

Adriana Zarri: the Power of a Lay Woman's Voice

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Abstract Contemporary historiography has investigated the life and thought of many women philosophers and theologians, but until now has forgotten Adriana Zarri (1910-2010), an Italian journalist and writer very actively involved in the ecclesiastical, theological and social debate of the twentieth century. This article, based on published and unpublished sources, intends to shed light on her life, her theological insights, her radical commitment for a profound reform of the Catholic Church and the advancement of women, as well as her defence of civil rights and the environment. From the 1970s she became a point of reference for many people, believers and unbelievers, uncomfortable with Church conservatism and eager to reflect on the great changes in culture, morals and the society of their time.

Keywords Reform of the Catholic Church. Laicity. Trinitarian theology. Hermitic life. Ecological awareness.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 An Early Religious and Literary Vocation. – 3 A 'Lay' Catholic Woman among the 'Catholic Avant-Garde'. – 4 A New Female Theological Voice. – 5 A Monastic Life Immersed in the Cosmos and History. – 6 A Hermitage Where One can 'Breathe'. – 7 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Adriana Zarri (1919-2010), a writer, journalist and theologian, is one of the few women who, as early as the 1960s, managed to make her voice heard within the Italian Catholic Church of the twentieth century. She wrote about theology before women in Italy were admitted to theological studies, elaborating an original Trinitarian concept that challenged the established traditions by giving more importance to the body, history, and the human dimension. She lived a form of lay hermitic monasticism, independent from the ecclesiastical hierarchy, while taking an active part in the ecclesial, social and civil debates that inflamed the second half of the twentieth century. She experienced 'cosmic communion' with the animals she raised and the fruits she cultivated, demonstrating an ecological sensitivity in synony with present-day crucial concerns and contemporary thought.

Although her writings had considerable circulation in Italy in the years preceding and following the Second Vatican Council, and despite the fact that the themes she debated upon as well as the choice to lead a hermitic life are still of considerable interest in historical research and contemporary religious studies, the literature on Adriana Zarri is almost non-existent.¹ Her name is mentioned in studies focusing on the *contestazione cattolica* or in summary books on the history of women, but she is never the object of specific attention.²

For both these reasons - the interest of the person on the one hand, and the absence of studies on the other - the proposal to write a biography of Zarri, which was put forward to me by the Associazione Amici di Adriana Zarri, appeared particularly stimulating. The Associazione gave me access to unpublished letters, manuscripts and youth diaries, as well as to Zarri's personal library. Its members, people who knew Zarri and found in her a spiritual point of reference, also made themselves available to release oral interviews.³ By adding to these her own numerous publications, as well as letters and documents kept in the archives of personalities and institutions with

1 Cf. the short section of the bibliography dedicated to the few writings and contributions on Adriana Zarri in Maraviglia, *Semplicemente una che vive*, 204. The most interesting studies will be indicated in the course of this article.

2 Among others Santagata, *La contestazione cattolica*, 40, 60; Saresella, *Dal Concilio alla contestazione*, 223, 427; Valerio, *Donne e Chiesa*, 91-2. Zarri is not mentioned in books concerning Italian twentieth-century female theologians, such as Militello, *Volte e storie*; Militello, *Donna e teologia*.

3 The documents are stored without any type of cataloguing at the home of a member of the Association. All these documents are referred to in this article with the acronym AAZ (Archivio privato Adriana Zarri). The library is kept inside a room at Zarri's last hermitage.

which Adriana Zarri was in contact,⁴ it became possible to reconstruct the life of a protagonist of Italian Catholicism and bring into light a personality that perhaps deserves to be known better than she has been so far.⁵ As the book, this article intends to sketch the portrait of a woman who was very active in the history of her time and managed to express, through her thoughts and way of living, yearnings and expectations still alive in men and women today.

2 An Early Religious and Literary Vocation

Adriana Zarri was born in San Lazzaro di Savena, near Bologna, on 26 April 1919, preceded by two brothers, in a family in which, thanks to a mill and a private farm, one did not suffer the poverty and hunger shared by the majority of the population.

Despite this apparently serene situation, her life as a child was afflicted by a dark inner tangle that she would later recall as a terribly conflicting attitude towards God, who owned every power and was fast to condemn, as depicted through her religious education.⁶ This conflict was later to be resolved through a powerful inner event, which occurred when she was eleven years old and led to a true 'conversion'. She reportedly spoke, although very rarely, of the sudden perception of God's presence as she watched the sunlit countryside:

I was looking out a window, it must have been spring, or perhaps the beginning of summer; the grass was tall, of an intense green. I was looking at the grass, the trees, the houses; I could hear the water from the canal, and suddenly I had the palpable sensation of God's love, that God was everywhere, that he was boundless warm love, a love that embraced me, swaddled me, and I was inside it.⁷

⁴ I visited, among others, the private archives of the bishop of Ivrea Luigi Bettazzi, the publisher Piero Gribaudo, and the ATI (Associazione Teologica Italiana) kept at the ISACEM (Istituto per la storia dell'Azione Cattolica e del movimento cattolico in Italia 'Paolo VI').

⁵ Since the publication of my book, three of Zarri's books have been republished: *"Tu". Quasi preghiere* (2021); *È più facile che un cammello* (2022); *La mia voce sa ancora di stelle*. An essay has also been written about her as a theologian capable of thinking in her time a Christianity "for the future": see Sodaro, "Adriana Zarri. L'eremita laica", 281.

⁶ Baldini, "Una donna nel deserto", 125.

⁷ "Ero affacciata a una finestra, doveva essere primavera, o forse l'inizio dell'estate, l'erba era alta, di un verde intenso. Guardavo l'erba, gli alberi, le case, sentivo l'acqua del canale, e improvvisamente ho avuto la sensazione palpabile dell'amore di Dio, che Dio era dappertutto, che era amore senza limiti, caldo, un amore che mi abbracciava, mi fasciava, e io c'ero dentro". Baldini, "Una donna nel deserto", 125.

The event presented the traits and was recalled with the language of mystical experience; it determined the beginning of young Adriana's theological reflection, soon intensified by the death of a dearly loved brother. As she would later write, she began to do theology "alone, in silence and in solitude", before taking up studies and courses in theology, which she was able to attend thanks to her membership, first in the GFCI (Gioventù femminile di Azione Cattolica) and later in the Religious Institute of Compagnia di San Paolo.⁸

Participation in the GFCI took place after the Zarri family moved to Bologna in June 1933, where Adriana, directed by her father to a professional school, was soon transferred to the classical studies program of a lyceum, due to her recognized intellectual gifts. There she received the foundations of an education that she soon supplemented with personal readings done at the Archiginnasio's library in Bologna.⁹

The youth branch of Azione Cattolica, reinvigorated and reorganized during the pontificate of Pius XI as an obedient and disciplined 'army' for the Christian reconquest of society, proved to her as to many members an "active and dynamic training ground for cultural and mental education".¹⁰ It was in that association, in which young leaders in particular were expected to read, study, learn to express their ideas and speak in public so as to spread the knowledge of Christian truths, that Adriana Zarri came across spiritual authors, exercised her dialectical skills and tried her hand at writing. In two booklets dated 1941, the future theologian discusses the moral intransigence and sexophobic obsession typical of the Catholic culture of the time, which celebrated the virtue of purity and execrated amusements and dances, considered to be at the origin of all modern debauchery.¹¹

From the time of these early works, Zarri demonstrated a predisposition for polemics, a tool she considered essential to the defence of truth and rights. The word "polemics", she wrote in her diary, was to her a "royal word, a proud word". She perceived herself as a "fighting spirit" with a "polemicist's mission" to which she wished to dedicate her life and "art".¹² Later, once the importance of history and the body

⁸ Zarri, "La narrazione teologica", 200.

⁹ Cf. Maraviglia, *Semplicemente una che vive*, 22-3.

¹⁰ Salvini, *Ada e le altre*, 32. Cf. also Dau Novelli, "Azione Cattolica e questione femminile". For the history of Azione Cattolica at that time, cf. Moro, "Pio XI: il Papa dell'Azione Cattolica". Adriana Zarri later argued against the uniformity and clericalization she identified in Azione Cattolica not only in the years of Pius XI but also after the Second Vatican Council: cf. Zarri, *Teologia del probabile*, 133-73.

¹¹ Zarri, *La grande crociata*; Zarri, *Febbre che sfibra*.

¹² Zarri, *Unpublished Diary 1941-43*, 14 May 1941, 8 July 1941, 19 July 1943, in AAZ.

had been redeemed in the light of greater awareness in the reading of the Bible, she would debate against the traditional readings that penalized sexuality, valuing and celebrating its fully human value.¹³

Besides Azione Cattolica, the other crucial institution for Adriana Zarri's education was the Compagnia di San Paolo, a congregation that offered both men and women a new – secular – form of religious life, i.e., the possibility of professing the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience not in a convent or monastery but while living in the world.¹⁴ She entered the congregation in 1942, probably inspired by Catholic personalities who were part of it such as Raimondo Manzini, then director of the Catholic newspaper published in Bologna, *L'Avvenire d'Italia*.¹⁵

Despite the opportunities for study offered by the institution, such as becoming acquainted with the classical heritage of Catholic culture, starting from the Gospels, Paul, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the young woman soon felt ill at ease with the obligations as well as human and cultural constrictions of the environment. She felt the need for a new spirituality which would overcome the pessimistic and mortifying attitude of traditional ethics to consider human experience in its fullness. Like others, she was inspired by the reading of French authors and publications, whose greater freedom and novelty of thought offered lexicon and content to Italian Catholics eager for religious renewal.¹⁶ Zarri quoted the French journal *La Vie spirituelle*, but in her notes and between her lines one can also trace *Les études carmélitaines* and “extreme interest” for the “apostolate of presence and silence” of Charles De Foucauld's followers.¹⁷ In one of her small notebooks of the time she transcribed significant passages such as the following by the French philosopher Gustave Thibon, a friend of Simone Weil: “Tomorrow perhaps a new type of holiness

13 This topic is at the core of Zarri's *Impazienza di Adamo*, and her two novels *Dodici lune* and *Quaestio 98*.

14 The Compagnia di San Paolo, founded in 1921 by Don Giovanni Rossi, secretary of Cardinal Andrea Carlo Ferrari, was, in 1941, a religious congregation that united laymen, laywomen, and priests dedicated to social, educational and cultural apostolates; it had also acquired various newspapers such as the prestigious monthly magazine *Il Frontespizio* and the Bolognese newspaper *L'Avvenire d'Italia*. Meanwhile, in 1939, Don Giovanni Rossi had left the Compagnia and founded in Assisi the Pro Civitate Christiana association, with which Zarri would later collaborate. On the Compagnia di San Paolo, cf. Caracciolo, *La fede e le opere*; Toschi, *Per la Chiesa e per gli uomini*; Zizola, *Don Giovanni Rossi*.

15 Raimondo Manzini (1901-1988) was chief editor of *L'Avvenire d'Italia* from 1927 to 1960 and of *L'Osservatore Romano* from 1960 to 1978. Cf. Carli, “Manzini, Raimondo”.

16 Cadioli, Vignini, *Storia dell'editoria in Italia*, 94-5.

17 Zarri, *Letter to Giovanni Battista Penco*, 2 September 1946, in AAZ. Zarri, “Fra Pio X e il cardinal Ferrari”, 99.

will emerge in which lovers of God will be men to the core”.¹⁸ She felt a growing need to share everyone's humanity, without distinction of status or condition, which led her to leave the Company in 1949.

3 A 'Lay' Catholic Woman among the 'Catholic Avant-Garde'

For Zarri and her generation, to live “human life fully and nakedly” meant to live a ‘lay’ or ‘secular’ life.¹⁹ The word ‘laicity’ was a key-word for her as well as for the Catholic culture of the twentieth century; it meant regaining, with full conviction, ‘the goodness of things’, ‘the fabric of human existence’, with the declared intention of overcoming the age-old dualism between nature and supernature embedded in the theological tradition. This is what she conveyed in her first book, *L'arcobaleno delle ore*, which was published in 1947 under the pseudonym Jana Predieri: it was the first signal of her quality as a writer and of the originality of her thought.²⁰

It was thanks to that book that she came into contact with Mario Gozzini and Nando Fabro, respectively the souls of two leading magazines of the time, the Florentine *L'Ultima* and the Genoese *Il Gallo* for which she herself soon started writing.²¹ This is how she met that particular galaxy of personalities from the ‘Catholic avant-garde’ who struggled to restore evangelistic and social impetus to what they perceived as conservative and traditionalist Catholicism: among others Giorgio La Pira and Ernesto Balducci.²² Zarri was one of the few

18 Sentence written down in a small notebook kept in AAZ. Zarri indicated her source: “Thibon. *Ce que Dieu a uni*”.

19 Zarri, “La narrazione teologica”, 209.

20 Predieri, *L'arcobaleno delle ore*. Pseudonym obtained from the final part of her name (Jana) and from her mother's surname, Elide Predieri.

21 Mario Gozzini (1920-1999), an Italian writer, journalist and politician, was a strong advocate of the dialogue between Catholics and Communists in the post-war years. He was senator of the Italian Republic from 1976 to 1987. On his experience, also as a founder of the bi-monthly *L'Ultima*, cf. Scirè, *La democrazia alla prova*. Nando Fabro (1900-1988) was in contact with well-known Italian and French Catholics and was actively involved in the ecclesial renewal, particularly through the promotion of the monthly publication *Il Gallo*: cf. Zanini, *La rivista “Il Gallo”*.

22 Ernesto Balducci (1922-1992), priest, member of the Piarist order, was a prominent intellectual, friend and collaborator of Giorgio La Pira, and founder of the Florentine monthly *Testimonianze*, aimed at promoting the culture of peace around the world. Cf. Bocchini Camaiani, *Ernesto Balducci*; Giovannoni, “*Io amo il futuro*”. Giorgio La Pira (1904-1977), member of the Constituent Assembly of the Italian Republic, later deputy of the Democrazia Cristiana and mayor of Florence, distinguished himself through the promotion of social policies and his activism on the issues of peace and dialogue between the peoples of the Earth. Cf. Cortesi, M.P. Giovannoni, P.D. Giovannoni, *Giorgio La Pira* (with bibliography).

women essayists in a sphere that continued – even among the Catholic avant-garde – to be dominated by men.²³ At some point, it even seemed Zarri might move from Rome, where she had settled with her father after her mother's death, to Florence, to take on a leading role in a Catholic weekly they meant to launch in those fervent ecclesial and social times.²⁴

Her first novels, *Giorni feriali* and *L'ora di notte*, published in 1955 and 1960, signalled her vocation as a storyteller, which she would always cultivate alongside essay writing. They earned Zarri her first praises and a certain notoriety.²⁵ The number of journals and newspapers for which she wrote soon multiplied, securing what became her precarious but fundamental means of support. She wrote for Catholic publications of different orientation and circulation: from weeklies with local circulation such as *Il Nostro Tempo* of the diocese of Turin, to national periodicals such as *L'Osservatore della Domenica* (the Sunday edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*); from scholarly journals of the democratic Catholic tradition, such as *Humanitas* and *Studium*, to *Studi Cattolici*, close to Opus Dei; from the bimonthly publication of the Dehonian Fathers of Bologna *Il Regno* to *Orizzonti*, a weekly news magazine published by Edizioni Paoline.

In these writings Adriana Zarri focused on various themes and motives central to her reflections, siding against traditional conceptions of Catholicism and in favour of a profound reform of the Church. She treasured the lessons of authors such as Pierre Teilhard De Chardin and theologians censored in the 1950s by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, then later invited as 'experts' to the Second Vatican Council, such as Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, and Marie-Dominique Chenu, who would soon become her friend and correspondent. Zarri's denunciation was directed against the 'pathologies' she saw in religious life – 'integralism', 'clericalism', 'immobilism' –, against an authoritarian and absolutist conception of Christianity and intellectualistic preaching disembodied from history. She was in favour of re-evaluating the role and freedom of the laity inside the Church, and of a more interior spirituality, close to the ordinariness of daily life – which became her distinctive feature.

In the early 1960s, years in which the Second Vatican Council, first in preparation and later in progress, favoured debate and discussion, Adriana Zarri collected some of her articles in a volume with the significant title *La Chiesa nostra figlia*. The book received con-

23 Cf. Falconi, *La Chiesa e le organizzazioni cattoliche*, 564-5.

24 On this, cf. Maraviglia, *Semplicemente una che vive*, 36-40. About this blooming period for the Florentine Catholic Church and its leading personalities cf. Giovannoni, "La città e la Chiesa di Firenze".

25 Zarri, *Giorni feriali*; Zarri, *L'ora di notte*.

siderable attention not only in the devoted press but also in a journal of secular culture, *Il Mondo*, thanks to an article signed Celso, pseudonym of Carlo Falconi, who wrote it was the most mature and modern book, in thought and style, that a lay Italian Catholic had so far written on the Church.²⁶

4 A New Female Theological Voice

Adriana Zarri's originality and theological competence were confirmed by her next two books, written during the 1960s when theological faculties in Italy had barely started to admit women.²⁷ The first, *Impazienza di Adamo. Ontologia della sessualità*, published in 1964, aspired to free human sexuality from the age-old negative prejudice to which it had been relegated by Catholic tradition, by making it part of a vast Trinitarian design that she saw imprinted in humanity and the cosmos.

In her understanding, not only the relationship between the sexes, but every level of life was affected by the relational dynamics governed by the triune God: the movement of distinction, dialogue, and re-composition that existed between Father, Son, and Spirit were, in her view, imparted to the entire world, through the act of creation and the gift of incarnation. She intended to develop this intuition in three separate works, and though that project was never carried out, the Trinitarian dimension remained the fulcrum of Zarri's theological conception. She continued to put it forward, disseminated in essays, novels and texts of various types; it was her own personal contribution to what Piero Coda – a theologian with whom she would later develop a deep friendship – defined as the “great ‘return’ of the Trinity in the history of the twentieth century Church”.²⁸

Many years later, in 1980, in an article that appeared in the collective volume *Essere teologi oggi* – which *de facto* recognized her theological stature – she addressed the singularity of her approach to theology. Her theology, she wrote, was born from daily experience, it was “impure, contaminated, compromised through living”, it was born outside academic contexts, acquired “intuitively”, “sapiential”, and then translated into different forms. She reaffirmed what she understood since her youth: that she was both writer and thinker, author of pages of different literary genres but all animated by the same intention: that of transmitting her own vision and under-

26 Zarri, *La Chiesa nostra figlia*. Cf. Zarri, “Cattolici e laicisti”. She responds to Celso, “La donna e la teologia”; Celso, “La Chiesa nostra figlia”.

27 Valenziano, “Una narrazione ‘parzialmente’ autobiografica”.

28 Coda, *Dio Uno e Trino*, 232. Cf. Maraviglia, *Semplicemente una che vive*, 80.

standing. Taking inspiration from the new current of “narrative theology”, she coined an original definition for her production: “theological narrative”.²⁹

Impazienza di Adamo was itself a sort of ‘theological narrative’, an essay in which Zarri, in the light of biblical texts and patristic literature, expressed her conviction that the image of God was reflected in the difference between male and female. She conceived the reflection of the Trinity in humanity as a triple process: from the originally indistinct biblical Adam, woman was carved out as the expression of plurality, until they would later reunite in eschatological unity in the risen Christ.³⁰

Written at a time in which works highlighting the female condition such as *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir and *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan,³¹ this text was greeted with a certain interest.³² It was translated into French in 1968 and earned itself an extensive presentation in *Archives de Philosophie*,³³ but in point of fact it had no impact on theological discussion. Adriana Zarri herself never made any reference to these books by de Beauvoir and Friedan: she shared their desire to reflect upon the role of women and give it greater importance, but always starting from the metaphysical and religious foundation which, according to her, was at the basis of the difference between the sexes.

In the following years, certain limitations of Adriana Zarri's theology would be pointed out, including by devoted voices. *Impazienza di Adamo*, assuming sexual morphology as the keystone to define the sexes – with man being the one who ‘gives’ and woman the one who ‘receives’ – actually embalmed the roles in their diversity and did not redeem woman from persistent subordination.³⁴ Furthermore, her Trinitarian concept, presented as a total and all-encompassing interpretative scheme, underestimated the *mysterium iniquitatis* present in humanity and in history, making the reading of the evolution of reality more indecipherable than it appeared in her exposition.³⁵

However, the concept offered its creator keys to redefine Christian identity and new paths to follow within the Church, society, life, and personal faith. In particular, the idea of omnipotence and absoluteness that had made God so distant and fearsome dissolved in

29 Zarri, “La narrazione teologica”, 199, 210, 214.

30 Zarri, *Impazienza di Adamo*.

31 Beauvoir, *Il secondo sesso*; Friedan, *La mistica della femminilità*.

32 Cf. Somnavilla, Review of Zarri, *Impazienza di Adamo*; De Fiores, “Ricerche ontologico-psicologiche”.

33 Zarri, *L'impazienza d'Adam*; cf. Ladrille, Review of Zarri, *L'impazienza d'Adam*.

34 Cf. Militello, *Unpublished Essay*, 18 May 2019, in AAZ.

35 Cf. Piana, “Adriana Zarri. Una teologia del probabile”, 14.

the Trinitarian dynamic, while different approaches to Christianity were made possible by putting into new light concepts such as relationship, becoming, and plurality. From this dynamic emerged the dialectic of giving and receiving, regarding which Zarri expressed a critical view of typically male activism, enhancing instead female qualities such as acceptance, openness, and listening. Variety and diversity were recognized as values to be protected and cultivated by the Church, society and humanity, within the multiple and varied equilibrium of nature.

The other book of great theological commitment by Adriana Zarri came out in 1967. Its title, *Teologia del Probabile*, signalled the modern awareness of the 'historicity' of the human dimension, and a sense of 'relativity' which should become part of the new consciousness of believers. The book placed before the reader topics and issues discussed in the recently concluded Council or even removed from conciliar debate: liturgical reform, celibacy of priests, indissolubility of civil marriage, role of the laity in the Church, hierarchical function and infallibility of the pope, temporal power of the Church and its relationship with political power.

As is well known, these themes were then at the centre of debates and disputes that deeply shook the European and Italian Catholic Church, torn between innovation and tradition.³⁶ It comes as no surprise that *Teologia del probabile*, clearly sided with ecclesial renewal, aroused considerable interest and received numerous reviews.³⁷ In particular, it won its author the full consent of the Dominican theologian Marie Dominique Chenu, who had played an important role in the Second Vatican Council,³⁸ and who undertook, unsuccessfully, to have the book translated and published in France.³⁹ Chenu maintained a twenty-year-long affectionate relationship with Zarri. The 25 letters he sent to her testify about his appreciation for her theological thought, their common hopes and commitment regarding the reform of the Church, and Chenu's deep understanding of Zarri's contemplative vocation.⁴⁰

Further acknowledgment came in 1967 with her election to the board of the ATI, an association intended to foster a theology in tune with the times and capable of communicating with the contemporary

36 Among the numerous studies on the subject, cf. Verucci, "Il dissenso cattolico in Italia"; Santagata, *La contestazione cattolica*; the essays published in Inaudi, Margotgi, *La rivoluzione del Concilio*.

37 Various reviews, both favourable and critical, are preserved in AAZ.

38 On this commitment of Chenu (1895-1990), cf. Turbanti, "Il ruolo del p. D. Chenu".

39 Chenu, *Letters to Adriana Zarri*, 22 January 1968 and 27 June 1968, in AAZ.

40 There is no space here to analyze the relationship between the two correspondents, about which cf. Maraviglia, *Semplicemente una che vive*, in particular 58-9, 65, 77.

world. The association was open to non-academic scholars who could demonstrate theological competence.⁴¹ With this election ATI intended to recognize “the first lay and female public voice in theology”, as recalls Severino Dianich, theologian and co-founder of ATI.⁴² Zarri remained a member of ATI until her death, taking active part in the first councils and annual meetings, though her choice to lead a solitary life would soon put an end to her executive functions.⁴³

Those were the years in which Zarri distinguished herself as an ecclesial commentator, using her pen to ensure that the hopes triggered by the Council were not forgotten or betrayed. She wrote multiple articles, often sparking off combative confrontations which put an end to her contribution to institutional Catholic newspapers and conservative journals (*L'Osservatore della Domenica*, *Il Nostro Tempo*, and *Studi Cattolici*) in favour of new intelligent arenas of political and cultural debate such as *Politica* and *Settegiorni*.⁴⁴

Unafraid of arguing with renowned personalities or of expressing herself on issues of the utmost delicacy for the morals and culture of the time, Adriana Zarri quarrelled with the already prestigious scholar Elémire Zolla who had become the spokesperson for the vast resistance to liturgical renewal, in particular to the suppression of Latin in favour of vernacular languages.⁴⁵ She also attacked Jacques Maritain, who in *Le paysan de la Garonne* published in France in 1966, rejected the opening to the world and to history welcomed by the Council, holding it responsible for the rampant abandonment of the Christian faith. In other contributions Zarri questioned the formalism of fixed Catholic morals, which ignored the evolution of customs over time and in different social contexts; she contested the obligatory celibacy of priests and discussed the slow progress and difficulties of the ecumenical mission.⁴⁶ Her opinions earned Zarri contemptuous headlines in conservative newspapers as well as public and private reprimands sent to *Politica* and the ATI, including requests that she be expelled or else the sender would leave the association.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Cf. Segoloni Ruta, *Tradurre il Concilio in italiano*, 11-16.

⁴² Severino Dianich interviewed by the author on 5 September 2019.

⁴³ On this cf. Maraviglia, *Semplicemente una che vive*, 59.

⁴⁴ Cf. Saresella, *Dal Concilio alla contestazione*, 60-1 and 71-2.

⁴⁵ Cf. Maraviglia, “Adriana Zarri ed Elémire Zolla”. Elémire Zolla (1926-2002) was a historian of religion, scholar of Western and Eastern esotericism and mysticism. Cf. Cecchetti, “Zolla, Elémire”.

⁴⁶ Cf. Zarri, “L’abuso comincia dentro”; Bianucci, “La teologa Zarri”; Zarri, Preface to *Io amo un prete*; Zarri, “Ecumenismo in crisi”.

⁴⁷ Cf. for example, Vero Latino, “La papessa che catechizza il Papa”. Cf. Maraviglia, *Semplicemente una che vive*, 71.

If Adriana Zarri's scathing and fearless attacks on Catholic conservatism alienated all those who felt that such ideas threatened the existence of the Italian Church, more than a few recognized the value and importance of her voice. Among her numerous theological acquaintances, particularly close to her were the moral theologian Giannino Piana, the biblical scholar Paolo De Benedetti, and several Camaldolese monks, first among which Father Benedetto Calati.⁴⁸ She also established affectionate relationships with bishops intending to implement the Council's reforms, such as the Archbishop of Ravenna Salvatore Baldassarri (1907-82), and later with the Bishop of Molfetta Tonino Bello (1935-93), of Livorno Alberto Ablondi (1924-2010), of Pinerolo Pietro Giachetti (1940-2022), and of Caserta Raffaele Nogaro (1933), while corresponding actively with the Archbishop of Turin Michele Pellegrino (1903-1986) and that of Milan Carlo Maria Martini (1927-2012).⁴⁹

But Zarri at times even hurled polemics against people who shared her requests for renewal, such as the Florentine parish of Isolotto, which in 1968 became a symbol of resistance against ecclesiastical authoritarianism in Italy.⁵⁰ To her, "humanization of faith" did not in any way involve, as it did to some supporters of the Catholic dissent, the "loss of meaning in the concepts of redemption and mystery".⁵¹ Indeed, where she perceived that religious experience was being perverted, she became harshly critical. This happened upon the publication of Isolotto's catechism, which, she wrote, reduced Jesus to "a most noble revolutionary", omitting any reference to the "Kingdom of Heaven" and the eschatological dimension of the Christian faith.⁵² Fidelity to humanity and to the earth need not sacrifice the "quest for the Absolute" or the "thirst for God". These yearnings were indeed so crucial to her that at the end of the 1960s, she opted for a monastic and hermitic life, a decision that would mark the second part of her existence.

⁴⁸ Giannino Piana (1939), former professor of ethics at the Universities of Urbino and Turin, is a prolific author of studies and essays on ethical issues in contemporary culture and society. Cf. Benanti, Compagnoni, *Un'etica per tempi incerti*. Paolo De Benedetti (1927-2016) stands out for his original reinterpretation of biblical texts through the Jewish tradition of which he felt part by birth and by choice. Cf. Cattani, *Dio sulle labbra dell'uomo*. Benedetto Calati (1914-2000), scholar, specialist in the Fathers of the Church, was Prior General of the Camaldolese Congregation from 1969 to 1987. Cf. La Valle, *Benedetto Calati il monaco della libertà*.

⁴⁹ Letters kept in AAZ. Of particular interest, a thorough review sent to Zarri by Pellegrino concerning *Teologia del probabile*, on which he expressed specific criticisms but which he positively assessed as "stimulus to reflection and theological investigation beyond commonplaces". Pellegrino, *Letter to Adriana Zarri*, 8 January 1968, in AAZ.

⁵⁰ Cf. Scattigno, "Il mondo cattolico fiorentino", with bibliography.

⁵¹ Cf. Lanaro's analysis, *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana*, 385-6.

⁵² Zarri collected the published articles in the book *Il grano degli altri*.

5 A Monastic Life Immersed in the Cosmos and History

Among the personalities Adriana Zarri met during the Council years was the Bishop of Ivrea Luigi Bettazzi, who shared her hope that Vatican II would launch a major ecclesial reform.⁵³ It was thanks to him that Adriana eventually moved from Rome to the Piedmont where, in the autumn of 1970, at the bishops' summer residence, she founded a small community with two friars. She baptized the place with the evocative name of Hermitage of the Santa Kenosis.⁵⁴ There, for a few years, she welcomed people and groups in search of silence and prayer. However, living in a small community turned out for Adriana to be but the first step towards a more strictly hermitic form of monasticism – the ancient form of religious life that was then being rediscovered in the West, including in Italy⁵⁵ – for which she soon felt a calling.

She identified as the ideal place for her new life an abandoned farmhouse, without water, electricity nor telephone, called Molinaso, in the Perosa Canavese area near Turin, where she managed to stay from 1975 to 1984, and would often recall as the most intense period in her life. Upon moving there in September 1975, she sent a circular letter to her friends, in which she explained the particular nature of her choice. She wished to live in a “desert” because it was to her a “happy place where to encounter God and men” not a place to “hide away” as in a

shell, protected from everyone's difficulties. Into the desert you enter, you walk, and you immerse yourself, taking on everyone's reality and problems.

Therefore, she would not give up ‘direct’ intervention, because according to her, the hermit had to exercise “a critical conscience made more acute and vigilant by her perspective of detachment”.⁵⁶

She lived a form of lay monasticism, cadenced by regular prayer based on the Benedictine tradition on which she consulted Father Calati for advice,⁵⁷ but without vows nor obedience to any ecclesiastical hierarchy. A monastic life that she recalled in intense “letters

53 The bishop of Ivrea (1923) would often recall the event and its quest for renewal. Cf. Bettazzi, *Il mio concilio*.

54 Zarri chose this name inspired by the concept of Jesus Christ ‘emptying’ himself of his divine condition, found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2: 7). She welcomed this concept as an invitation for the believer to seek poverty as a detachment from all “vanity”, “dissipation”, “alienation”. Zarri, *È più facile che un cammello*, 97-8.

55 Cf. Turina, *I nuovi eremiti*.

56 Zarri, *Un eremo non è un guscio di lumaca*, 7-11.

57 Zarri, *Letter to Benedetto Calati*, 19 September 1976, in ASC, sez. B, cass. XXVII, ins. 4.

from the hermitage”, which appeared in the magazine *Rocca* of the Pro Civitate Christiana of Assisi – for which she wrote from 1972 to her death –, later revised and made, in 1981, into one of her most read and best-loved books, *Erba della mia erba*.⁵⁸ In these she gave account of the freedom she took upon herself to create new rites, such as the ceremony of the “missa sicca”, in which, inspired by ancient customs, she celebrated the liturgy of the Word every day, then consuming the consecrated bread and wine she had been permitted to keep.⁵⁹ But above all she told her readers about her new daily life as a farmer and breeder and how it allowed her to experience the feeling of the divine she had first perceived in childhood and expressed in her Trinitarian theology. The beauty of her house, adorned with poor furniture and furnishings abandoned by others, her relationship with the earth and with plant and animal life, confirmed her perception of a circular relationship between God and the world. She had a profound conviction of an intimate “solidarity” between the Creator and his creatures, and was convinced that a “divine seed” lay buried “in the mortality” of beings.⁶⁰ She wrote:

We know that God is ‘other’; but he is Other inside; and his transcendent being is both above things and immanent within them. We say ‘Our Father who art in heaven’, which is a legitimate image, but we could also say: ‘Our Father who art on earth’. And the prevalence of one image over the other perhaps measures the distance – or proximity – that separates us – or brings us closer to the fullness of that realm that already is and is not yet; that does not yet invest us and already brushes against us.⁶¹

Before *Erba della mia erba*, Zarri’s new monastic and hermitic life favoured the flourishing of admirable books: in 1971 *Tu. Quasi preghiere*, in which the author, addressing the divine ‘You’ in the form of poetic dialogue, expressed passions and convictions that owed much to the *Song of Songs* and mystical literature; in 1975 *È più facile che un cammello*, meditations of a spiritual and sapiential nature based on

⁵⁸ Zarri, *Erba della mia erba*. It was later republished with other texts in Zarri, *Un eremo non è un guscio di lumaca*, 17-200.

⁵⁹ Zarri, *Un eremo non è un guscio di lumaca*, 173-6.

⁶⁰ Zarri, *Un eremo non è un guscio di lumaca*, 194.

⁶¹ “Sappiamo bene che Dio è ‘altro’; ma è un Altro dentro; e il suo essere trascendente e al di sopra delle cose è altresì un essere immanente e all’interno di esse. Noi diciamo ‘Padre nostro che sei nei cieli’; ed è legittima immagine, ma potremmo anche dire: ‘Padre nostro che sei in terra’. E il prevalere di un’immagine sull’altra forse misura la distanza – o la prossimità – che ci separa – o ci avvicina alla pienezza di quel regno che già è e non ancora è; non ancora ci investe e già ci sfiora”. Zarri, *Un eremo non è un guscio di lumaca*, 86-7.

passages from the Old and New Testaments; in 1978 *Nostro Signore del deserto. Teologia e antropologia della preghiera*, in which she proposed a radical rethinking of the act of praying along the lines of biblical, patristic and mystical tradition.⁶²

Through her way of life and her books Adriana Zarri became known as a master of prayer. She acted as companion of silence and contemplation for individuals and groups who, following strict rules, could share a few days with her in her farmhouse. However, keeping faith with her promise not to alienate herself from the world, she participated first-hand in the civil rights battles that divided Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, shattering the presumed unity of the Catholic world. Twice, at the time of referendums promoted by conservative Catholic circles, she sided with voters who upheld the laws that had introduced divorce and abortion in Italy, recognizing the need to overcome the clerical point of view in the relationship between State and Church, and to affirm the autonomy of the civil sphere from the religious one.⁶³

Her notoriety and stances cost her definitive marginalization from the traditionalist Catholic circle but also brought her new friends such as the writer and politician Rossana Rossanda, who invited her to write for the communist newspaper *Il Manifesto* of which she was a co-founder and for which the theologian signed articles until her death. Zarri and Rossanda were soon connected by deep understanding that went beyond life pursuits and cultural paths that were and would remain different.⁶⁴ Rossanda's friendship also sustained Zarri in the terrible adventure that led her to abandon her beloved Molinasso: the latest in a series of robberies during which, in January 1984, she risked losing her life.⁶⁵

6 A Hermitage Where One Can 'Breathe'

In 1986 a new chapter opened in Adriana Zarri's life. Thanks once again to Luigi Bettazzi's help, she was offered for free by the diocese of Ivrea the use of a small building complex called Ca' Sassino, at one end of the village of Crotte di Strambino (Turin).⁶⁶ She restored

⁶² Zarri, "Tu". *Quasi preghiere* (1971); Zarri, *È più facile che un cammello...* (1975); Zarri, *Nostro Signore del deserto* (1978).

⁶³ On the fierce debates born at that time, cf. Scirè, *Il divorzio in Italia*; Scirè, *L'aborto in Italia*. Zarri herself published a book-report on the referendum campaign against abortion law, cf. Zarri, *I guardiani del sabato*.

⁶⁴ Cf. Rossanda, "Le mie ore con Adriana". Rossana Rossanda (1924-2020) narrates her life in *La ragazza del secolo scorso*.

⁶⁵ Rizzo, "Rapinata tre volte".

⁶⁶ Cf. Maraviglia, *Semplicemente una che vive*, 96.

it, enlivened it with plants and animals using her architectural and creative wisdom, and began a “less rigid, more cordial and more humane” solitary existence, more prone to offer hospitality to individuals and groups.⁶⁷

In years in which many suffered from the intransigent and anti-modern positions of the ecclesiastical magisterium, Adriana Zarri's hermitage became “a place where everyone could lay down their burden and breathe”, where believers seeking new paths, divorcees, and homosexuals were welcomed without judgement, rejection or discrimination.⁶⁸ She herself accepted more readily invitations from grassroots groups, parishes, social clubs and associations who wished to hear her opinion on theological, ethical, and social issues ranging from the interpretation of the Bible to ecumenism, the death penalty, and themes of justice and peace.

In these years she achieved considerable popularity for her participation in a successful television talk show, *Samarconda*, hosted by the journalist Michele Santoro, who recalled her in a recent interview as “one of his masters of life”.⁶⁹ From 1988 to 1991, Zarri took part in the show as commentator on current events, or better as narrator of ironic and caustic “parables” denouncing political and ecclesiastical powers.⁷⁰

Denunciation characterized many of the articles she published in *Il Manifesto* and *Rocca*, but also in periodicals of various orientations such as the left-wing weekly *Avvenimenti*. In the same years, she started writing for the women's illustrated magazine *Anna* and the Franciscan monthly *Messaggero di Sant'Antonio*, periodicals in which Zarri tried her different expressive chords, including replying to readers' questions.⁷¹

She dedicated many articles to environmental issues, a topic that gained increasing attention in Italy from the 1980s onward. Aware of the “very old and incurably anthropocentric culture” which had hitherto dominated, she joined the quest for a new equilibrium between man and the environment, rejecting technical and scientific omnipotence as well as extremist environmental fanaticism.⁷² Zarri

67 Zarri, “Cammino di semplicità”, 109.

68 Ernesto Vavassori, a priest and very close friend of Adriana Zarri, interviewed by the author on 17 July 2017.

69 Michele Santoro interviewed by M. Mondo.

70 Cf. Placido, “Fa troppo freddo?”; Placido, “L'agonia di Minà”; Zarri, *Apologario*.

71 On all these publications she had her own columns. He wrote on *Il Messaggero* from 1986 to 1995 under the pseudonym Myriam; on *Avvenimenti* from 1990 to 2000; on *Anna* from 1994 to 2006.

72 Cf. Zarri, “Il padre-padrone dell'universo”; Zarri, “La salute della natura”. Many previous articles also deal with ecology: Zarri, “Riflessione sotto l'albero”; Zarri, “Ecologia e dintorni”.

developed a particular interest in the meaning of animal life and its possible eschatological perspective, a theme that still appeals to contemporary theologians.⁷³ She inserted animals, with full rights, into “the history of salvation” as recipients, with humanity, of the “new heaven” and the “new earth where justice dwells”.⁷⁴ She perceived the killing of animals for food as a specific and pressing problem, a dramatic act that she considered acceptable if dictated by vital need, but totally immoral if performed, as in the case of hunting, lightly and for fun.⁷⁵ She declared to be inspired in this by her friend Paolo De Benedetti’s “theology of animals” and might also have been influenced by the German theologian Eugen Drewermann’s thoughts on the “immortality of animals”.⁷⁶

It would be worth investigating the sources of Adriana Zarri’s inspiration on environmental issues. Here, however, we must limit ourselves to hypothesize that, although there are no clear links between her and ecofeminist thought, born in the 1970s,⁷⁷ nor direct contacts with theologians sensitive to ecofeminism, she must have come across writings suggesting a new theology of nature translated early on and discussed in Italy as well.⁷⁸ We know she was in friendly contact with the Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff who, precisely at that time, was imprinting to his quest an ecological and mystical turn aimed at taking care of the earth and its creatures.⁷⁹

Zarri was not a member of feminist or feminist theologians’ circles, but during the 1980s and 1990s she sometimes expressed herself on the female condition, then at the centre of an intense philosophical and theological debate. In particular, stimulated by the invitations of Cettina Militello, one of the first women theologians to become professor at a theological faculty in Italy, and by Luce Irigaray, the Belgian philosopher who first elaborated the concept of ‘sexual difference’, Zarri further developed the Trinitarian theological intuitions she had expressed in *Impazienza di Adamo* and in subsequent writings, though never methodically.

Thus in 1985, at a conference intitled *Donne: studio ricerca insegnamento della teologia*, she explained once again how the dynam-

73 Cf. Abraham, De Mori, Knauss, “Animali e teologie”.

74 Zarri, “Teologia degli animali”.

75 Zarri, “Una crisi sempre sospesa”; Zarri, “Gli animali nostri fratelli”.

76 Drewermann, *Sulla immortalità degli animali*; De Benedetti, *E l’asina disse*; De Benedetti, *Teologia degli animali*. These books are all kept in Zarri’s personal library.

77 Bianchi “Introduzione. Ecofemminismo”.

78 Most important among them: Ruether, *Per una teologia della liberazione della donna*; also cf. Moltmann (a theologian much appreciated by Zarri), *Dio nella creazione*.

79 Boff recalls his visits to her last hermitage, cf. Boff, “Adriana Zarri. I papaveri”. In *Ecologia, mondialità, mistica*, Boff quotes Zarri’s titles at pages 198 and 218.

ics of the sexes, which she saw inscribed in the Trinitarian image of God, served as a principle to contest the dominant culture: the dynamic relationship between the people of the Trinity invited, she claimed, to rethink our own ways of living and organizing society, by mixing the prevailingly “male” attitudes, linked to activism and efficiency, with the “alternative” and “female” qualities of “hospitality” and “contemplation”.⁸⁰ A few years later, she expressed herself anew on the richness of female “specificity”, when Luce Irigaray involved her in the book *Le souffle des femmes*, to reflect with other European theologians on women’s soul as a place of hospitality. According to Zarri, such richness resided in thinking of a God connoted not by the abstractness of “being” but by the warmth of “living”, and in nurturing “a contemplative attitude”, capable of “imagination”, “adventure”, and “abandonment”.⁸¹ Zarri’s own interest lay not so much in the discussion over the “special nature” of woman, which feminist theologians continued to question in those years.⁸² To her, indeed, woman’s special nature was already given: woman was the bearer of values to be highlighted as part of a universal heritage, so that a new world and a new way of thinking God could arise.

It is perhaps during the Ca’ Sassino years that Zarri produced the most mature fruits of her ‘theological narrative’, writing three novels that expressed once again, through characters and events, the questions and interpretations of their author.

In *Dodici lune* (1989), through the diary of pain of a writer who had lost his wife, she meditated on the omnipotence of God and the freedom of man, on the dialectic between body and spirit, on the relationship between man and woman, on what happens after death, and the eternity of hell, which Zarri denied.⁸³

One theme of the book was the splendour of sexual communion which the author recognized as the celebration, in the biblical and theological perspective, of the recovered unity of a divided humanity. This motif returned in the following novel, *Quaestio 98* (1994), a long existential parable about a monk who leaves religious life in search of authentic love, inspired by a passage in Saint Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* which indicated, according to Adriana Zarri, the possibility of reliving, in the communion of bodies, the plenitude of the experience of God. Bold intuitions that won the agreement of readers who grasped the liberating intent to escape from an age-old sexophobic

80 Zarri, “Donna e teologia trinitaria”, 81-2.

81 Zarri, “Une théologie de la vie”. The book was translated into Italian. Cf. Zarri, “Una teologia della vita”. Forcina, *Soggette*, 112-13, comments on Zarri’s text.

82 Carr, Schüssler Fiorenza, “La donna ha una natura speciale?”.

83 On *Dodici lune*, cf. Genta, “Eretica Zarri”; Borgese, “L’eremita ha scritto un romanzo”.

education, and the charm of the eschatological utopia, but also attracted severe critical judgments by fellow readers.⁸⁴

Adriana Zarri's last theological novel, *Vita e morte senza miracoli di Celestino VI* came out in 2008 and put forth once again, as in a compact synthesis, all of its author's hopes in the story of a small countryside parish priest called to the papal throne, who, after taking on the evocative name of the thirteenth-century Pope Celestine V - the pope who eventually resigned - left St. Peter's for a modest apartment and began a series of reforms. He abolished compulsory celibacy for priests, opened to the ordination of women, established that bishops were to be elected by local churches, inaugurated a new sexual pastoral, and donated the Vatican State to Italy. The book reserved the surprise of a double ending: in the first, Celestine VI died very old as a pope; in the second, he resigned, deciding to go back to being a simple parish priest.⁸⁵

The writer, weakened by old age and illness, was taking leave of her readers through this will delivering hopes palely reflected shortly thereafter by Roman pontiffs. A few years after her death, on 18 November 2010, one pope - Benedict XVI - resigned from the papal throne, and another - Pope Francis - gave up the papal apartment.

Poor signals compared to the demands for radical reform that animated the life of Adriana Zarri, interpreter and promoter, from the second half of the twentieth century to the early 2000s, of needs and hopes that still challenge theological thought, the existence of the Catholic Church, and human aspiration.

7 Conclusion

To study Adriana Zarri is to meet a deeply original and independent woman, able to make the Italian Catholic Church listen to her even before it opened to the voice of women, breaking the 'glass ceiling' that prevented women from undertaking theological studies. She became a well-known orator, capable of expressing fears and hopes that were deeply-felt before and after the Second Vatican Council, and are still alive in the contemporary religious sphere.

Her independence may serve to explain why she is relatively absent from the abundant literature dedicated to the Catholic world and to the enhancement of twentieth-century women theologians. Indeed, as a journalist and writer condemning backwardness with po-

⁸⁴ Cf. Del Rio, "Zarri, amplesso in Paradiso"; Passa, "Amore, un assaggio di Paradiso". Cf. Maraviglia, *Semplicemente una che vive*, 111-12.

⁸⁵ Cf. Quaranta, *Vorrei un papa laico* (interview to Adriana Zarri). Zarri, *Vita e morte senza miracoli*.

lemical vigour and advocating reforms with equal force, she antagonized the conservative sectors of the Catholic Church. Besides, the fact of being a self-taught theologian that expressed her insights in essays but also in imaginative novels and poetry, while gaining her considerable recognition among Catholic progressists, marginalized her from academic theologians. Moreover, the fact that she expressed herself in favour of women's dignity but shunned from confronting her ideas with contemporary studies and research, kept her away from a more significant participation in feminist theology debates. To many, finally, her active engagement in most divisive battles regarding civil and social rights seemed to contradict the contemplative calling she had materialized in choosing to live as a hermit for the second part of her life.

Adriana Zarri's profile is therefore somewhat 'atypical', markedly autonomous, which perhaps caused her estrangements and misunderstandings but earned her very significant relationships and marked a life that was a source of inspiration for many. Some aspects of her life appear worthy of further research both to enrich the space and credit dedicated to women in a tenaciously masculine twentieth century, and for the implications with some developments in contemporary spirituality. Let us signal three aspects in particular: Adriana Zarri's intense collaboration with magazines and newspapers of the Catholic sphere, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, when she was often the only female writer; her relationship with bishops and theologians, first among which Chenu and Pellegrino, who were willing to recognize dedication and worth in women, on which many colleagues would have disagreed; her spiritual thought, imbued with a deep perception of the presence of the divine in nature and aware of the need for a new model of relationship between living beings. This inclination above all invites further investigations. Adriana Zarri is, in her own way, an expression of the "Christian mystics" that Karl Rahner wished for in a much-quoted saying,⁸⁶ while many pages she wrote and first of all her life itself, reveal an ecological sensibility that, since the second half of the twentieth century, has never ceased to arouse new spiritual and theological consideration both within and beyond the confines of the Catholic Church.

86 "Christians of the future will either be mystics or cease to be". Rahner, *Nuovi saggi*, 24.

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