

support of each of their children. They also face the prospect of unemployment in middle age and beyond and of extended periods out of work for their offspring after the latter reach adulthood. The current teaching allows couples little hope for a responsible approach to environmental concerns in the light of world population growth. Perhaps it relies on 'God will provide'. Ordinary people do not have that luxury.

Considering the positive effects of an active sex life in a loving relationship, there would seem to be little valid purpose in placing unnecessary restrictions on it or in denying it to fertile couples who have a compelling reason for not producing children or not producing more children. A satisfying sex life together can be a lifelong blessing for a couple but some men and women are not dissuaded from frustrating even this side of their lives without any need for misdirection from church authorities. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that substantial numbers ignore the Church's prohibition against so-called artificial birth control, apparently with clear consciences and despite the notions of sin and guilt that have been projected onto this aspect of human behaviour.

Provided that couples have a sincere respect, or preferably a deep love, for each other, the mechanics of their mutual sexual activity should be irrelevant to a church. Perhaps the Church fears that any weakening of the nexus between sexual relations and the propagation of children would remove the moral censure from sex outside marriage. That is not necessarily so, although there would seem to be a good case for the degree of censure to depend on the circumstances.

The Catholic Church had a chance to develop its teaching consistently with contemporary reality during and in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. The chance was lost when Pope Paul the Sixth withdrew the matter from the assembly of the Council and then rejected the recommendation of the commission he had

established to examine it. The encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, reaffirming the prohibition of artificial birth control, was published in 1968.

The encyclical gave more weight to not contradicting the outdated line of the Pope's predecessors than to compassion for those affected or to the changed circumstances of married couples during their child-bearing years in the twentieth century. The chance was lost to develop a policy which reflected the growth in knowledge, consequent changes in perception and altered conditions in the world. The encyclical unleashed widespread disenchantment with the Church's teaching authority, known as the magisterium, from which the Church has not recovered. Later authoritarian reassertion of the ecclesiastic prohibition on birth control has done nothing to improve the situation.

Another aspect of sexual morality is also ripe for revision. It is now widely recognised that sexual orientation is genetically determined. Consequently, the Church's attitude to homosexuality needs reappraisal. A complication may exist because some married men also exhibit homosexual tendencies and some married women are attracted to lesbian relationships. It may be just as relevant, of course, that some married people are attracted to and also experience heterosexual relations outside their marriages but that is not a condemnation of heterosexual activity as such.

Extramarital sexual activities constitute a breach of trust where the couple has a commitment to exclusivity in their sex life and should be censured on that account, although there may well be mitigating circumstances. There is a similar commitment in the unions formed by many contemporary young people but without the formality of marriage. It could be argued that there should be a mechanism for the recognition of such unions. In a Christian marriage, after all, the partners themselves are the celebrants of the sacramental union freely entered into through their mutual commitment to each other. The civil law in Australian and some other