

**A Tribute to Pope Francis:
“In the Footsteps of a Father”
Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández
in Dialogue with the Doctrinal Section of the Dicastery**

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Question: Can you share your testimony about what you, who were especially close to Pope Francis, consider to be the heart of his thought and, in some way, also his legacy for the Church?

Prefect: Pope Francis’s thought can, of course, be understood through the texts he has left us. What we can do is offer a general guide for reading them.

One point that was very important to him was that doctrine should be clear. He always thought this. It is not true, as some say, that he wanted to create doctrinal confusion, that theological depth was unimportant to him, or that he did not want to get to the bottom of issues. He valued clear thinking; however—and this is the key point—in his view, everything plays out in people’s concrete lives. I am not talking about situational ethics, which is something quite different, but about the real life each person lives, where the history of their salvation and the mystery of salvation unfold. For this reason, Pope Francis especially appreciated our document *Dignitas Infinita*, because he has always emphasized this point, ever since his days as a priest. The document addresses the infinite dignity of each human person, which is a belief that guided his priesthood, episcopate, and the choices he made, such as visiting this journalist, this hairdresser, or this cleaning lady. For him, it was essential to meet every person, regardless of their social standing, because they are people with inalienable dignity, loved infinitely by God. This is the key point.

Therefore, when faced with a complex theological moral issue, we must always consider how it impacts real people, their lives, and their suffering. We should ask ourselves what effect our words might have on this person’s life if we say this or that. It is not that the truth itself changes; yet, the truth can be perceived by another person in different ways. For example, if I say that Christ is not a human person, theologically this is

absolutely correct. But if I say the same thing to someone who has not studied theology, they might understand that Christ is not a real man, that he is a man with a part “cut off,” or that he is not like us. The same applies when classical theology affirms that there is no movement in heaven. What does the person understand first? That it is better to remain here below, that eternity must be very boring, and so on.

These are two small examples that Pope Francis sometimes used in order to show that you can say something very clear and orthodox, but you must also ask how the other person perceives it, what impact it has on their life and God’s plan of salvation for them, how they will react, what effect it will have on the development of their personal journey, and so on. This seems to me the most important point for understanding many of the things Pope Francis said.

Another important point related to this is the conviction that there are many truths within the Church’s theology and teachings; however, there is a core, which is the *kerygma*, and this is fundamental to people’s lives. This theme has been present in Pope Francis’s teachings from the beginning, as he demonstrated in his catechesis and in his simplest, most everyday speeches, where he constantly returned to the love of God and to Christ who embraces us, walks with us, bends down to our sufferings, and unites them to himself. All of these are simply the *kerygma* itself expressed in plain words, but repeated in different ways for various circumstances. For Pope Francis, this was the heart of the revealed truth. The greatest risk is not communicating this heart but becoming fixated on secondary issues, which are also beautiful and true, but which might not bring the saving heart of the Gospel message to real people’s lives. This is what changes lives and truly fosters conversion and growth in the Christian life.

So, (1) attention to the lives of real people and (2) the *kerygma*: these are the two points I have heard from him for as long as I can remember, even before he was a bishop, and which he already held back then. When he became Archbishop, I was already the Rector of the Catholic University, and I had many opportunities to meet him, during which I sensed he had the same emphases, which he continued to have even after becoming Pope. Many other things could be said, but I think this is the key to understanding Pope Francis’s thinking.

On these issues, Pope Leo XIV is in the same line of thinking. Of course, this is not a new development, but something he has held since he was a Cardinal. During recent audiences, the Holy Father told me that the direction the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith has taken in recent years will continue to be the same. He even mentioned this during the Ordinary Session of the Dicastery for Bishops, regarding the criteria for choosing bishops. Pope Leo emphasized that bishops must proclaim the *kerygma*, be close to the people, understand their anxieties, and have the good of all at heart. At the beginning of the meeting, he read a list of points I felt I had heard before. He then clarified where they came from: they were the same points Pope Francis requested. We can say that there is certainly a difference in style and nuance between Leo and Francis—but ultimately, it is better this way since the Church is enriched by each Pontiff. Nevertheless, there is an underlying continuity that is important to understand because it also guides our work at the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Question: Could you also give us an account of your meeting with Pope Francis? You once referred to it when presenting *Dignitas Infinita*, saying that your meeting with him helped you rediscover your own dignity.

Prefect: Yes, and this was thanks to Pope Francis’s firm and deep belief in the dignity of every person. You could see this when he made decisions that affected someone. You might have a different opinion, but he would listen to you and show great respect. And he would never ask anyone to do something without that person’s free and clear acceptance. In fact, he asked me to do several things in my life; I initially refused some, but I later agreed. He never told me, “You must do it,” but always waited for my free decision. He never pressured me. In meetings with him, during some difficult moments I had to face—moments that were truly very hard—he said to me: “No, *Tucho*, hold your head high and don’t let them take away your dignity.” He said this firmly, looking me in the eyes, and that phrase really struck me and has remained a constant source of consolation for me. Many others also shared this experience; it was not something only I felt, as it reflected his deep conviction, which he also expressed in his words about the poor, about suffering, economic issues, and many other matters. Ultimately, it is simply an evangelical conviction.

Question: I would like to pose a question, but it is more out of curiosity. In our discussions with you, we have sensed Pope Francis’s strong support for this Dicastery—his genuine closeness and support. Sometimes, however, when Pope Francis talked about theology, he used words that I found a little severe, as if he had been somewhat hurt by the teachings he received. To put it briefly, he said several times: “Theology is just Denzinger.” Early in his pontificate, I translated some of his works and saw him more as a philosopher in his mindset than as a theologian, because when he spoke or wrote, he sometimes talked about theology as if it were merely a constant comparison with Denzinger. So, it was not always easy for me to understand his deep conviction about theology as a discipline.

Prefect: This is a very sincere and concrete question. Thank you. Pope Francis never had a personal issue with theology—no personal criticisms or disputes, not even with a theologian—nor any “wounds” that could influence him. I can say this with certainty. However, he was very struck by the constant accusations against others that he happened to hear, especially when he was a bishop, because some members of the Episcopal Conference belonged to a very conservative line of thinking and continually wanted to condemn this or that priest for saying something in a homily, or for writing it somewhere, etc. So, it is more about that aspect. I think that if there was anything that could have influenced him, so to speak, it was primarily a kind of unease toward people who dedicate their lives to persecuting others and finding faults in them, to looking for mistakes in them, and so on. And this was his issue: not with theology itself, but with this kind of situation.

Of course, one might also think that, when he was a student, he could have had teachers who were too “scholastic.” However, he appreciated his theology and philosophy teachers, so I can assure you it was not a personal problem or one related to his own history. Instead, it was that unease I mentioned earlier, especially because these people—who constantly sought to condemn others—spoke with great confidence, as if they had all the truth in their heads, without even needing to study because they already knew everything. I believe it was this situation that prompted Pope Francis to make certain remarks about theology.

Question: What you are saying now reminds me of Pope Francis's visit to the Dicastery, where the first thing he told us was precisely this. And it surprised me because he said, and I quote: "Let's be careful because I have often met people in my life who almost enjoyed torturing, punishing, or persecuting others." He also told us that these individuals usually join the military or the clergy.

Prefect: All joking aside, one could say that it was precisely this that gave rise to another point Pope Francis typically insisted on: that if you can help someone, you must do so. If you can choose between improving someone's life or making it more complicated, you should always choose to improve it, not complicate it. And if an issue can be resolved, we should do so. From this, we can derive a very simple principle, which I believe can also be useful for our work: not to complicate further the lives of people who already face many problems each day. Therefore, we must be careful not to add unnecessary burdens to their lives. Recall that Pope Leo told us to continue on the same lines of work we had under Pope Francis. So, when analyzing a situation, if we are unsure whether to say yes or no, we say yes. If there's a possibility of resolving something to help someone, then we do it. This can also help ensure that the Dicastery is not viewed as an "agency" that is constantly checking for errors or dangers. At the center of our work must be, above all, a commitment to fostering that which is good. This is a tangible aspect of our work on the various issues we handle. And then, when it comes to theological decisions: "*in dubio pro reo*". This is a classical principle.

Question: In Latin America, did the two "Popes," Francis and Leo, ever have the opportunity to meet?

Prefect: Yes, except that where Pope Leo was Bishop [i.e., the Diocese of Chiclayo, Peru] is very far from Buenos Aires. So, it was very difficult for them to meet since the journey between the two is long and complicated. They met occasionally at some bishops' meetings on certain issues, but they did not have close contact. Of course, they knew each other, and Pope Francis appreciated his work as bishop in Chiclayo. For this reason, and also because of what he had heard, he brought him here to the Vatican.

Question: Pope Francis has put great emphasis on the “peripheries.” Sometimes, it seemed like this represented a bit of a polemic against the “center,” in the sense that things can be seen better from more peripheral realities—possibly because he had some firsthand experience of this. Or in the sense that, from his point of view, perhaps the “center” does not see clearly, or even at all, what is happening in the peripheries.

Prefect: This aspect of Pope Francis’s thinking originates from an Argentine philosopher named Amelia Podetti (1928-1979), who was closely associated with another, perhaps slightly better-known philosopher, Günter Rodolfo Kusch (1922-1979), who spoke of the so-called “deeper America.” In Kusch’s thinking, there is a “superficial” America and a “deeper” America, and that deeper, popular America is a *humus*: a *humus* of good soil where many things can grow, many beautiful things, even many lights for understanding reality itself. Yet, this “deeper” level remains little explored by those who stay on the “surface.” Podetti, who was close to this line of thinking, developed the idea that some things can be seen from the center, but many other things cannot be seen from there since they can only be perceived from the periphery. This philosopher also had some connection with Gadamer, who spoke of the importance of one’s background in understanding reality, and that, when it comes to understanding something, there is never a *tabula rasa*; one always starts from some life experience. This background forms “prejudices,” which, however, Gadamer believed should not be understood in a negative sense, such as “this is a prejudice, so we must remove it to see the truth more clearly.” Gadamer disagreed and argued exactly the contrary: that “prejudice” is the possibility I have for accessing at least some aspects of the truth, a possibility that perhaps someone else does not have because they see things from a different perspective.

A concrete example of this can be found in the Bedouins in the desert. If you go to the desert, all you would see is an ocean of sand, and you find it very boring. You might say that it is impossible to find anything interesting there or that it’s just sand, and so on. However, for the Bedouin, who was born and raised there, the desert is full of beauty, life, and variety. If you spend a day with the Bedouins, they will help you understand this by saying, “Look at the shadows, look over there, wait half an hour, and you will see how the color changes, see this insect, etc.” In other words,

they will help you discover a world in the desert that you cannot see on your own. We can say that this “background,” these prejudices, are a source of wealth for the Bedouins, helping them access aspects of the truth that others cannot see. So, as Amelia Podetti said, these different perspectives allow us to gain richness and a broader, more complete understanding of the same truth, which in itself does not change. This helps us understand that in our work at the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, it is very important to listen to the opinions of those living in different contexts, who enrich our vision.

So, Bergoglio developed his discourse on the peripheries starting from this Latin American philosopher in dialogue with Kusch, who was an important author, but also in dialogue with a European like Gadamer, because he loved to read and listen to thinkers and philosophers, and he was in constant dialogue with them. Perhaps this fact may have given the impression that he cared more about philosophy than theology. Indeed, he was very attached to philosophical thought, but it is also true that he dedicated a lot of time to literature and Sacred Scripture and greatly appreciated the work of biblical scholars.

Well, even beyond Pope Francis, I think all these things can serve as a useful guide for our future work as well.