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Msgr. Victor Manuel Fernández, archbishop of La Plata, smiles after a Mass at the Cathedral in La Plata, Argentina, Sunday, July 9, 2023. Fernández was appointed by Pope Francis to head the Holy See's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican. (AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko)

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La Plata, Argentina — July 10, 2023
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Archbishop Victor Manuel Fernández, chosen by Pope Francis to head the Vatican office that ensures doctrinal orthodoxy, conceded July 9 he made mistakes in handling a 2019 case of a priest accused of sexual abuse of minors.

The case has drawn allegations by critics that Fernández tried to protect the priest, a charge that he has denied.

"Today I would certainly act very differently and certainly my performance was insufficient," he told The Associated Press during an interview after celebrating Mass in La Plata, about 70 kilometers (40 miles) south of Buenos Aires.

Francis appointed Fernández on July 1 to head the Holy See's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which guarantees doctrinal orthodoxy and one of whose areas involves handling sexual abuse allegations brought against clergy. He was also named a cardinal July 9 along with about two dozen religious.

BishopAccountability.org, a U.S. group that maintains an online archive on abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, has questioned the archbishop's appointment as head of the dicastery. It said Fernández refused to believe allegations by minors who accused Eduardo Lorenzo, a priest in the archdiocese of La Plata, of abusing them.

At the end of 2019, hours after learning that an Argentine judge had ordered his arrest for the alleged sexual abuse of five children, Lorenzo was found dead in what was ruled a suicide.

In response to the U.S. organization's criticism, Fernández told AP in a statement July 10 that he had never said he did not believe the allegations and that he took steps to distance the priest from the alleged victims.

On July 9, though, he was more self-critical of his actions, which he attributed to arriving in 2018 as archbishop of La Plata "without any experience in another diocese." He said church procedures for dealing with allegations of abuse committed by clerics "were less clear" at that time.

"I cannot say that I have committed a crime or something against what was established at that time, but that I could have been a much better father, much better pastor and much more efficient. That, of course, I recognize," he told AP.

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"With everything I say it is clear that I did not act in the best way," he said.

Fernández said he should have "treated the victims more closely" and acted "a little earlier" in removing Lorenzo from his duties as a priest while he was being investigated.

"I was waiting to see how justice acted, what the prosecutor did, what objective elements came to us," he said.

Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of BishopAccountability.org, expressed disbelief at the archbishop’s words.

"He declares himself bewildered, but he is a sophisticated and educated man," she said, adding that "claims of ignorance are not credible."

Barrett Doyle said Fernández "repeatedly" demonstrated support for the priest.

"If Archbishop Fernández finally regretted his handling of this case, why did he never reach out to Lorenzo’s victims?" she said.

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

Fernández said he had spoken to the pope about the criticism received about Lorenzo’s case and was told: "You explain reality as it was."