

## Dear friends and supporters of *Korbgemeinschaft*,

The world has not become more peaceful since my last newsletter - quite on the contrary. This makes it all the more important not to let the call for peaceful solutions, reconciliation, healing and salvation (physical, psychological and spiritual) be silenced.

For the Syrian population, the precarious situation in the immediate vicinity is the next major setback, further postponing any prospects for economic recovery. More and more refugees are arriving from Lebanon in panic. Many of these desperate people will not survive without help from abroad.



Despite certain security concerns, our little group, i.e. Sr. Walburga CS (co-manager of the foundation *Korbgemeinschaft*), Günter Kaltenbrunner (a highly committed, long-time volunteer helper) and myself dared to embark on a trip to Syria in September. The dates were deliberately chosen so that we could attend the first major meeting of Christian volunteer groups from several cities in Syria and thus provide advice and guidance.

The delayed return journey developed into a real challenge due to repeated flight cancellations in Beirut. Both Günter and Sr. Walburga remained calm and without fear. Due to the language barrier, Sr. Walburga and Günter were bound to follow many of the conversations with the young Syrian helpers and also with the completely impoverished families in a non-verbal manner, apart from summary translations for them on my part. And yet, through the power of the Holy Spirit, they both sensed more multifaceted details of what was said and, above all, what was not said than one might expect. After the retreat and information and best practices exchange days with the young volunteer groups, Sr. Walburga summed it up with these words: "I have rarely in my life experienced such great commitment, such strong gratitude, so much warmth and depth".

Attached to this letter, I want to share with you the very personal thoughts of Günter and Sr. Walburga describing their impressions of the encounters and experiences in Syria. I also send to you attached to his letter a sheet with short life stories noted down during our visits to impoverished families.

From my part, I would like to respond specifically to questions that I am repeatedly asked: What is the current situation in Syria? Is the "Bakery of Grace" still running? What can be done to help the Christians there?

### ➤ **The Situation in Syria**

The current situation in Syria is very bleak and has recently deteriorated even further. Salaries have been extremely low for a long time and are lagging ever more behind inflation. Despite the dollar exchange rate having remained stable for months, the purchasing power of the Syrian currency is steadily dropping. Prices for goods of all kinds are rising sharply, often overnight. Inflation is strongly connected to the energy shortage with constantly rising energy prices. Food, medicine, rent, education, mobility - everything keeps becoming more expensive.

The escalation of the war in Lebanon is also weighing heavily on the people in Syria. Among the refugees coming from Lebanon there are many Syrian war refugees who are now fleeing back to

Syria in great fear. The repeated displacements are more than traumatizing for those affected and are additionally driving up prices for energy, food and rents. Many of the once abandoned houses and apartments still lie derelict. There are not enough funds for rebuilding or restoring them. Medical operations in the mostly private hospitals are unaffordable for the poor. Many schools, especially those in rural areas, do not know what will come next. They no longer receive support for maintenance and repairs. There is also hardly any heating material for the winter.

The humanitarian situation is very depressing. Many families live in terrible poverty. Their children are malnourished and undernourished. More and more children are leaving school to work in order to somehow contribute to the family's livelihood.

Many of the young people are planning to leave the country as the only way out, even though



the security situation has become comparatively calm. This is plausible. How can one expect a person to survive, when the expenses exceed the meagre income tenfold or more? In their distress, people are looking for different ways to somehow survive this ordeal. In this situation, there are also

risks and temptations of a questionable or even criminal nature. The few remaining possessions often have to be sold if, for example, a vital operation needs to be financed. Today, the poor in Syria cannot survive without help from outside.

It is difficult to say how this depressing situation will further develop and how much longer it will last. We must cling on to our faith all the more strongly and trust in the help and grace of God, who undoubtedly works for the salvation of people in times of need.

#### ➤ **The Bakery of Grace**

Again and again, I experience the protective hand of God over the Bakery. It keeps running despite the unfavorable economic conditions and produces around two and sometimes three tons or more of good bread per day. When bakeries in the area close temporarily or even permanently due to necessary repairs, the Bakery of Grace is asked to increase its production quantity. The bread is still sold at an extremely low price (and even provided for free to the very poorest). In my eyes, this bakery is a miracle, the work of God through our hands. Despite all the difficulties and challenges, it endures and provides a vital service. It truly demonstrates the grace and mercy of God. A heartfelt thank you to every one of you who donates so that the bakery can continue to fulfill its social and Christian mission.

#### ➤ **What are the needs of people in Syria?**

During the numerous visits we made to families, in meetings with youth volunteer groups, during visits to some institutions and in several discussions, a variety of wishes and ideas have been expressed to us. A number of needs of the poor families can be seen from the attached visit notes, depicting short life stories. We will be compiling a more detailed list in the form of an updated appeal for donations, which I plan to send out to all of you separately before long.

In general, the basic necessities of life focus on food, clothing, medical care, housing, education and energy. We must bear in mind that thousands of families lack these essential means. People are justifiably afraid of the approaching winter time. There is little heating oil on the market. Each family receives a maximum of 50 liters of heating oil from the state for currently 5,000 SYP per liter (this corresponds to € 0.30, whereas two weeks ago this liter price was still at 2,000 SYP). On the black market, a liter now costs more than 17,000 SYP. However, a household needs at least 200 liters during the season in order not to freeze miserably in the buildings that are desperately in need of renovation (nobody is even remotely thinking of comfort temperatures).



Family with 7 children in Damascus



Visit to a family in Aleppo

Many families do not want to take their children out of private schools because the quality level of education in state schools has declined dramatically. However, the annual school fees have doubled compared to last year. During our visit, we noticed that the condition of some rural schools is no longer suitable for teaching. Many students need support to get to and from university.

Many poor families are unable to repair the earthquake damage caused last year, let alone the massive war damage that still exists in so many places. Older people increasingly need care, and the costs of medicine and operations have risen sharply. Even the large aid organizations are generally only ready to cover part of the costs. Cancer patients suffer enormously and so do all their relatives. Often the very last items of their possessions need to be sold in order to finance medication. There are too many other hardships for being all listed here.

### Vision

The fact that children sleep on in the streets and that women beg to feed or protect their children is evidence of alarming hardships. What happens to the poor is unjust. The civilian population is being noticeably and systematically strangled. It is difficult to say who is to blame. We must not accept this blatant injustice in silence, we must speak out for the poor, especially from the part of church.

As a clergyman, I look at the world through God's eyes. God certainly does not want these abuses. What is happening is against his will. God's creation remains beautiful and good despite everything. What people do is temporary and will not be permanent. The war will not last forever, even if its after-effects will be felt for a long time. God wants to restore his destroyed creation. To do this, he needs people who are committed to this cause. Such people certainly exist, they just have to be found and mobilized.

The large gathering of young volunteer teams from different parts of Syria in Saydnaya last month illustrated to me that, despite all the tribulation, there is much that can be done in God's name. These young people are highly motivated by Christianity, they are convinced of the



power of prayer. They make themselves available to the cause of the Church. They organize themselves and achieve amazing results in the social sector. Their impressive commitment is a clear signal that God himself is at work through their hands. They not only bring material aid, but also comfort and loving care to those in need who have been affected by war, earthquakes and the embargo, and now also to the new refugees who arrive every day. This selfless commitment of young people should definitely be encouraged. In my opinion, they are the true leaven of the Church. We can vest a lot of hope in these young people. If we let them down in their commitment and if we do not support them, then we run the risk of losing them.

I'll never forget this special scene in Aleppo, when I saw a girl sitting on the side of a road. She was playing with a cup and you could see that she was hungry. Two young people from our group spontaneously went to the next shop and bought a pizza for her. She took the pizza and was deeply grateful and surprised. Many other passers-by also watched in amazement. It is precisely such compassionate persons whom we need today, those who actually bear witness of the presence of Jesus in situations of despair.

Children are God's creation. They are also friends of Christ. We should pay attention to them. The children who are the victims of war are not forgotten by God. The hungry children on the roadsides and beside the garbage cans are not abandoned by God. If we do not pay attention to them, they could possibly be lured into criminal circles or even turned into terrorists.

My vision is as follows: If we join our hands here in Europe with the hands of these young people in Syria in the name of Christ, then miracles of salvation will happen in His name. This is the objective and purpose of *Korbgemeinschaft*. I would like to use this opportunity to thank the many friends and supporters from the bottom of my heart for reaching out and helping us to accomplish the miracles of Christ for people in need.

I am deeply united with all of you all in prayer and in the genuine concern for the poor,

Your Fr. Hanna Ghoneim

October 2024



General meeting of the partners of *Korbgemeinschaft* with Arch Bishop GEORGE KHAWAM in Syria Saydnaya, September 18-22, 2024