

Archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus insists he gets to decide future of historic Nicosia mansion

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The minister of communications and works said on Tuesday he was confident that consultations with Archbishop Chrysostomos would settle the future of the 18th century Nicosia mansion which the latter wants to convert into a byzantine museum despite fierce opposition.

Minister Yiannis Karousos said he would arrange for a meeting with the archbishop within days to discuss the matter. The archbishop has warned that while he is willing to hear what others have to say, the final decision is his.

Karousos on Tuesday reiterated his ministry's position, that the mansion of Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios, who was the official interpreter or dragoman to the Ottoman court between 1779 and 1809, must remain operating as an ethnological museum, "thus contributing to the conservation of historic memory for such an important period of the history of Cyprus."

The museum is an integral part of Nicosia and keeping it that way is an issue of public interest he said.

"We were not officially informed yet. We will take the initiative to talk to the archbishop," Karousos told state broadcaster CyBC.

He said that the property is owned half by the state and half by the archbishopric. The archbishop disputed this later in the day, telling Antenna TV that the church owned 70 per cent of the property.

"Part of it was appropriated many years ago. It was leased to the antiquities department by the archbishopric for a 30-year period," he said.

After that period expired, the lease was renewed for another five years. It expired three years ago.

"There are many legal issues we are looking into," he said, commenting on the property's ownership status.

He said his ministry was taking the initiative to solve the issue.

"We are certain the best solution will be found to continue serving the public interest," Karousos said.

According to the archbishop, however, the church owns most of the property as Kornesios' heirs donated it to the archbishopric.

"If they had wanted, they would have given it to the antiquities department," Chrysostomos told Omega TV on Monday.

The archbishop said he was sick of hearing people constantly criticising the church.

To prove his point, he said that around 30 to 40 hotels were built in an area of Paphos where the church wants to build its own hotel, but no one complained in those cases about the protection of antiquities.

"Yet when the church said it would build a hotel, everyone attacked," the

archbishop said.

On the Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios mansion, he said the church has its advisers and architects with whom it consults on such matters.

“When we could not utilise the museum, we leased it to the antiquities department because we were not in a position to manage it,” he said.

Now, after receiving advice from experts they know what to do.

“It is not as if we will make it up as we go along,” he said.

He also gave reassurances that the church would preserve the property’s history.

“The church has people who can manage its property,” he said.

He was referring to strong criticism by members of the public, political parties and the tourist guides association. The latter on Monday likened the church’s plans to a practice in the north where many Greek Orthodox churches have been converted into museums or other public buildings.

Akel and Disy said they would take to issue to parliament. The Greens too expressed their opposition to any changes to the museum in question.

Akel leader Andros Kyprianou said in a letter to Karousos that if the government agrees to the archbishop’s request it would be in “clear violation of the law on antiquities”.

The Kornesios mansion has been declared as an ancient monument since 1935, Kyprianou said, and has been operating as an ethnological museum since 1988.

He added that it is a monument of urban architecture and was never a place of worship.

“Therefore, the archbishop’s insistence on including it in a ‘chain’ of church monuments and museums is incomprehensible,” Kyprianou said in his letter.

“The church is part of the history of Cyprus and not its exclusive and privileged author,” he added.

The head of the Cyprus section of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), Chrysanthos Pissarides has also criticised the archbishop’s decision.

“Worth mentioning is the fact that about two-thirds of the mansion were bequeathed to the Archdiocese by its last owners on the condition that the

property would be properly preserved and converted into either an ethnological or a byzantine museum,” Pissarides said on Tuesday.

However, he added that no archbishop since that time showed any interest in honouring the specific condition. Instead the Antiquities Department took on the cost and restoration of the mansion and its subsequent conversion into an ethnological museum.

“The state, through the Department of Antiquities, has spent a great deal of money on the restoration of the mansion and its conversion into an ethnological museum, and continues to preserve it with money coming out of the annual budget,” Pissarides said.

Pissarides added that he hoped the government would look into filing a request for the mansion to become an Unesco site.

— Source: cyprus-mail.com

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