

Opinion clears way for restoration of religious site on U of L property

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FRANKFORT, Ky. — The University of Louisville may authorize a privately funded restoration of a church-related historic site on its property, the attorney general's office said.

"No reasonable person" would interpret it as a government endorsement of religion, according to the opinion, which was made public yesterday.

The site is the Grotto and Garden of Our Lady of Lourdes. It is on the former grounds of St. Joseph's Infirmary, which was built by the Sisters

of Charity of Nazareth in the 1920s.

The grotto, resembling a Catholic shrine of the same name in southern France, was designed by the same architectural firm — D.X. Murphy and Brothers — that designed the Churchill Downs grandstand and twin spires. The grotto is a state and city historical landmark.

Humana Inc. bought the property in 1970, demolished the infirmary and donated the site to the university. Thus exists "the extraordinary circumstance . . . where the state owns a registered historical landmark that is religious in nature," Assistant Attorney General Jennifer L.

Carrico said in the opinion.

A private group, the St. Joseph's Area Association, requested the opinion and has proposed using private funds to restore the grotto and garden.

Carrico's opinion, which is advisory and not legally binding, noted that the university has maintained the site "in secular context."

"No reasonable person who understands the history and context of the Grotto and Garden of Our Lady of Lourdes would believe the government has endorsed religion," the opinion said.