

Bread for Syria

Vienna, March 11th, 2022

Dear friends and supporters of Korbgemeinschaft (Basket Community),

During my two latest visits to Syria this year (first for 2 weeks, from January 16 - 29, and soon afterwards again for 5 days, from February 14 - 19, 2022) I witnessed that the humanitarian situation has been steadily deteriorating. The prospects have become even worse as a result of the Ukraine crisis. Deep concern about the future is noticeable everywhere. The question that the people living in Syria are asking themselves is: "What should we do?" Most people see no future for themselves in Syria and think of emigration as the only way out of the misery. But my faith says, and I am firmly convinced of it: There is still a chance in the home country if Christians act in the spirit of Christ, their master, both in Syria and abroad. So the question is: **What are we to do?**

In this letter, I would like to talk about a pressing issue, namely the rapidly spreading famine in Syria. Poverty is getting ever worse. Food is getting more and more expensive. The sources of income are becoming ever scarcer. Eleven years after the outbreak of war, reconstruction initiatives are still suffocated by the ongoing, unrelenting embargo. People have reached a point where resignation and the fear of starvation are growing.

In the midst of the pandemic, thanks to donors and sponsors, we were able to complete and put into operation the *Bakery of Grace*. This was done with the intention of being able to reliably provide poor people with bread at a low price and, if necessary, free of charge. We have so far managed to fulfil this expectation, but now we are facing an immense challenge.

The quantities of flour allocated by the state to bakeries that guarantee low-cost bread is becoming ever smaller and could soon run out altogether. I need to mention in this context that before the war, Syria used to be a thriving wheat producer. The state provided the farmers with seeds free of charge and purchased the harvest for a certain rate. The farmers grew durum wheat, which is suitable for pasta production. The state was able to export a large part of the harvest abroad and received foreign currency in return. With this money, considerably larger quantities of soft wheat were purchased, especially from Russia and the Ukraine, thus enabling the state to subsidize the flour for the bakeries.



The *Bakery of Grace* for example receives a ton of subsidized flour for approximately \$20 (our daily quota is currently 1.5 tons). By comparison, the price of flour on the open market is currently \$500 per ton. For several years now, the state has not received the harvest, or only a very small part of it. The wheat fields are partially set on fire (allegedly by "terrorists") before the harvest; another part of the harvest is stolen and sold privately. Most of the

fields located in the fertile Syrian "granary" are in the areas still held by the Kurds, where US interests prevail.

The energy situation is also getting tighter, fuel is becoming more and more expensive and ever scarcer and in this sector, too, state quotas are being reduced.

At present the state has to import soft wheat from abroad, while at the same time there is little durum wheat available for export. The bakeries can therefore no longer be supported as before. Fewer and fewer citizens are now getting bread at the subsidized price of the equivalent of 5 euro cents (0.05 €). Only recently 600,000 families were removed from the subsidy list. Let's imagine: A family with a very modest income buys 2-3 kilos of bread at the equivalent of 15 cents one day and the next day the same family has to pay 1.00 to 1.5 € for the same quantity of bread. In normal bakeries, a kilo of bread costs 2,800 SYP (= €0.65). It is getting ever tighter for the impoverished persons who see themselves acutely threatened by hunger. We must bear in mind that desperate people easily get entangled in dubious dependencies or drift off into crime. So we need to ring the alarm bells now.

A frequent experience that has left a painful impression on me during recent visits is the number of people who desperately rummage through garbage cans. This touches me deeply, because in an impoverished country, what can be found in the garbage cans that is still usable? And yet this seems to be part of everyday life for the poor and hungry. I personally see in such people the suffering Jesus.



The request of Jesus Christ, "You give them something to eat" is getting louder and louder for me. If the state cannot give us flour, then we have to see how we can get it ourselves. And here I rely on those people who are not indifferent to the misery of their fellow human beings. The *Bakery of Grace* has a capacity to process up to 20 tons of flour per day, which means we could supply up to 50,000 people with low-cost bread every day. However, we have to organize the necessary flour ourselves.

It would be desirable if we could get flour from countries that have excess quantities available. We mainly need flour for the *Bakery of Grace*, but it would be good to be able to get flour for other bakeries as well, in order to save as many people as possible from famine.

Unfortunately, the Ukraine crisis has also pushed up wheat prices here in Europe. This will obviously render it more difficult to obtain wheat. Currently, flour that is not subsidized by the state costs the equivalent of EUR 500 per ton on the local market (which is currently more than here in Europe, even if you factor in the transportation costs).

We could process around 7,000 tons of flour in the *Bakery of Grace* every year. I wonder if we are able to organize this quantity. My firm belief is that it will be feasible. I would like to ask two things of you today:

1. To make the cry for help by the people in Syria audible everywhere.

For doing this, clergy and other persons involved in the church can draw attention to this need by their intercessions or spread our call for donations.

2. Respond promptly to responses from helpful people in Western countries.

Each parish can also set a sign of solidarity. The Christians in Syria are putting great hopes and trust in their socially committed sisters and brothers abroad, who are receptive to Christ's words "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat" (Mt 25:35).

I am confident that the abundant and unfailing grace of God is the only saving power from misery. Jesus teaches us in the Lord's Prayer that we should ask for our daily bread because he knows that bread ultimately comes from God. In this sense we can also help through prayer.

Of course, it has also been suggested to me that sufficient quantities of wheat should be cultivated directly in Syria again in the long term. This idea is logical and it is my deep wish that this will come true. Unfortunately, the destructions of the war did not spare agricultural equipment and machines either, and many fields have long lain fallow due to war casualties and massive emigration. Support for seeds, machinery and irrigation is needed to cultivate the fields again.

You can thus help in many ways: through prayer, by looking closely and spreading the word, by donating money, materials or time. Perhaps we can this way demonstrate the mercy of God to the people in Syria. We are at the beginning of Lent, preparing ourselves for the suffering and resurrection of Christ. Fasting causes us to look at the poor and encourages us to do something for them. The suffering of the poor is the suffering of Christ himself and He wants to give them life. Bread gives life. Let us bear in mind that Jesus turned himself into bread in a mystical way so that everyone could receive him. Perhaps through this action we will mediate Jesus Christ and show that HE is truly the salvation of the world.

I wish you all a contemplative and graceful Lent.

Yours in Christ

Fr. Hanna Ghoneim

