The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about papacy and clergy

俗 Putonghua pronunciation: su2 Cantonese pronunciation: juk6
Meanings: vulgar, worldly, mundane, laity

俗 (radical 亻 = ren2, people) means 俗世 (su2 shi4 = mundane/ordinary-world): 習俗 (xi2 su2 = habits~ordinary = folk custom), 俗語 (su2 yu3 = folk-saying/idiom), 低俗 (di1 su2 = low-vulgar/unrefined).

In religion, 俗 means 在家人 (zai4 jia1 ren2 = living-at-home-people), i.e. 平信徒 (ping2 xin4 tu2 = ordinary/plain-believers = laity), unlike 僧尼 (seng1 ni2 = monks-nuns), i.e. 出家人 (chu1 jia1 ren2 = leave-home-people = clergy).

Clergy are also 凡夫俗子 (fan2 fu1 su2 zi3 = mortal-men~mundane-sons = ordinary people). Handling 俗務 (su2 wu4 = everyday/mundane-affairs), they must resist 俗念 (su2 nian4 = vulgar-thoughts): 貪 (tan1, greed), 淫 (yin2, lasciviousness). Some disillusioned clergy 還俗 (huan2 su2 = return-to-laity = give up monk-/nun-/priesthood).

by Diana Yue