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Pope Francis on July 1 appointed Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández to head the Vatican's doctrinal office, tasking his longtime fellow-Argentine theological adviser to chart a new course for the office once responsible for investigating theologians for doctrinal orthodoxy.

Fernández, 60, will succeed Jesuit Cardinal Luis Ladaria, 79, who has completed his term as prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and president of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the International Theological Commission.

In a letter to the archbishop, published on July 1, Francis sent a clear message that the purpose of the influential office once known as "the Inquisition" was not to control theologians, but to promote new ways of evangelization and doing theology in the modern world.

"The dicastery over which you will preside in other times came to use immoral methods. They were times when, rather than promoting theological knowledge, possible doctrinal errors were pursued," Francis wrote. "What I expect from you is certainly something very different."

"The different lines of philosophical, theological and pastoral thought, if they allow themselves to be harmonized by the Spirit in respect and love, can also make the church grow," the pope continued. "This harmonious growth will preserve Christian doctrine more effectively than any mechanism of control."

Fernández served from 2009-2018 as rector of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, a position he was appointed to by then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio. At the time, the appointment — which required Vatican approval — was held up by the Vatican's then-Congregation for Education over questions regarding Fernández's theological work.

Both Fernández and Bergoglio openly expressed their frustration with the process, and since becoming pope in 2013, Francis has sought to decentralize church governance.

Since his election as pope, Francis has relied on Fernández as an informal theological adviser. Fernández participated in the 2014 and 2015 Synods of Bishops on the family and is widely believed to be one of the primary authors of Francis' 2016 apostolic exhortation Amoris Laetitia, which offered a cautious opening to Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics.

In 2018, Francis appointed Fernández as archbishop of La Plata. His appointment to the Roman Curia marks the first time Francis has tapped someone from his native Argentina to run a Vatican department.

In 2022, Francis overhauled the structure of the doctrinal office, creating an independent section to handle disciplinary matters related to the sexual abuse of minors and another section to oversee doctrinal concerns.

In his letter to Fernández, the pope referred to this new division of labor in the office and asked the new prefect to commit himself to the "principal aim of the dicastery, which is 'to safeguard the faith.' "

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"We need a way of thinking that can convincingly present a God who loves, who forgives, who saves, who liberates, who promotes people and summons them to fraternal service," the pope wrote. "This happens if 'the proclamation concentrates

on the essential, which is the most beautiful, the greatest, the most attractive and at the same time, the most necessary.' "

"You know well that there is a harmonious order between the truths of our message, where the greatest danger occurs when secondary issues end up overshadowing the central ones," the pope continued. "In the horizon of this richness, your task also implies a special care to verify that the documents of your own dicastery and those of others have an adequate theological foundation, and are coherent with the rich soil of the church's perennial teaching and at the same time take into account the recent Magisterium."

Just a day before his appointment, on June 30, Fernández posted on social media that he had spent a week at the Vatican with Francis. Despite the pope's recent hospitalization for a hernia repair operation, he noted that the pope "works longer hours than anyone in the Vatican."

Fernández is slated to begin his new post in mid-September.

He will become the eighth prefect of the office since the Second Vatican Council, joining a list of other notable individuals that includes Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who was elected Pope Benedict XVI in 2005.