

*By Catherine Masters of the [NZ Herald](#)*

Ultra-hardline Catholics want Auckland Bishop Patrick Dunn to recant his qualified support for contraception or be sacked by the Pope.

Most Catholics, however, appear to support the bishop, but some are not prepared to say so publicly.

A spokesman for Catholic Action, Arthur Skinner, said yesterday that contraception was intrinsically evil and a mortal sin and Bishop Dunn should apologise to Christ and to Pope John Paul II.

The action group is an extreme, conservative band of about 300 members, who two years ago called for all the country's bishops to be sacked over their allegedly soft stance on the Virgin in a Condom exhibition at Te Papa.

"He [Bishop Dunn] is supposed to represent Our Lord and this is the problem, he's doing anything but," said Mr Skinner.

While Catholic Action plans to e-mail the Vatican immediately, others say Bishop Dunn's comments this week have won him many fans in the Catholic community.

Bishop Dunn said people outside the Catholic faith, over whom the Church had no sway and who insisted on "sleeping around," should protect themselves and others from harm and use contra-ceptives.

But he also said he was strongly against the use of contraceptives and fully endorsed the vision of the Church and the Papal ban on all forms of artificial contraception.

Yesterday the bishop attacked the "contraceptive mentality" and reiterated he was not backing contraceptive use - "definitely not."

Pope John Paul II is said to have become increasingly hardline in his stance against contraception as he has aged. In a letter to clergy and the faithful on the value of human life, he said artificial contraception was against life.

Dr Douglas Pratt, a senior lecturer in religion at Waikato University, said he thought the bishop had come close but not quite breached the decree.

"Time will tell as to whether he's naively walking into a mine-field."

He suspected Bishop Dunn had simply given voice to something many Catholic thinkers had felt and may have expressed privately.

It might look like a "bob each way" but the comments were quite creative "and I applaud him for that."

Papal decrees were for Catholics, said Dr Pratt.

"So in other words he [Bishop Dunn] is saying that within the Catholic system, within the Catholic vision, there are those who say it ought to apply to everyone, but there are others who say 'no, it applies to those who belong to the system.'

"He's voicing a more contemporary, what I would call a pluralist interpretation or application which is actually quite in concert with the modern age."

Many Catholics used artificial contraceptives despite the ban, he said.

Dr Greg Dawes, a former priest and now a lecturer in religious studies at Otago University, said he knew many priests who had expressed similar views but not publicly.

"There is a big gap between official teaching and the private beliefs and practices of many Catholics, a gap which seems to me to be unfortunate."

He said the Pope probably had more pressing concerns to worry about, but it may be the bishop was pushing the boundaries of the Church.

Cardinal Tom Williams, head of the Catholic Church in New Zealand, did not appear worried but said he had not caught up with the controversy.

The bishop was a good, sound man, he said.