

# Christmas Letter 2020

## God's justice and peace are anchored in us

Dear friends,

At this blessed time of Christmas, in the Solemnity of the birth of our Savior, and as we are approaching the end of 2020, which has been overshadowed by the Covid-19 crisis, I would like to write to you again. On the one hand, this letter is intended to describe the current situation in Syria and on the other hand I want to keep you informed about the things achieved by the Foundation "Korbgemeinschaft" thanks to your support. In the following chapter, I try to outline where help is particularly urgent these days. Finally, I will add a few words about my personal vision for improving the prospects for Syria. However, I need to mention that due to Covid-19 I have not been able to travel to Syria since February of this year. I received the information about Syria from my confreres and friends in Syria, with whom the Foundation "Korbgemeinschaft" closely cooperates.

### 1. The situation in Syria: poverty and social chaos

At the moment, the average monthly salary of a normal government employee is slightly below 15 €. There are people who don't even earn 10 € per month and there are many who have no paid work at all. This information alone gives you a sense of the depressing humanitarian situation. More than 90% of the civil population in Syria currently live below the poverty line. I am not referring to the definition of poverty the way it is commonly assessed here in Europe, but life in deepest misery. Thousands of families depend on donations and humanitarian aid. The lack of job opportunities makes the problem of corruption, crime, exploitation, drug trafficking, prostitution, etc. ever more serious.

This impoverishment is a consequence of the war and of the social injustices in our world. Even more so it is the direct outcome of the blatant world politics, which are based on power and authority rather than on humaneness.

The main concerns of the people in Syria today are the search for bread and heating oil, i.e. the fight against hunger and cold. Power supply has been reduced. During every 6-hour time span, there is an interruption of 4 hours, leaving electricity for only 2 hours. In many places there is no electricity for a whole day or even for several days. It is hard to imagine the hardships of pupils and students who try to study under these conditions. Enterprises that need a lot of electricity are also affected by shutdowns.

Diesel is difficult to obtain anywhere in the country. If it is available at all, one has to pay a high price. The state allots to each family 400 liters of heating oil a year in two installments at a reasonable price, which is, however, **not enough** for a family **to even last for a month** in the cold winter. There are no firm prices on the black market and you often have to pay five times as much. Unfortunately there is no state control for such transactions.

Bread doesn't cost much in Syria. For many people, bread is the main food for survival. The problem is that even bread is subject to a quota and you can't buy as much as you actually need for the family. Often you have to queue up for hours to get your own allotment (4 flatbreads per person and per day). The long queues in front of the bakeries are part of everyday life in Syria, which is particularly challenging now in the cold season.



Meat, fruit or sweets are meanwhile regarded as sheer luxury goods. People can only dream of such products.

During the year of 2020 a great number of disasters have struck the population of Syria. They have caused upheavals in the economy, have led to galloping inflation and have thus plunged the population into abject poverty:

- Outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early March. Unfortunately, people don't know how to cope with the crisis. In many cases it is impossible to observe the precautionary measures. Protective clothing, masks and disinfection materials are difficult to obtain or unaffordable.
- Putting on fire ten thousands of hectares of wheat fields in the northeast of the country in June and July. This happened already for the second time in areas under Kurdish control. While Syria always used to export top quality wheat, the country now has to import what. The state has to buy, without having state income. How can such things happen?! All this explains the current bread crisis.
- Putting on fire olive groves in the west of the country in October (at harvest time). A great loss for the poor people who live on agriculture. These badly damaged fields will still need years for recovery.
- The Caesar Act, which came into force in early June. This Act imposes economic sanctions on the part of the US against any state, any society, any organization and any company that supports the Syrian state. Many business people had to stop or suspend their business activities in Syria.
- The crisis in Lebanon has also had a negative impact on the Syrian economy since October 2019.
- Not to forget the armed conflicts in the north and in Idlib between the Islamist rebels, who are supported by Turkey and the so-called "Democratic Forces of Syria" (Kurds), which are supported by the US. These skirmishes are wearing down the people who live in these areas.

## 2. What the Foundation “Korbgemeinschaft“ is doing in the face of the dramatic situation

Our motto is: We must not remain inactive in the face of the misery of people. Salvation lies in the grace of God resuscitating us. With His grace and with the help of the numerous benefactors and aid organizations, we have been able to carry out the following projects this year:

### a. Bakery of Grace

Our pioneer project. It was truly God's grace that brought it about. Despite all the various obstacles, the bakery was completed to the point that good bread has been provided to the people in Maaruneh and the surrounding since September 11, 2020.

Currently 1,500 kg of bread are produced every day, providing at least 8,000 people

with bread. The production volume is planned to be increased step by step in order to be able to supply communities everywhere in the region. We intend to take this step, when a delivery van becomes available.



### b. Food and hygienic articles during the Covid pandemic

The donations received from individuals and the support from aid organizations have enabled us to provide 3,500 poor families with basic food. Some families have also received financial help for their own specific needs.



### c. Medication

Around 200 poor people in various villages, mainly the chronically ill, receive help, whenever available, for medication. Unfortunately, this is possible only on a sporadic basis.

### d. Students and pupils

We try to promote education by providing learning supplies and tuition fees. The young people are highly motivated to master as many school and university lessons as possible despite the Covid situation.

### e. Rental support

In order to prevent massive homelessness (often a direct consequence of unemployment), 100 poor families have received rental subsidies. At the same time, this also helps those who very often earn their only income from renting out part of their already limited living space.

#### **f. New Testaments for First Communion Children**

Because of the Covid pandemic, the First Communion celebrations have been postponed to September. Some parishes have shifted plans to next year. Nevertheless we obtained 1,500 copies of the New Testament.

#### **g. Christmas gifts for children and catechists**

Persistent poverty and deprivation wear down not only the physical but also the psychological health. A ray of hope at the time of the birth of Christ is incredibly important so that people do not fall into depression.



#### **h. Containers with humanitarian goods**

It is amazing how warm-heartedly people respond to fundraising calls. This year we were able to send 6 large containers (à 40HC = 67 m<sup>3</sup>) to Syria: three containers from Austria and three from Germany. Mainly clothing, warm blankets, items for the hospital and care sector, walking aids, etc. Thousands of families are supported by these goods.



### **3. Where your continued help is needed**

The Foundation „Korbgemeinschaft“ is collecting financial as well as material and non-material help:

- At the moment, people need help with food, especially milk for children, oil, cereals, rice and sugar, but also for other everyday products (such as hygienic products and detergents) as well as for medicines and heating oil.
- Parents attach great importance to a good education for their children. Students in particular need help for the fare to and from the education institution, for annual fees and writing materials.
- Your support is also needed to complete some work in and around the bakery, which has been left half-finished for the time being, and for certain additional facilities to gradually expand the production capacity.
- We need ideas and material support to employ young people and jobseekers (agricultural production, processing, etc.).
- For many small and single-person companies it would make sense to provide various materials, second-hand tools, etc.

- Various initiatives in the parishes or in the circles of friends to collect donations in kind as well as money are of great relevance to the work of the Foundation “Korbgemeinschaft”.

#### **4. Vision and Outlook**

Poverty in itself is not a bad thing. If it becomes too acute, however, it can turn into a breeding ground for crime, corruption, exploitation and social unrest. This is what happens when the poor are abandoned. On the other hand, poverty could be gradually alleviated if the poor were given guidance and the means to help themselves.

During this Christmas season, when we sing about “justice”, I look at the depressing humanitarian situation in Syria and ask, “Where is this Justice?!” How can a person live without an income?

The basis of existence has been forcibly stolen from the Syrian people. People's homes have been destroyed; the best doctors, engineers, scientists, teachers, craftsmen, and skilled workers have emigrated; the local currency has lost much of its purchasing power due to the embargo and the tightened economic sanctions; salaries have become so low that you feel as if you were working for free; the oil in the Kurdish-controlled areas is stolen from the Syrian people; young people turn their backs on their home country; the impoverished youngsters are turned into mercenaries for foreign powers; nobody is allowed to help the state, otherwise they will be punished (Caesar Act); in addition to all this, there is now the Covid pandemic, which is paralyzing the people; the state has hardly any income because tourism is at a standstill, industry and agriculture are badly damaged, forests and fields are deliberately burned down; the economy is severely damaged. Syria used to be a renowned exporter of wheat and oil. Today, people live without energy, they have no heating oil from their own resources and are experiencing a terrible bread crisis. All of this shows the injustice committed against the Syrian people.

Everyone is aware of the difficult humanitarian situation in Syria. I am surprised that the so-called international community is doing nothing about this knowingly caused impoverishment.

What can bring about help in the face of the injustices of our world order? There is only one word that comes to my mind, namely "GRACE". Only the grace of God, the care of God, can save. This grace is perceptible through those who believe in Jesus. This is what I learned from the example of the bakery that we have called the "Bakery of Grace" because it is indeed a gift from God that has been realized through the hands of believers.

Many friends ask me if there is still hope that Syria can get back on its feet. My answer – and this does not only apply to Syria – is that hope depends on how much we perceive God's grace inside of us and with what intensity of faith we act.

Although peoples' acute need is for food, it would be extremely important to also create jobs so that they can earn their daily bread with their own hands in the long run. This is exactly what the people want themselves, because they are hardworking and motivated and want nothing more than to rebuild their country and return to a normal life.

The bakery is an example of this help towards self-help. We would like to add two more floors directly onto the bakery building in order to set up a social market and a soup kitchen. All of these projects are meant to create good and meaningful jobs for young people. I hope and trust that this work will be fully in line with God's will.

We would like to carry out various other projects with your support, especially the development of small family businesses. People who have learned a profession and could practice it if they had the means could for example benefit from second-hand tools. We tried to support two families in this way and both cases have proved to be successful: A farmer can now produce milk with two sheep, make yoghurt from the milk and sell it in the village. Another one got an opportunity to earn money with the help of tools for plumbing installations.



I believe that step by step we can enable people to get the economy going again through hard work and diligence.



What people really need is not only our hands, but also our hearts in order to get back on their feet and be able to take care of themselves. Let us help them, each of us, as best as we can.

I am confident that we Christians can do a lot for justice and thus for peace in this world. We don't necessarily have to have political power. It suffices if we feel the grace of God inside of us and act accordingly.

In this sense I wish you the true joy of the Christmas days. In deep gratitude for your brotherly and sisterly support let me wish you grace and strength from God and his Son Jesus Christ for all your endeavors to bring about justice and peace in the world.

**Have a Merry Christmas time full of joy and love**

Your Fr. Hanna Ghoneim

Vienna, December 24, 2020

