

Who is a Member of the Church?

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“*Remnant Apologetics Series*,” January 2015 (updated)

On June 25, 2014, Pope Francis spoke to his last general audience before the July break concerning Christ and the Church. In his talk, the Pope warned against those who “think they can have a personal, direct, immediate relationship with Jesus Christ outside of the communion and the mediation of the Church...Our Christian identity is belonging! We are Christians because we belong to the Church. It is like a surname. If the name is ‘I am a Christian,’ the surname is ‘I belong to the Church.’”¹

Because Catholics have been so embarrassed and bewildered by the many heterodox statements of this Pope, it is understandable how some could actually be pleased with these recent comments. Sad, but true. Nevertheless, the Pope’s comments about who belongs to the Church are in dire need of clarification, especially because the Pope does not once mention “baptism” or the “Catholic Church” in his speech. Does the Pope mean that all who profess Christianity are, somehow, members of the Church? What Church? And what does it mean to “belong to the Church”? The Pope’s statements present an opportunity to clarify what all Catholics should know, but what many (even some traditional Catholics) do not know.

In order to be a *member* of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, one must be in *perfect union* with the *Body* of the Church (*imperfect union* does not suffice). This means that one must be baptized into that visible communion of men in which all (1) profess the same divine faith, (2) share the same seven sacraments, and (3) are subject to the Roman Pontiff. These are the three external bonds of union of the true Church of Christ, all of which are required for Church membership. Because the three bonds of union are necessarily visible means the true Church is visible and her members are known.

St. Robert Bellarmine, the great Doctor of the Church, is known particularly for his ecclesiology (study of the Church). The Fathers of the First Vatican Council drew heavily from the writings of St. Bellarmine when formulating their decrees and definitions on the nature of the Church, and subsequent Popes have done the same (e.g., Catechism of St. Pius X, Pius XII *Mystici Corporis Christi*). Because he is considered the “Doctor of Ecclesiology” of the Church, we can turn with confidence to the writings of St. Bellarmine as a sure guide to help us form a correct understanding of the nature of the Church.

In his classic treatise *De ecclesia militante* (“The Church Militant”), St. Bellarmine explains how membership in the true Church is defined by her three visible and external bonds of unity. He says that “this one and true Church is the assembly of men bound together by the profession of the same Christian faith and the communion of the same sacraments, under the rule

¹ www.asianews.it, June 25, 2014.

of the legitimate pastors, and especially that of the Roman Pontiff, the one Vicar of Christ on earth. From this definition it is easy to infer which men belong to the Church and which do not belong to it. There are three parts of this definition: the profession of the true faith, the communion of the sacraments, and the subjection to the Roman Pontiff, the legitimate pastor.”² Bellarmine explains that the union with the Body of the Church “is required as a minimum in order that a man may be said to be a part of the visible Church.”

In describing membership in the Church, Pope Pius XII says the same thing: “Actually only those are to be numbered among the members of the Church who have received the laver of regeneration and profess the true faith and have not separated themselves from the unity of the body or been excluded by legitimate authority.”³ Thus, Pope Pius XII affirms the doctrine of Bellarmine on the three external bonds of union: Profession of “the true faith,” admission to the sacraments (“received the laver of regeneration”), and union with the hierarchy (not “separated” from Body or “excluded by legitimate authority”). These three visible bonds of union are required to make one a *member* of the visible Church.

Body and Soul of the Church

In the same treatise, St. Bellarmine makes a distinction between these external, visible bonds of union and the *internal* bonds of union with the Church. The internal, spiritual bonds of union are the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity), sanctifying grace, and the gifts of the Holy Ghost which dwell in a man’s soul (God first infusing them in baptism). By way of analogy, Bellarmine refers to the external bonds of union as the *Body* of the Church, and the internal bonds of union as the *Soul* of the Church. For example, he says:

“We must note what Augustine says in his *Breviculus collationis*, where he is dealing with the conference of the third day, that the Church is a living body, in which there is a Soul and a Body. And the internal gifts of the Holy Ghost, faith, hope, charity, and the rest are the Soul. The external profession of the faith and the communication of the sacraments are the Body.”⁴

“Hence it is that some are of the Soul and of the Body of the Church, and hence joined both inwardly and outwardly to Christ the Head, and such people are most perfectly within the Church. They are, as it were, living members in the body, although some of them share in this life to a greater extent, and others to a lesser extent, while still others have only the beginning of life and, as it were, sensation without movement, like the people who have only faith without charity.”⁵

² *De ecclesia militante*, c.2.

³ *Mystici Corporis*, No. 22, June 29, 1943.

⁴ *De ecclesia militante*, c.2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

During the first half of the twentieth century, certain theologians began using Bellarmine's *Body* and *Soul* terminology in an imprecise manner. This imprecision led some theologians to imply, and others to explicitly teach, that the Roman Catholic Church (the visible Church) was the Body, while the Mystical Body of Christ (an invisible Church) was the Soul. This ecclesiological error eventually resulted in the false doctrine of two separate and distinct Churches: The Roman Catholic Church (the Body) and the Mystical Body of Christ (the Soul), which merely "subsists" in the Roman Catholic Church but also extends beyond her visible boundaries.

To clarify, the terms *Soul* and *Body* should not be understood as two separate Churches, or as if the former merely subsists in the latter, while at the same time being "present and operative" in other non-Catholic religious bodies. Rather, the *Soul* and *Body* are two distinct elements of the *one* true Church of Christ, which is the Roman Catholic Church. Said differently, the *Body* and *Soul* of the Church are used only *analogically* when describing the inner and outward bonds of ecclesiastical unity with the one Church. As Monsignor Joseph Fenton said, these analogical terms refer to "two distinct sets of forces or factors that function as bonds of unity within the Church militant of the New Testament."

Perfect and Imperfect Union

A person can be perfectly or imperfectly united to the Body of the Church (the visible society), and perfectly or imperfectly united to the Soul of the Church (the Holy Ghost). One is *perfectly* united to the Soul of the Church when he possesses all three theological virtues – faith, hope and charity - and is thereby living the supernatural life of grace. He is *imperfectly* united to the Soul of the Church when he possesses the supernatural virtue of faith (or faith and hope), yet is cut off from the life of grace by lacking charity (i.e., a Catholic in mortal sin). As Fr. Fenton explains: "There is no doubt whatsoever about the fact that one man can be more perfectly united to the Church than another. All acknowledge that a Catholic in the state of grace is living consistently with his membership in the Church, while a Catholic in the state of mortal sin is not."⁶

One is *perfectly* united to the Body of the Church when one is a *member* of the Roman Catholic Church (meaning he possesses *all three* external bonds). One is *imperfectly* united to the Body when one is not, but *desires* to be, a member of the Church, either by entering (i.e., catechumen) or returning (i.e. excommunicate) to the Church. As Bellarmine says: "Again, some are of the soul and not of the body, as catechumens and excommunicated persons if they have faith and charity, as they can have them." These people are "not of the body" because they are not yet *members* of the Church *in re* (in actuality), but are said to be "united" or "joined" to the Body of the Church *in voto* (by desire).

⁶ Fenton, "Membership in the Church," AER, April, 1945.

This is why Bellarmine concludes: “By reason of the second part [ineligibility to receive the sacraments] catechumens and excommunicated persons are excluded [not *members* of the *Body*], because the former are not yet admitted to the communion of the sacraments, while the latter have been sent away from it.”⁷ In fact, while Bellarmine says that catechumens and excommunicates may be “of the soul” of the Church (acknowledging that God may have infused divine faith into their souls), he still holds them to be *outside* the Church (not *members* of the *Body*), along with Jews, Muslims, pagans, heretics, apostates and schismatics.⁸

Because no one can obtain Heaven unless he dies in the state of grace, and one cannot possess grace unless he has faith (Heb. 11:6) and hope (Romans 8:24), *perfect* union with the *Soul* of the Church is *absolutely necessary* for salvation. On the other hand, based on the constant teaching of the Magisterium regarding “baptism of desire,” *imperfect* union with the *Body* suffices for salvation (for those who are *perfectly* united to the *Soul*).

Because being *perfectly* united (by the three external bonds) to the *Body* equates to membership in the Church, it is sometimes said that being united to the *Body* imperfectly (by desire, without all three external bonds) equates to “imperfect” membership in the Church. However, because one is either a member of the Church or not (with all or none of the rights and privileges), it is more correct to refer to those perfectly united to the *Body* as “members” of the Church, and those imperfectly united to *Body* as “joined to” but *not* “members” of the Church.⁹ There is a distinction between those who “desire” to be joined to the Church (non-members), and those who are already “members” of the Church. Those joined by the three external bonds of union are members, and those joined by desire alone are not members. This also means, as Fenton affirms, there are *not* two ways of being a member in the Church, but only one way (through the three external bonds of union).

Internal vs. External Faith and Church Membership

St. Thomas teaches that “all are bound in common to know the articles of faith,”¹⁰ and this includes some explicit faith in the mysteries of Christ (such as the Incarnation and the Blessed Trinity).¹¹ Thus, the interior virtue of faith is not a mere natural knowledge of God from reason, but a *supernatural* faith, as St. Paul says: “But without faith it is impossible to please

⁷ *De ecclesia militante*, c.2.

⁸ “By reason of the first part [lack of true faith] all infidels, both those who have never been in the Church, such as Jews, Turks, and pagans; and those who have been in it and have left it, as heretics and apostates, are excluded”; “By reason of the third part [lack of union with the Pope] there are excluded [not members of the *Body*] the schismatics who have the faith and the sacraments, but who are not subject to the legitimate pastor and who thus profess the faith and receive the sacraments outside.” *Ibid.*

⁹ Using Thomistic terminology, one might say that those imperfectly united to the *Body* of the Church are “members in potency.” By way of illustration, one who desires to become an American does not have the rights and privileges of an American (e.g., he cannot vote in American elections) until he is formally received into the society to which he desires to belong.

¹⁰ ST, I-II, Q 76, Art 2. While all men are bound to know the articles of faith, some are bound to have fuller and more explicit knowledge than others, depending upon their state in life (e.g., priests versus laymen).

¹¹ See ST II-II, Q 2, Art 7 and 8.

God. For he that cometh to God, must believe that he is, and is a rewarder to them that seek him” (Heb 11:6). Nevertheless, one does not have to *explicitly* believe in all the articles of faith to have the virtue of faith, so long as he is *willing* to believe them. St. Thomas says: “A man who obstinately disbelieves a thing that is of faith, has not the habit of faith, and yet he who does not explicitly believe all, while he is prepared to believe all, has that habit.”¹²

This means a person may have the interior virtue of faith without being a formal *member* of the Church. The true, interior virtue of faith is necessarily accompanied by at least the *implicit*, if not explicit desire, to belong to the Church, either of which joins the man (imperfectly) to the Body of the Church. While supernatural faith is explicit, the desire to belong to the Church is implicit if the person does not know the Catholic Church is the true Church of Christ but “is prepared to believe all,” and explicit if he does know this truth (e.g., the catechumen). There can be no desire to belong to the Body of the Church without the interior virtue of faith, and no one can belong to the Soul of the Church if he does not, at least implicitly, desire to belong to the Body of the Church.

Because a Catholic knows the Church is the infallible rule of faith, he maintains his membership in the Body of the Church by “professing the true faith” (along with his unity in the sacraments and governance of the Church). If he consciously dissents from a truth which must be believed in faith, he loses the interior virtue of faith, but still remains a *member* of the *Body* of the Church. Therefore, it follows that one needs only the outward “profession” of faith and not the inward virtue of faith to be an actual *member* of the Church. This conclusion is consistent with the teaching of Bellarmine and Pope Pius XII. In fact, Bellarmine acknowledged that certain members of the Church have *no* internal virtues but are still “of the body” (members of the Church) when he said:

“And, finally, some are of the body and not of the soul, as those who have no internal virtue, but who still by reason of some temporal hope or fear, profess the faith and communicate in the sacraments under the rule of the pastors. And such individuals are like hairs or fingernails or evil liquids in a human body.”¹³

If the external bonds alone did not suffice for membership, then one could argue the true Church is thereby rendered invisible, since man cannot see into the internal forum of another man where the virtue of faith abides (and hence cannot know who truly is a member of the visible Church). But an “invisible” Church, where members are known to God alone, is the heresy of Protestantism. This argument, in fact, was used by Bellarmine to defend his opinion that the external bonds of union alone suffice for actual membership in the Church. He said:

¹² ST, II-II, Q 5, Art 4, ad 1.

¹³ *De Ecclesia militante*, c.2. Bellarmine referred to those who possess the three external bonds of unity but lost the faith as “unworthy members” (but members nonetheless). Sylvius referred to them as members of the Church “*secundum quid et improprie*” (relatively and improperly speaking). Suarez, who differed with Bellarmine on the question, referred to them as “members in appearance only.”

“Now there is this difference between our teaching and all the others [the heretics discussed previously], that all the others require internal virtues to constitute a man "within" the Church, and hence make the true Church invisible. But, despite the fact that we believe that all the virtues, faith, hope, charity, and the rest, are to be found within the Church, we do not think that any internal virtue is required to bring it about that a man can be said absolutely to be a part of the true Church of which the Scriptures speak, but [what is required] is only the outward profession of the faith and the communion of the sacraments, which are perceptible by the senses. For the Church is a visible and palpable an assembly of men, just as the assembly of the Roman people or the Kingdom of France or the Republic of the Venetians.”¹⁴

We can further explain the absolute sufficiency of the external bonds alone for Church membership by illustrating that the rights and duties of Catholics in good standing are not based on their internal virtues. For example, a Catholic’s external bonds alone permit him to receive the sacraments in the Church (e.g., matrimony, confirmation) irrespectively of his internal virtues. Likewise, a Catholic’s external bonds alone also subject him to the positive law of the Church, independently of his inward virtues.

This is evident, for example, when we consider that a Catholic (whether or not he possesses interior faith) must follow the laws of the Church for his marriage to be valid, while a baptized non-Catholic can be *validly* and *sacramentally* married without having to do so. This is because non-Catholics (non-members) are dispensed from the canonical form of matrimony (which is part of positive laws), whereas *members* of the Catholic Church are not. Since the dispensation from the canonical form for marriage is not based on whether the Catholic possesses the interior virtue of faith, Church law confirms Bellarmine’s opinion that interior faith is not required for Church membership.

Union with the Body is Necessary for Salvation

As we have seen, a man must be joined to the *Body* of the Church, perfectly or imperfectly, *for grace and salvation*. This is why there is no salvation outside [apart from] the visible Catholic Church. Accordingly, a man must either be an actual *member* of visible Body of the Church, or *desire* to be a member of the visible Body, to be saved. Because Scripture says Jesus “is the saviour of his body,” this means that one must be united to His Body (actually or in desire) to be saved (see Eph 5:23). This also means the interior virtues by themselves are insufficient for salvation (although true, interior faith joins one to the Body of the Church by at least implicit desire).

¹⁴ *De ecclesia militante*, c.2.

The Council of Trent and its Catechism affirmed the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas and others by teaching that one can be joined to the Church either in reality (*perfectly*) or desire (*imperfectly*):

“And this translation [to the state of justification], since the promulgation of the Gospel, cannot be effected, without the laver of regeneration, or its desire [*aut eius voto*], as it is written; “unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.”¹⁵

Theologians such as St. Thomas and St. Robert recognized the apparent difficulty of reconciling that catechumens may be saved if they die before water baptism, even though outside the Church there is no salvation and catechumens are outside the Church *as such* (not being actual *members* of the Body). Bellarmine says: “Concerning catechumens there is a greater difficulty, because they are faithful [interior virtue of faith] and can be saved if they die in this state, and yet outside the Church no one is saved, as outside the ark of Noah...”¹⁶ Nevertheless, Bellarmine applies the teaching of Trent to the catechumen by concluding in no uncertain terms: “But without doubt it must be believed that true conversion supplies for Baptism of water when one dies without Baptism of water not out of contempt but out of necessity...”¹⁷

Because St. Robert says true conversion (desire, faith, hope, charity) undoubtedly *supplies* for water baptism for the catechumen means the catechumen actually receives the salvific *effects* of water baptism, even though it is a baptism of desire.¹⁸ This is why St. Paul in Hebrews 6:2 refers to “the doctrine of baptisms,” in the plural.¹⁹ If the catechumen receives the effects of water baptism, he dies *joined* to the Body of the Church (albeit imperfectly). Accordingly, the Catholic Church publicly manifests her faith in the deceased catechumen’s external (though imperfect) union with the Body by burying him as one of the baptized. While canon 1239.1 of the 1917 Code of Canon Law prohibits those who died without baptism from receiving ecclesiastical burial, canon 1239.2 states: “The catechumens who with no fault of their own die without baptism, *should be treated as the baptized*” (emphasis added). Thus, Bellarmine

¹⁵ *Denzinger*, 796.

¹⁶ *De ecclesia militante*, c.3.

¹⁷ *De Controversiis*, “*De Baptismo*,” *lib.* 1, c.6. St. Robert was simply echoing the teachings of the Council of Trent on baptism of desire in her canon on justification (see Dz 796) and in her Catechism, which has been taught by the greatest Saints, Fathers, Doctors and Popes of the Catholic Church (e.g., Augustine, Gregory Nazianzen, Bernard, Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Alphonsus Liguori, Pope Innocent, Pius V and Pius X).

¹⁸ These effects include forgiveness of original and actual sin, remission of all punishment, infusion of sanctifying grace and the theological virtues, and union (albeit imperfect) with the Body of Christ, the Catholic Church, but would not include the indelible mark on the soul because baptism of desire (and blood) is not the sacrament in reality but in desire.

¹⁹ While there is only one sacrament of Baptism (Eph 4:5), St. Thomas says St. Paul refers to “baptisms” in the plural in Hebrews 6:2 to denote “Baptism of Water, of Repentance [desire], and of Blood [martyrdom].” *ST*, III, Q 66, Art 2. The “doctrine of baptisms,” then, refers to the various means (water, desire, blood) by which the salvific effects of the single sacrament of baptism may be achieved.

says: “When we say ‘Out of the Church there is no salvation’, it must be understood of those who belong to the Church neither *in fact* nor or *in desire* ...”²⁰

Hence, while being joined to the external and visible Catholic Church (*in re* or *in voto*) is an absolute necessity for salvation (with which God cannot dispense), water baptism is a necessity of means to that end (with which God, in rare cases, can dispense).²¹ Because the catechumen’s *desire* for membership through baptism is itself a grace willed by God, St. Thomas says the desire “with God, counts for the deed.”²² After all, salvation is the work of God, not man, and God’s power is not tied to visible sacraments. This also means there are no exceptions to the truth that outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation (*extra ecclesia nulla salus est*).

While not denying or doubting the dogma, many Catholic converts struggle with the truth that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church and that one must be joined to the visible Body of the Church (actually or in desire) to be saved. Their difficulty understandably stems from their fear for the eternal fate of their non-converted relatives. While we may suffer worry in this life for our non-Catholic relatives and friends, our “faith that worketh by charity” (Gal 5:6) should move us to do what we can to prevent *their* suffering in the *next* life. To that end, we must charitably tell them there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church, and offer prayers and sacrifices for their conversion. As Our Lady said at Fatima, most people go to hell because they had no one praying for them. If we do our part, then God will do His, and He is never outdone in generosity.

To inspire our charity for souls, let us give the final word to Pope Eugene IV and his infallible declaration at the Council of Florence:

“It firmly believes, professes, and proclaims that those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews and heretics and schismatics cannot become participants in eternal life, but will depart “into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels” [Matt. 25:41], unless before the end of life the same have been added to the flock; and that the unity of the ecclesiastical body is so strong that only to those remaining in it are the sacraments of the Church of benefit for salvation, and do fastings, almsgiving, and other functions of piety and exercises of Christian service produce eternal reward, and that no one, whatever almsgiving he has practiced, even if he has

²⁰ *De Baptismo* IV 22, cited in Fr. Berry, *The Church of Christ*, p. 137.

²¹ Again, to use “membership” in the classical sense, it’s best to say the person may desire to belong to the Church, but he does not belong by desire to the Church, because he does not become an actual member of (belong to) the Church by desire. Simply said, he doesn’t enjoy the rights and privileges of the Church by desire alone. Accordingly, we say such a person (who has the Catholic “faith” and thus is not a Protestant) is not a “member” of the Church *as such*, but is “joined to” the Church.

²² See *ST*, III, Q 68, Art 2.

shed blood for the name of Christ, can be saved, unless he has remained in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church.”²³

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January 2015

²³ Council of Florence, *Cantate Domino*, 1441.