

Ochi Bayanjargal: Listener and Speaker

Eric Hollas, O.S.B.

Ochi was not typical of the people who have spoken to the monastic community. For one thing, he is quite young. For another, he was the only one in the room who spoke fluent Mongolian. And third, he showed not a shred of stage fright. Perhaps he had already pushed himself to the limit so many times that a case of the nerves simply was not in the cards. In any event, he was there to tell the monks what it was like to grow up in Mongolia. On that topic Ochirbat Bayanjargal, a 2015 graduate of Saint John's University, was the undisputed expert in the room.

All of this raises several questions. How did a young man from Mongolia end up speaking to a group of monks in Minnesota? Equally puzzling, how did a guy who grew up on the other side of the planet come to Saint John's University? And finally, how is it that this same young man is now in Israel as a member of the Benedictine Volunteer Corps? It is a great story and testimony to the power of the Benedictine tradition to change the course of one life.

Ochi was born in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. Once part of the Soviet Union, Mongolia has gone through an enormous transition, and Ochi's own family scrambled to adapt. So it was that Ochi and his brother



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spent much time with their grandparents, while their parents struggled to make a living in a new economy. Ochi describes himself as a self-starter, and in the eighth grade he dreamed of college in the United States. That is what prompted him to enter a competition that tested his athletic, academic, and social skills. Of fifty-three entrants, he was the last man standing. And that's what led him to Saint Benedict's Preparatory School in Newark, New Jersey. There he encountered the Benedictine tradition, and there he took hold of the thread that eventually led to Saint John's.

Saint John's Abbey has long ties to Newark Abbey, and in recent decades several monks from Newark have studied at Saint John's, including Father Edwin Leahy, O.S.B., the current headmaster at Saint Benedict's Prep. It was Father Edwin who welcomed the first Benedictine Volunteers from Saint John's ten years ago. Since then some

thirty-five alumni from Saint Benedict's Prep have come to Saint John's for college. It was into this atmosphere that Ochi entered eight years ago.

Ochi describes the distance between Ulaanbaatar and Newark as enormous, but his experience at Saint Benedict's made the distance to Saint John's short. He came to America as a "listener," and English was just one of many challenges. But he persevered, he worked, and in time he mastered the language. By the time of his graduation from Saint John's, Ochi was both a listener and a speaker.

Yet another new experience for Ochi was the Benedictine tradition. Neither Benedictines nor Christians figured into the landscape of Mongolia, but he soon

The Benedictine Volunteer Corps of Saint John's Abbey exists to provide a year of volunteer service for graduates of Saint John's University at a monastery of the worldwide Benedictine confederation and to support the work, prayer, and life of Benedictine monasteries around the world.



Ochi serving in Tabgha, Israel

began to absorb this new influence. At Newark there was one monk who had a particular impact on Ochi's life. He daily encouraged Ochi to smile, but this was at first an irritation. People do not readily smile in his own culture, and for two years Ochi resisted. But one day he realized the cultural difference that the monk had tried to teach him. He began to smile, and he discovered that people reacted more positively, and it impacted his own mood. He has not stopped smiling since!

At Saint Benedict's, Ochi met several Benedictine Volunteers from Saint John's, including one who is now a monk of Saint John's Abbey: Father Michael Leonard Hahn. Father Michael

Ochi gravitated to the liberal arts and majored in economics. He worked at making friends, joined the wrestling team, and served as a resident assistant in one of the dorms. All the while he began to think about his future—to the liberal arts he attributed his outlook on life. No longer was it a matter of the job he hoped to get. Rather, the important question centered on the person he aspired to be.

Ochi's familiarity with the Benedictine tradition continued to grow, but unlike most of his classmates, monks had been part of his mental landscape for years. He appreciated the presence of the monks and came to respect the prayer life he encountered here. This prepared him for the next adventure—service in the Benedictine Volunteer Corps at the priory of Tabga in Israel.

Ochi is now settling into Tabga, determined to contribute in any way he can. He takes with him his personal store of wisdom. "Learn as much as possible, and do your best. If something good happens, great. If bad, then you learn." If Ochi has not paraphrased from the *Rule* of Saint Benedict, it's still very close to Benedict's advice to look for the face of God wherever you turn. **✠**

Father Eric Hollas, O.S.B., is deputy to the president for advancement at Saint John's University.

Leonard recalls stopping by Ochi's room in the latter's first weeks in Newark, and he worried about the challenge that Ochi faced. Adapting to an alien culture would be daunting, but adapt Ochi did.

From the Benedictine Volunteers Ochi learned about Saint John's University, and in time it became his dream. With their encouragement he applied, but nothing was sure until he received a call from Mr. Brandon Novak, the wrestling coach at Saint John's. With only nine days before the first day of classes, all was finally set. It was time for Ochi to pack for Minnesota, rather than for Ulaanbaatar, and to become a Johnnie.