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Father Luis Garcia is seen greeting a parishioner and her toddler in Houston June 4, 2022. (OS

Father Luis Garcia is seen greeting a parishioner and her toddler at the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Houston June 4, 2022. (OSV News photo/James Ramos, Texas Catholic Herald)

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Women who have conceived a child out of wedlock and have the courage to choose life for their baby "should be encouraged to have access to the healing and consoling power of the sacraments," said the head of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, the dicastery prefect, was responding to a question from a bishop expressing concern for single mothers who abstain from the sacraments fearing the rigidity of their pastors and judgment from Catholics in their parishes.

"It is noted that in some countries, both priests and some lay people prevent mothers who have had a child outside of marriage from accessing the sacraments and even baptizing their children," said the cardinal's reply, which was

approved by Pope Francis Dec. 13 and was posted on the dicastery's website the next day.

Cardinal Fernández noted that Pope Francis had addressed the issue in 2012 when he was still archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

"There are priests who do not baptize the children of single mothers because (the children) were not conceived in the sanctity of marriage. They are the hypocrites of today," the future pope had said. "They turn God's people away from salvation."

"And," he had said, "that poor girl, who could have sent her child back to the sender but had the courage to bring him into the world, goes on pilgrimage from parish to parish to have him baptized."

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The cardinal also quoted Pope Francis' remarks in 2015 to a virtual townhall meeting organized by ABC News with people in the United States.

Speaking to a mother in Los Angeles, the pope told her, "I know that it is not easy to be a single mother. I know that people can sometimes look down on you. But I want to tell you something: you are a brave woman because you were able to bring these two daughters into the world. You could have killed them in your womb, yet you respected life: you respected the life you had inside you, and God will reward you for that, and he does reward you."

Cardinal Fernández said that Catholics should be educated to know that "being a single mother does not prevent that person from accessing the Eucharist."

Like with any Catholic, he said, the "sacramental confession of sins allows the person to approach communion. The ecclesial community should, furthermore, value the fact that single mothers welcomed and defended the gift of life they carried in their wombs and struggle every day to raise their children."

And, the cardinal said, if there is a situation where a woman "sometimes resorts to selling her body to support her family," the reaction of the parish must be "to do everything possible to help her avoid this very serious risk rather than judge her harshly."

People like to quote Jesus' words to the woman caught in adultery: "sin no more," the cardinal wrote.

"Certainly, Jesus always invites us to change our lives, to respond more faithfully to God's will, and to live with greater dignity. However, this phrase does not constitute the central message of this Gospel pericope, which is simply the invitation to recognize that no one can cast the first stone."

In his response to the letter sent by Bishop Ramón de la Cruz Baldera of San Francisco de Macorís, Dominican Republic, Cardinal Fernández also quoted from Pope Francis' 2016 exhortation, "Amoris Laetitia," on marriage and family life.

"Referring to mothers who must raise their children alone," he said, Pope Francis "reminds us that 'in such difficult situations of need, the Church must be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance, rather than imposing straightaway a set of rules that only lead people to feel judged and abandoned by the very Mother called to show them God's mercy."