News



Father Anne (Anne Tropeano), ordained a priest in 2021, is leading the God Says Now campaign to ensure that priesthood is included in the upcoming study that the Vatican has commissioned on "the role of women in the Church" as part of synod on synodality. (Nathaniel Tetsuro Paolinelli)

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Anne Tropeano decided she could no longer wait.

Three years ago, inspired by her deep prayer and spiritual formation in the Ignatian tradition, she answered the call she'd been hearing for years to be ordained as a Roman Catholic priest — even though that meant breaking the church's ban on ordination of women and facing excommunication.

Today she goes by "Father Anne," after her ordination through the Association of Catholic Women Priests. Her vocation has led her not only to pursue priestly ministry, but to advocate for Catholic women who hear the same call. "I have a vocation to priesthood, but since the church is blocking my way to live out priesthood, I have a call within a call — to bring the church into alignment with God's desire for women's full participation," she said.

Father Anne's call may sometimes have seemed idealistic and unachievable. But she sees a special moment for the church, an opening for real progress.

> 'The question has to be rephrased: "Is God calling women to ordained ministries?" Asking the question in this way makes the Holy Spirit the protagonist.'
> —Father Anne
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Her focus now is on the upcoming study that the Vatican has commissioned on "the role of women in the Church" as part of the Synod of Bishops' synod on synodality. She is leading a campaign, God Says Now, to ensure that priesthood is included in this study, which will be completed by the Synod's fifth working group composed of members of the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith.

"Calls for women to be ordained came from around the world in the early stages of the ongoing synod on synodality," said Father Anne. "The call was for ordination of women at every level: deacons, priests and bishops. People are not free to speak openly about this, but the call is real."

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Father Anne cited the church's long and open intellectual tradition as a key reason for including women's priesthood in the study. "Whenever there is a question, we enter into dialogue. If parts of the world are calling for women's ordination and other places are saying 'no,' then what is the invitation from God? The only way to find that out is to enter into open, honest, free inquiry. This is our tradition."

Father Anne pointed to a preface that Pope Francis himself wrote to the book *Women and Ministries in the Synodal Church*, written in February by three theologians and two cardinals who participated in the meeting of the Council of Cardinals. "Throughout the modern era, particularly marked by the fascination for 'clear and distinct' ideas, the Church has also fallen, at times, into the trap of considering fidelity to ideas more important than attention to reality," Pope Francis wrote in the preface.

He added: "Reality, however, is always greater than the idea, and when our theology falls into the trap of clear and distinct ideas it inevitably turns into a Procrustean bed, which sacrifices reality, or part of it, on the altar of the idea."



Pope Francis and his international Council of Cardinals continue their discussion of women's role in the church at the Vatican Feb. 3. Women who spoke to the group are Bishop Jo Bailey Wells, deputy secretary-general of the Anglican Communion, Salesian Sister Linda Pocher and Giuliva Di Berardino, a consecrated virgin from the Diocese of Verona. (CNS/Vatican Media)

For Father Anne, the reality is clear: Women throughout the world are being called to priesthood. She answered that call even at the cost of excommunication, but she insists that she is still a part of the church, loves it deeply and believes that it can change.

"Excommunication is the harshest punishment by canon law to be given to a member of the church," she said. She still attends Mass in the institutional church, wears her collar and receives a blessing rather than communion. "You can't receive sacraments, work for the church or volunteer for the church," she said. "But they can't remove me from the church; I will not be moved."

She said that the God Says Now movement is working with great respect for the institutional church and the synodal process: "We are appealing to everyone's humanity in this historic movement … God Says Now is working in the church to advance women's participation at every level — deacon, priest and bishop."

Father Anne believes that one of the most problematic aspects of the discernment question is the way it has been framed. "To the question 'Can the Church ordain women?' many popes have given a clear answer: 'no.' The question has to be rephrased: 'Is God calling women to ordained ministries?' Asking the question in this way makes the Holy Spirit the protagonist. We ask, 'Where is God?' It also allows a more honest look at how women have been fighting for full participation for a long time."

Craig Ford Jr., assistant professor of theology and religious studies at St. Norbert College, researches gender, sexuality and race in theology. He said he believes that Father Anne's goal of getting priesthood into the upcoming study is modest and viable.

"As a theologian who tells groups of students every day to study, my understanding of the movement is to expand the scope of what this study group at the synod will

look at," he told NCR. "I find nothing objectionable about this. There is nothing to be afraid of, especially when the question of gender is one of worldwide interest throughout the entire Catholic Church,"

Ford notes that there is a consensus in the church that women perform many leadership roles at all levels. The question is whether these roles should receive sacramental recognition.

"The documents coming out of the Vatican state that respecting women's leadership does not require any sacramental recognition," he says. "But some theologians raise the question that if women are performing the same leadership roles — if they are ministering to the sick as men are, bringing people into the life of the church as they are — then why is the sacramental recognition denied them?" Ford asked.



Father Anne (Anne Tropeano), right, poses with Javier Benavidez and his family. Benavidez is a campaign organizer with Father Anne's God Says Now campaign, which is working to ensure that priesthood is included in the upcoming study that the Vatican has commissioned on "the role of women in the Church" as part of the

Synod of Bishops' synod on synodality. (Javier Benavidez)

One argument is historical, asking why, if women served in sacramental roles in the past, they cannot do so now. This is the approach of Discerning Deacons, a group that since 2020 has been advocating for discernment throughout the church about women in the diaconate.

Some theologians point to the idea of dignity before God: Are men and women truly equal if only men can serve *in persona Christi*? Ford and others note that people every day experience women acting on behalf of Christ through good works and care for the human condition.

"If people experience women bringing Christ to them in a unique way, similar to a male priest, that might be the place of experience from where discernment must come. That is what Father Anne is focusing on," Ford said. "It's one of the most theologically ancient messages we have — once people have an experience, how do we focus on this not only in our worship, but also in our doctrine?" Ford said.

Father Anne said she believes the church is in a pivotal moment. Full participation of women has always been God's desire, she said, but that desire can now be realized because the whole world — religious and secular — is moving toward gender equality in leadership.

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"We've had male-only leadership everywhere for most of human history. Now we have war, poverty, global warming. It doesn't work," she said. "There's a massive dawning awareness in humanity of our relationships with one another and the earth."

Father Anne said we are living in a time of opportunity for the church to take a prophetic stance.

"The Roman Catholic Church has grown. It's one of the largest nongovernmental providers of education and health care in the world. It has a seat at the U.N.," she said "When the church comes into alignment with God's will for women's participation in the world, it will be a massive force of renewal."