Vatican
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A man wearing a violet zucchetto stands next to another man wearing a skufia hat

Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández, appointed prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith by Pope Francis July 1, 2023, speaks with Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kiev-Halych, major archbishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, as they arrive for a session of the Synod of Bishops on the family at the Vatican in this Oct. 12, 2015, file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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A U.S.-based group that tracks how the Catholic hierarchy deals with allegations of sexual abuse by clergy says Pope Francis made a "troubling" choice in appointing an Argentine prelate to a powerful Vatican office that handles such cases.

On July 1, the Vatican announced the pontiff had picked Msgr. Victor Manuel Fernández, archbishop of La Plata, Argentina, to head the Holy See’s watchdog office for doctrinal orthodoxy. Its mandate includes handling sex abuse allegations lodged against clergy.

BishopAccountability.org, a 20-year-old Massachusetts organization that maintains an online archive of abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, said in a statement that the prelate in 2019 refused to believe victims who accused a priest in the La Plata

archdiocese of sexually abusing boys.

Francis "made a baffling and troubling choice,'' the group said in a statement emailed late July 1 in the U.S., citing how Fernández handled the case.

"In his response to allegations, he stoutly supported the accused priest and refused to believe the victims,'' BishopAccountability.org said. Fernández "should have been investigated, not promoted to one of the highest posts in the global church."

Telephone calls to the La Plata archdiocese office went unanswered on July 1. The archdiocese didn't immediately respond to an emailed request for comment from the archbishop.

As a leader of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, the 60-year-old archbishop, who will take up his Vatican post in September, "will have immense power, especially when it comes to judging and punishing priests who abuse children,'' BishopAccountability.org said.

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A trusted adviser to the pontiff, Fernández has been nicknamed the "pope’s theologian" because he is widely believed to have helped author some of Francis’ most important documents. The pope named him to head the La Plata archdiocese in 2018.

BishopAccountablity.org said after a 2008 child abuse complaint against a La Plata parish priest resurfaced in 2019, the archbishop published a letter from the priest on the archdiocese's website. In it, the clergyman denied the abuse allegation and said he was slandered.

The archbishop later went to the accused priest's parish and celebrated a Mass with him, according to BishopAccountability.org.

Despite more allegations surfacing, Fernández allowed the priest to continue work. The archbishop eventually removed him, saying priest requested to leave for "health reasons.'' In December 2019, the priest took his own life hours after a judge issued an order for his arrest, according to the watchdog group and Argentine media reports at the time.

"Nothing about his performance suggests that he is fit to lead the pope’s battle against abuse and cover-up," BishopAccountability.org said of Fernández.

Francis has pledged that the Catholic Church will adhere to a zero-tolerance policy on clergy sexual abuse.