

Pronunciation of Ecclesiastical Latin for English Speakers

Nowadays, there are two ways to pronounce Latin: 1) **Ecclesiastical Latin** (aka “Church Latin), which refers to the pronunciation and usages of Latin by the Roman Catholic Church, and 2) **Classical Latin** which is Latin as was spoken by Caesar, Ovid, Cicero etc., in the Classical period of Ancient Rome.

With regards to Ecclesiastical Latin, historically there were four major ways of pronouncing it: Spanish, German, English, and Italian pronunciations. Towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, an effort was made to unify all these variants under one form: the **Italianate pronunciation**, which is how a modern-day Italian from Rome would pronounce Latin. This is the variant endorsed by the Vatican, and the **one we are going to learn**.

Online and offline, you will find multiple tables and rules about how to pronounce Ecclesiastical Latin and sometimes these contradict one another. Thus, we need a **central authoritative standard** for pronunciation, and for that there is nothing better than the ***Liber Usualis (Solesmes, 1961)***. This is one of the most important Gregorian chant books for the Holy Mass and Divine Office produced by the monks at the Abbey of Solesmes in France. Its introduction to Gregorian Chant is also invaluable if you are so interested.

The table below is a copy of what is found in the *Liber Usualis (Solesmes, 1961)*, in the section titled “Rules for Interpretation” at the beginning of the book, section “Vowels and Diphthongs” pp. xxxvj-xxxix.

Stress Marks

You will notice in many Roman Missals and even in this document that Latin comes along with certain accent marks. These marks, unlike in Spanish for example, are not accent marks because Latin had no accents.

Rather, these are stress marks that tell us which syllable to stress when pronouncing the word.

For example, in the *Pater Noster* prayer, when we see the word *sanctificétur* (*sanc-ti-fi-cé-tur*), we must pronounce it by stressing the third syllable -cé- more than the other syllables.

Vowels and Diphthongs

Each vowel has one sound; a mixture or sequence of sounds would be fatal to good Latin pronunciation; this is far more important than their exact length.

It's also important to realize that, unlike classical Latin, ecclesiastical Latin does not differentiate between long and short vowels, which makes learning it much easier than classical Latin, since English also does not distinguish between long and short vowels.

It is of course difficult to find in English the exact equivalent of the Latin vowels. The examples given here will serve as an indication; the real values can be best learned by ear.

A	<i>A</i> is pronounced as in the word <i>Father</i> , never as in the word <i>can</i> . We must be careful to get this open, warm sound, especially when <i>A</i> is followed by <i>M</i> or <i>N</i> as in <i>Sanctus</i> , <i>Nam</i> , etc.
E	<i>E</i> is pronounced as in <i>Red</i> , <i>men</i> , <i>met</i> ; never with the suspicion of a second sound as in <i>Ray</i> .
I	<i>I</i> is pronounced as <i>ee</i> in <i>Feet</i> , never as <i>i</i> in <i>milk</i> or <i>tin</i> .
O	<i>O</i> is pronounced as in <i>For</i> , never as in <i>go</i> .
U	<i>U</i> is pronounced as <i>oo</i> in <i>Moon</i> , never as in <i>custom</i> .
Y	<i>Y</i> is pronounced and treated as the Latin <i>I</i> . (see above)
	The pronunciation given for i , o , u , gives the approximate <i>quality</i> of the sounds, which may be long or short; care must be taken to bring out the accent of the word. e.g. <i>mártyr</i> = <i>márteer</i> .

Double Vowels	As a general rule when two vowels come together each keeps its own sound and constitutes a separate syllable. Therefore, most combinations of vowels are not diphthongs . e.g. <i>diéi</i> is <i>di-é-i</i> ; <i>fílii</i> is <i>fíl-i-i</i> ; <i>eórum</i> is <i>e-ó-rum</i> .
OU AI	The rule of each keeping its own sound applies to OU and AI . e.g. <i>prout</i> is <i>pro-oot</i> ; <i>coutúntur</i> = <i>co-oo-toón-toor</i> ; <i>áit</i> is <i>áh-eet</i> .
AE OE	However, AE and OE are pronounced as one sound, like E above, and thus constitute one syllable. Thus, they are diphthongs . e.g. <i>caelum</i> = <i>ché-loom</i> ; <i>móenia</i> = <i>mé-nee-a</i>
AU EU AY	The two vowels form one syllable (they are a diphthong) but both vowels must be distinctly heard. The principle emphasis and interest belongs to the first which must be sounded purely. If on such a syllable several notes are sung, the vocalization is entirely on the first vowel, the second being heard only on the last note at the moment of passing to the following syllable. Examples: <i>Láuda</i> , <i>Éuge</i> , <i>Ráymundus</i> .
EI	EI is similarly treated only when it occurs in the interjection: <i>Hei</i> = <i>Hei*</i> , otherwise <i>Méi</i> = <i>Mé-i</i> , etc. * ' <i>Hei</i> ' is an interjection that expresses grief, anguish, or fear, similar to saying “alas” or “oh dear” in English.
QU NGU	U preceded by Q or NG and followed by another vowel as in words like <i>qui</i> and <i>sanguis</i> , keeps its normal sound and is uttered as one syllable with the vowel which follows: <i>qui</i> , <i>quae</i> , <i>quod</i> , <i>quam</i> , <i>sanguis</i> . But notice that <i>cui</i> forms two syllables, and is pronounced as <i>koo-ee</i> . In certain hymns, on account of the metre, this word can be treated as one syllable.

Consonants

The consonants must be articulated with a certain crispness; otherwise the reading becomes unintelligible, weak and nerveless.

C	C coming before e, ae, oe, i, y is pronounced like <i>ch</i> in <i>Church</i>. e.g. <i>caelum</i> = <i>che-loom</i>; <i>Cecília</i> = <i>Che-cheé-lee-a</i>
	CC before the same vowels is pronounced <i>T-ch</i>. e.g. <i>ecce</i> = <i>et-che</i>; <i>siccitas</i> = <i>seét-chee-tas</i>.
	SC before the same vowels is pronounced like <i>Sh</i> in <i>shed</i>. e.g. <i>Descéndit</i> = <i>de-shén-deet</i>.
	Except for these cases C is always pronounced like the English K. e.g. <i>cáritas</i> = <i>káh-ree-tas</i>.
	CH is always like K (even before E or I) e.g. <i>Cham</i> = <i>Kam</i>, <i>máchina</i> = <i>má-kee-na</i>
G	G before e, ae, oe, i, y, is soft as in <i>generous</i>. Think of it like a Y sound, e.g. <i>mági</i> = <i>má-yee</i>; <i>génitor</i> = <i>yé-nee-tor</i>; <i>Regína</i> = <i>Re-yée-na</i>. Otherwise G is hard as in <i>Government</i>. e.g. <i>Gubernátor</i>, <i>Vígor</i>, <i>Ego</i>.
	GN has the softened sound given to these letters in French and Italian. e.g. (French) <i>agneau</i>, (Italian) <i>signor</i>, (Italian) <i>monsignor</i> The nearest English equivalent would be N followed by y. e.g. <i>Regnum</i> = <i>Reh-nyoom</i>; <i>Magnificat</i> = <i>Mah-nyée-fee-caht</i>
H	H is pronounced K in the two words <i>nihil</i> (<i>nee-keel</i>) and <i>mihi</i> (<i>mee-kee</i>) and their compounds. In ancient books these words are often written <i>nichil</i> and <i>michi</i>. In all other cases H is mute.
J	J, often written as I (e.g. <i>Jesus</i> or <i>Iesus</i>), is treated as Y, forming one sound with the vowel which follows it. e.g. <i>jam</i>, <i>iam</i> = <i>yam</i>; <i>alleluia</i> = <i>allelóoya</i>; <i>major</i> = <i>ma-yor</i>
PH	Sounds like F or like the way <i>ph</i> is pronounced in the word <i>philosophy</i> in English.

	e.g. <i>phásma</i> = <i>fás-ma</i>
R	When with another consonant, care must be taken not to omit this sound. If it is before a consonant, as in <i>carnis</i>, it must be slightly rolled on the tongue. It is not like the soft <i>r</i> in the English word <i>red</i>. If it is between vowels, it has a softer sound as in <i>Kyrie</i> and <i>Gloria</i>. The combinations <i>rh</i>, <i>rr</i> are pronounced with a longer trill as the double <i>r</i> is pronounced in Spanish. p.ej. <i>rh</i>etórica = <i>rre-tó-ree-ca</i>; térra = <i>tér-ra</i>). Care must be taken not to modify the quality of the vowel in the syllable preceding the <i>R</i>. e.g. <i>Kýrie</i>: Say <i>Kée-ree-e</i> not <i>Kear-ee-e</i> <i>sápere</i>: Say <i>sáh-pe-re</i> not <i>sah-per-e</i> <i>diligere</i>: Say <i>dee-lée-ge-re</i> not <i>dee-lee-ger-e</i>
S	S is hard as in the English word <i>sea</i> particularly before consonants or at beginning or end of a word as in <i>semper</i> but is slightly softened when coming between two vowels. e.g. <i>miseri</i>córdia, ró<i>sa</i>
T	T is like the English T, except as below. TI standing before a vowel and following any letter is pronounced <i>tsee</i>. e.g. <i>patiéntia</i> = <i>pa-tsee-én-tsee-a</i> <i>grátia</i> = <i>grá-tsee-a</i> <i>constitútio</i> = <i>con-stee-tú-tsee-o</i> <i>laetítia</i> = <i>lae-tée-tsee-a</i> Except in these four cases where TI is pronounced <i>ti</i>: 1. If the syllable ti is preceded by S, T, or X: <i>iústium</i> (<i>yús-tee-um</i>), <i>Brúttium</i> (<i>brút-tee-um</i>), <i>míxtio</i> (<i>méex-tee-o</i>). 2. At the beginning of a word: <i>tiára</i> (<i>tee-á-ra</i>). 3. When the <i>i</i> is stressed: <i>totíus</i> (<i>to-tée-us</i>); <i>prophetía</i> (<i>pro-fe-tée-a</i>).

	4. In words of Greek origin: Boeó t ia (<i>be-ó-tee-a</i>).
	TH is always simply T . e.g. <i>Thómas, cathólicam</i>
X	X is pronounced <i>ks</i> , slightly softened when coming between vowels. e.g. <i>exércitus</i> = <i>ek-sér-chi-tus</i>
	XC before a, ae, oe, i, y = KSH . e.g. <i>excélsis</i> = <i>ek-shél-sees</i>
	Before other vowels XC has the ordinary hard sound of the letters composing it. e.g. <i>excussórum</i> = <i>eks-koos-só-room</i>
Y	A Latin vowel, and is pronounced like I .
Z	Z is pronounced dz . e.g. <i>zizánia</i> = <i>dzi-dzá-nee-a</i> .
	In the middle of a word, like <i>nazarenius</i> , Z is pronounced as ts . e.g. <i>nazarénus</i> = <i>na-tsa-ré-nus</i> .
All the rest of the consonants B, D, F, K, L, M, N, P, Q and V : Pronounced as in English.	
Double consonants must be clearly sounded. <i>bello</i> = <i>bel-lo</i> , not the English <i>below</i> ; Examples: <i>terra</i> = <i>ter-ra</i> ; <i>Abbas</i> = <i>Ab-bas</i> ; <i>áttica</i> = <i>át-tee-ca</i> ; <i>ille</i> = <i>éel-le</i> ; <i>afflígit</i> = <i>af-flée-yeet</i> .	