

Preface

In the course of the last century, the ideas of Catholic theologians about Mary shifted startlingly. Neo-Scholastic Mariology, with its robust metaphysics, sought chiefly to describe the unique status of the woman who was the Mother of the Word of God incarnate, equipped for her role, and her wider destiny, by special supernatural “privileges.” The biblically oriented Mariological writing which prepared the way for, and followed on, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was more concerned with Mary’s exemplary status as a woman of faith. This approach, in itself perfectly legitimate (not least, it was a common theme of the ancient Fathers of the church), could morph into something rather more ideological at the hands of some writers for whom the claims for the Mother of God typical of classical Catholic doctrine and traditional devotion were thrown into the shade—to put it kindly. Somewhere between these two sharply contrasted approaches (and midway between them in time) lay the path of a *ressourcement* theology which, in “returning to sources” not only scriptural but also liturgical and patristic, sought to enrich the inheritance of Latin theology by adding an emphasis that was more *cordial*—addressing the “existential” dimension proper to persons and prosecuting its task not only in the categories of ontology but in the language of the heart.

The present study aims to contribute to the revival of a more full-blooded body of Marian teaching, taking its cue from, especially, the major encyclical letter of John Paul II, *Redemptoris mater*, issued in 1987. In the way proper to a Catholic theologian (of any period) I seek here to synthesize biblical data with resources from the subsequent tradition. And in the spirit of a pope who was both poet and philosopher, I exclude neither the materials of tradition in its imagistic mode, as with much of the celebration of Mary's role found in the Fathers and the liturgies, nor the deliverances of tradition in its more conceptual manner, as in the great assertions of the councils and the magisterium of the popes, commented and explained as these are by the church's divines, not least via the argumentative strategies of the Scholastics, notably St Thomas and the members of his school.

The figure of Mary continues to exercise its fascination. This is so not only for the devout, who themselves can profit by an enhanced understanding of their faith. It is also true for those who are simply curious, who scratch their heads in puzzlement at traditional Marian belief and piety. How is it that Catholic (and Orthodox) Christianity, otherwise regarded as typically "patriarchal" religions, can find so substantial a place in this way for the feminine—for what the Anglo-French man of letters Hilaire Belloc called in biting sardonic verse "a female figure with a Child"? Hopefully, this book will provide some answers.

Aidan Nichols, OP
Blackfriars, Cambridge
Memorial of our Lady of the Snows, 2013