

De Membris Ecclesiae (*On the Members of the Church*)

by **Sebastianus Fraghi (Sebastian Fraghi), 1937**

[Online Location of Text Here](#)

- OCR of the original text by AI (claude-sonnet-4-5-20250929).
- Translation of the original text performed by AI (claude-sonnet-4-5-20250929).
- Last Edit: November 16, 2025.
- Version: 1.0
- Selection pages: 67-70

Homo constituitur membrum Ecclesiae per baptismum validum

Saint Robert Bellarmine holds that putatively valid baptism suffices for someone to become a member of the Church: “I respond that for someone to be of the body of the Church, the character is not required, but external baptism, nor is external baptism required for one to be considered and to be of the Church, but only to be admitted... Hence Innocent III... judged that an unbaptized priest had truly been in the Church, and ordered that sacrifice be offered for his soul, as for other faithful” ¹.

With *Saint Robert Bellarmine* others hold the same view, such as the Würzburg theologians ², *Dominicus Palmieri* ³, *C. Pesch* ⁴, *Antonius Straub* ⁵; but this is rejected almost unanimously by others, and *Saint Bellarmine* himself did not completely adhere to this opinion; for he adds: “It could nevertheless also be responded, and better, that those who are not baptized... are of the Church according to external appearance only, that is putatively, not truly” ⁶.

First of all, it should be noted that *Sacred Scripture*, the *Fathers*, and *Councils*, when they speak of incorporation, speak of baptism simply: therefore we must understand valid baptism. For in a matter of such great importance, the contrary ought to be proved, not merely affirmed without qualification.

¹ {org. 1} *On the Church Militant*, III, c. 10.

² {org. 2} Cf. HENRICUS KILBER, *On Theological Principles* (1852) n. 93.

³ {org. 3} *On the Roman Pontiff, with Prolegomena on the Church*, p. 45.

⁴ {org. 4} *Propaedeutic Institutes*, n. 329.

⁵ {org. 5} *On the Church of Christ*, n. 1304-1308.

⁶ {org. 6} Op. cit., III, c. 4.

Indeed, an invalid act is null and will always be such. Thus a marriage invalidly contracted will always be null, even if it is held by all to be valid; and if the defect is later discovered, either a separation of the spouses or a sanation in radice [healing at the root], or a renewal of the marriage itself will be necessary.

Add to this that through baptism a person acquires the capacity for the social goods that exist in the Church, especially for the sacraments and for participation in the spiritual life. This capacity is possessed properly on account of the character. It is clear that through invalid baptism, no character is impressed: therefore neither does a person acquire the right to those goods. Whence, because grace is not conferred and character is not impressed, we must conclude that through invalid baptism there is no incorporation into the mystical body.

The authority of Innocent III does not weaken our assertion, because that Supreme Pontiff does not affirm that such a priest was a member of the Church, but only says that he could have been saved “because he had died in the faith of Holy Mother Church and in the confession of Christ’s name”; namely, through a vow, through the desire to belong to the Church he could have been saved⁷; and this is according to what we said above, namely that for someone to be able to attain salvation there is required at least an implicit vow of belonging to the Church: therefore that priest could have been saved because he had this explicit vow.

Here it should be well noted that from the fact that valid baptism is required, the visibility of the Church does not perish.

We must distinguish between visibility and recognizability. When we say that the Church is visible, we do not wish to affirm that this visibility or recognizability extends to individual members, such that error would be infallibly excluded concerning each and every member.

The Church of Christ has certain marks by which it can be recognized as the true Church among all other similar assemblies. But from this it is not permissible to conclude that all things in the Church are visible. For the Church is visible as a whole, but not according to its totality; just as a man is said to be visible, because although he has an invisible part, this nevertheless manifests itself through visible acts.

Moreover, the Church of Christ must consist of members who are validly baptized, because Christ instituted baptism as the means of aggregation: therefore in the Church the majority are certainly and validly baptized. This certainty—as is evident—does not regard individual members, but the whole body: it is possible that some member may be only apparently Christian; but it is impossible that the whole body should be constituted of those who are not truly Christians, because thus one would no longer have the Church of Christ.

The certainty which is had concerning the visibility or recognizability of the Church of Christ is an altogether firm certainty, the certainty of faith: the other certainty which regards individual members is only moral, namely excluding prudent doubt, which is sufficient in this case for

⁷ {org. 1} Cf. Epistle “Apostolic See” to the Bishop of Cremona; DENZINGER-BANNWART, 388.

regularly and ordinarily judging concerning this or that member, although, speaking absolutely, it could happen that some person might be only apparently a member of the Church.

Therefore there is no difficulty concerning this matter, except perhaps concerning those who preside in the Church.

In this question it must always be kept in mind that the Church is a supernatural society whose head, leader, and governor is Christ, who cannot permit that in the Church the majority would be invalidly baptized, or that the majority of priests would lack the power of orders; we say this *a fortiori* concerning Bishops. Concerning these, Saint Robert Bellarmine states: "...I say that in Bishops two things are to be considered. First, that they hold the place of Christ.... Second, that they possess the power of orders and jurisdiction. If they are considered in the first way, we are certain with infallible certitude that those whom we see are true Bishops and our Pastors. For this does not require either faith, or the character of orders, or legitimate election, but only that they be held as such by the Church.... If they are considered in the second way, we have only moral certitude that these are truly Bishops, although it is certain with infallible certitude that at least some are true, otherwise God would have abandoned the Church: but for us to hold the Church as certain and conspicuous, as regards both heads and members, the first consideration suffices"⁸.

Concerning the Supreme Pontiff, however, it can by no means be admitted that someone invalidly baptized could ascend to the Roman Chair: our mind cannot even think this: for it is Jesus who assists His Church until the end of the world. "For — says Cardinal Billot — it will pertain to the infallible providence of God to ensure that the entire Church does not adhere to a false head, and consequently that no one is received as Supreme Pontiff who does not possess all the conditions of membership"⁹.

⁸{org. 1} *On the Church Militant*, III, c. 10.

⁹{org. 2} Cf. Cardinal BILLOT, *On the Church of Christ*, p. 279.