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Pope Francis stands in front of and holds his hand in a blessing gesture towards a large audie

Pope Francis arrives in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace Feb. 18, 2023, to speak to participants in a canon law course sponsored by the Roman Rota, a Vatican tribunal dealing primarily with marriage cases. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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If the purpose of the Catholic Church's canon law really is to promote people's salvation, as the law itself asserts, then its application must be primarily pastoral and aimed at promoting evangelization, Pope Francis said.

"Your work deals with rules, processes and sanctions," but since people and their salvation are the "subjects and objects" of the church's law, their rights and concrete needs must be "at the center of your work," the pope told participants in a course sponsored by the Roman Rota, a Vatican tribunal that deals primarily with marriage cases.

The course Feb. 14-18 focused on the "ministry of justice in the synodal action of the church." The participants included canon lawyers, students of canon law, parish

priests and members of parish and diocesan offices for the family.

"We are accustomed to thinking that canon law and the mission of spreading the Good News of Christ are two separate realities," the pope said. But there is an intrinsic link. "One might say, schematically: there is no law without evangelization, nor evangelization without law."

But canon lawyers cannot be "state clerks" ticking off compliance, the pope said. Instead, they must promote and protect the primary right of the faithful, which is to be evangelized and led to an encounter with Christ.

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The goal of a canon lawyer cannot be "to seek convenient solutions to legal problems or to attempt certain balancing acts," which could result in "rigid formalistic and bureaucratic frameworks that neglect true rights," the pope said.

"The most important principle, that of evangelization, must not be forgotten," the pope said. And since "reality is superior to any idea," the application of the law relies on the virtue of "juridical prudence that discerns what is truly just" for the individual involved and for the church community itself.

Canon lawyers and those involved in marriage preparation and family ministry must cooperate for the good of the individuals involved, the pope said. They do so by working to ensure that a marriage being planned will be valid and by accompanying couples in crisis situations, "including directing them to the church courts when it is plausible that there is a ground for nullity."

Those who work for the diocesan or regional tribunal "can never forget that they are dealing with matters that have a strong pastoral relevance, so the demands of truth, accessibility and prudent speed always must guide their work," the pope said.