

Dear friends and supporters,

It has been quite a while since you received my previous newsletter. The reason for this is not that I have had nothing to report, but rather that I didn't know where to start. There is so much that I want to share with you.

The people in Syria have been waiting for so many years for their situation to improve. There have been repeated setbacks, again and again shattering hopes. Today everyone is looking with great fear and concern at the bloody and highly dramatic events in the Gaza Strip. The war is waged between Hamas and the Israeli army, but those who inevitably become victims are predominantly civilians, – innocent children, women, elderly, sick and helpless people. The same thing is happening in Syria. The embargo, which is officially directed against the regime, affects largely the poorest levels of the population, and they are the ones who suffer most from the consequences. Although we cannot do much about political, economic or military decisions, experience shows that we can do a lot to alleviate the suffering of the poorest people.

### **My personal impressions of the current situation in Syria:**

As a result of the protracted negative economic developments, the humanitarian situation in Syria has become extremely depressing and is even continuing its downward trend. How can a citizen today be expected to live on an average monthly salary of an equivalent of only 15 EUR, let alone support a family?! With this salary, you have the constant impression of having to work almost for free. It is obvious, that this income is far too little to make a living from. This in turn paves the way for the rise of corruption and crime. Public employees likewise can no longer make ends meet with what they earn. This is the reason why many of them try to charge extra money here and there illegally for services that are actually part of their jobs.

Hundreds of thousands of houses have been badly damaged by the war and by the earthquakes and there is a lack of funds for repair. Thousands of houses have been lying in ruins for 10 years. Millions of people still do not have a permanent home and are constantly on the run. Rental payments are no longer affordable for most people. They have been waiting for an improvement and for an opportunity to return to their homes for such a long time. This hope continues to dwindle year after year.

Medical care has become increasingly difficult and expensive, especially for the seriously and chronically ill. Medical operation costs are astronomically high. For example, a knee operation costs 30 million SYP (approx. 2,000 EUR) and it will not be carried out until the full amount has been paid. If someone in a family gets cancer, the family must sell all its belongings in the hope of being able to finance the lengthy treatment. A good school education has likewise become quite expensive. In view of rising inflation rates, private schools are charging ever higher fees.



In such cases, parents have no choice but to take their children out of private schools and send them to one of the state schools where the quality of education has dropped considerably.

Everything is still getting more and more expensive, even though the dollar exchange rate has stabilized quite a while ago. The prices are extremely erratic. Two months ago, energy prices rose by 160 % during a single night. Such an increase drives up all other prices. Only a few weeks ago, the price of a 30-piece carton of eggs – a product meanwhile regarded as a standard substitute for meat, which hardly anyone can afford any longer – rose from SYP 32,000 to SYP 58,000 in the course of one night. This creates the feeling that the money no longer has any value.

Every time I visit Syria, I notice how frustrated most people are. They feel insecure in their own country and see no future prospects at home. Therefore, they consider emigration as a last resort out of their misery. Many people dream of getting asylum in Europe, especially in countries that offer social assistance such as Germany, Austria or Sweden. For this prospect that are ready to give up everything at home.

The poorer members of society certainly have no chance of making it abroad. These are people who lost everything in the war, they no longer have a job, a lot of elderly people have been abandoned by society, many of them are traumatized and totally desperate. They have no means left to support themselves. Due to malnutrition, they become increasingly sick and feel left alone in their misery. There are many widowed women, many orphans and abandoned children.

### **Despite all this, there is still hope!**

However, the situation is what it is now, and we need to make the best of it. Despite all the misery, there are also courageous and socially committed Christians in Syria who are rowing against the tide and who do not want to abandon their sick, disabled and elderly fellow human beings. I intend to focus this letter especially on these wonderful people.

The Foundation

*Korbgemeinschaft* strives to strengthen these helpers, who surprisingly include mostly young people, and to sensitize them to their Christian mission.



*Visit to old, deserted persons in Aleppo*



*Retreat in Slinfe, September 2023: Part of the youth group that helps in Aleppo, Latakia, Tartous and Homs, as partners of Korbgemeinschaft*

It important to these young people to seek out their needy fellow human beings and to help them. They come together in prayer and they stand behind their shepherds, – the bishops and priests. They are well motivated along Christian values. The humanitarian goods that *Korbgemeinschaft* regularly sends from Austria and Germany are distributed as fairly as possible. The young helpers visit old people's homes, orphanages and homes for people with disabilities. They inquire about the most urgent needs of the poor and

try to alleviate their suffering as best as possible. They distribute small amounts of cash, buy medicine for the sick, and provide food and sometimes some energy for families in need.

They look after the children and try to ensure that they do not lose the joy of life despite all the hardships. They suggest interesting ideas that can help to lighten up people's lives. I was in the lucky situation of meeting the young helpers during my latest visit to Syria in September this year while they gathered for a retreat with the Franciscans in Slinfe, near Latakia. The particularly



*The partner team of Korbgemeinschaft in Latakia, with food packages for needy families*

gratifying aspect about this is that these helpers have been increasing in numbers. There



*Happiness of children who have just received some milk*

are now 100 of them. They are looking after around 2,000 families, as well as many sick and lonely people. The helpers are committed to the

spirit of the Church: they follow in the footsteps of Jesus. They serve as a sort of sensor in society. Where there are wounds, they look carefully and try to provide alleviation. *Korbgemeinschaft* supports them and gives them what the „basket“ is holding in store for them.

I personally think that there is good potential for gradual reconstruction through those who remain in their home country, provided they receive support from outside. We have to keep in mind that most people who receive help are much more interested in obtaining “help towards longer-term self-help” than in being dependent on alms. This safeguards human dignity and conforms to the mission statement of



*Preparation of food packages for Christmas in Latakia*

*Korbgemeinschaft* that help should always be provided at eye level. People are willing and eager to work hard



*Happiness about warm clothing from our humanitarian container shipments*

and to get things done with their own hands, but unfortunately numerous business people have turned their backs on the country in recent years. I plan to write in more detail about such reconstruction projects in a separate letter soon. I will specify in my next letter what type of help is specifically needed.

However, at this very moment we are quickly approaching Christmas. The whole world is looking forward to this event. For the first time, I recently heard these sad words from a fellow priest in Syria: "I almost wish that this festival wouldn't come because I can't give anything to the poor, not even to the children." Another priest told me: "We can no longer ignore people's needs because Jesus appears through them." He reminded me of Christ's words: "Whatsoever you do to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do unto me." It is common for the poor at this time of the year to expect something from the Church that brings joy to them. As Christians who want to convey God's mercy, we should help the Church in Syria to fulfill its mission in the spirit of Christ. These young people plan to provide food and small amounts of money to up to 3,000 families in need. Many priests ask me for help to buy small Christmas presents for children. There are 6,000 of these children in their parishes. In this cold season, families are looking for warmth for their children. Many are asking for heating oil.

It can be comforting and meaningful for all of us to think about the families in need during this Advent season and to do something for them, namely to make a donation or to collect donations through activities such as parish cafés, benefit concerts, flea markets, birthday parties or anniversaries dedicated to a humanitarian purpose, and similar initiatives. It often helps to talk to friends about the activities and goals of *Korbgemeinschaft* and to motivate people to help on site in Syria, where the need is particularly pressing. Your donation, which will reach those in need on a 1:1 basis thanks to our voluntary work structure, will certainly result in a lot of comfort, hope, confidence and, in any case, great joy.

It would be nice and desirable if the young, Christian-motivated helpers could approach their needy fellow human beings with their extended hands filled with goods. This would show that Jesus Christ is working through them despite all the surrounding misery. Your generosity can motivate young people to remain in their home country and act as „leaven“ for a humane society.

I wish all and each single one of you a contemplative Advent season filled with grace and with the light and love of Christ.

Your Fr. Hanna Ghoneim



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