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The Holy Spirit came upon the church while they were together in the upper room at Pentecost. When *“the Holy Spirit said: ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’”*, the Bible says that the apostles did not restrict themselves to calling on the Holy Spirit, but *“Then having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.”* (Acts 3: 2, 3).

After the Lord had appeared in person to St. Paul on the road to Damascus, He sent him to Ananias to be baptized, taught, and included in the church group.

The spirit of individualism is a great danger to the one who possesses it and to his followers. Throughout history, no one fell into a heresy except when he had become self sufficient and had isolated himself from the Church group.

The Orthodox teacher is aware of the church group and is not an egotist who stands alone in his thinking or opinion. On the contrary, he lives in fellowship with the group and presents his ideas to his father confessor and to the whole group to judge them. If he is criticized, he listens carefully and humbly, and if he is invited to a discussion, he comes to it with an open heart and a mature mind. In Orthodox thought, no one is infallible but are all weak. That is why the apostle says: *“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive stricter judgment.”* (Js. 3: 1). The most dangerous thing in the life of a minister is to lose the sense of discipleship and of his need to learn and to correct himself from time to time.

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“Individualism” in the Church ---- just like in the society or nation ---- is at one and the same time a danger to both the individual and the group. Let us examine some points:

**First: Individualism Eliminates the Body**

The “individual” is separate while the “member” is united! The individual is an entity that can be independent, and there is danger in his independence, egotism, and selfishness both to him and to the group.

The “member”, on the other hand, is a part of the whole, a part of the body

which cannot live alone or do any work or function on its own. He needs the other members so that together they form the body and so that he possesses life and work and feels that he has a role to play in the group and that the group has a role to play in his life. That is why it is impossible for the member to be separated from the body.

The group also takes care of the member since his unity with the group does not annul his individuality, his privacy, or his special function which maybe cannot be performed by anyone else. That is why the group has to give the member the full opportunity to contribute and to work. As for the member, he cannot live if he separates himself from the group.

St. Ignatius says: *“The one to whom the Church is not a mother, cannot have Christ for a father!”* This means that the member must be united to the body, the Church, whose head is Christ, the Lord of Glory.

We know that the word *“knesset”*, = *“ecclessiya”* = “group” and is composed of:

- + The Lord of Glory who is its Head and the Church, His holy bride.
- + The heavenly members who have gone to paradise.
- + The members who are still struggling here on earth.

The Christian individual must be a church member; that is, he has to be united with:

- + the Lord Jesus through prayer, the Bible, and Holy Communion.
- + the saints, asking for their intercession and taking them as examples.
- + the believers, being aware of his brothers and serving them in a life of fellowship.

Therefore, St. Paul almost cries out. *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body --- whether slaves or free --- and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many. if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body? if the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? if the whole were hearing where would be the smelling? But now, God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where yet one body. And an eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have to need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ No, much rather those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty, but our representable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it, or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.”* (Acts 12: 13 - 27).

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**How beautiful is this song about the church, the body of Christ, from which we can perceive the following truths:**

1. The believer is a member, the church is a body, and Christ is the head.
2. There is a definite difference between one member and another, but they all complement each other.
3. There is a role and a function for each member; otherwise, he would be “an appendix”.
4. There is equality among, and the same honor for, all the members.
5. there is unity and harmony in the body, and no division or schism.
6. Each member needs the other members.
7. Joy and pain are shared.
8. Each member serves the others.

That is how each of us must feel so that we do not live in a hateful individualism but with a ‘team spirit’ and a ‘group spirit’, with the Spirit of God distributing different gifts but unifying the whole.

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**Second: Differences Do Not Eliminate Unity**

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the gathered disciples. At the beginning, the Spirit of God took the form of a strong wind that filled the house they were staying in. There is no doubt that this wind was a kind of spiritual revival for the disciples, but as a group. The word ‘*rih*’ (the Arabic for wind) resembles the word ‘*roh*’ (the Arabic for spirit); in Hebrew there is one word for both ‘*Ruah*’, meaning both wind and spirit. There is a clear resemblance between the spirit and the wind causing the Lord to tell Nicodemus: “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” (Jn. 3: 8)

- + The wind is the secret of the life of the body while the spirit is the secret of the life of the soul.
- + The wind cannot be seen; what can be seen are its manifestations. The same is true of the Spirit.
- + The wind exerts pressure to give us life as long as we do not resist it, and the Spirit also urges us on in order to give our souls life if we do not reject it.
- + As humans, we cannot perceive the boundaries of the wind, and the Spirit is infinite by nature.

Therefore, we say that the Holy Spirit answered the prayers of the apostles as they prayed with one spirit, and was poured into their lives as a group and a church, granting them spiritual life.

Next, and at the same moment, the Spirit appeared to them as cloven tongues of fire that came to rest upon each of them. This is where individual gifts, differences, and individuality come in, for each was granted his own special gift so that all complemented each other in a single body.

That is why we say that the group does not cancel differences and differences do not eliminate the group. Discovering the gifts of the members is probably the work of the group, as well as identifying their potential and exploiting it for the public good and that of the individual. The member should endeavor to adhere to the group, for this is the secret of his life and the meaning of his existence, for the Head is Christ who is the source of existence!

### **Third: Individuality Eliminates Autonomy**

One of the most dangerous matters is for an individual to make of himself his own authority to which he refers to. Even if he resorts to someone else, he is wrong! Soundness of thought and decision are not guaranteed in humans as individuals, but a holy group united with the Lord and guided by the Spirit can be a reference point for every believer.

Thus, although St. Paul received his mandate as an apostle directly from the Lord when He appeared to him. When He taught him and entrusted the faith to him, he went --- by revelation --- to an 'authority' which is the church group, or the group of disciples, in the fear that his running might be in vain, both in the present and past.

*“Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain..... But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter .....they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.” (Gal. 2: 1 - 10)*

In this passage, we see the following:

1. St. Paul, who had received his apostleship directly from God, did not think it beneath him to refer to the Church.
2. The apostle had served for 14 glorious years, but now he feared that he might have run in vain.
3. The apostle did not present the idea of serving the Gentiles to the disciples, but he put before them the principles of the Gospel. *“I communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles”* . All were certain of the unity of the gospel and the good news.
4. The authority to which he referred did not belong to one of the disciples

who had been with the Lord, but to the group of apostles, especially Peter, James, and John. This is a rejection of individuality and an endorsement of group effort.

5. The group assigned different apostles to the ministry to the Jews and Gentiles.
6. The group gave the apostle Paul the hand of fellowship to affirm the unity of the body and the fellowship of the members.
7. The obligation of all to serve the poor confirms the body's realization that unity exists among the different peoples, and between the Jews and Gentiles in particular.

The member who tears himself from the body of the church is a branch that isolates itself from the vine, or a stone that separates itself from the building. May the Lord keep us from the spirit of individualism and may He grant that we may together live as one group and one body.

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#### **Fourth: Different Gifts**

The Bible offers us different analogies for the Church, the most important of which: a body, a vine, and a building.

Each comparison has its own features, the most important of which is that the member can only live if it is rooted in the body. *“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, you cannot unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”* (Jn. 15: 4, 5)

Also, these analogies have the element of ‘complementing’, for what is the significance of the stones without pillars, foundations, and roof? *“You are God’s field, you are God’s building”* (1 Cor. 3: 1), *“you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual home”* (1 Pet. 2: 5)

Although these comparisons assert the idea of ‘distinctions’, for the pillar has a different function from that of the foundation and of the stone, these distinctions are not differences. The distinctions are there to fill various functions, but only in harmony, unity, and cooperation.

St. Paul devotes a whole chapter of his epistle to the Romans to the discussion of “different gifts, and says: *“Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, if prophecy ..... or ministry..... he who teaches .... he who exhorts .... he who gives, .... he who leads .... he who shows mercy ... “* (Rom. 12: 6 - 16)

In this chapter, we see different kinds of service:

1. Prophecy: that is predicting the future or preaching that is Spirit inspired.

2. Service: seeing to people's different needs, '*diaconia*'
3. Teaching: explaining the way of Christ spiritually, theologically, doctrinally, and ecclesiastically.
4. Preaching: exhorting people to repent and to turn to God.
5. Giving: of both material goods, effort, and time generously.
6. Leadership: management, organization and leadership.
7. Mercy: service to God's beloved poor, sick, needy, old, blind, deaf, dumb, illiterate, and mentally handicapped, etc.
8. Love: having loving relationships with all citizens.
9. Sharing: with the joyful and the sad.
10. The saints: serving the servants as well as the poor.
11. The strangers: taking care of them and seeing to their needs.

These are examples to illustrate the fact that there are many different services within the church and each of us must have a role with the grace of God and the sound guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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#### **Fifth: The Soundness of the Mission**

The mission can only be sound if it comes from the Church and the evidence to prove that is that the Lord Jesus, after he appeared to Peter on the way to Damascus, said to him: "*Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.*" (Acts 9: 6) The Lord then appeared to Ananias and said: "*Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus; for behold, he is praying ...*" (Acts 9: 10 - 16). When Ananias went to St. Paul (Saul) he said to him: "*Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. ....Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins,....*" (Acts 9: 17, Acts 22: 16). Of course, the Lord could have baptized, opened his eyes, given the Spirit, taught, and given the mission directly Himself, but He wanted to protect us from feeling we are wise, for the condition is that our mission must come from the church.

The same thing happened again when the Holy Spirit said: "*Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them*". They could have rushed to the ministry but the apostles "*having fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, sent them away.*" (Acts 13: 2, 3).

Preparing its children for the ministry through the Holy Spirit is one of the tasks of the Church in their lives. It then sends them off officially; they do not send themselves, in fulfillment of what the apostle said: "*And how shall they preach unless they are sent?*" (Rom. 10: 15)

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## **Sixth: Council Decisions**

The council decisions that did not emanate from an individual but from local and world councils. This confirms that the church rejects the concept of individualism in order that a decision is the right one and God's Spirit can go to work.

An example from the Bible is the Council of Jerusalem in 59 AD mentioned in Acts 15 when Paul and Barnabus went to Jerusalem to discuss with the Church there whether it was necessary to circumcise the Gentiles. *"And when they came to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all things that God had done with them."* (Acts 15: 4) After *"much dispute"*, in which many took part, particularly Peter and James, they reached a final decision at the beginning of which they said: *"it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, ..... it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...."* (Acts 15: 25 - 28).

Also in the story of the young adulterer in Corinth, St. Paul decided to cut him off for a while until he repented, saying: *"In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit and with the power of the Lord Jesus Christ ....."* (1 Cor. 5: 4). Notice the three powers in the Church gathered together:

- + the power of the Lord Jesus
- + the power of the clergy
- + the power of the believers

This is how things should be conducted in the Church, in fellowship and as a group, without individualism and isolation.

Thus, the church continued to convene holy councils to decide on and enact laws for the preservation of the faith and doctrine, such as the council of Nicea to oppose Arius, the council of Constantinople to confront Macdonius, and the council of Ephesus to oppose Nestorius.

The church is a group of people and the Orthodox teacher abides by the group spirit and can never separate himself from it. It is not enough that this should be the case for him and for his ideas, but he should consider the church a basic authority to refer to in his life, his behavior, and his ideas so that he does not lose the way and cause others also to go astray.

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### ***The Blessings of Group Work:***

1. In it, you experience the spirit of fellowship and individualism is absorbed
2. In it, you obtain different gifts exactly as the members of a body complement each other with the different specializations that are necessary to the building

up of the church, such as teaching, serving, preaching, helping the poor, sympathizing with the sick, the old, the handicapped, and the blind.

3. The size and extent of service will be boundless since individual potential will be multiplied by the number of the members in the group.
4. In it, you experience the beauty of the love which God created us to experience and to enjoy when we feel the Spirit of God at work within us, blessing us and uniting us.
5. In it, individual contribution, which the group is concerned with, is combined with the authority that the individual refers to.

***May the Lord bless our lives and His service to the glory of His Name.***