Since the beginning of the year, we had been preparing for corona cases in the Caritas Baby Hospital. The first cases in adults were finally discovered in Bethlehem in early March. We were very concerned as Italy was already mourning a high number of deaths at that time – the fear of the virus increased. The government immediately imposed a curfew and brought public life to a standstill. This worked out very well as we are used to curfews imposed by the Israeli government. Even though staying at home was nothing new for us, this situation was different. The movement between Bethlehem and the surrounding cities was limited to the bare minimum. Numerous facilities of public life and everything that had anything to do with tourism was closed: hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, etc. The Church of the Nativity and the mosques were also closed. The government urged the citizens to stay at home during the day.

At the Caritas Baby Hospital, we immediately responded appropriately to ensure the safety of the sick children and our staff. Since mid-March, our laboratory has been carrying out coronavirus diagnostic tests for Bethlehem and the southern West Bank, commissioned by the Palestine Ministry of Health, since our laboratory is a centre of reference and a central diagnostic station for the coronavirus. Despite the current state of emergency, the Caritas Baby Hospital continues to work well. As many families were not able to come to our hospital, we set up a medical consultation for the parents of ill children via a telephone hotline of the Caritas Baby Hospital where the doctors answer the questions of concerned parents. In this way, we were often able to reassure them, when for example, a child had symptoms, such as fever or cough, and they directly associated this with the coronavirus. Our infection committee has been monitoring the situation daily and has taken the right measures to maintain the medical operation of the hospital and to protect sick children, their family members and the staff. The hospital is well occupied, especially our intensive care unit, as intensive care beds are most needed. Three children infected with the coronavirus came to our hospital; their mothers were also tested positive. They were very surprised by the result since they hardly had any symptoms and did not expect to be infected. Since we screen all patients we take in these cases could be detected and treated in time. At the same time, we were able to protect our staff.

The pandemic affects a country whose population is largely under high economic pressure. The strict protection measures mainly affect the poorest. They are more financially at risk than in terms of health. The already high unemployment rate has again risen in the course of the pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 will be long lasting and leave their mark in the long term. The loss of jobs, the collapse of small and medium-sized businesses and an increase in poverty are the consequences. As far as possible, people are trying to wash and disinfect their hands when going shopping or entering public buildings. However, there is just not enough money to buy enough face masks, gloves and disinfecting agent. Furthermore, when in doubt, people decide in favour of food rather than disinfecting agent.

Currently, the number of infected people is rising again since the curfew is not taken seriously in some areas here. Some people even believe that there are no corona infections at all. Everything was just a
rumour, so they think. As long as some people do not take the corona infections seriously, we will continue to live with these conditions for a long time. The death cases caused by corona amounted to five in March and April. Now the numbers have risen to 114. Most of them are from Hebron, which is a lot by our standards. In a village such as Hebron, where everybody knows everybody, there were five funerals in just one week, which is indeed a lot.

We introduced the obligation to wear face masks for all staff members and patients at the Caritas Baby Hospital. The patients receive the masks free of charge at the reception desk before entering the outpatient clinic. They are instructed in hygiene measures and their temperature is controlled with an electronic measuring device. Keeping consistently the distance and wearing a face mask does often not work outside the CBH – and so we pray that none of our staff members get infected while they are out and about. Two of our doctors and one nurse have already been infected with the coronavirus and sent into quarantine. As all staff members wear face masks, only those three got infected and all those who were working together with them were tested negative. The situation is difficult. We are very worried that the situation might worsen since there is no adequate medical care. Our country does not have the capacities to care for many sick people. Somehow, life has come to a standstill. No one knows how long this will still take; we just hope that the pandemic will soon come to an end. We do want our normal life back! Our whole life now revolves around corona, people only talk about negative things, they are isolated and the media seems to know no other topic than this one. Consequently, many psychologists try to raise awareness for mental illnesses so that those concerned and those suffering from depressions are not ignored. Physical violence has also increased, as men who are not able to work, are always at home and close to their wives, which results in violence in the family.