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24th August 2026: the Chapel of St. John of Nepomuk in Spiš Jerusalem. In the background on the right is St. Martin's Cathedral in Spišská Kapitula (Zipser Chapter), the venue for the 21st Symposium on Canon Law.

Photo Záboj Horák

The Spiš (Zips) symposium: the 21st edition

Spiš/Zips (Slovakia) is a historical region, in the Middle Ages with mixed Slovak and German settlement, known for its Spiš towns, making it an important cultural and economic entity. There are numerous large and richly decorated Gothic churches here, often with Romanesque foundations. Alongside these are many Renaissance and Baroque monuments. It is particularly pleasing that these churches have remained filled with worshippers from that time until the present day.



*The Bishop's Cathedral of the Diocese of Spiš within the castle grounds of Spišská Kapitula.
Located next to it is the diocesan seminary.*

Since the Middle Ages, Spišská Kapitula has been the spiritual centre of Spiš (region of Zips). In 1776, the Pope established the Diocese of Spiš by papal bull, covering the historical regions of Spiš, Orava and Liptov. Throughout this year, the diocese is celebrating two hundred and fifty years since it was founded.

The diocese is dominated by St. Martin's Cathedral with its two Romanesque-Gothic towers. Spišská Kapitula is the seat of the Bishop of Spiš, the bishop's curia, the ecclesiastical court and the seminary. The canons' houses that line the main street leading from the gate of this ecclesiastical town are home to many other ecclesiastical offices and institutions. Some people compare Kapitula to the Orthodox Mount Athos.

Spišská Kapitula, along with Spiš Castle, has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1993.



*26th August 2026: Spišská Kapitula with St. Martin's Cathedral.
Spiš Jerusalem stretches out behind it.*



*A panoramic view of Spišské Podhradie (German: Kirchdorf), with Spišská Kapitula above it.
The Tatra Mountains are visible in good weather. The photo was taken from the opposite hill
where Spiš Castle is located.*



Spiš Castle, one of the largest ruins in Central Europe. Somehow, the author of these lines managed to climb it on foot in one go during a lunch break between lectures.

The opening of the 21st Symposium on Canon Law on the morning of Tuesday, 25th August in the seminary auditorium, which is dominated by a statue of St. John Paul II,¹ was a glorious, magnificent and joyful occasion.

The first speaker was *Monsignor František Trstenský*, who has been the Bishop of Spiš since 2023. He emphasised the importance of canon law, without which members of the church “would succumb to those who are stronger, more powerful and more influential”. He then read out a letter of greeting that had been sent to the symposium by *His Excellency Nicola Girasoli*, the Apostolic Nuncio to Slovakia, who studied canon law.



Mons. František Trstenský at the opening of the conference.

¹ This Pope, who knew Czechoslovakia very well, visited Spišská Kapitula and the nearby historical town of Levoča on 2nd and 3rd July 1995. As a keen skier, he enjoyed going to the Tatra Mountains and the surrounding Slovak mountains, and Levoča had made a strong impression on him when he visited it when he was still a young man.

Monsignor Bernard Bober, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Košice and president of the Slovak Bishops' Conference, then took the floor.

The next speaker was *Dr. Radovan Čikeš*, Head of the Department for Churches at the Slovak Ministry of Culture. He talked about his department's activities and described relations between the state and the Church in Slovakia as balanced. He highlighted the international treaty between the Apostolic See and the Slovak Republic, the 25th anniversary of which was commemorated at an international conference in Bratislava.² His remark that the Department for Churches had been approached gradually by several priests requesting that the department set up an ombudsman's office to defend priests against their superiors caused amusement in the hall, in which there were more than 200 judges from ecclesiastical courts – mainly priests – from Slovakia, the Czech lands, as well as dozens more heads of court registries, notaries and other court officials.

The next person to speak was *Associate Professor JUDr. ICLic. Záboj Horák, LL.M., Ph.D.*, vice-president of the Church Law Society (CLS), who greeted those in attendance on behalf of the society's president, *Reverend Professor Jiří Rajmund Tretera OP*, of the Department of Canon Law at the Charles University Faculty of Law and the Pastoral Care of Lawyers in Prague. He recalled the early days of the Spiš Symposium on Canon Law in the 1990s and noted that the symposium continues to develop and has become legendary.



Assoc. Prof. Záboj Horák from the Prague Faculty of Law speaking at the opening of the conference.

The founding generation of the symposium were *Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski*, president of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signature and prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Higher Education in Rome, *Monsignor Danial Faltin*, a native of Spiš and member of the Supreme Court of Appeal of the Roman Rota, and the canonist *Monsignor Ján Duda*,

² See VLADÁR, Vojtech, *Symposium to mark the 25th anniversary of the entry into force of the Basic Treaty between the Apostolic See and the Slovak Republic*, in: *Church Mirror* 1/2026, pp. 5–6.

who is now a professor of canon law at the Faculty of Law of Comenius University in Bratislava.

He also recalled the generation of participants, and above all Canon Dr. Jiří Svoboda, judicial vicar of the Prague Interdiocesan (now Metropolitan) Court, who each year led the Czech delegation that travelled by minibus from the Archdiocese of Prague.

Monsignor JCDr. Tibor Hajdu, PhD., judicial vicar of the Metropolitan Ecclesiastical Tribunal in Bratislava and assistant professor of canon law at the Catholic Theological Faculty in Bratislava, who expertly presided over the whole conference proceedings and chaired the event, introduced the first of the lecturers.

This was *Monsignor Bruno Fabio Pighin*, professor of canon law at universities in Rome, Venice and Lugano, author of the classic textbook *Il nuovo sistema penale della Chiesa*, Venice, 2021. He delivered two consecutive lectures: the first concerned the new penal system of the Church; the second dealt with the canon law protection of minors and vulnerable adults. The author of these lines was so impressed by the teaching skills of this lecturer and his PowerPoint presentations that he took photographs of them on his mobile phone. In particular, he will use the content of the first lecture when teaching students of canon law during lectures and academic seminars on canon law at the Prague Faculty of Law.



Mons. Pighin lecturing on canon criminal law.

The next lecturer was *Monsignor Krzysztof Józef Nykiel*, who since 2012 has been the Regent of the Apostolic Penitentiary, which deals with matters of the internal forum and indulgences. He explained the work of this pontifical tribunal, whose powers are governed by Articles 190–193 of the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, issued by Pope Francis in 2022.

After lunch, the symposium participants travelled by bus to Kežmarok, a town roughly 40 kilometres to the northeast of Spišská Kapitula. There, they celebrated Holy Mass in the Basilica of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, a masterpiece of High Gothic architecture. The main celebrant was Mons. Krzysztof Nykiel. The church, filled with concelebrating priests and the faithful, was decorated with masses of flowers from an exhibition that had just been held here. At the conclusion, Bishop Nykiel summarised the activities of the Apostolic Penitentiary and the sacrament of penance (confession): Let us be pure so that we may serve God faithfully. At the conclusion of the Mass, all the concelebrants and dozens of altar servers spontaneously formed a beautiful guard of honour from the basilica to the Kežmarok parochial house.

On Wednesday, 26th August, the day began with the recitation of the Breviary, followed by a Holy Mass in St. Martin's Cathedral in Spišská Kapitula. The main celebrant was the Bishop of the Diocese of Spiš, Mons. František Trstenský. At this Mass and all the others held during the symposium it was wonderful to observe the harmony among the bishops present, the two hundred priests from various nations, deacons, seminarians and dozens of altar servers, and the excellent work of the masters of ceremonies, who directed these grand celebrations so professionally.

The first speaker that day was *His Excellency Monsignor Andrea Ripa*, secretary of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura in Rome, with a lecture entitled *Vulnerability as a Relationship*.

The next lecture was given by *Monsignor Konštanc Adam OP*, a judge at the Roman Rota and professor and former rector of the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, known as the Angelicum, in Rome.

Mons. Adam, who was originally a vet, comes from eastern Slovakia and has been a regular lecturer at the Spiš symposium and a friend to many Slovak and Czech canonists for decades. In his lecture entitled *New Submission of a Case* he tackled a complex topic from the field of matrimonial procedural law. The Roman Rota, as appellate court of higher instance at the Apostolic See, decides on a few to dozens of cases each year which are based precisely on the new submission of a case.

The basis of this institution is the emergence of at least one new, substantial piece of evidence that could have resulted in a different assessment. And this is a different legal institution from appeal.



From the left: Mons. Andrea Ripa, Mons. Tibor Hajdu and, at the lectern, Mons. Konštanc Adam.

He was followed by *Monsignor Grzegorz Erlebach*, originally from Silesia in Poland, a judge of the Roman Rota and also a regular lecturer at the symposium, with two lectures: the first was *an analysis of the Roman Rota's case law in matrimonial cases*, while the second dealt with *the drafting of judgments and the protection of privacy*.

One of the interesting features of this year's symposium was the participation of representatives from all three courts of the Apostolic See: the Apostolic Penitentiary, the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura and the Roman Rota.



The synagogue in Spišské Podhradie.



*The Lutheran Church and the square in Spišské Podhradie. In the background is Spiš Castle.
In the foreground is the statue of the Virgin Mary.*



*At the lectern is Professor Vojtech Vladár, head of the Department of Canon Law
at the Faculty of Law, Comenius University in Bratislava.*

Wednesday afternoon saw three events relating to the organisation of academic research and the presentation of their results: the general meeting of the Slovak Society of Canon Law was held, and there were lectures by Professor JUDr. Vojtech Vladár, PhD., Head of the Department of Canon Law at the Faculty of Law of Comenius University in Bratislava, and Monsignor Professor Cyril Vasil', Greek Catholic Eparch of Košice, his colleague from the same institution.



From the left: Greek Catholic Bishop Mons. Cyril Vasil', Mons. Grzegorz Erlebach, Prof. Vojtech Vladár, Mons. Tibor Hajdu.

Professor Vladár analysed the institution of *the oath in canon law* and Professor Vasil' discussed *changes in canon law during the pontificates of recent popes*. There was an interesting discussion afterwards. A question was raised from the floor as to whether the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* had created some confusion by renaming the former Roman congregations as dicasteries and increasing their number to sixteen. Mons. Vasil' replied that, from practical experience, he would prefer retaining the traditional name of 'congregation', which, amongst other things, has clear historical connotations.

On Wednesday evening there was the traditional garden party, which is also renowned at the Spiš symposium. Professor J. R. Tretera from Prague always recalls the stimulating conversations he had with Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski at these garden parties in the 1990s.

He passes on many of the wise thoughts expressed at that time to future scholars of canon law and to generations of students at Prague's Faculty of Law. Cardinal Grocholewski spoke many world languages and could lecture fluently in Latin. He was a man with a global outlook and in his cardinal's cassock he fitted perfectly into the Renaissance gardens and buildings of Spišská Kapitula. He seemed to transport the participants back to those glorious times when the Church was the chief creator and sponsor of culture.

On Thursday, 27th August, after Holy Mass celebrated in St. Martin's Cathedral, there were several lectures: Monsignor Konštanc Adam addressed *the subject of the nullity of marriage on the basis of coercion and grave fear in accordance with Canon 1103 CIC*.

Monsignor ICDr. Karel Orlita, judicial vicar of the Diocesan Ecclesiastical Court in Brno and president of the Academy of Canon Law in Brno, spoke on the topic of *Veritatem facientes in caritate: the truth that must be carried out*. He devoted his lecture to the theological and procedural dimensions of Article 300 of the instruction *Dignitas connubii*, issued in 2005 by the Pontifical Council for Legislative texts for cases of the nullity of marriage.

JCDr. Ondrej Marek, a priest of the Latin Rite Archdiocese of Košice and attorney of the Roman Rota, spoke on the topic of *the judge's certainty concerning the irretrievable breakdown of marriage (canon 1675 CIC)*.

This was followed by *presentations by judicial vicars*, in which they discussed the numbers and types of cases decided on by their courts.

Text Zábój Horák.

Photos Monika Menke and Zábój Horák

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Editor-in-chief:	Rev. Jiří Rajmund Tretera OP
Deputy editor-in-chief:	Zábój Horák
Executive editor:	Michaela Holubová
Technical editor:	Tomáš Grundza
Layout:	Marek Novák
English translation:	Gareth Davies

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