

## Hand in Hand in the Footsteps of Jesus

On the occasion of my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, my wish was to be allowed to accompany Fr. Hanna on his visit to Syria in September.

I was particularly looking forward to meeting the highly committed young Christians from around various places in Syria. As mentioned in the previous letter, groups of young volunteers have formed in several cities, following the example of the first group in Aleppo, in order to bring support to those most severely affected by war, earthquakes and the embargo. The trip was scheduled with a view to being able to participate in the first large volunteer meeting intended for the exchange of ideas and best practices. On the evening of September 18, we all arrived in Saydnaya, delighted by a beautiful sunset.

In the morning, we celebrated the Eucharist in the large, covered square. Archbishop George Khawam from Latakia explained that each body needs a skeleton. Our service to our neighbours has a spiritual foundation, which means that we are in the service of Christ. We receive something that we are expected to use and which we eventually must account for. In the parable, silver coins are distributed to the servants to conduct business with. One of the servants hides the money away. He is a bad servant. We should be guided by the search for the ideal service and should connect it with real life. That's how we get ahead. It is about virtually entering into the word of Scripture: Where is God addressing me? Me personally? What does he want from me? Where is he touching me, calling upon me to change prevailing conditions? I may be mocked and misunderstood by others. Those who follow the ideal often appear to others as being weak, as outsiders. And yet it is precisely this person who contributes to building the kingdom of God. Those who use their gifts conscientiously and follow the example of Jesus, those who manage to unite a group, can work miracles. In all of this, we must be mindful. There might always be someone in any group who does not follow the call. Jesus was also betrayed by one of his disciples. We must carefully watch out that the group is not being split up. It is important to speak out openly and courageously when we become aware of disagreements, when something seems to go wrong. We are called to work in the kingdom of God, and we will be held accountable for our work. Let us carefully watch out to ensure that the group is truly following in the footsteps of Jesus, serving the poor and not the egocentric purposes of some individuals.

During our stay in Syria, we visited individual groups in their communities. Some are very homogeneous and have found a good place where they are well equipped. Others still lack a suitable room and equipment. We help them in their search for resources. Each group should have a person in charge of coordination, documentation and reporting. We want to make sure that in context with our projects no one succumbs to the temptations of corruption. In view of the pressing hardships, corruption is unfortunately widespread.

I admire the dedication, fullhearted commitment, the service and the fine intuition of George and Michel, who have brought these groups into being. They live according to the example of Jesus. He called them and sent them out. I feel deeply connected to them, even though I don't understand the Syrian language. The decision to follow Jesus unites us across all borders.

I should like to briefly put the spotlight on a few selected elements of our overall program:

- Visits to very impoverished people (distressing life situations noted in a separate document)
- Visit to “Arche”: carers live with disabled persons and additionally run five day-workshops in the building
- Visit to the “Bakery of Grace” and the social market
- Visits to some church kindergartens and schools
- Meetings with some youth volunteer groups in their communities (Aleppo, Saddad, Latakia)
- Visit to two storage spaces for humanitarian supplies in Aleppo
- Meetings with bishops, priests and religious sisters and brothers
- Catechesis meetings with young people
- Baptism of children
- Projects such as: Water pump, goats for widows, production of caskets, Aleppo soaps and similar products
- Meeting with our long-standing partner pharmacist in Damascus
- Kafar Seta: Renovation of a recreational facility for people with disabilities and their carers
- Impressions of the massive destructions in Aleppo, Latakia, Homs, Damascus and in Lebanon

What touched me deeply during the entire stay were

- \* the hospitality we experienced: despite the little that is available, we were looked after attentively and lovingly cordially
- \* the cordiality
- \* the life-affirming celebration culture
- \* the gratitude for not being forgotten by the world
- \* the natural spontaneity with which my advanced age didn't seem to matter to anyone

After these experiences, I sensed the cry for help inside of me even more strongly than before. Prayers feel different, very real, very close and personal – I can hardly describe it in words.



I embarked on the journey with deep trust in God and I felt no fear.

What we do, we do in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Personal impressions gathered by Sr. Walburga Starkl CS

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Attachment to the “Letter to Friends and Supporters”,  
October 2024 issue