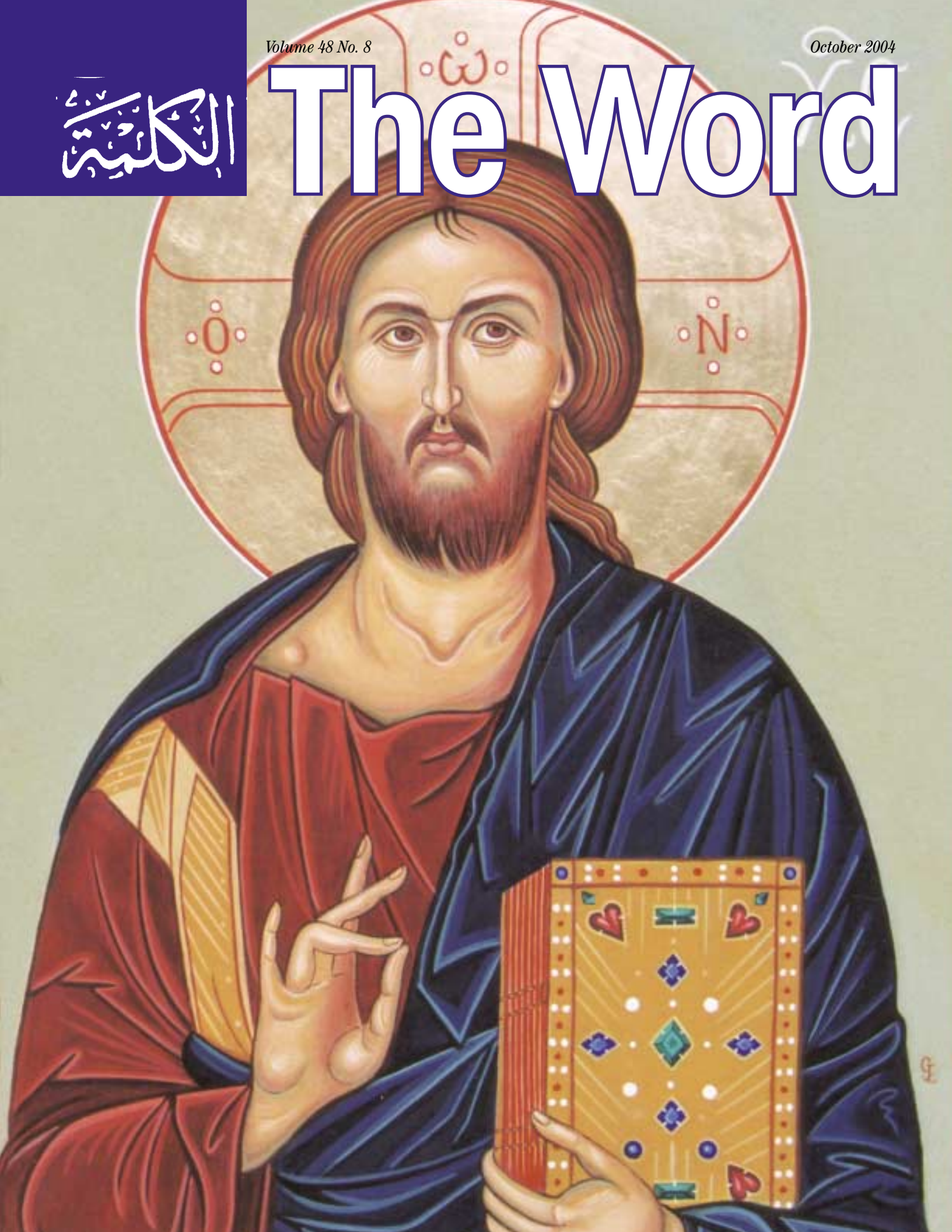


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الكلمة

The Word



students

FROM NORTH AMERICA
connect at the University of Balamand



Pictured in front row, left to right: Faculty Advisor Dr. Jihad Attiyeh, Jenna Zraick, Mireille Tannous (Monitor), Michael Ajalat, Lydia Najim, His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV (Founder of the Balamand University), Samantha Seaman, Marie Saba, Miriam Hyder, Joy Saba. 2nd row, left to right: Rima Abourjeily (Monitor), Zack Howard, Laura Nicola, Nicole Ajalat, Zachary Bayrouy, Tom Saba, Kathy Saba, Vera Hayek (Monitor). 3rd row, left to right: Brandon Hess, Raymond El-Hajj (Monitor), Christopher Solomon, Joel Nixon, Paul Ayoob, Michael Crawford, David Ajalat, Richard Ajalat, Bianca Bucaram, Hyam Massoud (Monitor).

The following is a voyage of self-discovery, adapted from the daily journal renderings of Thomas Saba, one of the participants in CONNECT, a program at the University of Balamand in northern Lebanon, July 3-31, 2004. For university-aged young people, this program is designed to help North American students connect with their roots, learn about the history and culture of the region, and the origins of the Orthodox Church. For further information, go to www.balamand.edu.lb.

JULY 5, 2004 — DAY 1

The first day began with an intensive Arabic lesson and a tutorial on Lebanese cooking. My group participated in making a delectable dessert that we could not pronounce and would never attempt cooking ourselves. But it sure did taste good ...

This afternoon we visited the Miramar Beach Club and swam in the warm waters of the Mediterranean, with a backdrop of the Tripoli skyline. The President of the Balamand University, Dr. Elie Salem, hosted us for dinner at his hilltop home. Delicious Lebanese dishes, dabke music, a vast field of olive trees, a view of tiny villages scattered sparsely around the Lebanese mountains under a canopy of stars, and selfless hospitality that only the Lebanese can provide made this an evening to remember ...

DAYS 3 AND 4: A TOUR THROUGH TRIPOLI AND THE BEITEDDINE PALACE IN THE SHOUF MOUNTAINS

We enjoyed an evening at the Beiteddine Palace (where the President of Lebanon, Emile Lahoud, spends his summers) and watched an outdoor show of Cirque Eloize, similar to Cirque du Soleil. Our hotel room overlooked the mountains and valleys of the Shouf.

The tour of Tripoli was slightly less serene. The combination of covered, bustling souks (bazaars), vendors selling watermelon in the street, cars driving chaotically, unbelievably hot weather and the call to prayer echoing through the city, offered a glimpse into the Muslim Arab world. The girls got an added bonus when they were asked to wear full robes and hoods (in the sweltering heat), before entering the mosques we were visiting. But the noise seemed eons away when we walked through a narrow alley through a residential area and heard two little girls, folding laundry and singing a popular Arabic song that we hear at most haffis in North America. A true connection was felt amid all the hustle and bustle of the city.

DAY 5: A TOUR DRIVE THROUGH BEIRUT AND A TASTE OF THE NIGHTLIFE

After Arabic class the day was spent driving around Beirut in the bus and window-shopping. We enjoyed a shawarma in a cafe on the coast of Junieh Bay, one of the most important ports of Lebanon. Beirut has been transformed from a city ravaged and torn apart by war into one that is modern and cosmopolitan. We ate at a cafe and smoked narguile, surrounded by cobblestone streets, colored lights shining on the white facades of new buildings and hundreds of young, vibrant Lebanese exuding a new sense of confidence. It was clear that the Lebanese are proud of what they have accomplished since the war ended more than a decade ago, especially the calming of tension among religious factions. Our

guide, Raymond, said it best while looking through an alley at a minaret and a church steeple, side by side, when he said, "This is the pride of the Lebanese."

DAY 6: A HIKE THROUGH THE CEDARS OF AKKAR, THE QAMMOU'A FORESTS AND PICNIC LUNCH

Today we enjoyed a connection with Lebanese nature.

A three-hour bus ride to the north of Lebanon with our entertaining driver, Marwan, led us to a mountainous region containing dry forests. We hiked to an altitude of close to 5000 feet. At some points, we could see snow on distant mountains and clouds nearly at eye level. We thought about the importance of this land and the events in history that transpired here. A shepherd and his herd and the crystal clear water made us realize that it has almost remained untouched by civilization. A young Bedouin boy on horseback led us to an outdoor restaurant owned by his family to meet the rest of our group, and here we ate some of the best Lebanese food we had ever tasted, all prepared from their vegetable fields and goat herds in small straw huts in which they lived. Their hospitality was gracious and the setting was spectacular.

DAY 7: SUNDAY, JULY 11, 2004, A DAY OF REST

Today we all enjoyed a day of rest. Some of the students went to visit family and friends in neighboring towns, while the rest of us enjoyed relaxing around the campus and watching the Lebanese University games held at Balamand.

This morning we attended Liturgy at St. Mary's Church at the Balamand Monastery. What a wonderful experience to pray at a church and be surrounded by icons more than 300 years old! This evening we were invited to celebrate a wedding in the same church. Presiding over the service were three bishops, one of which was Bishop Ilyas Kurban, one of the most talented Byzantine chanters I have ever heard.

DAY 8: AN EXPLORATION OF LEBANON'S NATURAL WONDERS

Today we got to experience some of the natural beauty of this land. Jeita Grotto is a cave in Mount Lebanon with the most incredible limestone stalagmites and stalactites (icicle-looking rock formations coming down from the roof and projecting up from the ground) formed over the last 30 million years. Riding a raft along an underground river, we were mixed between feeling that we were in a horror movie and being taken aback by the natural beauty.

Our next stop was a short hike along the natural bridge in Faqra, formed by Mother Nature connecting two mountain ridges on Mount Lebanon.

Lebanon: a country loaded with both historical and natural mystery.

DAY 9: A VISIT TO ANFEH BY THE SEA

Today my sisters and I visited our good friends at Beit Aoude in a small village close to campus called Anfeh. After our large-scale excursions to big cities and tourist attractions, it was nice to experience village life in Lebanon. Anfeh is a beautiful town sitting on the coast of the sparkling Mediterranean with many Orthodox churches dating back hundreds of years. It is also a place where they produce salt by filling large pools of seawater and allowing the water to evaporate, leaving the salt behind. Narrow streets, kids playing soccer, people sitting on their balconies, the fresh scent of fig trees and the warm greetings to other villagers made me understand why people love to come back here so much.

DAY 10: BEIRUT AND JUNIEH BAY

Our “Connect” group explored the national museum of Beirut and the campus of AUB, cycled around the city, explored Nahr el-Kalb and took the teleferique to the Harisa (a statue of the Theotokos) above Junieh Bay. Yes, it was an action-packed day. The national museum, sitting on the green line of the civil war, was completely restored in the early 90s, in the aftermath of destruction and looting. Today it stands as a monument describing Phoenician history from 1 million years BC and a model of the bold reconstruction campaign launched after the war. Our cycling excursion gave us a chance to see the seaside boardwalk of Beirut at a slightly faster speed than most pedestrians. We climbed the steep hills of Junieh Bay via ski lift and had an unforgettable view of the entire Bay, Byblos to the north and Beirut to the south.

DAYS 11, 12, 13: THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS ... AND BACK

The trip started with a visit to Ba'albeck, a historical site containing some of the most well-preserved Roman ruins in the world: a real Lebanese treasure.

Our trip to Syria was the farthest from the Western world many of us had ever been. We visited Homs, Hama and Aleppo, three historic cities. We truly felt as though we had entered a different world as we walked through crowded souks with animal carcasses hanging in shop windows, heard calls to prayer coming from several mosques simultaneously, and interacted with people who spoke only Arabic and had very little exposure to Westerners.

Current-day Syria, however, was but a small part of our trip. We learned about Arab history by visiting the Hama museum, several castles and forts, the pillar of St. Simeon, upon which he sat for 38 years, and saw rich, elaborate mosaics. The highlight of the trip was the whirling dervishes. The venue was an old stone building with no roof and we had it all to ourselves. Over a cup of sweet tea, we watched a show of traditional

Islamic Sufi mystical singing and dancing. The performers exuded such passion and energy!

DAY 14: VISIT WITH THE PATRIARCH AND ST. ELIE FESTIVAL

This morning we headed down to the St. John of Damascus School of Theology to be greeted by the University President, Elie Salem, and His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV. Dr. Salem discussed with us the importance of political, cultural and religious identities and how confusion of identities was a primary cause of the Lebanese civil war. His Beatitude stressed the importance of “remembering the East.”

In the evening, we enjoyed an American-Lebanese combo dinner including everything from chicken wings to zaatar bread at Porfavor in Tripoli. The St. Elie Festival commemorates the feast day of the Prophet Elias in a small Orthodox village near the University. We really felt a part of the village culture as we participated in the dabke with hundreds of people, dodged fireworks set off in every direction and admired the people praying to St. Elie in the church amid the chaos.

DAY 15: THE SOUTH OF LEBANON

Today we traveled almost from one end of Lebanon to the other. It was a picturesque drive down the coast, with banana plantations, clear blue water and, of course, a spontaneous dabke on the bus. We visited Saidon (Saida) and Tyre (Sur) in a much-anticipated trip to the south. We saw the road trodden by Alexander the Great, an ancient Hippodrome, second in size only to Circus Maximus in Rome, and in the distance, the Lebanese border with Israel. On the way home we stopped at the Hard Rock Café in Beirut for hamburgers and French fries.

DAY 16: PRE-GRADUATION PARTY

The campus is getting ready for the graduation ceremony on Friday. Lebanese flags are flying all over campus, and I mean everywhere: on the facades of buildings, draped over the rocks and in the trees! This afternoon was a typical day at the beach. Tonight we attended the cocktail party for the graduates and their families in a beautiful courtyard on campus. The Connect participants were the first to dance and get the party going. Our group is becoming well-known on campus and in the entire Koura region. What a feeling to dabke on Lebanese soil!

DAY 17: THE CEDARS OF LEBANON

We experienced once again the majestic scenery of this country and learned about the man who put it into words: Khalil Gibran. A difficult hike through the dry and somewhat unfriendly vegetation of Ehden on Mount Lebanon ended in a traditional Lebanese lunch at a restaurant in the middle of

the mountains. In the afternoon, we explored the Gibran museum in Bsharre. The introspection expressed in his paintings must be a result of the serenity and beauty of Bsharre, allowing profound meditation. The last stop after a drive through small Maronite villages on Mount Lebanon with kids playing soccer was a walk through the Cedars. Although only about 400 trees remain, it was one of the highlights of the trip. The air was fresh and cool and the trees were magnificent. They were very meaningful to me for several reasons. The trees were an incarnation of a feeling I had about Lebanon as I was growing up: not religious conflict or corrupt government, but historical and biblical significance, majestic nature and the land of our forefathers.

DAY 18: GRADUATION AND MEETING WITH THE PATRIARCH

A second audience with the Patriarch of Antioch allowed us to ask a few more questions and take some pictures. In response to many of our questions concerning other Christian churches, His Beatitude stressed the importance of separating nationalism and religion.

Tonight was the graduation ceremony for students at the Balamand, including many of our monitors (Roger, Raymond, Rima and Mireille). We felt as though we were cheering for our family. We were so proud. Although the ceremony was long, the after-party at The Batroun Country Club made up for it. Once again, the Connect group got the party started and danced the night away.

DAY 19: CAMPING AT PEARL BEACH

Dr. Manal Nader, our faculty advisor for the week, organized a full day at Pearl Beach and an overnight camping trip. We enjoyed a full day of windsurfing, sea kayaking, jumping off rocks, sailing in a catamaran, swimming in the Mediterranean, lounging by the water, and one of our favorite pastimes, discussing Lebanese politics. The day was completed when the red sun dipped into the Mediterranean.

DAY 20: VISITING FAMILY ON SUNDAY, JULY 25, 2004

We were invited by friends to a family home in Bterram. This day was certainly a highlight of the trip for me. The love that the villagers had for each other and showed my sisters and me was almost overwhelming. After the Church service (which the priest dedicated to "beit Saba"), all of the parishioners came to introduce themselves to us. As it turns out, the priest, the chanters, and almost everyone in the church are part of the same family. We were invited to the priest's house for coffee after Liturgy. What made the day so special was that we felt like we were at home.

DAY 21: VISITING AND SHOPPING

We got in touch with distant relatives and were invited to their country home in Hasroun the next day. In the afternoon, we shopped at the ABC shopping center in Ashrafiieh. The luxurious and expensive mall was a reminder of the clash between Eastern and Western cultures in Beirut. Other participants of Connect enjoyed camping, sunbathing and snorkeling, on El Barbara overlooking the sea.

DAY 22: SIGHTSEEING

Visit to Jbeil and Batroun, old chapels, Byblos, Citadel and souks, Monastery, dinner and ice cream in Douma and St. Katherine's Monastery in Kaftoun.

DAY 23: CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL LESSONS

Arabic course, Lebanese Cuisine course, visit to Koura, Zgharta, Temple of Naous, and Monastery of Qozhaya.

DAY 24: LAST FULL DAY IN LEBANON

This morning we learned the Lebanese national anthem and we sang with pride. More newfound relatives met us. What was so amazing was that the entire family made a special effort to meet us and find out who our parents are and what we study in school. They were very pleased to hear how much we love Lebanon and especially our observations regarding family, village life and hospitality. We all agreed that we feel much more "connected" to the country now that we know our family. We were able to leave under one condition: that we come back in the future many times, with our mothers and fathers, spouses and children.

Very special thanks to Faculty Advisors, Dr. Elie Karam, Dr. Manal Nader, Dr. Nadim Karim, Dr. Tony Georges, Mr. Michel Nseir, the wonderful monitors (Balamand students), and Khatmeh Osseimeh Hanna, North American contact, who worked so tirelessly to offer us this incredible experience of connecting us with our cultural heritage. We bring back to North America a love and appreciation for this beautiful and historical country that now holds special significance in our lives. We will never be the same. Meet-alf shukran!

Thomas Saba is an Altar Server at St. George Church in Montreal, and a first-year Medical Student at McGill University. He, his three sisters and 19 other young adults from the Archdiocese made this second annual college-student pilgrimage to Lebanon.