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

聖
Putonghua pronunciation: sheng4
Cantonese pronunciation: sing3
Meanings: divine, holy, sacred, saint, saintly

聖 (聖 er3, ear + 口 kou3, mouth + 王 wang2, king) suggests kingly/divine listener/speaker, i.e. god/saint. Catholics read 聖經 (sheng4 jing1 = holy-scriptures/bible), worship 聖三一 (sheng4 san1 yi1 = holy-three-one = the Holy Trinity: 聖父 sheng4 fu4 = Holy-Father, 聖子 sheng4 zi3 = Holy-Son/Jesus, 聖神 sheng4 shen2 = Holy-Spirit), 聖母 (sheng4 mu3 = holy/Jesus’ mother, Mary).

領聖洗 (ling3 sheng4 xi3 = receiving-holy-baptism), 守聖餐 (shou3 sheng4 can1 = follow-holy-feast = observing Holy Eucharist/Communion) are 聖禮 (sheng4 li3 = holy-sacraments).

聖伯多祿 (sheng4 Bo2 Duo1 Lu1 = St. “Pedro”/“Peter”-transliterated) is Rome’s first bishop/Pope. 聖女貞德 (sheng4 nü3 zhen1 de2 = holy-girl-“Jeanne d'rc”/“Joan of Arc”-transliterated) is French 聖人 (sheng4 ren2 = divine-person = saint).

by Diana Yue