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Cardinal-designate Victor Manuel Fernandez, archbishop of La Plata, officiates Mass at the Cathedral in La Plata, Argentina, Sunday, July 9, 2023. Fernandez was appointed by Pope Francis to head the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican. (AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko)

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Three decades ago, when he was a parish priest in Argentina, the man named by Pope Francis to be the Catholic Church's new guardian of doctrinal orthodoxy wrote a short book about kissing and the sensations it evokes.

Some conservative sectors in the church are using the reflections in "Heal Me with Your Mouth. The Art of Kissing" to criticize the appointment of Cardinal-designate Victor Manuel Fernández to lead the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, a body once known as the Holy Office that for centuries was responsible for persecuting heretics, disciplining dissidents and enforcing sexual morality.

"These are ultra-conservative sectors that deeply hate the Argentine pontiff [Francis]," Fernández, the archbishop of La Plata, a city 43 miles south of Buenos Aires, told The Associated Press.

"They take a phrase from the book and say: 'Look at the level of this theologian. How can a person who uses these expressions be the prefect of the Doctrine of the Faith?'" said Fernández, who dreamed of being a poet when he was younger.

The 80-page book, published in 1995 but no longer in print, has emerged as a key point used to blast the appointment of the 60-year-old archbishop commonly known as "Tucho" to one of the Vatican's most powerful offices.

The book highlights the importance of kissing in human relationships, defining them as expressions of absolute love. "In English, 'Kiss,' in Italian, 'bacio,' in French, 'baiser,' in German, 'kuss,' in Portuguese, 'beijo.' Depending on how it's done, it is also often called 'peck,' 'sucking,' 'drilling,' etc.," the book says.

An article published earlier this month on Catholic news agency Zenit said that "everyone is talking about Monsignor Víctor Manuel Fernández ... and above all about his kisses."

Criticism of the archbishop, whose appointment was seen by some as an attempt to break with the past, has come from conservative religious figures in the United States.

"Pray that he returns to the Catholic faith," Tyler, Texas Bishop Joseph Strickland wrote on social media.

Fernández, who has long had a close relationship with the pope, a fellow Argentine, said he rejected later offers to reprint the book.

"I was already older, and I thought this is a book about the kiss ... so I said, 'No, no, no, please, don't reprint it, let's leave this in the past.' But well, now it's my karma," Fernández said with a laugh.

One of the excerpts from the book reads: "A couple with a lot of sex, a lot of sexual satisfaction, but few kisses that are genuine or with kisses that say nothing is digging the grave of love with each sexual encounter, creating routine, fatigue, and weariness until one of them finds something more human."

Fernández argued he can't be accused "of anything" because the work in question "contains no heresy or error." He stressed that the strategy of his critics is to "quote phrases" from the book repeatedly to question the pope for appointing someone with "such superficial theology and street language" to a key position.

The book includes a poem written by Fernández: "How was God so ruthless to give you that mouth... No one can resist, witch, hide it."

The cardinal complained on social media that critics mistranslated "bruja," or "witch," as "bitch."

Fernández said he wrote the book along with a group of young people when he was a parish priest in the Argentine town of Santa Teresita, in the central province of Córdoba. He said it was written as a catechesis for teenagers, with the contributions of his young collaborators, and he improved them by providing "a little editing."

In the book's introduction, Fernández wrote that the book was not written from his personal experience and that his goal was to summarize what "mortals" experience when they kiss.

Fernández says he has written dozens of texts since then and his critics should cite ones he has published in "top-level" journals. He has been the rector of the Catholic University of Argentina and head of the Argentine Society of Theology. He was recently named a cardinal.

"But they take this little youth catechism, from a poor parish priest from the countryside, and take phrases out of context," Fernández said.

In Argentina, Fernández has received some criticism on social media but has the support of the church in his homeland.

"He has given an excellent and clear explanation of the issue," said Máximo Jurcinovic, director of communications for the Argentine Episcopal Conference.

Fernández said the pope told him his task as head of the doctrinal office would be "guarding the teaching that stems from faith" in order to "give a reason for our hope, but not as enemies who point fingers and condemn."

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The book is not the only piece of controversial writing Fernández has done in the past.

He has acknowledged that some of his writings were sent to the Vatican, anonymously, after then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio appointed him as rector of the Catholic University of Argentina in 2009. The controversy resulted in a two-year delay in his being cleared for the job.

Fernández wrote about the ordeal soon after Bergoglio was elected Pope Francis, recounting that a newspaper article he had penned about gay marriage had been included in the anonymous dossier and that an unnamed Vatican "congregation" – believed to be the one responsible for Catholic education -- repeatedly refused to receive him to explain himself.

He has also had to acknowledge mistakes in his handling of a 2019 case involving a priest accused of sexually abusing 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 AP after celebrating Mass in La Plata.

By appointing Fernández to head the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Francis seemed to indicate a desire for a break with the past.

"The Dicastery over which you will preside in other times came to use immoral methods. Those were times when, rather than promoting theological knowledge, possible doctrinal errors were pursued. What I expect from you is certainly something very different," the pope wrote in a letter to Fernández.

German Cardinal Gerhard Müller, who served as prefect of the office until Francis fired him in 2017, said the new directives are out of place considering the mission of that department was to "protect and promote the revealed faith."

"This is not a theological academy or a talk show where everyone can express their opinion," Müller said on conservative U.S. broadcaster EWTN.

Fernández has characterized himself as a reformist who doesn't like to "break with everything," but advocates for a church that is "more inclusive, more respectful of different ways of living and thinking."

[Associated Press journalist Nicole Winfield in Rome contributed to this report.]