

St. Irenaeus Institute

FOR CATHOLIC THOUGHT



Photo: Nicholas Sun

New Scholar-in-Residence

Dear friends of the St. Irenaeus Institute,

I am delighted to write to you with the exciting news that **Dr. Joshua Hren** is the newly appointed **Scholar-in-Residence at the St. Irenaeus Institute**.

Many of you will know of Dr. Hren from his work with the prominent Catholic publisher, [Wiseblood Books](#), and from his novels, short-shorties, essays, and books. For those who do not know him, Joshua is founder and editor of Wiseblood Books and co-founder of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, and was co-founder of the Great Books Honors College at

Belmont Abbey. Joshua regularly publishes essays in such journals as *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *First Things*, *America* and *Public Discourse*, *The Hedgehog Review* and *Plough*, the University of Notre Dame's *Church Life Journal* and the *University Bookman*, *Christianity and Literature* and *LOGOS*.

We recently had opportunity to sit down with Joshua and ask him a bit more about himself, his past and present work as scholar and teacher, and about his plans and hopes for the St. Irenaeus Institute in Milwaukee.

Joshua, what does it mean, for you, to be an educator and a scholar?

Because of the high stakes at play in education, I see my work as a sacred trust. How do we make the truth beautiful, make the difficult good worth chasing after—without falsifying the difficulties or papering over the uglier aspects of the real? How do we delight readers and students while instructing without catering to the pleasures that stultify and cloud the learner's capacity for “conversion” into the great conversation? How do we incite *metanoia* in a manner that conforms to the mode of the receiver—not forcing the learner to move too quickly, not humoring his sloth? How do we hold fast to first principles without mistaking our own preferences for eternal revelations? How do we seek wisdom with courageous openness but without falling prey to the skeptics predilection for deferral in the face of every either / or decision? Education is not a marketplace of ideas wherein neutral, competing products vie for the hearts and minds of students. While prudential disagreement is ever a legitimate prospect, very few questions are reducible to arbitrary opinions or moral neutrality.

Thus, cognizant of my own fallibility, I take special care to impart in my students the thirst for a supra-intellectual wisdom. As Aquinas argues in his *Summa Theologiae*, “The wisdom named among the gifts of the Holy Spirit is distinct from the wisdom found among the intellectual virtues. This second wisdom is acquired through study, but the first ‘comes from on high,’ as Saint James puts it.” But these two kinds of wisdom, the mystical and intellectual, are fundamentally interrelated rather than

antithetical. Ultimately, cultivating this twofold wisdom is the purpose of education. It is what I, as a teacher, aim to inspire in and draw out of (*educare* = "to draw out") my students.



You have been involved in various scholarly and educational endeavors throughout your life, and have been both founder and leader in a number of roles: you founded Wiseblood Books in 2013; you co-founded and taught philosophy, theology, and literature in the Honors College at Belmont Abbey and later, with James Matthew Wilson, the first-ever Catholic Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of St. Thomas (TX). What drew you to the work of the St. Irenaeus Institute?

I suppose that, for reasons I don't entirely understand (perhaps because I have an overactive imagination and can be pig-headed in my pursuits?) God has repeatedly turned my gaze to various vacuums in our world. Thanks be to God, Wiseblood and the Great Books Honors College at Belmont Abbey and the MFA at UST all continue to flourish. In the years immediately after the founding of the MFA, whose students and classes I love deeply, the prospect of co-founding anything further was daunting, but when I learned of the St. Irenaeus Institute I found an immediate affinity with Aaron Ebert and Joshua Miller, and, hearing of their germinal accomplishments and vision, my heart cried out: so much of what they've done is precisely what I've been hoping would happen for something like decades at this

point: a lively continuation of the Catholic intellectual tradition in Milwaukee. For instance, St. Irenaeus ran a *Fides Patrum* series this past year, monthly seminars open to the public arranged around close-reading of Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and an accompanying socratic-style conversation. By all accounts it nourished participants in surprising ways—and in talking to at least one of the participants the only words that encapsulate the affect it seems to have had on him is “life-altering.”

For years I have been repeatedly visited by this image of working at UWM, somehow connected to the Newman Center, and I had no idea why or how this could happen. I wondered whether it was just a kind of nostalgic longing, given that I completed both my undergraduate and doctorate education at UWM (Religion and Literature, Political Philosophy and Literature, Classical Rhetoric, and Creative Writing) and saw what a profound influence a single Christian professor could have in a secular university. And maybe I wondered if I might serve that role for others, just as others served it for me: one of the founders of Religious Studies at UWM, and a priest who taught in Comparative Literature cracked open, for me, the whole Western tradition, the great books project, and the Catholic intellectual tradition, along with other rival traditions. But when St. Irenaeus invited me aboard, I knew this lodged image was no mere nostalgic tick or quixotic wish: here was a real and living vacuum that needed filling, a way God could (if not exactly make something out of nothing) multiply our couple of loaves and fishes. I long to again put my hand to the plow of a common educational project in person with a community of colleagues devoted to the aims of Catholic education.

What will you be doing in your new position as a "Scholar-in-Residence"?

I should remain mum on the specifics, but the most significant thing is that Aaron and I are working with administrators at UW-Milwaukee and the UW-system more broadly to increase our for-credit course offerings at UWM.

This fall, I will be teaching a seminar-style **short course on St. Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*** at the UW-Milwaukee Newman Center. The seminars will be held on

select Thursdays at 7-8:30pm. (You can find further details [here](#).)

In terms of scholarship, I have recently published essays on [James Joyce](#) (*America*), on [Dostoyevsky](#) (*Plough*), and on "[The Moral Imagination and the Spirit of Literature](#)" (*Public Discourse*). This last is something of an overture to my book *More than a Matter of Taste: The Moral Imagination and the Spirit of Literature*, which is forthcoming from Word on Fire in Spring of 2026. Here is one of the endorsements the book has received so far:

Joshua Hren has written an extraordinary book, learned and wise, offering an unbelievably rich tour through great writers and the thorniest debates about the role of the arts in our moral, political, and spiritual lives. Hren writes with sensitivity, insight, and wonderful stylistic flair. A joy to read.

-Phil Klay, National Book Award-winning author of *Redeployment*

My book *Faith in the Furnace of Doubt: Dana Gioia's Visionary Poetics* is also forthcoming, this fall, from Catholic University of American Press. This is the first full-length, in-depth study of Gioia's poetry, which is an ideal site for thoughtful exposition of spiritual searching undertaken in a contemporary idiom. I am also carving away at the edges of *The Hôtel-Dieu*, the third in a trilogy of novels (beginning with *Infinite Regress* and including *Blue Walls Falling Down*) whose umbrella title is *The Accidental Family*.



You once indicated that your love for and commitment to Milwaukee parallels and is inspired by that of James Joyce in relation to Dublin, Ireland. Can you elaborate on this? For you, what is the significance of the St. Irenaeus Institute being in Milwaukee, and how do you envision it serving the people of this city and Archdiocese?

A single sentence in the “Oxen of the Sun” episode of *Ulysses* epitomizes Joyce's analogical approach--the reason he writes about Dublin: “Any object, intensely regarded, may be a gate of access to the incorruptible eon of the gods.” Outside the novel, Joyce put his point in a more prosaic key: “I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin, I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal.”

When I ride the bus down Milwaukee’s Capitol Drive, my mind under the influence of *Ulysses*, I see the unity in an apparently disconnected, disparate fragments flitting by at forty miles an hour. I am simultaneously in Milwaukee and in Dublin and in all the cities of the world. I see before me the two cities, the city of God and the city of Man, see that I am fully capable of putting my hand toward building both, of shoring up the imperium over against the Church or, brick, by brick, bringing the Church back into the *agora*. I remember St. Augustine’s remark, in *City of God*, that *Socialis*

est vita sanctorum”--“even the life of the saints is a life together with others.” Our communal relations are not some kind of punishment that disappear when our time here is over, but part of our eternal destiny. If we are saved at all we are saved into the communion of saints, collectively circling the Primum Mobile, the Living Flame of Love at the center of the cosmos.

In the *Summa*, the Dumb Ox insists that “just as it belongs to religion to give worship to God, so does it belong to piety, in the second place, to give worship to one's parents and one's country.” Milwaukee is my homeland even more than the U.S.A. is, and—I think this especially grows out of my time as chaplain for the homeless at St. Ben's Community Meal, my work at Messmer High School, and my many years living in the Riverwest neighborhood and the Eastside, busing and bicycling all over the city—Milwaukee is, in a way that I don't completely understand, my muse. Having been born and raised here, and looking back from afar for seven years as a professor at several universities across the States, I am grateful God has given our family a way to return, and, with Irenaeus, this new way to serve the city and its university (UWM)--to serve the city from the heart of the Church.

Joshua is the author of ten books: the short story collections *This Our Exile* and *In the Wine Press*; *Last Things, First Things, & Other Lost Causes* (poems); *Middle-earth and the Return of the Common Good: J.R.R. Tolkien and Political Philosophy*; *How to Read (and Write) Like a Catholic*; the novels *Infinite Regress* and *Blue Walls Falling Down*; and the theological-aesthetical manifesto *Contemplative Realism*. Joshua's *Faith in the Furnace of Doubt: Dana Gioia's Visionary Poetics* is forthcoming from Catholic University of America Press (2025), and *More than a Matter of Taste: The Moral Imagination and the Spirit of Literature* is forthcoming from Word on Fire (2026). Joshua and his wife Brittney live with their four children in Menomonee Falls.

We are thrilled to have Dr. Hren aboard as our Scholar-in-Residence and we look forward, with joyful anticipation, to how the Lord will use him in this role to enable St. Irenaeus more and more, as he put it, to serve the city from the heart of the Church.

Very gratefully yours,
in Christ,

Aaron C. Ebert, Ph.D.
Executive Director
St. Irenaeus Institute

Support Our Work

First, please pray for our labors, that they bring many yields and fulfill God's will. Please also consider making a one-time or recurring donation to the St. Irenaeus Institute. Without your generous gifts, our programs would not be possible; our distinctive efforts to revitalize Catholic intellectual life, serving the city of Milwaukee from the heart of the Church, would cease.

Make a gift

st-irenaeus.org

St. Irenaeus Institute, 3001 N. Downer Ave., Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53211

[Unsubscribe](#) [Manage preferences](#)

Send free email today