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A man wearing bishop's clothes talks to a man wearing a clerical collar. A Swiss guard is visib

Archbishop Victor Fernández, then rector of the Catholic University in Argentina, talks with Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of La Civilta Cattolica, as they leave a session of the Synod of Bishops on the family at the Vatican Oct. 14. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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When Pope Francis said he wanted the focus of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith to be "something very different" from the dicastery's reputation as a stringent watchdog, he was not saying anything goes, Cardinal-designate Víctor Fernández, the dicastery's new prefect, said in an interview.

"It is clear that at no time does the pope say that the function of refuting errors should disappear," he told the Rome-based Jesuit journal, La Civiltà Cattolica, in an interview published Sept. 14.

When Francis named the Argentine theologian to the post in July, he released a public letter saying the dicastery's "central purpose is to guard the teaching that

flows from the faith in order to give reasons for our hope, but not as an enemy who critiques and condemns."

Fernández said the dicastery's approach is key.

"Clearly, if someone says that Jesus was not really human or that all immigrants should be killed, a decisive intervention will be necessary," he said. "But at the same time this will provide an opportunity to grow, to enrich our understanding."

As an example, he said, a person who denies Jesus' humanity may have a "legitimate intention to better show the divinity of Jesus Christ," and one who is against immigrants may be trying to draw attention to flawed laws and policies.

"A fundamental criterion to be preserved is that 'any theological conception that ultimately questions God's omnipotence and, especially, his mercy' must be considered inadequate," Fernández said, quoting Francis' letter to him.

The pope also asked him "to bring theological knowledge into dialogue with the life of the holy people of God," responding to new challenges and questions.

For that dialogue to work and for the church to effectively communicate the response of Christian faith, the cardinal-designate said, Catholics must be willing to embrace "an asceticism: to tolerate with charity the recurring aggressiveness that assails us."

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"Might society's questioning be a mediation that God himself uses to disarm us, to open us to something else?" he asked.

The Catholic Church, he said, cannot "ignore the fact that the verbal violence of some groups is an understandable outburst after many centuries of our own verbal violence," for example, by using "insulting, very offensive language, or of manipulating women as if they were second-class."

Francis is a model of the kind of patience needed, he said, a patience that "comes from his heart as a father" and hopes that "with time a better balance will be found."

The church also insists on "the value of reason and the need for dialogue between faith and reason, which are not contradictory," Fernández said.

However, there is a danger that an individual or group of individuals espousing what they claim is reason propose "a set of principles that govern everything, even if it is ultimately a 'forma mentis' (mindset), more philosophical than theological," he said. Their way of thinking "ultimately takes the place of revelation!"

Such a group, he said, believes "they alone are 'serious,' 'intelligent,' 'faithful.' This explains the power that some churchmen arrogate to themselves, going so far as to determine what the pope can or cannot say, and presenting themselves as guarantors of the legitimacy and unity of the faith. After all, the 'forma mentis' of which they consider themselves absolute guardians is a source of power that they want to safeguard."

But, he said, "it is not reason, it is power."

Francis "asked me to safeguard the teaching that flows from faith," he said. "The words 'guard' and 'care' are among Francis' favorite words. It's no accident that he is especially devoted to St. Joseph. Care, for him, is a fundamental attitude that flows from the Gospel. Just as one cares for people, one must do the same with the doctrine that emerges from faith."

The first step, he said, must be "a deep appreciation of what is to be cared for, that is, it implies that one loves doctrine as a precious treasure and that one is rightly proud of that divine gift."