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Women and the Shaping of Catholicism

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Holy and Loving God,
from the very beginning
fashioned in your own likeness
you enriched your wondrous creation
with men and women
called to be reflective of your will
and stewards of your mysterious
and spell-binding universe.

And when
in the course of time your goodness
fashioned a redemption beyond human comprehension
you selected a woman
to be the mother of your incarnate son
her name was Mary.

She was a woman
filled with your grace
mature beyond her years
eminent in her humility
approachable in her simplicity
nurturing in her maternal responsibility
patient in her suffering
so meriting at the Council of Ephesus
the grandest title of many acclaimed titles

Theotokos
Mother of God.

But she is not alone
as in your providence and in all ages
women of every tribe and nation
have responded
to the prompting of your grace
to remind us of your promises
to escort us on life's journey
and to assure us that with your help
doubts can be dissipated
temptations can be vanquished
and heaven can be ours.

Long before Gabriel awaited
Mary's response to a divine invitation
we can ponder the roles of
Sarah and Esther and Judith and Ruth
in the unfolding story
of our history of salvation.
When at last your son walked among us
he found time to nurture the faiths of
Martha and Mary
his friends at Bethany
and from the entanglements of sin
he rescued and prepared
Mary Magdalen
to be a primary witness to his
Resurrection.

And in the growth of the infant Church
the Roman Christians
did not forget their own when they added

Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy,
Agnes, Cecilia and Anastasia
to the Canon of the Mass.

And so it has been
down through the centuries
convinced by a burning belief in the
gospel message of your son
fortified by your Spirit and by grace possessed
myriads of women
have discovered the secret to holiness
and in so doing have constantly
reinvigorated your Church.

You gave us
Elizabeth of Hungary and Elizabeth of Portugal
and Elizabeth Ann Seton
Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux
and Mother Teresa
Bridget of Sweden and Brigid of Ireland
Catherine of Siena and Catherine Laboure
Margaret of Scotland and Margaret of Cortona
Frances of Rome and Frances Xavier Cabrini
the heroine of France
Joan of Arc
and the victim of Auschwitz
Teresa Benedicta of the Cross
but besides all these valiant
and saintly women
whose names deservedly
adorn our liturgical calendars
you have called millions of others
whose faith is known to you alone

whose lives are hidden in relative obscurity
but whose genuine example and sincere devotion
has influenced countless generations
in their search for that life of meaning
which can only be found in your
presence and in your friendship.

On this day of study and reflection
help us to be as grateful to the women in our lives
as your son was to the woman from Nazareth
who formed his heart and opened his mind
to the wonders of your world
as she accompanied him
from Bethlehem to Calvary.

AMEN