

## **St John's controversial extension dropped**

**by David Lindsay**

The highly controversial plans to excavate an underground extension for the St John's Co-Cathedral Museum will not see the light of day, following an agreement between the Prime Minister and the Archbishop to recommend the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation scraps the project.

With the Foundation being headed by the government on one part and by the Church on the other, yesterday's announcement could be taken as a given that the proposed project will not proceed.

A statement issued by the Foundation in the wake of yesterday's surprise government announcement confirmed as much, in that it expressed its agreement with the recommendation.

Yesterday's announcement came less than three hours before Parliament was to debate a parliamentary motion lodged by Opposition Leader, Joseph Muscat, calling on the government to cease supporting and to disassociate itself from the project. The opposition withdrew its motion soon after Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi announced in Parliament that the project would not be carried out.

The project has been opposed by a number of Nationalist Party parliamentarians, and the debate that was to have been yesterday evening was expected to have been something of a slippery slope for the government.

At least three PN backbenchers – Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando, who had launched a scathing criticism of the project during a parliamentary adjournment in November, and former ministers Ninu Zammit and Jesmond Mugliett – have all spoken publically against the proposed project. Many others have privately expressed serious reservations over the project.

In a short statement issued yesterday afternoon, the Department of Information said Prime Minister, Lawrence Gonzi, had met with Archbishop Mgr Paul Cremona OP on Tuesday to discuss the contentious project, and left the meeting with the opinion that

the “project tied to the St John’s Co-Cathedral should not be a matter of division among the Maltese people”. The statement said Archbishop Cremona had expressed his concern over the situation.

The Foundation had proposed extending the co-cathedral’s museum by creating additional exhibition space by excavating under the cathedral. The new exhibition space, which was intended to have housed the Foundation’s collection of Flemish tapestries, had been awarded EUR14m in EU funds while the Foundation was to have injected a further EUR2m into the project.

It was feared the plans to excavate beneath the cathedral would have placed the architectural and historical gem in undue peril. The plans announced last year were also to have involved excavating St John’s Square and a section of St John’s Street to a depth of five storeys so as to accommodate the underground extension.

The project had been rife with controversy from the outset. Most recently environmental NGO Flimkien Ghal Ambjent Ahjar last Saturday called for the resignation of the Foundation’s board on account of its finding that excavation plans had been drawn up as early as 2006.

It also accused the Foundation of not revealing expert reports warning of the risk the project would place the cathedral under should excavations proceed, and described the Foundation’s persistence in the face of such threats as a “shocking lack of responsibility” on the Foundation’s part.

The NGO had cited minutes from the Malta Environment and Planning Authority’s Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee, which found, among other objections, that, “Any excavation in the immediate surroundings of the cathedral is extremely dangerous to the structural stability of the cathedral itself, and the proposal is therefore not acceptable. The committee feels that the sacred nature of the cemetery should be safeguarded and respected and that the proposed uses are not compatible with the important historical and religious nature of the site.”

In a statement reacting to yesterday’s news, Alternattiva Demokratika chairperson, Arnold Cassola, welcomed the development, commenting, “The government has realised that this project would not have been beneficial at all for our country. The government did well to listen to the voice of the people and of civil society and to not insist on a project that could have provoked irremediable damage to St John’s Co-Cathedral and our capital city, Valletta.”

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