for the great love that they have shown by donating as well as by motivating and encouraging others to help.

I would like to thank the private donors, the institutes, the parishes and associations for their brotherly and sisterly solidarity with the Christians in Syria and for their energetic, exemplary work.

I would like to mention that up to 90% of the donations we have received so far for this project have come from people who have made a pilgrimage to Medjugorje. I was there two years ago and asked the Queen of Peace for help for Syria. During my last visit in June of this year, I asked Her for help with the bakery. Soon afterwards, more than € 200,000 in individual donations were flowing to the bakery project. I would therefore like to thank especially the Mother of God especially for the compassionate people whom she sent.

I would like to entrust all of you to Her protection and I wish you all a blessed and joyful Christmas with lots of light from the Newborn. The new New Year of 2020, I wish you lots of hope, peace, joy, happiness, health and all the very best.

God bless you!

Your Fr. Hanna Ghoneim

