

Finding and Giving Hope

Dear friends and supporters of *Korbgemeinschaft*,

This letter summarizes the main impressions gathered during my latest visit to Syria, which took place from May 18 to 27. I had the privilege to be accompanied by a remarkable person, namely Princess Marie of Liechtenstein, the wife of Prince Gundakar of Liechtenstein. It was an exciting journey with many insights and new impulses that I should like to share with you.

The main purpose of the trip included meetings with the groups of young volunteer helpers in Latakia and Aleppo, which *Korbgemeinschaft* is able to support thanks to the generous donations you have entrusted to us.

Princess Marie of Liechtenstein was particularly interested in gathering impressions of the situation of women. She wanted to come along and see the needs for herself in order to think about whether help is possible and how to approach this. Supporting women and easing their plight is also an important item on the agenda of *Korbgemeinschaft*.

As is the case during every visit to Syria, a few unforeseen program items came up that had not been scheduled in advance, but were nevertheless interesting and worth mentioning.

All in all, we gained a great variety of interesting impressions, which radiate a lot of optimism and hope and at the same time motivate us to strive for an even stronger commitment to the people of Syria.

During this trip we had many motivating encounters with clergymen, bishops, priests, religious and many Christians involved in social work. In Damascus we met the Syrian Catholic Bishop Jean Jihad Battah, the Franciscan Sisters and many priests and lay people. We also visited two schools for handicapped children and the organization "*L'Arche*" (a home for handicapped people).

In Homs we had the opportunity to meet the Melkite Bishop Jean Abdo Arbach and the newly ordained Syrian Catholic Bishop Julian Jacques Mourad. We also had interesting conversations with some priests and many active Christians.

On the way to Latakia, we stopped in Marmarita to visit Bishop Georges Khawam, the Melkite Bishop of Latakia, a kindergarten run by the "*Sisters of Perpetual Help*" and a nearby old people's home run by the Greek Orthodox Church. In Latakia we went to the Franciscan monastery and gathered information on their wonderful works and charity projects. Accompanied by Father Fady Azar OFM, we had a chance to visit some areas that were particularly badly hit by the earthquake. Fr. Fady is one of the local partners of *Korbgemeinschaft* and receives money and humanitarian goods from us for distribution to the poor in his parish. We also visited another emergency help distribution center in Latakia, set up in the local Melkite church, where we had a chance to talk to the women of the parish and with a group of young volunteers engaged in social work.





After our encounters in Latakia we proceeded to Aleppo. Along the way we witnessed the terrible destructions caused by the war and by the earthquakes. The poverty in these areas is beyond description.

In Aleppo we had a chance to visit the Melkite bishop Georges Masri, bishop emeritus Jean Jeanbart and some priests. Our highlight was meeting the group of young volunteers who are supported by *Korbgemeinschaft* so that they can provide the poor with food, clothing and some money.

These meetings were intense and in-depth. We witnessed the terrible needs first hand. What was not new to us is the fact that many people are left with nothing after the catastrophe. In the earthquakes, many lost their homes. The fear of sudden aftershocks has remained omnipresent. This intensifies people's wish to leave their home country. The rents for apartments that are still habitable are constantly increasing. The families living in rental apartments have to pay ever more. You can clearly see that life is becoming increasingly expensive, the income is meager and the little that people still own is losing in value every day. Anywhere you turn you can sense the hope that help is provided from abroad.

People are living in deep misery. Still, there is hope, especially among those who remain faithful to the Church and who willingly serve the Church's aims. These are not many, but still there are enough of them. I see great hope in these committed young people and women. They constitute two important pillars of society that deserve special attention and support. These people are looking for "a life in dignity" not only for themselves, but also for the others who need their help. In these helpers I felt a true and deep Christian love. In my opinion, they act like "leaven" that we should cultivate and multiply.

The young people in Syria are giving hope but they urgently need our solidarity and support

First I should like to describe the youth group in Aleppo. 25 young people are doing volunteer work in the service of God. They have lost a lot themselves, but the good, compassionate soul remains in them and this is their true treasure.

They receive from *Korbgemeinschaft* humanitarian goods, food, clothing and also financial funds. They ensure that this aid actually reaches those most in need. They have set up in front of St. George's Church (the largest Melkite church in Aleppo) a space to distribute clothes. The families come and are allowed to choose what they need most.





Korbgemeinschaft-Team in Aleppo

So far, considerably more Muslims than Christians have taken advantage of this help. The young volunteer team does a great job. Some of them go out into the streets and invite the impoverished to get food and some clothing. When the members of the team of helpers hear about the problems of the needy, they also visit them at home and bring along some cash for the families. They often listen patiently and attentively to the needs of the people and share their sorrows with us in the form of photos, videos and descriptions of the

individual situations. This is done at the explicit wish of those giving insights into their daily lives. Whenever the young helpers hear about old people who are on their own and many of whom have difficulty walking, they go to the makeshift shelters and bring help directly to the people. Along with the goods, it is important for them to also bring comfort and joy and happiness for the poor children. I am personally impressed that this volunteer group is taking initiatives, developing own ideas based on the situation and trying to implement these ideas with our support. The families need much more than just material things to cope with the difficult situation. They need a lot of warm-hearted attention, encouragement, consolation and hope, as well as a ray of joy and special events to now and then light up the sad daily struggle for survival. All these things are part of the volunteer efforts of this group of young helpers.

A similar group has also been formed in Latakia. What is particularly gratifying is the fact that these two groups are in contact with each other and are exchanging ideas and best practices. In the meantime, some highly committed Christians in Homs are planning to set up a similar volunteer group and a distribution center. I believe the Spirit of Christ works in such people and makes them grow in love and charity.



Soccer tournament of the parishes in Aleppo

Women can do a lot in this crisis, but they need ideas and resources to implement them

Another social pillar that I regard as very important is the extremely valuable potential of women. I had the opportunity to meet widowed women in a parish. These are often relatively young (between 28 and 35 years old). Their biggest concerns are the children. The women have to work in order to feed their children, but at the same time they should take care of the children at home. When they work, they often have the feeling of being taken advantage of.

A woman who studied business administration worked in a private company as a manager. She had a salary equivalent to US\$100. In itself this is a good pay compared to that of public servants. Nevertheless, she had the feeling that the employer earned a multiple from her work. She asked for a pay rise several times, but to no avail. Volunteering for the church now made more sense to her than working for the company, because she didn't feel that her work was duly appreciated by the company owner. Many women have similar feelings.

All of them have expressed the wish that the Church should give them a worthy job. It hurts to see that the church pays far too little attention to these valuable members of Christian communities. I could see in the eyes of these women that they primarily want to live in dignity. Working in and for the Church brings them joy and honour. The church should do more in this area and should show solidarity with these women. They have great potential for the Church and for society as a whole.



What type of help is needed in Syria?

In Austria I am often asked: Where is help needed?

All those living in misery need financial help for rent, food, education, repairs in the apartment and equipment repairs, mobility, medical care, rechargeable batteries, etc. We try to send much needed small household appliances in the humanitarian goods containers. This is basically a form of emergency aid, which serves to ensure short-term survival.

Sustainable reconstruction aid would consist in creating job opportunities so that people could survive in the long run and could provide for themselves and their families with the work of their own hands.

Accordingly, *Korbgemeinschaft* has been trying for some time, with the help of many friends, to carry out projects that enable people to help themselves. The "*Bakery of Grace*", our pioneering project in the area of reconstruction aid, has provided an important service since its opening, particularly during the Covid pandemic and after the earthquake. The bakery produces plenty of bread in good quality. Many poor people and a number of social institutions benefit from this bread. Other projects of *Korbgemeinschaft* so far in the area of help to self-help include a school bus, a rural dental clinic, sewing machines for some women, a moped for someone who delivers home food packages for non-mobile people and much more. Some recipients get a certain amount of seed capital to build up a business step by step. We plan to start farming projects as soon as possible. We have already been able to finance two tractors for this purpose.



We are also providing ongoing support for students so that they can continue their education and will hopefully be able to complete their studies. Emergency aid for poor families with clothing, food and medical supplies is also carried on continuously.

What strengthens my hope for a better life in Syria is the faith of many Christians here in Europe and the strong will to help because people can see the injustice of the situation. These Christians in both Europe and Syria give hope for the future of the Church. For me these are the true witnesses of the faith and love of Christ and also the conveyors of hope.

Let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your help, for the in-kind donations, for the financial support, for the prayers and for advocacy.

I should also like to use this letter to thank all those who responded positively to the appeal for donations after the earthquake and who showed a lot of compassion, solidarity and love. The help came in different ways, just as we had hoped and even more. Many have donated, collected, packed and loaded things into the containers. So far this year we have already been able to pack and ship 5 large containers from Austria and Germany. Very soon 2 more containers will be sent from both Austria and Germany. In addition to the donations in kind, impressive amounts of cash donations have been received in our Foundation's account. A total of over €150,000 has come from parishes, dioceses, charities and private individuals, including regular donations to cover those operating costs of the *Bakery of Grace* that exceed the sales proceeds, so that the poor can get their daily bread at a minimum price and, if necessary, free of charge. I should like to thank each donor personally, but unfortunately I don't have the time to do so. With your kind donations we have been able to help thousands of families who would suffer hunger, homelessness and utter misery without your help.

I should also like to convey special thanks to all those who have prayed for us and our work and who have moved many hearts on behalf of the suffering people in Syria. In prayer we feel the need of our fellow human beings but at the same time the power of God in them. Therefore we support them.

Last but not least, I should like to thank those who give us valuable advice and support us mentally and morally so that we can continue our work despite all obstacles.

In my recent pilgrimage to Medjugorje, I felt a great strength in the Church that gives me hope. Our Lady has many "children" who pray the Rosary. These people are anchors for the future. I thank God for having made their acquaintance. I also feel a sense of belonging to and connectedness with them.

Trusting in this strength, I should like to entrust you all to the protection of Our Lady.

May the grace of Jesus Christ always accompany you so that you can bear witness to His work in your words and deeds.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Hanna Ghoneim

Vienna, July 10, 2023



Collection of humanitarian goods in Vienna



Humanitarian goods in Vienna- ready for transport to the earthquake stricken areas in Syria



Loading a container despite heavy rainfall



Arrival of humanitarian shipment in Syria



Arrival of humanitarian truck shipment in Aleppo



Visit to the „Bakery of Grace“



Fans cheering at the soccer tournament in Aleppo



Community of Charity in Damascus