

Jacob Imam, Class of 2012

By Karen Beman

On June 18 Jacob Imam boarded a Boeing 767 jet bound for the Middle East, via Rome. In less than 24 hours he would venture through a special section of the Vatican to attend an audience with Pope Francis. The visit was in part sponsored by Bethlehem University and Reunion of Agencies to Oriental Churches (ROACO). ROACO is a committee which unites funding agencies from various countries around the world to provide funding assistance in different areas of life: worship buildings to scholarships, houses of study, and formation of social and health care facilities.

During the Papal address, Pope Francis commended the Eastern Christians for suffering for the name of Christ and exhorted them to continue to keep the faith. The opportunity to meet the Pope was an extraordinary experience for Jacob; one few will ever experience in a lifetime." His words were encouraging and his passion startling." True to Jacob's gregarious style, his introduction to the Pontiff was memorable for both men.

"When I shook his hand I showed him how to do a sic'em, the main cheer of Baylor University. I figured that everyone in the world needs to hear about and know two things: the good news of the gospel and how to do Baylor University's specialty sic'em. Pope Francis already knew about the former, so I blessed him with the latter." As Jacob reflected on this rare opportunity to greet the head of the Roman Catholic Church, he was taken by his humble, yet powerful presence. "He truly is an incredible man—a leader that the church truly needs at this time. A leader who any Christian, no matter what denomination, can look to as an example."

Jacob traveled to the Middle East to study Arabic for the summer at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is of Palestinian descent and he was compelled to study and absorb culture, context, and the complexity of faith and heritage. His primary motivations were two-fold. "First, it is one of the best universities in the world and they have a phenomenal language department. Second, I wanted to be among the Israeli people."

"I wanted to learn who these people are, who have a rich history of being used by God. I wanted to learn how to live amongst them and befriend them so that they may have a different view of Arabs and especially Palestinians."

When asked about his observations regarding the way faith in action is expressed, Jacob was quick to respond. "It is far from being the 'Holy Land.' Tradition is so strong. People don't want to depart from calling themselves a Christian, or Muslim, or Jew because they don't want to lose their family or national identity. Many Christians have not reconciled that worship is not a place, but rather the person of Jesus Christ." Jacob has struggled with the realization that for many "there is no action to their faith. There is no reality in the fact that God had the temple destroyed for a reason, ushering



in the Spirit of God to reside in believers and not a building." There are a number of evangelical churches, some are growing and are remarkably passionate about the life of Jesus, but the workers are few and it does not appear that they are doing well. "I'm sharing Jesus' love and forgiveness here a lot."

As a scholar, the opportunity for Jacob to study at Hebrew University has been rewarding and challenging. "We are learning about 100 words a day and I can speak somewhat decently with people on the street." After years of Latin and Ancient Greek, "It's nice to finally learn a spoken language!"

University classes were comprised of 13 students, half of whom were Jewish and the other half were from all over the world, including Barbados, Switzerland, Britain, Russia, Canada, Denmark, and of course, the U.S. The Arabic immersion experience was an intense exposure to language acquisition. During the month of July, Jacob spent at least 5 hours per day studying Arabic, in what is roughly equivalent to a year's worth of coursework. "Giving impromptu speeches and demonstrating my ability to discuss politics and other topics in Arabic is awesome!"

As the Fourth of July approached, Jacob was very cognizant of being an American. "I didn't think I'd be able to celebrate independence with the same excitement this year but I was sure wrong. I was invited to the Independence Day celebration at the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem. There I was able to meet the Consul General himself as well as many other consuls general from many different countries. It was a wonderful event where many people from literally all over the world came together to celebrate America."

As a result of his many conversations that evening, Jacob is hopeful that they might lead to future internships. He will be exploring possibilities with the UN in Jerusalem and also the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem. "I would love to live in the Middle East one day, so this might be a step in that direction."

Jacob returned to Baylor University in August to continue his undergraduate studies in classics, philosophy, and Middle Eastern studies.