Vatican
Vatican News
A green book and a blue book stand next to each other on a red background

Code of Canon Law books for the Latin and Eastern Catholic churches are pictured in Rome at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in this Sept. 15, 2016, file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Cindy Wooden

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — December 1, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

All the Catholic Church's structures, including tribunals and faculties of canon law, must undergo a "pastoral and missionary conversion" to ensure the church is giving the world "the only thing it needs: the Gospel of the mercy of Jesus," Pope Francis wrote.

"To be pastoral does not mean that the norms should be set aside, and one sets off in whatever direction one wishes, but that in applying the norms one should make certain that the Christian faithful find in them the presence of the merciful Jesus, who does not condemn but exhorts them to sin no more because he gives grace," the pope wrote to an international group of canon law scholars.

Francis made his remarks in a message to the "Consociatio Internationalis Studio Iuris Canonici Promovendo" (literally translated as the international association for promoting the study of canon law), which was celebrating its 50th anniversary with a conference in Rome Dec. 1.

When canon law is an instrument of mercy, the pope wrote, "even when a severe sanction is to be applied to one who has committed a very serious crime, the Church, which is mother, will offer him the help and spiritual support that is indispensable so that in repentance he may encounter the merciful face of the Father."

In its application, he said, each church law must be interpreted in light of the "supreme law," which is "salus animarum," the salvation of souls.

Advertisement

The application of canon law is something which must be done in prayer and with fidelity to the word of God, the living tradition of the church and the magisterium or teachings of the popes, he said.

"The wisdom that comes from God, received in prayer and in listening to others," he said, should guide canonists "in distinguishing what is essential in the daily life of the Church, inasmuch as it is desired by Christ himself and established by the Apostles, and also expressed in the Magisterium, and what instead is merely a set of external forms, perhaps useful and significant in the past, but no longer so in the present or, indeed sometimes, an impediment to a witness that, especially today, requires greater simplicity to be credible."

As a model, Francis pointed to most Catholics' mothers, who first taught them the faith. This essentiality of faith is what was transmitted to us by our mothers, the first evangelizers. "Why not take her as a point of reference regarding the attitude of spirit to be lived in the various situations of Church life?"

The pope thanked the canon lawyers for their contributions to church life and prayed that they would be "instruments of God's justice, which is always inseparably united with his mercy."