Sermon delivered at the Priesthood Anniversary

at St. Rochus Church in Vienna on October 11, 2026

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear friends and supporters of *Korbgemeinschaft*,





Thirty years ago, Patriarch Maximos V. laid his hand on my head and spoke these words: “Divine grace, which heals the sick and makes up for what is lacking, has chosen Deacon Hanna Ghoneim to become a priest.” These words were followed by a long ordination prayer while the hand remained on my head. That hand weighed so heavily on me that I thought I would never be able to stand up again. I had to remain kneeling. It was very hot in the church and I almost fainted. Strange thoughts crossed my mind: Am I not being called after all? Maybe I won’t be able to remain in the priesthood; maybe I’m not worthy, and so on. Suddenly, after the prayer, I was told, “Stand up; now you will receive the chasuble”, - the same that I am wearing today.’” The Patriarch said, “Axios, Axios, Axios” (worthy, worthy, worthy), and the choir and the congregation also said “Axios” aloud, three times.

“The hand of the Lord was upon me,” we heard in the reading from the Book of Ezekiel. These words appear several times in the book. Whenever God needs something from the prophet, He places His hand upon him and reveals His glory to him. He shows His people in exile how their limbs can come to life when they are breathed upon by the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God gives life. What is dead comes to life. Our God is the God of the living, not of the dead. When He sees His people weary, worn down, sluggish, and powerless, He intervenes through people who listen to Him and who carry out His work of salvation—as the prophets did, and today through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the salvation of the world—yesterday, today, and forever. That is what our Christian faith teaches us. As we heard in the Gospel today, Jesus is told that

his friend Lazarus is sick. Everyone thinks Lazarus is about to die. But Jesus sees that this illness will not lead to death; rather, it serves to glorify God.

How can an illness lead to the glorification of God?

This is the wonderful thing about our Lord. What is bad can serve to bring glory.

When I saw in Syria how people were starving and struggling for their daily bread, how hard it is for people in rural areas to get bread, how poor the quality of the bread is, and how disadvantaged rural people are because of their poverty, I complained to the Lord: "Why are people dealing with Your bread this way, even though Syria has enough wheat?" The answer was: "*You* give the people in your home country good bread." Amid the poor-quality and the scarceness of bread, I heard Jesus say: "I want to give people good bread. Can you do this?" I didn't believe that such a thing was possible, just as the disciples didn't believe at first, when they fed the great crowd on the mountain. At that time, I asked and prayed for a small bakery for a small village. God provided a large bakery that supplies several villages with bread. This is the hand of God working through our hands. Our God is glorious. His glory depends on how we respond to His Word. God shows Ezekiel that the bones come to life when they receive His Spirit. When God lays His hand upon them, wonderful things happen. Then revival can take place.

The war in Syria has turned my life upside down and also called my priesthood into question. Very often I thought about giving up my priesthood, because I felt very weak in the face of people's suffering. The irresponsibility of many of the Church's shepherds and the corruption in society—and even within the Church—led me to have diabolical thoughts. Everywhere, misery and suffering, fear and future worries are chasing people from one place to another. Is it God's will that people live amidst constant war and death? Not at all. God wants life in peace and joy, in justice and freedom. People are to love one another and help one another to live. That is God's will. Where can this be found? Could it be that God's will is unworkable? No. His plan will ultimately be fulfilled. But He needs people who will commit themselves to this purpose. In the midst of despair, God comes, lifts us up, and gives us a mission.

In times of need, God is at work. But He needs workers who are willing to commit themselves to His plan. When we are suffering, He acts and gives us the strength for a new life. His grace is abundant. To collect God's gifts and send them to Syria, I have established a foundation called "Korbgemeinschaft – Hilfe

für Syrien" (aid for Syria), together with some friends and with the blessing of His Eminence Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. This "basket" collects not only money, but also many humanitarian goods, ideas, friends, helping hands, and kind hearts. Everything that goes into it comes from God and is given out of love by our friends to the suffering people in Syria. This has given rise to a community—hence the name "Korbgemeinschaft" (basket community). This community, which acts in accordance with God's will, follows Christ's call: "*You* give them something to eat!" The empty hands of Christians need our gifted hands in order to survive.

This community is meant first and foremost to serve the glory of God. "Do everything for the glory of God," was mentioned in the second reading. This was the motto of my ordination 30 years ago. Just as Jesus glorified God in the illness of Lazarus, so too should we reveal the glory of God in the misery and distress of our fellow human beings in Syria.





The glory of God is to fulfill God's will. God provides the ideas and the strength to put them into action. I have experienced this myself through the bakery, the social markets, the collection of humanitarian goods, the assistance provided to thousands in need, the renovation of many schools and kindergartens, the support of many nursing homes and educational institutions, and the support of pastoral and social work in many parishes. The more we help, the longer God's grace endures.

Our God, whom we have come to know through Jesus Christ, is glorious. We ask Him for something, and He gives us more than we expect.

God's salvation is here. His grace is inexhaustible and at work at all times, especially in times of crisis. When the world is falling apart, we know that the glory of God is near.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Very often I have felt that the Lord's hand weighs heavily upon me. It makes me so tired. But after thirty years, I realize that this hand lifts me up again and again and carries me.

Whenever I plan a project for Syria, I get the feeling at first that it might not come to fruition. I have inner doubts, thinking that I'm a failure and too weak for it. But then I see that the project does happen after all. In the midst of my despair, I hear a soft voice: "Of course you can't do this on your own. Besides, this isn't your project—it's Mine." All you are supposed to do as a priest is simply to spread my will. And indeed, when I speak about what God wants, something wonderful happens. Time and again, the Lord sends us people unexpectedly, and the work is accomplished. This is *Korbgemeinschaft*: placing our hands at God's disposal. God sends his faithful ones—his angels—to carry out his deeds.

At this point, I should like to thank the Trinitarian God for His wonderful grace, which I am privileged to experience through your hands.

I thank all the sisters and brothers from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Slovakia, Sweden, Hungary, the United States, and Mexico, who have spared no effort in supporting God's works with great love through *Korbgemeinschaft*. The list of names is too long to enumerate them all here. I thank my family in Syria and all the young people who distribute the donations from the basket to those in need in Syria. I thank my Melkite parish in Vienna, my second family, which supports me in my mission for the Christians in Syria. I thank all the priests and, above all, the religious sisters for their wonderful dedication to alleviating the suffering of our fellow Christians in Syria. We notice that most of the "helpers" are women. And most of these women are of retirement age. They are not old women, but young angels. Most of these women know Our Lady of Medjugorje, the Queen of Peace, the Gospa. To all these women, I should like to say a few words of thanks and recognition from the bottom of my heart:

You are a treasure of the Church. You are a great source of support for the priests. Through your helping hands, I feel the sustaining hand of God; I feel God's mercy. I learn a great deal from you, especially self-sacrifice and how to have compassion for those in need. Through your hands, I also feel the hands of the Mother of God. I thank the Gospa for you.

With your help, I am able to reveal the glory of God in my priesthood.

Glory be to Him forever and ever.

Fr. Hanna Ghoneim