

Exclusive: Archbishop Fernandez Warns Against Bishops Who Think They Can Judge ‘Doctrine of the Holy Father’

The Vatican’s new doctrinal chief also discusses his openness to same-sex Church blessings, shares his thoughts on the German Synodal Way, and explains his approach to safeguarding doctrine.

[Edward Pentin Interviews](#) September 11, 2023

VATICAN CITY — The incoming prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith has warned that bishops — both “progressive” and those from “traditionalist groups” — who think they have a “special gift of the Holy Spirit to judge the doctrine of the Holy Father” are on a road to “heresy” and “schism.”

Speaking in response to a question on accepting Pope Francis’ magisterium, **Cardinal-designate Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández** told Register senior correspondent Edward Pentin in an exclusive Sept. 8 email interview that the Pope not only has a duty to guard and preserve the “static” deposit of faith, but also a second, unique charism, only given to Peter and his successors, which is “a living and active gift.”

“I do not have this charism, nor do you, nor does Cardinal [Raymond] Burke. Today only Pope Francis has it,” said Archbishop Fernández, who takes over from outgoing Spanish prefect Cardinal Luis Ladaria Ferrer this week and will be elevated to cardinal at a consistory on Sept. 30. Cardinal Burke recently wrote the preface of a [book that was sharply critical](#) of the upcoming Synod on Synodality and has often expressed concerns about some teaching of this pontificate.

“Now, if you tell me that some bishops have a special gift of the Holy Spirit to judge the doctrine of the Holy Father, we will enter into a vicious circle (where anyone can claim to have the true doctrine) and that would be heresy and schism,” he said.

The Argentinian archbishop, who reportedly [ghostwrote](#) Francis’ 2016 apostolic exhortation [Amoris Laetitia](#) and has contributed to several other major papal documents, addressed several concerns in the interview, namely that pastoral practice is being separated from sound doctrine, the issue of “modernizing” the Church, and his stated openness to same-sex Church blessings. Cardinal-designate Fernández, 61, said he had already given 40 media interviews since his appointment was announced in July and had not wished to give any more but kindly gave these brief answers to the Register via email.

Regarding the German Synodal Way, he said the German Church “has serious problems and obviously has to think about a new evangelization,” but he distanced himself from that controversy, saying he knows “little about it” and instead preferred to stress his own “formula for dealing with the religious indifference of society” in the way he evangelized as a priest and bishop in Argentina.

Your Excellency, what does the term “modernizing the Church” mean to you? What does that involve, and how important is it?

I would never use the term “modernize” to apply to the Church, because it is a category more appropriate to corporations or other institutions; it does not apply to a supernatural reality such as the Church, which has eternal elements. Recent popes have used the word “reform” in the belief that there are aspects of the Church that can change, but always without renouncing a permanent *humus* (Latin for

“soil” or “ground”) that goes beyond the passing of time, the different epochs and the superficial aspects of the world.

The expression “modernizing the Church” could lead us to the error of subsuming the permanent and ever-new richness of the Church, including the Gospel, into the framework of a given epoch (in this case, modernity), which will also pass away, as all other epochs have passed away. In short, the expression “modernizing the Church” makes no sense to me.

You said in a July [interview](#) with Crux that you take Pope Francis’ words about accepting the recent magisterium very seriously and that the faithful should allow their thought “to be transfigured with his criteria,” particularly when it comes to moral and pastoral theology. What is the “recent magisterium” exactly? How does it differ from the non-recent magisterium, and what do you mean when you say “transfigured with his criteria” regarding moral and pastoral theology? Is it binding; and, as prefect, how will you deal with those in the Church, especially bishops and priests, who won’t subscribe to the Holy Father’s magisterium, as they might see it as contradicting established Church teaching?

When we speak of obedience to the magisterium, this is understood in at least two senses, which are inseparable and equally important. One is the more static sense, of a “deposit of faith,” which we must guard and preserve unscathed. But on the other hand, there is a particular charism for this safeguarding, a unique charism, which the Lord has given only to Peter and his successors.

In this case, we are not talking about a deposit, but about a living and active gift, which is at work in the person of the Holy Father. I do not have this charism, nor do you, nor does Cardinal Burke. Today only Pope Francis has it. Now, if you tell me that some bishops have a special gift of the Holy Spirit to judge the doctrine of

the Holy Father, we will enter into a vicious circle (where anyone can claim to have the true doctrine) and that would be heresy and schism. Remember that heretics always think they know the true doctrine of the Church. Unfortunately, today, not only do some progressives fall into this error but also, paradoxically, do some traditionalist groups.

One criticism often directed at Church leaders, especially since the Second Vatican Council, has been an absence of clarity in Church teaching. How can individual faithful Catholics find a path to salvation when the Church's teaching appears obscured by debates influenced by what they might see as worldly values that have entered the Church and an apparent lack of certainty that has ensued? What might you do as prefect to help address this lack of clarity?

Debates (and therefore some lack of clarity) have existed throughout the history of the Church. There were fierce debates among the Fathers of the Church, there were debates among religious orders, and how can we not remember the [*de auxiliis controversy*](#), where two groups of theologians and bishops condemned each other [over the relationship between divine grace and free will] until the pope decided that it was an open question and forbade them expressing themselves in condemnatory terms?

However, even in such situations that may seem scandalous, the Church grows and matures in its understanding of some aspects of the Gospel that had not been made sufficiently explicit before. I believe that this dicastery can be a space that can welcome these debates and frame them in the secure doctrine of the Church, thus avoiding for the faithful some of the more aggressive, confusing and even scandalous media debates.

In an [interview](#) with InfoVaticana in July, you seemed to be open to Church blessings of same-sex couples if they can be carried out without causing confusion. Could you explain more what you meant by this? What sort of confusion were you referring to?

I was referring to confusing a same-sex union with a marriage. At this point, it is clear that the Church only understands marriage as an indissoluble union between a man and a woman who, in their differences, are naturally open to beget life.

You've said that doctrine cannot change, but our understanding of it can. Yet some [Church watchers see this](#) as subverting the Church's immutable teaching under the guise of pastorally helping the faithful, creating a false dichotomy between doctrine and pastoral praxis that actually cohere. Do you see doctrine as an obstacle to being truly compassionate, and if so, why?

True doctrine can only be a light, a guide for our steps, a sure path and a joy for the heart. But it is clear that even the Church does not yet fully grasp the full richness of the Gospel. In some areas it has taken centuries for the Church to make explicit aspects of doctrine which at other times she did not see so clearly.

Today the Church condemns torture, slavery and the death penalty, but this did not happen with the same clarity in other centuries. Dogmas were necessary because before them there were issues that were not sufficiently clear.

The doctrine does not change; the Gospel will always be the same. Revelation is already settled. But there is no doubt that the Church will always be tiny in the midst of such an immensity of truth and beauty and will always need to continue to grow in her understanding.

What will be your approach to the German Synodal Way? To what extent do you think your openness to same-sex blessings and your expressed desire to foster a softer approach to heretical theologians or positions might help the German situation?

The German Church has serious problems and obviously has to think about a new evangelization. On the other hand, today it does not have theologians on the level of those who were so impressive in the past. The risk of the Synodal Way lies in believing that by enabling some progressive novelties, the Church in Germany will flourish. This is not what Pope Francis — who emphasized a renewed missionary outreach focused on the proclamation of the *Kerygma*: the infinite love of God manifested in the Crucified and Risen Christ — would propose.

I don't know why some of your colleagues identify me with the German way, which I still know little about. Look, my most famous book is called [*Los Cinco Minutos del Espíritu Santo*](#) (*The Five Minutes of the Holy Spirit*) and contains a daily meditation on the Holy Spirit that has sold 150,000 copies. Did you know that?

On the other hand, I was a parish priest, and I was also a diocesan bishop. Go and ask the faithful in my parish what I did when I was a parish priest, and you will see: Eucharistic adoration, catechism courses, Bible courses, home missions with Our Lady and a prayer to bless the home. I had 10 prayer groups and 130 young people.

As diocesan bishop, I used to ask people about what I'd discuss in my homilies in the cathedral and in my visits to the parishes: about Christ, about prayer, about the Holy Spirit, about Mary, about sanctification. And last year I proposed to the whole

archdiocese to concentrate on “growing together towards holiness.” Whatever some of your colleagues may say, that was my formula for dealing with the religious indifference of society. Like the Pope, I believe that without mysticism we will go nowhere.

Nota: el texto que antecede ha sido reproducido en forma íntegra de la siguiente fuente <https://www.ncregister.com/interview/exclusive-archbishop-fernandez-warns-against-bishops-who-think-they-can-judge-doctrine-of-the-holy-father>