

God needs our helping hands

Christmas Newsletter 2022

Dear friends and supporters of *Korbgemeinschaft*,

For quite a while now I have been thinking it over and over what to write to you and how to express my worried mind. Many friends want to know how the people in Syria are doing, how the projects of the Foundation *Korbgemeinschaft* are progressing and, above all, whether and how the *Bakery of Grace* is still running. Your sympathies and signs of genuine interest are comforting for me, especially since my last visit to Syria (this year has taken me to Syria six times) has caused despair and nightmares. For the first time, the situation in Syria seems bleak and desperate to me. I have decided to confide in you, to talk about my anxiety and tell you what I am going through. Perhaps this will result in one or the other feedback that will help the people in Syria to survive.

Please allow me to describe below some of my experiences in Syria, which reflect the general condition of the local people:

Already for the past few years, the electricity power supply has been off for whole days. Especially in rural areas, the lack of energy is very depressing. In the cities, electricity is turned on every 6 hours, but only for a maximum duration of 2 hours. Now, during the winter time, electric power supply no longer follows a regular schedule even in the cities. How can a household these days function without electricity? How can small businesses and production processes be sustained without electricity? Many companies have been closed down because it is no longer profitable to invest in them. This of course means ever higher unemployment and forces people to emigrate.



People are looking for Help in the church

People go to sleep and they wake up the next morning to new energy prices and, as a result, higher prices for food and for all other goods and services. When I was in Syria in September 2022, the Euro rate was 4,300 SYP, now the rate is at 6,400 SYP. The average monthly salary is still unchanged at 100,000 SYP (which is

meanwhile equivalent to merely 15 Euro). A liter of petrol costs SYP 15,000 (Euro 2.5) on the black market today. The extremely high energy prices render mobility and all business activities extremely difficult. People are frustrated. The economic situation has seen no improvement for years and the war in Ukraine makes the prospects even bleaker. All this adds to despair and hopelessness.

In the present letter, I should like to focus particularly on two areas of life that are often addressed in Syria at the moment: education and healthcare. Subsequently I want to add some information on the current status of the *Bakery of Grace*.

Education: The conditions for school lessons are extremely challenging, especially in public schools. Classrooms are dark, currently cold, the sanitary facilities are desolate, there

are few pedagogues, hardly any suitable teaching and writing materials, and the trip to the schools is expensive and functions only sporadically. That's why schools now have three days off per week.



The annual fees in private schools are regularly increased. The same is true for the bus trips to the schools and back. There are new rates for school transportation every month, depending on energy prices.

With regard to the trips to the universities, the students as well as the professors are desperate. Public transport is no longer reliable. Everyone has to find his/her own way of getting somewhere. The lecture halls are overcrowded.

The professors proceed from the prerequisite that the students have PCs, but this is usually not the case. Students often use cell phones as a makeshift substitute for a PC. There are computers in some faculties, but these are not always ready for use. A student of dental medicine told me that he has to buy and bring along all the materials needed for presenting himself for exams. Very often the practical exercises are canceled for lack of electricity. Online learning is not possible for many because the network sometimes fails or is not available at all. Learning and studying has become a struggle. Despite everything, many young ones manage with great effort to get good grades. Of course, it is easier for those who have financial means. A student needs at least 500,000 SYP per month, a pupil 200,000 SYP just for the trips and for some food at the educational institute. In the past, the state was able to offer good education free of charge. Education today is inadequate and expensive.

The healthcare system: From my point of view, the most depressing thing in Syria is the healthcare system. Anyone who falls ill is exposed to even greater misery. The sick one has to be treated privately, but this has become unaffordable for almost everyone. Unfortunately, the few still existing health insurance companies no longer offer adequate coverage. Today, citizens have to bear the financial burden of medical treatment on their own.

Every week I receive pleas to provide help for cancer patients. The sums requested are astronomical. One ampoule sometimes costs up to the equivalent of 3,000 Euros.

Unfortunately, one hears about many serious health problems in Syria today, where help is urgently needed and the sick cannot find any form of remedy. Very often, aid organisations such as *Caritas* or similar institutions are likewise at a loss.

Medication for chronic diseases is no longer readily available. Unfortunately, many medical products are now mainly sold on the black market.

A lot of things are going wrong in this sector. Since everything is scarce, patients are expected to pay the costs before any treatment or surgery. The sums demanded are usually unaffordable, so that treatment, surgery and cure are not provided to them.

There are so many grievances that I cannot list them all in this letter. One question I keep asking myself: People earn very little and life has become exorbitantly expensive. How can people survive at all in this misery? This question has lately been often on my mind and here are some of the answers I got:

1. The salary earned from an employment in the public service suffices for just two or three days. Those who manage to find additional private work can somehow make ends meet.
2. Aid from abroad: Those who have relatives or friends abroad and are supported by them are in a lucky situation. This is also the reason why many young people want to emigrate at any cost.
3. From Corruption: Corruption is lurking around every corner these days. The fact that public servants can no longer live on their salaries is a breeding ground for corruption.
4. Another way that is unfortunately very often taken in order to somehow survive is the path of immorality and crime, above all theft, drug trafficking, prostitution, etc. A social phenomenon noticed ever more frequently is the exploitation of children and child abuse. More and more children have to screen the rubbish in the hope of finding something useful or edible. These are scenes that are incredibly painful for me. In this context I have asked myself: Where are the human rights, the right to a dignified existence for these desperate people?
5. From illegal trading and black market dealings: In this situation where there is a shortage of everything, there is also an illegal trade in energy and even in bread. The state price for a liter of diesel is the equivalent of EUR 0.10, on the black market you have to pay the equivalent of EUR 1.5. A kilo of bread officially costs less than EUR 0.05, but it is traded for EUR 0.30 on the black market. The same is true for medicines. The official price indicated on the package is different from the market price. Bills of medical doctors and hospitals are also constantly rising with the rate of inflation.

These ways (except for the first two) are not pleasing to God. I think Christians, especially those who sincerely believe in Christ, can do a lot about this. The *Bakery of Grace* is a concrete example of how it can work.

The "Bakery of Grace": Many friends are asking me how the situation of the Bakery is developing. Despite all the turbulences, it has remained in operation and it produces bread, which means protection from hunger for many people. Here is a small report on the current status and the numerous challenges faced.

At the moment, the Bakery employs 12 persons. Work begins at 1:30 a.m. and ends at 6 a.m. The sale of the bread takes place from 6

a.m. to 8 a.m. About 1,800 kg of bread are baked every day. One kg of bread is sold for 200 SYP (about 0.03 Euro). The cost of a kg of bread at our Bakery is around 0.20 Euro. A balance sheet is drawn up at the end of the year. The high costs are due to the fact that we have to pay the diesel for the power generator ourselves (the public power supply has been a problem for years), as well as wages, maintenance, repairs, materials such as yeast, salt, sugar, oil, etc. Gradually the experience concerning production and logistics are getting better and better. In any case, the quality of the bread is very good. It would be nice if we could produce a larger quantity per day. Since there is not enough flour in Syria, our Bakery receives only 1.5 tons of flour from the state every day.



How can the Bakery finance itself? In times like these, certainly not from the business result, which – from a purely economic point of view – is unprofitable. Private bakeries can no longer survive without illegal business. The *Bakery of Grace* is not kept alive by illegal business, but by the inexhaustible grace of God, which takes shape in the form of bread. The Bakery is owned by the Greek Catholic Patriarchate and is not intended to serve primarily as a business activity, but rather as a social Christian service. The reason why I personally do not want to speak of "deficits" is that the bakery is sustained by God, through His charitable donors.

A profiteer cannot comprehend this, but someone who knows what grace is will understand. It is interesting that people are happy to donate toward this purpose because the bread is of good quality and it is given to the poor at a very low price. There is a strong will to keep the Bakery running despite all the obstacles and challenges.



This Bakery teaches me personally "Whatever the Lord pleases" will happen (Psalm 135,6). God only needs faithful hands. He does not need profiteers, but people who are aware of his mercy and act accordingly. What kills in the crisis are the often cold and cruelly calculating profiteers of misery (the war profiteers). What enlivens is the rich and inexhaustible gift that comes from God.

With this in mind, I wish you from the bottom of my heart the warmth of God's love, especially at Christmas time, peace and silence to reflect on essential things, comfort and compassion in hours of sadness and despair, Christian-minded friends conveying cheerfulness and confidence in all situations in life. Furthermore, I want to wish you a prosperous and healthy New Year of 2023.

Your

Father Hanna Ghoneim

Vienna, December 24, 2022

