

Cypriot Church breathes hell-fire as gay rights loom

Helena Smith in Nicosia

TRYING to block an imminent liberalisation of Cypriot law on homosexuality, the island's spiritual leader says that unless homosexuals repent their "unnatural acts" the Church will be "obliged" to excommunicate them.

The Orthodox Church — which is Cyprus' richest organisation, with factories, hotels and wineries among its

many assets — has vociferously opposed plans to decriminalise homosexuality.

"Homosexuality is against God's law and therefore illegal," Archbishop Chrysostomos said in an interview in his office, where he sat surrounded by Byzantine icons.

"If it is legalised it will create a lot of problems and, like smoking, will become a dangerous habit. It will encourage perversion, it will taint children . . . In order to save others, the Church will be

obliged to excommunicate those who refuse to repent."

The threat from the 78-year-old cleric, whose name means "Golden Tongue", comes as the government prepares to put through a bill to legalise homosexuality. The Council of Europe has said the government must repeal the old law by the end of July — when parliament rises for the summer — or risk being ejected from its ranks.

Cyprus is seeking membership of the European Union:

accession talks are scheduled for next year.

Pressed by Council of Europe, the centre-right coalition two years ago reluctantly amended the island's antiquated legislation, under which gay men can be imprisoned for up to seven years for sodomy — though the authorities say it is never used. But the archbishop's protests and the Church's hold over many MPs have persistently prevented parliament from endorsing the change.

Some MPs have expressed the fear that making homosexual acts legal will diminish the ability of the Greek Cypriots National Guard to defend its community against the Turkish army, which occupies the north of the divided island.

In the last six weeks, gays have been called "abnormal" by straight-laced MPs, denounced by clerics, and likened to the debauched inhabitants of the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Archbishop Chrysostomos' decision to take the law into his own hands has put the government into an unexpected quandary.

Few ministers wish to offend him, but the government has been under heavy pressure to scrap the legislation since 1993, when the European Court of Justice agreed with Alecos Modinos, a prominent gay rights activist, that the law both "violated his privacy and human rights."