Acceptance speech - LutherRose 2026

Roma, Camposanto Teutonico, Nov 7, 2026

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I.

Mr President, Honorable Guests, Magnifica Rettrice, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured by this recognition, which fills me with pride and with humility: a vice and a virtue from which irony has almost always protected me.

I am grateful to my Rector, Rita Cucchiara, for her words and for the friendship she has never failed to show me in these years of shared service to our university and to a science we cultivate from different sides – but which is the ground on which we met, and on which a university stands as long as it does not renounce itself.

I am humbly grateful to the Internationale Luther Stiftung for a honor which goes far beyond my capacity of courage and entrepreneurship: president Gauck was a great friend a President Napolitano and is a good friend of President Mattarella and to be in a list where him, vicepresident Verstaeger and so many real innovators are, is a bit too much for me.

This made a bit complicated for me todecide how to answer to the Lutherrose, and how say something with could be as courageus and innovative to persuade the board that they did not make a mistake.

The imminent conclusion of the History of Ecumenism urged me to speak about the balance of four volumes heavy with work. The recent encyclical Magnifica Humanitas made me think of artificial intelligence, a subject dear to my Rector, who is one of the stars of that field. And the time that I have spent with Dietrich Bonhoeffer mad me think that his poems (which are think must me considered as a single book and that I have translated into italian) could inspire me.

Then I told myself that this was the moment to adhaere to a scholarly option that is decisive for me, and that I inherited from my teacher and from his teachers: what distinguishes curious history from deep history lies not in "method", but in the choice of the object – in the risk and the challenge that the choice of the object entails.

II. The question

And so, coming here, to the Campo Santo Teutonico where the patriarch of the discipline I practise, Hubert Jedin, came to seek refuge as a Jew and as a priest who had taken seriously the logic of Saepenumero considerantes – not to dare to say what is false, not to fear to say what is true – it seemed to me that tonight I could thank you by handing you my answer to a question about the new antisemitism that is coming back from the past with a dynamic that remembers a famous loghion preserved in the Gospel of Luke 11,24-26

ταν τὸ ἀκάθαρτον πνε μα ἐξέλθῃ ἀπὸ το ἀνθρώπου, διέρχεται δι' ἀνύδρων τόπων ζητο ν ἀνάπαυσιν, καὶ μὴ εὑρίσκον λέγει· ποστρέψω εἰς τὸν ο κόν μου ὅθεν ἐξ λθον· 25καὶ ἐλθὸν

εὑρίσκει σεσαρωμένον καὶ κεκοσμημένον. 26τότε πορεύεται καὶ παραλαμβάνει ἕτερα πνεύματα πονηρότερα ἑαυτο ἑπτά , καὶ εἰσελθόντα κατοικε ἐκε , καὶ γίνεται τὰ ἔσχατα το ἀνθρώπου ἐκείνου χείρονα τ ν πρώτων

As you know in Luther's translation:

24 Wenn der unsaubere Geist von dem Menschen ausfährt, so durchwandelt er dürre Stätten, sucht Ruhe und findet sie nicht, so spricht er: Ich will wieder umkehren in mein Haus, daraus ich gegangen bin. 25 Und wenn er kommt, so findet er's gekehrt und geschmückt. 26 Dann geht er hin und nimmt sieben Geister zu sich, die ärger sind denn er selbst; und wenn sie hineinkommen, wohnen sie da, und es wird hernach mit demselben Menschen ärger denn zuvor.

Antisemitism is a theme I have met at many points of my research: the studies on Roncalli; the sentence in which Pius XII asks him whether his "silence on the conduct of the Germans is not judged badly"; the note of the Holy Office forbidding the return to their parents of baptised Jewish children saved in convents – children whom Roncalli had taken out to hand them to Herzog and give them a future in the land and in the faith of their fathers; the history of Nostra aetate and of Vatican II; the Palestinian attack on the synagogue of Rome on 9 October 1982. A theme that today pursues me with a question on which the proprium of my craft has something to say: is the new antisemitism really new?

III. Did we know?

That we are facing a global antisemitic flare-up is self-evident: numbers and episodes say so, fears and insolences that cut diagonally through our societies in a great – I quote Jedin – theologische Unklarheit. Some of the "never agains" of 1945 have been swept away: the only standard is the double standard, borders are fitted with bizarre moral sensors that sometimes ring and sometimes do not, disarmament has passed from a political to a homiletic theme. And antisemitism has reappeared.

For those who had never laid it aside, nothing has changed. For the others, the scene carries a burning question: should we be surprised, or should we have expected it?

Yes, we should have known. Indeed, we knew. We knew it so well that we could not say it to ourselves. We lacked the tools to admit that the countless "never agains" of the Shoah ceremonies, the collective indignation at attacks on synagogues, kosher restaurants and Jewish kindergartens, the alarm at the hooligan hatred of the stadiums, were all built on sand. All of them: the hypocritical and the sincere. Sand full of noble intentions, but sand.

The memory of the survivors – condemned to remember and to ask us to remember – seemed to have fixed the moral punctuation of public discourse. Their beloved faces, their broken voices, their slow words allowed us not to say that this punctuation was written on lines often left empty, where we hoped time would write the deep, pitiless, severe analysis we were avoiding. They knew. The most implacable with themselves, like Primo Levi, had been crushed by it. The most pessimistic, like Liliana Segre, bitterly foresaw a tomorrow in which what they had borne would become ten lines in a schoolbook.

The rest of us trusted the rites of memory and the seasonal pilgrimages of teenagers to the camps, called to be moved by a pain that, without demanding categories, became a generic compassion sealed with a silicone of tears. An emotion that left intact the prejudices grazing in the dirty temple of our consciences. Because an exorcism works only if Evil is called by its name, and recognised not as Absolute but as all too human.

We all knew everything, and we hoped the castle would delay the reckoning by a generation, or two, or three. It took a few hours of 7 October 2023: not a "genocide", which was beyond Hamas's reach, but a Shoah in miniature, rebuilt to the millimetre like a model railway – the house-to-house round-up, the broken doors, the deportation by selection, the killing of as many "pieces" as possible, in Himmler's jargon. And then the rebound: the thousand-and-some dead of 7 October first matched, then dwarfed by a hecatomb in Gaza; and the lexicon sliding – the Israeli army strikes, Israel bombs, the crime of the Zionists, the guilt of the Jews.

IV. The old system

The new antisemitism that seems to have awoken from its sleep has almost nothing new inside it. It stirs the same paradigms, secularised. The antisemites of Christian history were exactly like those of today: convinced that nothing in them was unmotivated, indecent or unacceptable, but that they were merely applying an obligation flowing from three findings held to be unquestionably "true" through all the regimes of Christendom, from Leo the Great to Monsignor Tiso – and shared, in a diabolical ecumenism, by Catholics and Protestants alike.

The first was that the Jews were the deicide people. It fixed not so much responsibility for the death of Jesus – condemned to a wholly Roman torture by a Roman prefect – as the conviction of a collective guilt of the Jews of all times, and of a collective sanction: the diaspora, decreed on a people repudiated for eternity by the Eternal, scattered everywhere so that each portion of Christendom would have "its own" Jews at hand to prove that the crime had not lapsed. A perversion of the Gospel, for which the light came into a darkness that was the human condition, not Judaism.

The second was that this condition was not irredeemable, because it could be remedied by conversion. Baptism was the moral proof of the innocence of Christian antisemitism: it "sufficed" to convert in order to escape discrimination – though not Nazi racism. Here too a perversion, for neither Jesus nor Paul ever doubted the perennity of the covenant, which is not an obstacle to mission but its direction.

The third the blood libel which is a form of supersessionism: a new people of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus, replacing the old one – hypocritical, formalist, devoted to vengeance and thirsty for blood. The legend of ritual infanticide entered the cult of the saints and popular sensibility – a friend and a pupil of Huber Jedin, Igino Rogger abolished after Vtican II the cult of san Simonino -- perverting the biblical datum that the shedding of blood is the primal human condition, sharpened and not soothed by fraternity.

It took a Shoah for Christianity to wake from this diabolical self-hypnosis, which few – Dietrich Bonhoeffer among the few – had understood to be diabolical precisely because it was seductive, satisfying, even equipped with its own biblical apparatus.

V. The new system

When the good feelings, good reasons and good intentions have evaporated, when the war down there gives way to a truce, what will remain on this side of the Mediterranean is another antisemitism: brand new, or the old one rejuvenated by a brief and intermittent rest. And like the other, it will be a theologically constructed hatred.

In place of deicide has come the accusation of genocide – as effective as deicide in extracting a poisonous criterion from an objective fact. That war on civilians is terrifying and inhuman, and was not invented by fanatic people like Bezalel Smotrich or Itamar Ben Gvir: is known to Guernica, Coventry, Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Hanoi, Beirut, Sarajevo, Grozny, Mosul. These horrors should lead to the repudiation of war. Instead, the immense suffering of defenceless populations in Gaza is not a war to be ended and never begun again: it is "genocide" – a category which, like deicide – is prepared and adopetd to male Jews actors or accomplices of a code with a single crime. In every historical event there are individual responsibilities; only for Israel, only for the Jews, is there a collective and indelible guilt. The word genocide also cancels every methodological doubt: and it has a retroactive aftertaste: if the descendants of the victims are doing the same, then the crime prepared by centuries of hatred was merely one instance of human wickedness – an evil from which another is not added but subtracted.

In place of conversion through baptism and the repudiation of the faith of the fathers, there is another conversion to a theoretical antisionism: from "occupation", through the repudiation of a heritage given the generic name of "Zionism". As in Christendom only the Jew converted in time escaped condemnation, so today only the Jew who converts from Zionism to the diaspora may be forgiven and admitted to the civil assembly, without paying with his rights or his life for being a Jew.

In place of the blood libel there is… the blood libel! It differs from the pasto only in its mechanics. There are no rabbis draining the veins of a little Simon of Trent; there are persons, universities, companies, orchestras, laboratories "complicit" in genocide and therefore deserving a necessary, justified, non-negotiable boycott – a complicity to be confessed with the same docility with which tortured Jews confessed before ecclesiastical tribunals. What happened in a city turned battlefield, between an army besieged in its own technological fortress and a guerrilla quartered in hospitals and maternity wards, happened – we are told – because the Jews want to drink innocent blood: their fanaticism is unlike any other because it is "natural".

VI. The anguish of the historian

Henri-Irenée Marrou wrote a a famous essai : Tristesse de l'historien. I do understand him, and I must say that what I feel is more than a sadness: it is anguish. But anguish can produce either impotence or commitment. And I am here to tell my commitment.

Those who chose the study of history as their trade have lived until now with a conviction: producing historical knowledge has a paradoxical but real efficacy: the more immune it is from simplistic and ideological purposes, the more it yields ethical and social results. That is why the study of antisemitism was so urgent in the 1950s; why understanding its mechanisms, from forced baptisms

to the dilemmatic silences of Pius XII, from hatred of the Talmud to the turning point of Vatican II, was so necessary.

The anguish of the historian today is that the speed with which antisemitism is recomposing itself into a political theology full of terrible energy seems to say not that his work was in vain, but that there is nothing useful left to do. Yet perseverance in this craft – the stubborn conviction that critical rigour can balance ideological fury, if not today then tomorrow – is the only antidote to that sense of impotence.

And what can be done for this and the next generation is to plant trees, that in my domain means feeding a generation with knowledges and instruments. And this is the reasoins that urged me and my friends to work for a European Research Infrastructure for Religious studies (a Cern, where we take into careful examination not subatomic particles, but historical facts and theological interpretations) and now to open a Library for the History and Doctrines of Judaism in Venice, that together with the Libraries in Bologna and Palermo will be the house for thinking, understanding, questionins, criticizing.

A complicated effort because now donations to something "Jewish" is unbeliveably affected by antisemitic prejudice; but exactly for this reason it is more urgent than ever. And a due ad a sweet obligation ["Iugum enim meum suave, et onus meum leve"] for a historian of the Christian history or for a Christian faithful.

Because the craft of history teaches that a force of resistance to this rebound antisemitism would exist: it lies precisely in the Christian churches, incubators and custodians of the other antisemitism. And for this reason incubtors and custodians of the reaction against antisemitis, with a "zeal for the House of the Lord"

Not all the Churches, not always, not undoubtedly all of them. Some remains on the wrong sides: the Christian Zionism which is the hidden and posoned agenda of the worst of Israeli politicians is there to remember us that "Der Alte würfelt nicht" it is true also for the Christian thought).

But other churches has shown something important (like the church officials protecting the German synagogues from antisemitic aggressions in July 2025): a will that comes from the conscience and the need to resist and from the historical awareness that antisemitism ignites in a second and goes out in a millennium, because it knows how to find theological reasons to feed itself: an impious, unsaubere Geist, that contaminates the earth on which it burns.

Is there in critical scholarship the lucidity this requires? Is there in the churches this theological strength? Jedin's generation answered with its life, here, in this house. Ours must answer with the choice of its goals and the firmnes of those who pursue them.

Brueder, bis nach langer Nacht / unser Tag unbricht: / halten wir stand! (p. 66)

Thank you.