

THE NEW PREFECT

Pope calls Fernandez to lead Dicastery "against" Doctrine of the Faith

ECCLESIA

04_07_2023



**Stefano
Fontana**



Francis has appointed as Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith Archbishop Victor Manuel Fernández, who has always been his faithful companion and whom he has gradually promoted in Argentina to significant posts, such as the rectorate

at the Catholic University and the ordinariate in La Plata in a hasty replacement for Bishop Héctor Aguer, guilty of disagreeing with the pope on *Amoris laetitia*.

Since Fernández is a carbon copy of Francis (some even suspect the reverse), since he is among the material authors of his encyclicals and exhortations, and since he has long since projected himself on the avant-garde line of Church reform, Fernández was the 'unmentionable' for those who are currently concerned about the ongoing process led by Santa Marta, especially in the run-up to the Synod on synodality.

This will now be able to develop along the lines of welcoming the hot topics - blessing of same-sex couples, female diaconate, overcoming priestly celibacy - without any more control from Rome, indeed with its help and connivance. For this reason, the appointment has surprised many who see in it an act of arrogance, a disregard for the many in the Church who are rightly concerned about the current uncontrolled thrust forward, an unprecedented and no-holds-barred acceleration in the attempt to reach the final reckoning. An appointment destined to accentuate the conflict in the Church, forcing the other side into tougher resistance.

If the name of the person appointed is of great concern, even more worrying is the letter - another surprising fact - that the pope addressed to him, written in the same style as the new prefect's letter of reply: the language used is exactly the same, to the point that some mischievous people have speculated that both were penned by Fernández, Ghost Writer on this occasion too.

It is a letter with disruptive content with respect to what has hitherto been considered the specific purpose of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and, indeed, what has been considered the Doctrine of the Faith. To the point that, after reading it, one can apprehensively ask oneself the question of what will become of this central Dicastery of the Roman Curia, bearing in mind that if this Congregation changes, it means the whole Church will change.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is not a cultural centre, it does not animate theological research, it does not provoke debate and it does not initiate processes of confrontation. Rather, the opposite must be said. The Congregation says the last word and closes, on that point, the research, the debate, and the process. In the instruction *Donum veritatis* on the ecclesial function of the theologian of the same Congregation, led at the time by Ratzinger, it is well explained (n. 14) how the magisterium has a "definitive" character in order to protect "the people of God from deviations and bewilderment, and to guarantee them the objective possibility of

professing the authentic faith without error".

The Congregation is at the service of this need for definitiveness. It intervenes (used to intervene? ...) to clarify the truth when dangerous doubts arise or when it is actually denied; it does so in an affirmative manner but, indirectly, also in a negative manner by condemning error. In his letter to Fernández, on the other hand, Francis says that it should encourage the "charisma of theologians and their commitment to theological research" as long as "they do not settle for a desk-bound theology", a "cold and hard logic that tries to dominate everything".

Here the meaning of the term 'doctrine' is dismantled and thus the task of the Congregation changes. With an image as confusing as 'desk-bound theology' and with the instrumental forcing of 'cold, hard logic', the correct and traditional vision of doctrine, now understood as research in a procedural context, is demolished. The new prefect, therefore, will have to watch over not the sometimes unbalanced creativity of the theologians in order to lead them back to their genuine ecclesial vocation, rather over the evaluations of the Congregation, which will no longer have to be doctrinal (cold and hard in Bergoglian language), but possibilistic and open.

It is easy to imagine what this means for the hot topics on the agenda today and that will become very hot with the Synod.

This work of animation, according to Francis' letter, must be done in a climate of both philosophical and theological pluralism. "The Church 'needs to grow in the interpretation of the revealed word and in the understanding of the truth', without this implying the imposition of a single way of expressing it. Because 'the different lines of philosophical, theological, and pastoral thought, if they allow themselves to be harmonised by the Spirit in respect and love, can also make the Church grow'". Gone are the concepts of Revelation, Deposit of Faith, and Doctrine. Also broken is the relationship between reason and faith, which makes it impossible for revealed faith to coexist with all philosophies and all theologies, which love cannot harmonise except by passing through their truth and not against it. Love respects the principle of non-contradiction.

The letter also contains a blow below the belt against the running of the Dicastery during previous pontificates: "The Department you presided over in other times came to use immoral methods. Those were times when, rather than promoting theological knowledge, any doctrinal errors were pursued. What I expect from you is undoubtedly something very different". The astuteness of the phrase 'in other times' fails to conceal

that the criticism is directed at the recent past and especially at the long era of Ratzinger as head of the Doctrine of the Faith.

Even leaving aside the person named, this letter is enough to cause great concern about the future of this Dicastery. It will probably be a Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with little interest in doctrine, or even opposed to it. It will understand its role as promoting theological dialogue, but without exercising any form of doctrinal control and guarantee. It will conceive itself as the engine of a process rather than the Dicastery that guarantees the goal of the journey. It will be pluralist and will welcome all philosophies and theologies. It will be all this and perhaps more. Let it not be thought, however, that it will no longer be dogmatic or that it will not be inflexible. It will be, but of a dogmatism without truth and focused on praxis. Those who do not conform to the new practices will be condemned and persecuted. And even merely 'resisting' will become an indictment.